

## Agency Leadership Disasters

*Stories from some agencies we know with suggestions to avoid similar fates*

**Agency T:** A high-energy place, a big independent in a large town with brand new offices and quickly coming off a couple of flat-to-awful years. Sounds good so far, but here's the problem: the 7 VPs do everything they can to avoid each other - some actually brag they haven't spoken in months!). They have no regular meetings. Sadly, several say that even though they're paid well, they hate coming to work because they dislike their colleagues so. They simply can not work as an effective group and so the agency misses opportunities and is a pretty miserable place to work for a lot of people.

**Agency D:** In business 18 years, 28 people on staff. Scraping by but they'll probably survive today's soft economy. Unless, of course, the owner's unmitigated and TOTAL lack of trust in his 4 senior players doesn't scuttle the ship. He says he can't stand to even look at them they're so incompetent, unreliable and disengaged. He hasn't done anything about it because (1) "it might upset our clients" and (2) "it's hard to get good people."

**Agency V:** Dad now in his 60s started this place and did well (the biggest Mercedes, house in the mountains, and everything's already paid for). Brought his kid in a couple

of years ago right out of college to begin to take over. The problem: Dad's so afraid the whole thing might crumble that he's paralyzed about doing anything differently than he did 25 years ago. This guy could be the poster boy for the Risk Aversion League and as a result the agency's dying. Clients are bailing and there's no new business to speak of. There'll be very little left for the kid to run.

**W**arren Bennis, who has made a career studying why some leaders are great and others fail, would probably tell you these agencies are in serious trouble because of titanic leadership breakdowns. Let's look.

**T**here's no shared dream at Agency T, only personal agendas. It's the CEO's job to blend differences in style and provide direction and meaning to achieve a common unifying mission. Bennis tells the story about the Manhattan Project and George Kistiakowsky, a great chemist who later served as Eisenhower's chief science advisor, who threatened to quit because he couldn't get along with a colleague. Project leader Robert Oppenheimer simply said, "George, how can you leave this project? The free world hangs in the balance." Conflict, even with brilliant and diverse people, is

resolved by reminding people of the mission. Works especially well at agencies.

**H**ow'd you like to work at Agency D where the owner doesn't trust his key people and they don't trust him? How this guy came to hire so many people he dislikes and distrusts would keep Dr. Phil happy for several shows, but the point is if you've got trust you can ride out all kinds of storms. Trust starts with the CEO generating and demonstrating faith in the senior team –if it isn't there it won't be anyplace else in the company.

Over at Agency V, Dad's gotten way too comfortable. I call this the WAS disease – We've Arrived Syndrome. If the top banana isn't fueled by urgency, risk taking and experimentation then the agency is careening toward perdition. The son wants to diversify and maybe acquire some competitors (they've got the cash), but Dad won't agree to it. Too risky. Bennis says willingness to risk failure to achieve results is at the heart of all successful ventures.

I'd add that success stops when risk ends.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe Grant". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J" and "G".