

Who will teach the teachers?

 By [Damon Stapleton](#) 10 Aug 2016

Many years ago, I worked with a truly great global creative director. Let's call him John.

He was a mentor to me. We were working on a large global piece of business. The problem we faced was making the company, and by company, I mean a board of about 12 very conservative, risk-averse people understand they had to change. We had to make them understand that the work they were doing wasn't the path forward.



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At the time I didn't have a clue how to do this. I was young and a little out of my depth. The people I was dealing with were worried about their prostates and I was worried about getting a Playstation. That is a big difference in anyone's language. The last thing these people wanted to do was take a risk. It is one of those situations where paralysis was the most likely outcome. This is always a problem because the speed an agency needs to move at is often way faster than the speed a large multi-national wants to proceed at.

The meeting began in the good boardroom. The boardroom that is used when they bring out the good biscuits. Wood panelling and tiny microphones for each chair. A horseshoe-table full of corporate *bonhomie*. We stood up and we began the presentation. The first slide was a whole lot of print ads that belonged to this company and its competitors. John and I stood up. John looked at the gathering, pointed the screen and asked, 'Who can tell me what is wrong with this slide?' The board looked at it. Some squinted. A few looked at each other. They shrugged. Nobody knew.

John then simply said one sentence.

'All the logos have been switched.'

The board stared at the print ads and realised their competitors' work had their logo on it and vice versa. Nobody on the board had noticed. The work in this sector was generic and violently boring. They realised they were looking at a sea of sameness. Everybody understood.

John then simply said 'That's why you need to change'. They all nodded. Essentially, it was a one-slide presentation. We had broken all the rules of big meetings. It had also probably saved us three months in time. He had also taught me a valuable lesson. John had framed the problem so beautifully that everybody understood they desperately needed a solution.

This meeting happened almost a decade ago but it has stayed with me. I think it has stayed with me because I feel lucky to have had a teacher. Somebody to show me. I think as agencies become leaner and leaner this will become a rare thing. It also showed me that creativity can do something that nothing else can. In the hands of the right person creativity doesn't just tell you the truth, it makes you feel it.

That moment came back to me this week because of two things. I saw an international piece of work that wasn't just bad, it was dangerous. Dangerous for the agency concerned. It said to me the people in the agency didn't know what they were doing or were so stretched they had lost perspective. Or, perhaps no creatives were involved at all. It said there was no wise head in that agency, or the client for that matter. There was no teacher. There was no mentor.

Just deadlines, pressure and very little wisdom. I think this is going to become a problem in the next couple of years. We are going to see some real car crashes.

The other reason is an increasing belief I have about the current unsatisfying narrative in our industry. It is the idea that creativity can come from anywhere. We can all just become one big think tank. Until you make the work that is. Then often very young creatives have the heavy responsibility to make sense of all those magnificent suggestions. You see, creativity can come from anywhere. But the work gets made by creatives. It is their job. It would seem many have forgotten that it is a skill and an actual job. It is a job with a lot of pressure. If you don't believe me, go and try it. It is a job where mentorship, support and experience could make a massive difference to the work and the people that make the work.

Many seem to think if everyone is a creative the work will improve. Quantity rather than quality. The more ideas, input and multitudes of collaborators the better. Actually, the opposite is true.

In fact, if you look at the work that is globally celebrated like Under Armour, John Lewis and just recently the new spot from Channel 4 for the Paralympics, the one thing they have in common is quality, a simple idea, couple of wise heads and great creatives working on it.

A very old formula.

I go back to that meeting where I saw what creativity and quality can do. Where I saw somebody with the experience and talent to change someone's business in a single moment. Where somebody has taught me a lesson that will always stay with me. That is what great mentors do.

They give you things that are unaffected by time.

"Any fool can know. The point is to understand." Albert Einstein

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