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Learning creative focus

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BODY:

"But that's so logical," the wondering student said, "Why doesn't everybody do it that way?"

We were discussing an approach to creative work called FOCUS. Developed at General Electric a dozen years ago, FOCUS teaches that the creative process has three phases -- analytical, strategic and creative -- which must be approached in that order.

The student had just watched lights go on all over her copywriting class, as work suddenly had purpose and popped into focus.

People weren't just making ads anymore. They were helping someone to understand something, or persuading someone to do something. They were creating a dialogue. In a word, they were communicating.

Why doesn't everyone, indeed?

I remembered again Ogilvy & Mather creative leader Norman Berry's plea, born of frustration easily imagined: "Give me the freedom of a tightly defined strategy."

It's hard to communicate when clients are vague about with whom you should be communicating, about what or why. How can I tell this talented, trusting person that some of her clients or bosses won't have answers to the questions she will ask?

Shall I quote Peter Drucker to her? "Many managers don't know whether their advertising does anything; or if so, what," he noted in "The Age of Discontinuity."

Shall I explain to her about how the windows have a tendency to turn into mirrors, the higher up in the executive tower you go?

She's already observed that too much corporate advertising is what former GE Ad Manager Dave Burke used to call "we-we" advertising, but the phrase "executive ego trip" hasn't occurred to her yet.

Shall I tell her about the people she'll meet who won't care how good she can be?

Shall I quote a highly placed consumer advertising executive, who subscribes to the Wernher von Braun "dynamite behind the wheels of the Volkswagen" theory? ("It's messy, but it'll move the car forward," von Braun is alleged to have said.) My friend's application of that theory is "If there's enough media throw-weight behind a commercial, it doesn't matter whether it's any good or not."

Shall I tell her about the agency account guy with the ossified taste who "knows what the client likes" and wouldn't let an idea leak through even if he had to soak it up with his Sulka tie? Or about the shell-shocked creative director who's lost his nerve and wants only to deliver on time -- whether he has anything to deliver or not?

Or about the ad manager whose wife went to art school once and whose daughter is the target group and who runs his own review board around the dining table at night?

Of course not. I want her to leave Chapel Hill hopeful. I want her to expect to find the client who knows exactly what he or she wants his advertising to accomplish, who holds the agency accountable for those results, but who would no more tell the agency how to achieve them than he would tell the doctor where to make the cuts to take out his gall bladder.

I want her to expect to find the account executive who treats her like a treasure, welcomes her work and brags about her to the client -- even when she misses.

I want her to expect to find the creative director who can teach her, expand her knowledge, nurture her talent -- even if he sees early that she's going to be his equal or better.

I want her to expect to find the "real world" full of people who want to do the best work of their lives every day they come to work, who want the same for all their colleagues . . . people who are excited about advertising, who work hard and long because they want to . . . people who won't settle for less.

And I want her to make life so miserable for all the other turkeys that they'll think about finding some other line of work. Keep asking those questions, Deirdre. *Non carborundum illegitimi.*