

Creative Business

Where Agency Directors Learn How to Read a Spreadsheet

Gideon Amichay kept thinking about an exam question long after his seminar was finished. Not because it was so abstract and theoretical, but because the situation in the exam could have been real. Amichay was asked to envision that the creative director of a large agency that comes to work one day and sees that the office has been completely turned upside down. The exam question is: How should the director deal with his staff in this situation?

"This kind of outbreak is typical for creatives," said Amichay, who is the director of an agency in Israel which has won numerous awards. "They love to break the rules. It is part of their job." In each team, just like in his agency, there are the "stars" and the "silent helpers". At the end of the seminar, Amichay came to the conclusion that such an outbreak is a sign that even the biggest divas secretly are afraid to fail. Amichay suggested that the boss has to change the mood of the office and allow their employees to speak about their fears. At the same time, it must be clear: "The amount of awards you won last year no longer interests anyone; what counts is this season".

One of the goals of the MBA-Program which Amichay graduated from is that these types of insights don't just occur to managers even after decades in a creative industry. Since 2006 the Art Director's Club of Germany and the Steinbeis University have been offering the first "MBA in Creative Leadership" at the Berlin School of Creative Leadership, which they founded. Graphic designers, architects, journalists, marketing experts and film and television managers learn in a one-year, part-time program how to handle leadership roles. In five modules lasting two weeks, they learn how to organize, motivate employees and negotiate with customers. Accounting and finance strategies are also part of the curriculum.

Why is this necessary? "Management training usually gets left out of most creative education programs," says Dieter Herbst, Professor at the University of the Arts (Universitaet der Kuenste) in Berlin and head of the master's program "Leadership in Digital Kommunikation", intended for those who work full-time. At art colleges business classes are often met with skepticism. "We are not interested in training managers!" it is said.

Creatives often realize during the course of their careers that they "speak a much different language than their IT-Expert or business colleagues" and are not able to "translate their ideas," said Herbst. Creatives with additional management training have much better career chances: "When designers work for a corporation their creativity doesn't serve their self-fulfillment, rather it serves the company goals. With additional education they can show that they have understood this."

Sebastian Turner, partner at the ad agency Scholz & Friends, has had similar experiences. "At some point in your career you just can't move any further up the ladder without solid business knowledge," said Turner, one of the founders and a director of the Berlin School. Creative businesses are often run by accountants, and the creatives are somewhat to blame for this. A "mixture of arrogance and shyness" keeps them from gaining the necessary

business knowledge. The excuse usually is: "I am too creative for that stuff!". But without the business knowledge you can easily feel "like a clown" in a sales meeting, said Turner. The creatives usually have a disadvantage when it comes to strategy and management discussions. After Turner completed his MBA, he felt he could see the clients eye to eye, and was in a better position to integrate his ideas, since he understood the "thought process of the manager."

Nevertheless, many participants feel lost in the course material at the beginning of the MBA modules, which include strategies, organizational charts, and statistics, said Doug Guthrie, Management Professor at New York University and docent at the Berlin School. Practical examples serve the purpose of enlivening the course materials for the students.

The MBA students, as at other business schools, work on case studies, and not only from the fashion or advertising industries. There are also case studies about the development of a new airline or a change in management at a consumer goods company. "You are certainly not going to become the director of a bank after these courses," says Sebastian Turner. "But the basic knowledge will help you to understand the clients and their situations."

And the business courses have not dampened his creative energy, said Berlin School alumnus Gideon Amichay. He now thinks more thoroughly through the feasibility of his concepts, but this is better than having to give up on high concept ideas. His masters thesis, which all Berlin School participants must turn in at the end of their class, even made it's way into his work at the agency. Amichay had worked with the phenomenon of the "creative consumer": Consumers that use a company's products to make their own films or photos. In researching this topic Amichay saw this phenomenon not as a danger but rather as a chance for creative industries, said Amichay. Now Amichay offers his clients the possibility to design campaigns and portals that use the creativity of the consumers to create individualized messages.

As the director of an agency, Amichay had a few other issues that came up after starting a course of study so many years into his career. First was the uneasiness that his choice to do an MBA might cause in his team: "Why is he studying again? Is missing some skills or is he unsure of himself?" Secondly, he saw that this agency ran well without him while he was attending the MBA modules. "That was pretty scary - you think that you can't be replaced!"

When Amichay returned from a seminar about company management, his team saw what change their boss was capable of. Amichay ripped all the designs, posters and drawings off the walls and declared to his shocked staff: "The past is not relevant - we need to re-invent ourselves!". "But then they found the white walls refreshing and motivating". After one week the first new designs were hung.

By Tina Rohowski
DIE ZEIT, 8. October 2008

