Agencies Need Teams, Not Departments

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Twenty-seven. That's how many times I offered a brilliant freelance creative director a full-time job when I was chief creative officer. Twenty-seven times, they said no.

It drove me crazy. They already freelanced with us regularly, loved the team, crushed the briefs, and (apparently) tolerated me just fine. The money was great. What was the problem?

When we finally got to the bottom of it, their answer illuminated everything wrong with how agencies develop talent: "I don't want to deal with clients. I don't want to run a piece of business. And I don't want to manage anyone."

In other words, they just wanted to do what they did best—cook up great work.

Within agencies, we've built these rigid departmental structures where career advancement means taking on more responsibilities that often have nothing to do with what made someone exceptional in the first place.

We're obsessed with making everyone do everything. Got someone brilliant at cultural activations? Great, now make them lead a 360 creative platform. Have a writer who can craft the perfect script? Awesome, put them in charge of managing 10 people and attending status meetings. Excel at brand identity? Here's a

stack of banner ads to oversee.

It isn’t just wrong, it’s wasteful. We’re taking our best specialists and turning them into mediocre generalists. And the solution isn’t complicated: Build teams, not departments.

Think about any great sports team. They win because they have players who excel in their positions and complement each other. They don’t force their star quarterback to play defense. They don’t ask a guy who hit 50 homers and stole 50 bases to pitch. Wait, bad example. You get the gist.

So why do we keep doing this in advertising?

Instead of building hierarchies where everyone needs to be a jack-of-all-trades to advance, we should be creating flexible teams of specialists who are beyond brilliant at their craft. Want a massive cultural moment? Bring in the earned media virtuoso. Need a platform that will define your brand for the next decade? Get the strategist who’s done it twenty times. Looking for innovation? Tap the person who’s launched billion-dollar products.

But here’s the key: Don’t make any of them do all of it.

When I finally wrote that CD a custom contract—no clients, no management, just pure creative work—they took the job. Years later, after I’d left, they were still there. Why wouldn’t they be? It was the perfect role for their talents.

The future of our industry isn’t about building departments of generalists. It’s about assembling teams of specialists who complement each other’s strengths. Yes, it requires more flexibility. Yes, it means rewriting some HR policies. And yes, it might make your org chart look messy.

But the payoff? Better work. Happier talent. More efficiency.

And a whole lot less super-unique, polygonal pegs being shoved into round holes.

It’s time to stop forcing people up a ladder they never wanted to climb—don’t tell Jalen Brunson he needs to play center to advance his basketball career. Let’s build teams that let experts be experts.

The future belongs to the specialists. The only question is whether your agency will be smart enough to let them play their position.

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