The Design Career Path:
Career Development for In-House Creatives and Managers

Finding practical ways to help creative professionals in their career development is one of the many compelling interests of managers of in-house creative teams, particularly during these challenging economic times.

A group of **30 people** in the InSource community came together to share their insights on the topic of **The Design Career Path: Career Development for In-House Creatives and Managers**, an InSource Roundtable Event held in New York City on November 4, 2011.

Memorable Career Advice Given to NY Roundtable Participants "You are the heat for your team – Not only should you take the heat for the whole group, you also help fan the fire that keeps them going and dish out the heat to fight like hell on their behalf." • "Do what you love and the money will follow." • "Slow and steady wins every time." • "Document everything." • "Follow your dreams." • "Listen more than you talk." • "I'm here for you. It's my job to put my pencil down to help you." *[From a boss when interrupted by an employee with a question]* • "Always market and promote yourself as much as you promote your clients." • "Do what you love—design." • "Just try it." • "Make the best of what you have." • "Have an upbeat attitude no matter how exhausted you are." • "Stop being a perfectionist; it's okay to make mistakes and learn from them." • "Follow your gut." • "Believe in yourself." • "Always think about what to do next." • "Never let them see you sweat." • "Have a secretary, don't be one." • "Do your best." • "Try something new every day." • "Improve your selling and communications skills." • "Put yourself behind everything." • "Give good projects to work on to those you manage." • "Try to make the world a better looking place." • "Go beyond boredom." • "Rushing never saves time." • "Own up to your mistakes and offer solutions to fix them." • "If you can't add value, you're wasting your time." • "Fight for what you believe in."

InSource provides the following take-away messages from these discussions in hopes that participants will find inspiration to move forward in applying best practices in the workplace:

Ideas to Promote Career Development

> Providing opportunities for learning or training builds confidence and identifies competencies for both the inexperienced and experienced designer. Examples include teaching software skills to others; coaching junior designers on print production by taking them on press checks; and providing individualized coaching and mentoring.

> Assign "guru" area/tasks for each member of your creative team.

> When limited career advancement opportunities exist within your company, help employees grow in place, which helps them to acquire skills and experience to advance their careers outside your company.

> Advancement alternatives can be explored, including pursuing executive training on the business side of design management in academic programs, working on pro bono projects for your company, volunteering for leadership opportunities in the design community, and becoming a teacher of design.

In-House Areas for Advancement for Managers

> Identify specific functions in your workplace and how expansion in any of these areas can strategically lead to career advances:
> • print shop
> • brand management
> • events
> • audiovisual, web, digital products
> • manage staff in multiple locations
> • budget management

> Start by thinking about what additional areas you would like to manage. For example, does your in-house photographer work without the benefit of art direction? Can functions currently outsourced be reeled in for in-house work performance and/or oversight based on making a case to show both quality improvement and cost savings?

> Be aware that taking on additional responsibilities does not necessarily lead to career advances. Develop an integrated strategy that showcases your value to others in business terms such as return on investment, value-added productivity, and how to move the company forward.

> Take the initiative to bridge the gap with others relating to workload/workflow issues with such messages as "we can help you" and "involve us earlier" and "we can do more than make it pretty."

> Avoid the trap of focusing on "doing things cheaper"—others will focus on "cheap" and dismiss the value of design.

> Suggestion was made to study your company's organizational chart to understand key players and how your creative team fits in the organization. Then consider identifying specific skill sets (not people) that exist and how they fit into the overall productivity of the organization. Adopt a mindset that goes beyond being production-oriented by creating output to becoming involved in offering distribution solutions.

> Find out what are the specific goals of your boss. Know and understand the goals of your boss. Focus on "how can I and our creative team help advance these goals?"

> Reach out to other groups in the organization and ask, "How can I be a resource to you?" Adopt a mindset of "do first, get rewarded later."

Areas for Development for Your Staff

> Expanding the number of departments at your firm that want to work with your in-house creative team allows your team new areas of responsibility and opportunity, which, in turn, furthers their career path.

> Examples of specific actions to take are learning additional software to take on web and intranet projects; improving knowledge of Adobe Creative Suite by attending offsite classes; and improving knowledge of print production by attending press checks and paper shows.

> Elevate yourself by building the skill sets of those you manage.

> Ask your staff, "Where do you want to grow?" Listen to them and figure out how training or self-training interests can be addressed.
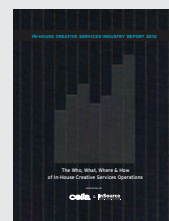
> Train your staff on how to effectively present their work, as well as develop their selling skills. Bring staff along to internal business meetings for exposure to the language/interactions with other decision makers in the company.

> Share department goals, strategies, and budgets with the entire creative team up front so your team understands they are part of something bigger than only their immediate workload. During formal goal-setting sessions, draw a direct line from a person's goals to the goals of the person's boss/company.

> Involve staff in the process of defining expectations versus exceeding expectations.

> Build your own culture with your creative team. What's really important is what happens between the manager and each member of the creative team. Above all, people want to be treated well. Gestures such as expressing appreciation/encouraging healthy competition with gift cards or other personal rewards can help build morale, as well as developing a department "brag book" for collecting positive feedback from others or documentation of appreciated work.

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