

# Courage at the Top

*If you want to make your agency run like the best, do what they do*

There's real consistency about what CEOs do at better-run agencies. What follows is just one man's opinion, folks, but maybe it will give you something to talk about at your next management team meeting.

**1. Plant your flag.** Have agencies collapsed into mere commodity services? If you do basically the same thing as the guy down the street, prospects and clients will be forced to make decisions only on price. Successful agencies don't run like Wal-Mart where pennies and 'price slashers' dominate. They know who they are, how they're really different than others, and most importantly they know how to sell the DIFFERENCE not the price.

The reason agencies get beaten down on price is they've allowed themselves to be treated that way. Stand for something! Lots of big agencies got that way because they had guts when they were small.

**2. Make the tough decisions.** Most agency execs know exactly what to do but often lack the juice to pull the trigger. Face it: you know who's performing, who's skating, who the troublemakers are, and who should be fired. I've seen entire agencies held hostage by a single scheming employee that agency management didn't have the courage to get rid of. You get paid to do the tough stuff; don't be a sissy about doing what you (and everyone else) knows must be done.

Running a business is really only a series of incremental experiments. Take action and move on. If it doesn't work, try something else.

**3. Limit Entitlements.** Give me a raise 2 years in a row for doing basically the same job and you've conditioned me to expect another one this year. And thus salaries spiral uncontrollably upward.

If you don't have an objective-based performance/reward system, you're cheating *yourself* (out of getting better performance from your employees), your *staff* (not rising to meet more demanding challenges means skills and potential atrophy), and your *clients* (if they don't see a constantly improving crew they'll be forced to look elsewhere).

Yeh, things like salary reviews, promotions, titles, etc. are messy and unpleasant but you've got to get over it. In our business *people* are the capital. And growing capital, after all, defines ROI. It's a business, remember?

**4. Outlaw one-way meetings.** Does this sound like a staff meeting at your place - you talk and the staff 'listens' just short of a group coma? Don't waste your time and theirs with these kinds of 'meetings.' A meeting is a meeting of *minds* - an exchange of ideas and different opinions.

The best agencies are always alive with a buzzing interchange of ideas.

And never interpret the absence of questions as an indication of understanding or acceptance. If no one asks questions, DEMAND them. Ask for a play-back about what you've just said.

Go around the room and call on people just like Sister Ann Marie used to do. You're the leader – lead!

**5. Check your navel regularly.** Take an honest inventory of yourself and your leadership style then set a plan for personal change. Some agency principals actually believe they are the only ones who (a) work hard, (b) care about the place, or (c) have original ideas. They telegraph a "Me Big Chief" attitude all the time. The best agency leaders we know have no need whatsoever to prove anything to anyone except themselves.

**6. Don't bad-mouth clients.** This is one of the stupidest and most pernicious things you can permit. Remember the obvious: Clients are your *customers* – without them you'd be out of business. Just because you work at an ad agency doesn't mean you're de facto a better person or smarter than your clients.

You say their constant fiddling with 'our creative' is proof of how dumb they are? Understand that when they change things, no matter how capricious it may appear, they're only trying to improve the product before it hits the street. They probably have the same fears about screwing up and losing their job that you do. . . maybe even more so. And if you're an AE doing this "you won't believe what the dumb-ass client said" stuff, you'll continue to reap grouching creatives, lousy work, and unhappy clients

because that's exactly what you're sowing. Knock it off.

CEOs, if you're running the place and fall into this kind of spineless behavior, at least have the guts to resign the clients you claim to despise. Or else get out of the business all together. Believe me, clients *know* when they're not liked. They tell us so.

**7. Be visionary.** If you were told your life from this point forward would always be the same with no change whatsoever until the day you suddenly die, you wouldn't be too happy. Your staff is looking for something engaging and motivating beyond just today's chores and this week's paycheck. People want something to *believe* in.

Give them hope. Describe how great it will be once the firm achieves its potential, how the changes and improvements will pay off, and how they'll achieve personal fulfillment. Paint a vivid picture of how you see the future that transcends the mundane drudgery of the day-to-day. Leaders are defined by their ability to inspire about what tomorrow could be. Are you inspiring?

Applying these fundamental operating standards only when it's convenient keeps many agency CEOs stuck running in place. What *really* separates one agency from another is more about courage at the top than talent everywhere else.

