

The creative industry needs a leadership overhaul

By [Nic Simmonds](#), issued by [Clockwork](#)

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The vast array of creative industry titans, both individuals and companies, to have fallen on the wrong side of moral history in the last 10 years may be a profoundly illuminating sign of the state of leadership in these spaces. I mean, if the mind behind the wholesome Pixar classic, *UP!*, turned out to belong to an altogether unwholesome man, then is anything sacred?



Nic Simmonds

But let me recalibrate, and turn our focus to our beloved advertising industry. Stories of creepy, inappropriate executive creative directors are altogether too common. Tragically, women seem to take the brunt of the toxic, misogynistic culture that permeates many of the halls of the most hallowed, award-winning creative shops.

“It’s all about The Work, creativity above all else!” you’ll still hear, as the global networks pit their locally housed pawn-agencies against each other, fighting to the death and throwing everything they have at each other to come out on top. It’s all about winning; is there a better high in advertising? Don’t answer that question.

The hours seem endless, and weekends are not sacred. Family, health and personal wellbeing come second to, you guessed it, The Work! Management is mandated to squeeze and freeze salaries, bonuses are rare, and authoritarian control-and-command management techniques are still common-place. “Oh you were planning on going to the bush with your family next week? Sorry but (insert huge FMCG client)’s through-the-line brief just came in and we really need this one.” It’s a specific example, but certainly not unfamiliar to anyone who has worked in advertising.

I’ve never liked the culture in advertising. Of course, not all agencies are run like this, and nor is the toxic work culture I’m describing unique to us. But I’m an advertising CEO, so I’m not going to talk about what investment bankers get up to in their offices. I came from journalism, and don’t get me wrong, that is a whole other beast. But what I’ve seen that is unique to advertising, is the intense glorification of high-profile account and award winning, at the tremendous personal cost of the individuals who are tasked with these monumental expectations.

Staff move on, and they move on quickly. After all, the best way to get paid more is to shop yourself around. I’ve had countless good friends work at agencies, who have, despite being commended for great performance, been stonewalled year after year when asking for an increase, or been given a paltry 3% and a pat on the back because it was a lot more than what everyone else got. And yet the pressure and expectations on them continue to mount. Listen I get it, I’ve studied corporate finance and am busy with an MBA. Our business model revolves around maximising the difference between what we pay people, and what we charge for their labor. But is it just me, or is the short-termism seemingly apparent everywhere I look in our industry just confounding? Maybe I’m the idiot here, but I’d rather be missing something and convinced that there’s a better way, than just accept that it’s OK to bleed people and place egos and account wins over the health and wellbeing of the people doing the work.

In my view, the overt prioritisation of the output – The Work – over the people doing it, is equivalent to putting your foot flat on a car’s accelerator to take it as fast as you possibly can, without caring if the engine explodes and you crash horribly. I get that the culture we live in is more interested in what we achieve than how, or why we achieved it. But eventually pushing things to breaking point is just going to make them, well, break. And we have seen it time and again, without having to look beyond South Africa’s own advertising industry.

Right, so I've blown 600 words venting, let me bring this home with what I believe is a better way to start thinking about how we should lead and manage our businesses. To go back to my previous analogy, what if we treated our agencies like beautiful, vintage sports cars that we really loved? We drove them properly, and paid as much attention to what was happening inside of them as how fast we could drive them?

What if we started to really care about the culture of the businesses we are custodians of? What if we actually owned the importance of making sure our people had weekends to spend in whatever way they wanted? If we said, it's not OK for people to constantly work past 5pm every day? I am not saying those things don't happen at Clockwork. What I am saying, is that our leaders and managers are mandated to make sure they are the exceptions, not the rule.

I believe it is our moral responsibility to prioritise the wellbeing of our people above (YES, ABOVE) The Work. That sounds like a ridiculous thing for an advertising executive to say. But I also believe that by doing so, by focusing on leading ethically and with purpose beyond winning at all costs, that we will win more often and do better work in the long term. Also, everyone involved in what we are doing will have better lives, and I think that is a lot more important than all the awards and money in the world.

If you think that a lot of what I am saying here will boil down to agencies needing to just hire more people and pay them a bit better, then you are on the right track, and are probably an advertising executive. And yes, that probably means less profit sometimes. Which is fine with me, but then again, I don't have global shareholders or an EMEA CEO to account to every month.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nic Simmonds is the co-CEO of Clockwork.

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