

**THE  
COMPLETE  
CREATIVE  
DIRECTOR**

A masterclass in  
confident creative  
leadership

**Mick Mahoney**

**THE  
COMPLETE  
CREATIVE  
DIRECTOR**

**THE  
COMPLETE  
CREATIVE  
DIRECTOR**

BIS Publishers  
Timorplein 46  
1094 CC Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
bis@bispublishers.com  
www.bispublishers.com

ISBN 978 90 636 9871 3

Copyright © 2025 Mick Mahoney and BIS Publishers.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owners.

Every reasonable attempt has been made to identify owners of copyright. Any errors or omissions brought to the publisher's attention will be corrected in subsequent editions.

Art direction by Grant Parker  
Design by Alexandre Coco  
Copy-editing by Rosanna Fairhead  
Proofreading by Kathy Steer  
Indexing by Hilary Bird

**To Paul Weinberger and  
John O’Keeffe. Thank you  
for your trust and belief.  
You were bigger influences  
than you know.**

# **THE COMPLETE CREATIVE DIRECTOR**

**A masterclass in  
confident creative  
leadership**

**Mick Mahoney**

**BIS Publishers**

<b>Foreword.</b>	6
<b>Introduction.</b>	10
<b>How to use this book.</b>	14
<b>Acknowledgements.</b>	15
<b>Notes.</b>	230
<b>Index.</b>	236

# 1

## **What does it take?**

16

# 2

## **The other stuff a CD does.**

36

# 3

## **Coping with the chaos.**

54

# 4

## **What does everyone expect from me?**

74

# 5

## **Building and running a creative department.**

94

6

**Clients.  
Love them  
or lose them.**

116

7

**How to  
master  
pitching.**

136

8

**Inspiring  
a creative  
culture across  
the agency.**

154

9

**The commercials  
of creativity.**

174

10

**Adapting  
to change.**

194

11

**The pros and  
cons of awards.**

212

# Foreword.

I've always considered George Bernard Shaw's oft-quoted epigram 'Those who can, do; those who can't, teach' to be a false dichotomy. I think Aristotle was much closer to the truth when he said: 'Those who understand, teach.' For starters, some of the greatest practitioners in history have also been great teachers; it's not mutually exclusive. Albert Einstein taught theoretical physics at three universities in three different countries. J.R.R. Tolkien was an English teacher. Marie Curie, Stephen Hawking, Noam Chomsky and J. Robert Oppenheimer also made a living in the teaching profession at some point. And no one would have a pop at their talents when it came to walking the walk.

I have always found that having a track record or validated proof of your ability as a master practitioner is something of a prerequisite if you want to gain genuine respect from those you aspire to teach. For me, Mick is the perfect marriage of theory and practice, and that's a great thing because the world needs both. I've had the privilege of seeing Mick's dual talents up close, as his strategic partner for almost a decade. I've seen this on everything from big, established, centuries-old brands to fledgling start-ups taking their first anxious steps in comms. I've worked with him to run a company of more than 1,000 employees, and I've sat in a room with him when there were just three people and a dog (literally). In terms of clients, I've watched him advise grizzled, cynical industry veterans, but equally coax and cajole enthusiastic youngsters landing their first campaigns. I've watched him execute award-winning and till-filling work on domestic and international campaigns from massive telly to social channels that weren't even theory when he started out in the business. And I've watched him sensitively nurture placement teams on their first day, and calmly steer the most talented senior creatives towards achieving more than they thought possible.

The world needs teachers with a deep understanding of their subject, who can help to develop the next generation with their relentlessly enthused and seductively hypnotic passion for it. But it also needs lauded, awarded, respected practitioners who don't just parrot received wisdom or marketing theory.

A note of caution: the internet (especially LinkedIn) is full of lofty listicles and gushing bullet points passing themselves off as



the quick-fix solution to creating great work or becoming a brilliant creative director. But they always lack the meaningful practical advice needed to put that theory into practice, or any understanding of the multiple factors at play to enable the promised success. They feed on anxious minds.

In my eyes, there really is no one better for any creative person to learn from than Mick. He won the Cannes Grand Prix at an age when most creatives are still dreaming of their first promotion. He went on to become one of the most awarded creatives of his generation. He was also the first CCO to feature on *Campaign* magazine's Annual List of top creative leaders in three successive agencies. He has created and overseen some of the most famous and lauded work in the world. Yet he retains a relentless interest and infectious enthusiasm for the pursuit of great ideas, and for inspiring others to join him.

There is a serious lack of material to advise ambitious and talented creatives on how to make the step from writing to managing. Or how to develop the many new skills they will need as they rise through the levels to CCO and their responsibilities multiply. Until now, there has certainly been an absence of a considered and comprehensive blueprint for how to be an effective creative director, which demonstrates an understanding of the pressures, complexity and nuance needed to succeed in this most demanding of roles. Especially one written by a recognised expert. Fortunately, we now have *The Complete Creative Director*. You'll never get to be a great creative director by reading a book. But I think you'll get to be a better and more confident one by reading *this* book. And regardless of what stage of your creative leadership career you are at, even if you're a creative who is dreaming of becoming one, this text should be your constant companion. It has much to *teach* everyone about *doing*.

Kevin Chesters.  
CSO, KC Consulting

**You have to learn how  
to be a creative director.  
You can't just be given a  
title and go, 'TA-DA!  
NOW YOU'RE A  
CREATIVE DIRECTOR.'**

**Nadja Lossgott  
Joint CCO, AMV BBDO London**

# Introduction.

was not a complete creative director. I've never met anyone who is. I'm not even sure it's possible to be one. But if we know what one looks like, we can all, at least, have something to aim for. And that has got to be a good thing, right?

The reason for writing this book is that, to the best of my knowledge, no one else ever has. There are a number of books that focus on a few aspects that I cover, but there is nothing that encompasses everything you will need to be aware of. In fact, there is very little training or guidance for creative leaders in the advertising and communications industries full stop. It's ad hoc at best. There's no professional qualification or industry-recognised training programme. It's as if we no longer need help, advice or nurturing once we leave art school or finish our advertising degree courses. We're expected to pick it up along the way, to learn on the job. This works to some extent for many people – it's how I learned – but we simply can't know how many people it hasn't worked for, and how much better we could all be at the role if training were available. Given how important the role is to the advertising and communications industry, I believe it's a missed opportunity not to commit to increasing professionalism and knowledge transfer, and lowering the anxiety attached to the job. It would also make a huge difference to creative departments, agencies, clients and the industry generally to have happier, calmer and more confident CDs. The more the mechanics of being a great CD are understood, the more we can focus on the work and on nurturing talent. And that is what really matters.

For years, creative directors have guarded their secrets, nervous of giving away any advantage and worried that they will look vulnerable if they admit to not knowing something. I've experienced both of those feelings. And neither is helpful. Seeking and sharing knowledge are not weaknesses – they are strengths.

I first became a creative director twenty-five years ago, and I was clueless about what my new role entailed. My intention with this book is to share what I've learned since, informed by my experiences as a CD, ECD (Executive Creative Director) and CCO (Chief Creative Officer). These experiences enable me to offer a real-world view. It's not an idealised account of what a CD could be, nor is it sugar-coated. It's a practical how-to manual that you can refer to throughout your career.

Another creative director might write a very different book, but I'm certain that we would agree on the fundamentals that underpin the role and how to succeed in it. In fact, it has been reassuring to discover through my research for this book just how closely the best minds in the business align on what 'good' looks like when it comes to being a creative director. I hope it triggers debate and that the role and its many aspects are discussed more openly than they are right now. I genuinely hope that future editions of this book contain myriad amendments and builds from all the brilliant and committed creative directors that come into contact with it. And I hope it becomes the catalyst for more support and knowledge transfer for what is an increasingly demanding and complex role.

Looking at the contents page, you might wonder why there isn't a chapter dedicated to creative leadership. It's a deliberate omission. Great creative leadership is the sum of all the sections in all the chapters of this book. It manifests itself in everyday ways, not in grand gestures. And, since this is a practical manual, I wanted to keep it that way. You will learn to lead with confidence in your own abilities, care and compassion for others, and a commitment to great work.

I wish I could say that I lived up to every point in every chapter. But I didn't. Most of the time I simply didn't know what I didn't know. There was no framework to refer to, no instruction manual, and that resulted in a lot of unhealthy anxiety and unnecessary underperformance. I would often say jokingly that I was making it up as I went along. But I really was. All creative directors are at every stage. I hope that will now start to change.

*The Complete Creative Director* provides clear, practical actions for you to incorporate into your working day. It will help you to become more aware of and knowledgeable about what is expected of you as a creative leader, and what is to come. You will have a clearer understanding of best practice and feel confident to tailor what you have learned to suit your unique personality. You will also have mechanisms for keeping your anxiety in check, enabling you to approach the role with greater focus and authority. You will gain a better understanding of how to build strong key relationships, both internally and externally, and how to radiate a creative culture across

the business. You will be more resilient in the face of setbacks and adaptable to constant change. All this will give you more time and energy for what ultimately matters: developing great creative work.

This book covers how to create the conditions, relationships and environment to get to great work. It doesn't deal with what great work looks like. That's up to you. (And there are countless books, courses, podcasts and so on for that.)

I'm very grateful for the life that being an advertising CD/ECD/CCO has enabled me to enjoy, and I'm excited to be able to pass on what I've learned. It's an incredible rollercoaster of a career choice. And one that I've never regretted for a moment.

## How to use this book.

*The Complete Creative Director* is not intended to be read sequentially. Feel free to do that, but it was written as a reference book, something useful to return to again and again when the need arises.

Certain topics will be more relevant to you at different stages of your creative leadership career. But there are such blurred lines and overlaps between the various creative titles and responsibilities associated with them in different agencies and organisations that it would be impossible to separate them all in a meaningful way. So I have used the term 'creative director' in its generic sense of a creative professional with leadership responsibilities. You can then determine what is relevant to you.

At the end of the book there are six blank pages for you to add your thoughts, experiences and builds so that you can personalise your copy. If you think your notes contain something I should have included, or if you have a great build on anything I've mentioned, take a photo or scan of them and send them to me at [mick@mcreativeindustries.com](mailto:mick@mcreativeindustries.com). I plan to update the book regularly to keep it as relevant as possible.

I am also conscious that there is only so much information that you can put into a book before it becomes overwhelming and defeats its original purpose of being helpful. Fortunately, I can go into more practical detail in the *Complete Creative Director* masterclass training programme I run, or in my one-on-one coaching sessions.

# Acknowledgements.

*The Complete Creative Director* would not have been possible without the wisdom and support given by some of the creative industry's finest minds. More than 40 hours of recorded interviews and more than 2,000 pages of transcribed notes have helped me to shape what you are about to read.

Helen Andrews – CEO, Johannes Leonardo NY

Lynsey Atkin – former CCO, McCann London

Claire Beale – Editor, Creative Salon

Chris Beresford-Hill – Global CCO, BBDO

Richard Brim – former CCO, Adam & Eve DDB London

Rob Campbell – CSO, Colenso NZ

Kevin Chesters – CSO, KC Consulting

Scott Dungle – CCO, Uncommon London

Charlie Gatsky Sinclair – President Brands & Entertainment, Uncommon

Alex Grieve – Global & London CCO, BBH

Bronwen Hemming – FD, Wieden + Kennedy London

Nicholas Hulley – Joint CCO, AMV BBDO London

Tanya Livesey – Global MD Creative & Design, TTB

Nadja Lossgott – Joint CCO, AMV BBDO London

Katie Mackay-Sinclair – Partner, Mother London

Felix Richter – CCO, Mother London

Charlie Rudd – CEO, Creative Practice, Publicis Groupe UK

Bill Scott – CEO, Droga5 London

Rodrigo Sobral – Global CCO, Oliver

David Spencer – CFO, Goodby Silverstein & Partners SF



Creative directors are often thrust into leadership roles with little practical guidance. The result? Anxiety, costly mistakes, frustrated clients, dysfunctional departments and unhappy agencies. As the role becomes increasingly complex and demanding, the need for clear, actionable advice is more urgent than ever.

*The Complete Creative Director* is the first comprehensive manual for creative directors, offering essential tools to help you lead

with confidence, and providing straightforward advice that you can build into your day. It outlines what's expected of you at every stage of your leadership career,

and gives you the tools to meet those expectations.

You'll gain a solid grasp of best practices while learning to adapt them to your style and personality. The book also offers techniques for managing anxiety, building relationships both inside and outside your organisation, and fostering a creative culture. You'll learn how to develop a thriving creative department, master pitches, and engage with the commercial side of the business. This book will make you resilient in the face of setbacks, adaptable to change, and better equipped to focus on what truly matters: delivering exceptional creative work.

# THE COMPLETE CREATIVE DIRECTOR

[www.bispublishers.com](http://www.bispublishers.com)



9 789063 698713 >