

A VIEW FROM JOSH KRICHEFSKI

Mental health in agencies – assessing the impact of client behaviour

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I recently took part in a closed debate in the Houses of Parliament around the motion that “client behaviour is a contributor to putting at risk the mental health of agency personnel”. I argued, alongside Kerry Chilvers from Direct Line Group, a MediaCom client, against the motion.

This is an emotive topic and even the above two sentences will likely have provoked an immediate response from many reading this. Whether you’re client or agency-side, the topic of “the client/agency relationship” and, in this case, how much that relationship impacts the health of those involved, will resonate.

And it's a tension that lay at the heart of the debate I took part in. I believe the logic behind this was "clients are demanding more for less; this is putting pressure on agencies; this is creating stress for their people; this is causing mental health problems".

But I don't believe that is completely accurate.

The pressures of a rapidly transforming world

The first part is true. Whether clients are cutting budgets or asking for more within existing budgets, the message is the same – deliver more for less. And it's not hard to see why this is happening.

The world is changing, economically, politically and socially, and clients are under more pressure than ever. Pressure to innovate, grow market share, win over customers or potential customers, improve productivity and efficiency, make a positive impact on the world. The list goes on. This impacts what they need from an agency and yes, that often translates into "more for less".

The second part of the motion logic – "this is creating stress for their people; this is causing mental health problems" – is not accurate.

What do we mean by "mental health"

It's no secret that mental health is important [to me as a person](#) and to MediaCom as a business. I believe it's my responsibility, and the responsibility of every manager at MediaCom, to help our people protect their mental health.

Part of the challenge in helping people maintain good mental health lies in overcoming misunderstandings around it. In the case of this debate, we started by discussing the notion that stress causes mental health problems.

MIND [states that](#) "mental health problems can have a wide range of causes. It's likely that

for many people there is a complicated combination of factors – although different people may be more deeply affected by certain things than others”.

It then gives a list of factors which could result in a period of poor mental health, of which I'd hope the only one a client could influence is stress. But we should note that it's listed as “severe or long-term stress”.

This isn't about “having a bad day at work” or “facing a tough deadline”, it's about a sustained period of severe stress. This is a vital distinction because stress itself is not negative. [Lack of stress is as bad for us as too much stress](#). In short, we need a certain level of stress to function at our best.

For me this clears up whether client behaviour puts our mental health at risk. Because, for this to be true, we would have to believe not just that clients can make work stressful, but that client behaviour is directly causing “severe and long-term stress”. And I don't think that's fair.

The responsibility of agency management

Clients want more great work for less. And at times they may exert some pressure to get it. But it is the job of agency leadership and senior account management to manage the pressure that comes from clients so that excessive, long-term stress does not arise.

There are many ways to go about this but to pick what I feel are the three most vital:

- **Human conversations:** we need to have frank, open discussions with clients at the contract stage then continuing those on an ongoing basis. This lets everyone be clear on what clients can reasonably expect, and it lets you define how to work together to get the best results.

We also need to be brave and have open conversations with clients about the issue of stress on our people. We're all human, why would acting like one be strange or

unprofessional? Clients are not inhuman and they're also smart enough to know they'll get better work from their agencies if they work in a respectful, collaborative way that values agency personnel.

We should discuss what level of pressure will bring the best work from our people, and about what level of pressure is unreasonable. It can be a tough conversation, but managers and business leaders must have them. Otherwise we are failing our people.

- **Training our people to look after those around them:** the second way we can make sure that pressure from clients does not lead to “severe and long-term stress” is by training and developing our managers properly.

They need to be able to recognise the signs of short-term overwork and manage their teams appropriately, intercepting and responding to any minor issues before they become major ones.

In training them on this – how to spot problems and then how to address them with clients – you give them all they need at a skills level. But you also show them that protecting their people in this way is part of their job and the business supports them completely in it.

- **Training our people to look after themselves:** we also need to help our people handle stress and their feelings. We do a lot of training around the areas of mindfulness, resilience and stress management – sharing with our people life skills that will be important both in and out of work.

One of the key themes of this training is that each individual is responsible for skilfully managing their own feelings and their own response to pressure.

That's obviously a very nuanced idea. And such coaching needs to be combined with making sure we are protecting our people from undue stress. But all individuals can play a role in protecting themselves. Our job is to teach them how to do that.

This is a difficult topic to discuss. Our industry is built on the relationships between clients and agencies. But I don't feel it's helpful, or responsible, for agencies to blame a client for poor mental health. We need to take a long hard look at ourselves, the kind of conversations we're having with clients and understand the role we play in this.

I believe many clients are putting more pressure on agencies. But this should never translate directly into poor mental health for agency personnel. And if it does, it's not the client's fault, it's the agency's. Because we have failed to do a vital part of our job.

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