

The illusion of control

 By [Damon Stapleton](#)

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Kintsugi: The Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with powdered gold.



Image © [Damon's Brain](#)

Recently, I was in Sydney at an award show conveniently called AWARD. A young creative started chatting to me before the show about good and bad agencies.

He asked me what the difference was between a good agency and a bad agency. I had written a piece about this before, so I used what I had written. I said the difference was that most agencies have similar ideas but great agencies make their ideas, average ones don't.



In defence of the often maligned creative

Damon Stapleton 19 Oct 2016



He sort of nodded and wandered off to get another beer. I felt a bit weird. I had given this nice little answer. A neat little one liner. But, it felt insufficient. Maybe even bullsh!t.

Now, it is true that average agencies don't make their best ideas. However, the real question is, *why* don't they make their best ideas?

So, imagine having an idea. Perhaps, even a great idea. It is precious and fragile. It is not perfect but could be powerful. It is new and you believe in it but have no data to back up your gut instinct.

“ Now, take that idea and put it into an environment where there is a process. This process has many boxes that all have to be ticked. This means a new thought meets an existing blueprint. This mitigates risk. It also creates work that has been made many times before. So, the idea dies. ”

Also, the idea cannot have any imperfections according to the existing blueprint. So, round after round of alterations occur. We are now no longer looking at the idea because it is interesting, we are trying to make sure it isn't incorrect. So, the idea dies.



Ideas: They are not for everyone

Damon Stapleton 20 Sep 2017



What happens in a bad agency is that the process becomes more important than the idea. Not being wrong is far more important than being right. And by right, I mean interesting. This is not an earth-shattering problem, except for the fact that it kills creativity. Stone dead. Although, at a painfully slow pace.

Creativity is used to break patterns and create new ways of moving forward. Whereas a process is a pattern designed to give consistency. You could not have two more fundamentally different ways of thinking if you tried.

Creativity does not happen in a consistent timeline, a process does. Take the Japanese art of Kintsugi, pictured above, for example. Process would give you the bowl and discard any broken pieces in a timely fashion. Whereas creativity arrives fashionably late and takes the broken pieces and creates something even more beautiful. Creativity has made something new. Something different. Process creates what exists consistently with an unerring accuracy.



What if the right answer is wrong?

Damon Stapleton 26 Jul 2017



Creativity also needs madness and a fair bit of chaos. Process is all about control. One of the strangest phrases in the English language is 'the creative process.' In essence, they are opposing forces. **Control and chaos.**

A great agency has the ability to harness both of these qualities. This balance lets ideas live a little longer. It is an alchemy that creates a measured madness. They make a space for insanity and instil an unyielding understanding for why discipline is required.

An agency often starts to go into decline when one of these forces overwhelms the other.

When an agency is ruled by chaos, the decline is often sadly spectacular and pretty quick. It is literally like somebody jumping off a building.

“ When an agency is paralysed by control, the death is a far stranger one. The agency doesn't know it is dead. Often, for years, everything works. Everybody knows what their job is. There is great comfort in the precision of process. This comfort is what is sold to clients. Not the work. And then, one day, the client says, 'the work you are making is boring. It's kind of a bit sh!t.' Game over. ”

Average agencies like the comfort of making bowl after consistent bowl, until one day they get smashed and nobody knows what to do with the broken pieces.

Great agencies are able to have both structure and chaos. They can make bowls but they can do so much more.

To paraphrase Leonard Cohen, they understand that it's the cracks that let the light in.

“In all chaos there is a cosmos, in all disorder a secret order.” – Carl Jung

ABOUT DAMON STAPLETON

Damon is regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia. Before that, ECD at Saatchi and Saatchi Australia, before that, group ECD of TBWA Hunt Lascaris and global ECD of Standard Bank. He has won over 500 awards internationally, including a D&AD Black Pencil, Cannes Grand Prix, Grand Clio, ADC Black Cube and most effective ad in the world by Warc 100. Damon is now regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia...

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