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# Creative Types Need a Balance of Searching and Selling



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**Creative people can take your business to a whole new level, but don't expect it to be an easy ride.**

On October 22, 2015, when Raf Simons resigned as creative director of the prestigious French fashion house, Christian Dior Couture, the company's chief executive Sidney Toledano and the whole fashion world wondered what went wrong. Just four years earlier, Simons' predecessor John Galliano, the company's star British creative director, had been fired for 'odious behaviour' when, after a very public battle with addictions, he was caught on film hurling anti-Semitic and racist abuse in a Paris café. Like Galliano, Simons had brought success to the Dior brand, sending revenues and the company's share price soaring. He has, however, a very different personality and during his tenure there had been no signs of unease or disruption.

Simons' departure, while unexpected, was not out of character for an industry which is becoming increasingly known for its churn of creative individuals. Over a recent 12-month period, 11 other creative directors of major fashion houses left their positions. And, while there are many

exceptions to the trend – Francisco Costa and Italo Zucchelli spent more than 10 years at Calvin Klein before being replaced by Raf Simons, and Donna Karan was the creative director of her namesake company for 31 years before stepping down in 2015 – recently the relationship line between creative types and the houses which employ them, seems to be shrinking: as we asked in a recent [case study](#) written with INSEAD Research Fellow Brian Henry, PhD, is this a durable trend, if so why and can it be mitigated?

## **Commercial vs. creative tension**

Creating an environment where creative people can flourish can be challenging. This is not confined to traditionally creative industries such as fashion, film or music. Journalism, science, academia, IT and technology organisations are all home to creative people working to produce output or ideas that are both novel and useful. While creative thinking is increasingly being credited as vital to a successful business or leadership, creative people are very independent and autonomous thus making their relationship with conventional management difficult. Hierarchy is loathed and emotions can run high.

Luxury and fashion industries are home to a particularly heightened tension between commerce and creativity. To meet the growing need for creative and innovative products in a highly competitive environment, creative people are being pushed to meet untenable deadlines and satisfy customer expectations that do not match their sensibilities. They are expected to promote their work, to establish a proximal relationship with customers, selling the brand dream by connecting it with everyday life, all the while under pressure to deliver more and faster. For the first 10 years of Galliano’s career he worked on two collections a year, by the time he was fired from Dior he was overseeing 32 collections or, as Dana Thomas noted in her book [Gods and Kings: The Rise and Fall of Alexander McQueen and John Galliano](#): “He was no longer a designer – he was a manager, a job for which he was never trained.”

Star designer Alexander McQueen, voiced his own frustration when quitting the role of creative director of Givenchy in 2001, complaining that his contract was constraining his creativity. Considered one of the best designers of his generation, McQueen committed suicide in 2010.

Innovative and imaginative products are seldom produced without resolve and effort, and pressure to meet quotas or timeframes can hinder both the

creativity and productivity of creative types. This adds to existing pressure and is likely to result in either self-destructive action, as was the case with Galliano and McQueen, or a split with their firm, the option Simons took.

## **Finding the balance**

For the people who employ creative types, finding a balance can be tricky, and leaders or business operators and MBAs coming from a purely business background may find themselves out of their depth. Hermès International director general, Christian Blanckaert (INSEAD MBA 71J) was faced with a lot of pushback when he took on the role at the luxury goods manufacturer after a career leading the French technology and electronics giant, Thomson. Blanckaert noted that when he first entered Hermès he was, in essence, told that he knew nothing about creativity and needed to learn before being able to lead.

Creative people, according to Blanckaert, need to be given space in which to experiment and gain inspiration, and the freedom to act. They need to have the opportunity to travel to get fresh ideas from abroad and have easy access to all the sometimes very pricey materials they want (tools, machinery, fabrics, and so on). But they also require some kind of structure. Managers need to suggest deadlines and offer support functions, they also need to be strong enough to support the demands of characteristically moody and emotional people and flexible enough to address seemingly random, not necessarily managerial, problems.

## **How to find the right balance**

In many cases, this structure and support can be found when creative types work in partnership. Designer Tom Ford and former Gucci CEO Domenico de Sole established a successful balance in their partnership, as did Prada's Patrizio Bertelli and Miuccia Prada, combining Bertelli's intense business drive with Prada's creativity. Former Burberry CEO Angela Ahrendts and Christopher Bailey, her chief creative officer, worked together for eight years between 2006 and 2014. Their partnership and understanding of each's role, eased the tension between the creativity and business side of operations and saw profits soar. When Ahrendts left to take charge of Apple's retail operations in 2014, Bailey – who has been credited with transforming the company into a digital force live-streaming fashion shows and pre-releasing pictures of his latest designs on the internet – took over the reins.

In partnerships like these, both sides need to understand and respect each other. The managerial side has to acknowledge that creative people need a special environment in which to work while the creative side has to accept that thoughtful management is vital to sustaining a long-term business and ensuring the creative product survives. Simons had an excellent working relationship with Delphine Arnault while working at Dior, and it may have been her move to Louis Vuitton which prompted him to reassess his tenure.

There is also the matter of culture and fit, particularly important in luxury and fashion. Simons, in many ways was the opposite of his predecessor Galliano. He was quiet and not the expansive type. As a Flemish-speaking Belgian, his French was stilted. Dior is a very French company and there was tension and conflict in terms of style. After leaving Dior, Simons moved to Calvin Klein which was much more suited to his minimalist approach to fashion and preference for simple designs and colours. For business people, change may be seen as the chance to stretch one's abilities. But for creative people, work is very personal. When hiring creative types, it is important to think about the match and the organisation that will best help them to flourish - while meeting deadlines and sales expectations.

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