

CREATIVE LEADERSHIP SURVEY

In The Church Of Inhouse Design, Open-Mindedness Is The New Sacrament

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Last year's American Inhouse Design Awards Annual looked at the tradeoffs of working in an inhouse department and two transcendent challenges that come with the territory: the need to gain the respect of non-design decisionmakers within the organization; and the inherent difficulty of staying fresh and innovative in an institutional setting.

This year, with the help and inspiration of the staffing experts at The Creative Group, we turn to a related aspect of living and working inhouse: what makes an effective leader in today's creative setting.

The conclusions are based on a survey of the winners of the 2008 American Inhouse Design Awards, crafted by The Creative Group and conducted online in June. Numbers tell part of the story, but comments on what makes a "dream" boss are revealing as well. Selected results — just the tip of the iceberg — are reported here; complete data will be available to GDUSA readers at creativegroup.com in the full.

SAY GOODBYE TO THE STRONG SILENT TYPE

In the abstract, one might think of the ideal creative leader as a John Wayne-type, strong, silent, tough, admirable, distant. Quite the opposite — it's so long, cowboy — at least according to the results of the 2008 survey of winners.

When asked the traits are most desired in a leader, our award winners opted for the attributes of openmindedness, adaptability, responsiveness, flexibility, the ability to listen and to communicate. These so-called "soft skills" dwarfed the harder-edged bundle of traits associated with leaders such as assertiveness, decisiveness, self-control, certainty. They also overshadowed the traditional virtues of loyalty, integrity, warmth and patience.

More analysis needs to be done: again I urge you to obtain the complete report from The Creative Group. But for these purposes, it is fair to say that there is a growing emphasis on creative leadership that is nimble, flexible, communicative, open to dialog and new ideas, and comfortable with consensus. This is perhaps the single most compelling conclusion of this year's survey; arguably this development is not so very surprising in light of the fluid, fragmented and change-oriented era in which we all work.

THE TRAITS MOST DESIRED IN A CREATIVE LEADER

1. Open-mindedness (64.4%)
2. Adaptability (61.5%)
3. Enthusiasm (50.6%)
4. Influence/Motivation/Encouraging (50.6%)
5. Decisiveness (42.5%)
6. Responsibility (42.0%)
7. Assertiveness (40.8%)
8. Initiative (37.9%)
9. Honesty (28.2%)
10. Self-Confidence (23.6%)
11. Self-Control/Emotional Stability (18.4%)
12. Self-Awareness (15.5%)
13. Carefulness (15.5%)
14. Patience (10.9%)
15. Warmth/Compassion (9.2%)
16. Loyalty (7.5%)

SINGLE QUALITY AMONG THE FOLLOWING MOST ESSENTIAL FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP (In Order)

1. Strong Interpersonal Skills (38.2%)
2. Strategic Vision (32.9%)
3. Integrity (18.2%)
4. Creativity (8.2%)

BACK OFF

At the opposite end of the spectrum, it is clear what designers do not like in a manager. As one person wrote: "It's hard to pick just one trait — really, anything that disrespects the employees under that manager..." And if that disrespect takes the form of micromanaging or stealing credit, that is even worse.

THE LEAST DESIRABLE TRAIT IN A CREATIVE MANAGER (In Order)

1. Micromanagement (31.8%)
2. Taking Credit For Others' Work (31.1%)
3. Poor Communication Skills (22.3%)
4. Unreasonable Work Expectations (8.8%)
5. Insensitivity To Personal Interests/Obligations (2.0%)

CREATIVE LEADERSHIP SURVEY

RECOGNIZE ME

The question of recognition — in this case how well creative management earns or advocates for recognition of the department and the individuals within — continues to haunt the inhouse environment. There is simply not enough of it to go around in the micro sense (psychic and financial rewards for the designers) or in the macro sense (understanding of design as a business asset). But as the results of the new survey indicate — at least for our award winning design departments, there is reason to believe progress is being made in this regard.

CREATIVE LEADER'S EFFECTIVENESS IN COMMUNICATING TO OTHER LEADERS/ EXECUTIVES THE BUSINESS VALUE OF DESIGN

Very Effective	24.0%
Somewhat Effective	57.3%
Not Very Effective	14.0%
Not At All Effective	4.7%

CREATIVE LEADER'S EFFECTIVENESS IN EARNING RESPECT/RECOGNITION FOR THE DESIGN TEAM

Very Effective	34.9%
Somewhat Effective	51.0%
Not Very Effective	8.7%
Not At All Effective	5.4%

MOST EFFECTIVE WAYS FOR CREATIVE LEADERS TO RECOGNIZE A JOB WELL DONE (Given The Current Economy)

1. Communicating To Upper Management (74.4%)
2. Recognition At Staff Meeting Or In A Newsletter (60.8%)
3. Award Or Awards Programs (52.7%)
4. In Person Thank You (49.3%)
5. Paid Time Off (43.9%)
6. Handwritten Thank You (27.7%)
7. Emailed Thank You (27.7%)
8. Company Paid Meal (21.6%)
9. Gift Certificate (20.3%)

PASSING THE TORCH

The survey reveals an interesting paradox: inhouse designers appear hungry to learn how to be leaders, how to interact with upper management, how to manage projects and people, how to get ready to accept the torch. As Ralph Nader once said, before he became a serial presidential candidate: "The function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers." But there is a dearth of such preparation and informal comments in this regard were especially negative.

COMPANIES WHO IDENTIFY AND PREPARE INDIVIDUALS TO MOVE INTO MANAGERIAL ROLES

Yes	45.5%
No	54.5%

RATE YOUR FIRM'S ABILITY TO PROVIDE LEADERSHIP SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Excellent	13.0%
Good	32.9%
Fair	33.6%
Poor	20.5%

SHOULD A GRAPHIC DESIGN DEGREE HAVE A LEADERSHIP COMPONENT?

Yes, Both BFA and MFA	59.5%
Yes, BFA Only	8.1%
Yes, MFA Only	19.6%
No	12.8%

MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES

We were also interested in the challenges or perceived challenges that creative leaders face. The answers are illuminating, as you will see.

GREATEST PRIORITY FOR CREATIVE LEADERS IN THE COMING YEAR (In Order)

1. Doing More With Less (39.2%)
2. Integrating New Technology and Media Channels Into Business Initiatives (29.7%)
3. Remaining Innovative (26.6%)

CREATIVE LEADERSHIP SURVEY

GREATEST STAFF RELATED CHALLENGES FOR CREATIVE MANAGER (In Order)

1. Motivating Staff (32.7%)
2. Recruiting Qualified Staff (19.0)
3. Delivering Criticism (16.3%)
4. Resolving Staff Conflicts (12.2%)
5. Retaining Staff (9.5%)
6. Training Staff (3.4%)

DREAM A LITTLE DREAM

In light of the above challenges, we asked the non-managers in the group the soul searing and searching question: Can you do better than your boss? The response is mixed.

DO YOU THINK YOU COULD DO A BETTER JOB THAN YOUR BOSS?

Yes 40.6%
No 59.4%

In this vein, we also queried what the dream boss is or should be. Here are a cross section of (the printable) comments:

"The person would have to have an open mind to take in criticisms as well as keep up with the latest trends. The person should also demonstrate strong communication as well as interpersonal skills between employees and other company execs. And finally, it's imperative to have the right attitude to facilitate and motivate employees while they are under extreme pressures from tight budget-cuts."

"Open-minded, fair, enthusiastic, an advocate for the department, good communicator, good sounding board, empathetic, even-tempered, flexible."

"I have him. He is the perfect balance of friend and boss. He is very fair, never takes credit for the work we do, very appreciative. He is our advocate."

"Someone with a creative background who is not a dictator or micromanager or a crashing bore who talks incessantly about their dog. This person would adequately train full time and freelance personnel. Recognition would be provided for all employees who have done exceptional work. A pleasant working experience would be mandatory."

"Easygoing, funny, delegates, has confidence in me."

"A mentor and a creative example of innovation."

"Someone who encourages their staff. Every week bringing in visual stimulants and a lesson or two during the weekly meeting. Bringing the team together with exercises, and encouraging artists to submit work for competitions. Recognizing partners of their achievements to upper executives and in company magazine. Take field trips instead of boring meetings to drum up creativity, and even work on providing laptops for artists to take home instead of staying at work all hours. They would give room for working on improvement by telling artists ways of growing and doing better."

"Lets you do your job. Backs you up in political situations Is accessible to me. Pays me well, appropriate for responsibilities."

"My dream boss would be a creative who understands that it takes different approaches for each employee in order to inspire their creativity and loyalty."

"The woman I work for now is the best I could ever ask for. She gives respect, ask for our opinions and truly makes us feel and tell us that we are an asset to her."

"A boss who respects creative and the process. When I'm having a moment like 'I've lost my mojo,' he/she would give me a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup and tell me to walk away for 30 minutes instead of worrying about my time sheet."

"Someone who respects my work ethic, skills, and the fact that I have a life outside of the office. I will do great work for someone who acknowledges my strengths and allows me to use them, and who allows me to improve on my weaknesses."

"Has great intercommunication skills."

"Has vision and confidence, not swayed by the latest trend or fad. Focused, consistent and ability to see what's important and what is not; will fight for his/her team."

"CREATIVE, ASSERTIVE, GRACIOUS, APPRECIATIVE, CONSTRUCTIVE, HIGH-ENERGY."

"Hard working, open-minded and in tune with fellow workers capabilities."

"Someone who treats everyone as equals and allows the team to work together on a level that is void of job titles. This allows everyone to feel they are equally apart of the project and conducive to creative strategies that are effective."

CREATIVE LEADERSHIP SURVEY

“Trusting, encouraging, helpful, patient, focused but flexible, knowledgeable and a friend.”

“Accessible, inspirational, supportive, champion of design, ability to connect with upper management.”

“Sensitive, great communicator who able to see the big picture instead of just the moiré pattern in the loop.”

“Encouraging, supportive, open-minded to new concepts and ideas.”

“No micromanaging. No top down management. First class mind. Balls of steel.”

“Clearly communicates, respects and trusts judgment and experience of creative director and creative staff, allows flexibility and helps sell ideas to upper management.”

“Creative, open-minded, concept before solution.”

“My situation is different since my boss is not a creative person. It would be nice to have another creative to work with.”

“There is no such thing.”

“The dream boss looks a lot like me.”

“Someone who believes everything I create is brilliant and is able to explain why to prospective clients and gets me significant raises each year. (Geez, might be my mom if she were rich...)”

“HONESTLY I DON'T KNOW. I DON'T THINK THAT IT EXISTS.”

“Someone who lets me do what I do. Who knows when I'm at a creative road block and can suggest solutions to motivate me. Someone that knows my strengths and can utilize them.”

“I already have my dream boss, thank God. It's been a long road to get here!”

“A dark Betty Page look alike who loves tight cloths and constantly made wonderfully inappropriate comments all the while stroking my ego and suggesting how much she would like me in charge after work”

ONE BIT OF ADVICE

Inquiring minds also want to know the one piece of advice that readers should give and/or take in order to be a more successful creative leader. Here, once again, is a reasonable cross section of comments.

“My advice would be, push our ideas harder to the upper management and leaders.”

“Walk in your designers' shoes for just a week. See the hurdles we face, and the tools we do not have.”

“Lobby for better control of all creative content being done in the company outside of the creative department.”

“Help communicate throughout the company that good marketing design — design that combines the science and art of marketing — can drive results. The Creative Services department is not simply a place to get work executed. It is a place that can add real value.”

“Be an advocate. Inhouse creative departments don't get enough respect from upper management or the company as a whole.”

“Figure out a way of communicating our department's importance to the rest of the company.”

“It is better for the company as a whole if the creative department stays abreast of current design trends and programs; we need a budget to do so.”

“Be a super connector, be aware of what is going on, that's where you'll provide the most value — bringing it all together. Especially in our organization where we have a “siloed” approach to getting things done, often the right hand does not know what the left is doing, nor do they realize the negative impact of that. As an inhouse creative team, we see all the ships sailing past each other and wonder why isn't anyone talking and solving these problems together?”

“Respect professionals for their experience, expertise and knowledge.”

“Be a mentor, lead by example, critique work honestly, don't settle for good enough.”

CREATIVE LEADERSHIP SURVEY

"Find a way to connect all the displaced creatives who aren't in the Creative Services department. We have to do the same types of jobs you do, but we're out on our own, which makes it hard to know what visual standards we are supposed to be adhering to and even harder to get upper management to listen to us without backup."

"Don't always agree with design changes because the person making the changes is an executive. Educate them as to why we designed items to look a certain way. Don't always say yes!"

"Creatives who are talented and hardworking will eventually leave a good job if they don't feel their needs are being met, and easily find another job. Talent abounds in our field, but a good employee is hard to find. Keep an eye on your team and make sure you have them in mind, not just all the other management and political agendas. A happy and fun environment for creatives goes a long way, and will always be better for the bottom line."
"Cut the dead weight."

"Listen, listen, listen."

"Since I am the manager, here is my advice to myself: promote the value of design here and try to get the school to allow me to be more creative, take a little risk and see if that doesn't generate more funds. I have proven that a few times so now the door is opening wider. And the recent award from Graphic Design USA went a long way to help, too!"

"Make an informed decision and then follow through. Do not be swayed before the program even has a chance to show results."

"Treat your team well. All team members are integral to getting the project complete on time and on budget. Celebrate successes with each other."

"Define our marketing goals better."

"Be more consistent."

"Loosen the reins "

"It does a company no good when you have too many chiefs and not enough little indians. You need to find ways to keep good employees on board by keeping them motivated and happy; not finding ways to milk a dry cow when most employees are already overloaded in this wave of economic cut-backs."

"Listen to us."

"Be more open to different voices in the room."

"LET YOUR DESIGNERS DESIGN."

"Closely scrutinize your management team. Seek anonymous feedback from the team that they supervise. Self-serving, incompetent management leaders can poison a creative team."

"Take more risk"

"We really need a creative team retreat once a year to celebrate accomplishments, share ideas, and become creatively re-energized."

"Be an example for your staff to follow. Exhibit the qualities that you wish others to exhibit."

"To continue to foster an environment that is conducive to creative thinking and team building."

"Understanding of the time it takes for quality work and to try to ask for designs with a little more lead time to deadline."

"Keep up the great work! And get us all some more money!"

"Back up the designers and stop rolling over for everyone."

"Take it easy. Try not to show temper and strong negative feelings towards a project or person. It lowers morale of the whole team."

"Keep up the outstanding work! You've set the bar pretty high, and I look forward to wearing your shoes one day!"