

Managing creatives.

Managing a team of creative people can be challenging.

It's a constant balancing act.

It's challenging because Australian universities and private providers are nurturing a generation of independent thinkers. Most are not taught to work collaboratively and many don't like being told what to do.

And it's challenging because creativity is inherently unpredictable but an integral part of a design manager's role is to reduce risk and deliver predictable results. You can see the problem.

Management styles.

A quick Google search finds hundreds of online references on how best to manage and lead. In a Harvard Business Review article *Leadership that gets results*, Daniel Goleman outlines six leadership styles:

1. **Coercive**: managers who demand compliance
2. **Authoritative**: like a military leader, these managers mobilise people towards a vision
3. **Affiliative**: a caring-sharing manager that builds relationships and promotes harmony
4. **Democratic**: a manager that promotes democracy through participation
5. **Pacesetter**: those that lead by example, setting a standard and pace for others to follow
6. **Coaching**: managers that identify what needs to be done, delegate responsibility and develop others for success

Goleman identified the *authoritative* leader as visionary. In his view, people who work for authoritative leaders understand that what they do matters, and why. It's arguable that all managers need to be authoritative.

More interestingly, the two styles of leadership that Goleman identified as having a **negative** effect of

culture and workplace performance were *coercive* and *pacesetter*. Coercive is self explanatory: it's hard to imagine any worker would like to be led by a coercive manager. The problem with pacesetter, he says, is that it's a form of egomania.

In fact, the pacesetter style destroys climate [morale]. Many employees feel overwhelmed by the pacesetter's demands for excellence, and their morale drops. Guidelines for working may be clear in the leader's head, but she does not state them clearly... Work becomes not a matter of doing one's best along a clear course so much as second-guessing what the leader wants.

Pacesetters don't nurture talent in others, they work to produce cookie-cutter replicas of themselves. Since successful, sustainable creative teams need to include a mixture of technical and creative skill-sets and diverse backgrounds and personalities, pacesetters often don't build great teams.

Interestingly, Goleman found the least-used form of leadership was *coaching*, and he surmises that's because of time constraints.

Coaching leaders help employees identify their unique strengths and weaknesses and tie them to their personal and career aspirations. They encourage employees to establish long-term development goals and help them conceptualize a plan for attaining them. They make agreements with their employees about their role and responsibilities in enacting development plans, and they give plentiful instruction and feedback.

Time constraints aside, coaching is a management style that works well with creative teams. Inspiring designers with an end goal and them helping them learn and develop to reach that goal is a win:win situation. That said, not all managers find coaching easy. Nurturing talent in others requires specific personality traits.

Managing creatives.

The first step of managing creatives is to build a supportive, collaborative environment where skilled designers feel supported and encouraged to take risks and solve problems collectively.

A supportive, collaborative environment is built around clear, effective communication.

These five tips are tried and tested:

1. Don't micromanage

Tell them what you want done, not how to do it. Independent thinking creatives generally do not respond well to micro-management. No designer likes a design manager standing over their left shoulder when they are trying to get a job done. Better to provide a comprehensive brief and timeline that includes touch points when the project can be discussed.

2. Make constraints clear

A former Ogilvy Creative Director, Norman Barry, is quoted as saying '*Give me the freedom of a tight strategy*'.

Creatives typically work best when they have clear direction and understanding of the goals before they start work. Providing clear direction, specific needs and a transparent timeline helps improve the work and avoid frustration.

3. Define roles and responsibilities

People work best when they know what is expected of them and to whom they are answerable. That's why job descriptions are so important – a comprehensive, documented job description is the perfect way to manage expectations.

4. Give objective, constructive feedback.

Giving negative feedback is the hardest part of a design manager's role, but it can't be avoided.

Two ways to avoid making feedback personal are:

- » evaluate using the language of the brief, so the comment is objective rather than a subjective view. For example: *The brief requests the logo remains on the cover.*
- » focus on teamwork rather than the individual. In this context, recommendations to change (or even reject) a design are phrased in terms of 'How can we make this better?' Feedback, then, isn't personal, it's a rallying cry to the team to pitch in on a new solution.

Managing creatives is not for the faint hearted, but recognising your management style and its advantages and disadvantages; building a collaborative supporting environment; and communicating with clarity are three ways to rise to the challenge.

Praise often – more than you think you should.

One of the toughest jobs of a design manager is giving feedback. Many find it difficult but that may be because they are focused on correcting mistakes instead of offering positive feedback.

Leaders can be more effective when they give praise. It builds teamwork and morale.

A good design manager pro-actively develops skills in giving praise. It doesn't have to be long-winded, it can be brief, but sincere.