

The Power Of Creativity

An Interview with Andrew J. Robertson, Chairman, BBDO Worldwide

EDITORS' NOTE Andrew Robertson is Chairman of BBDO Worldwide. He served as President and CEO for two decades, during which BBDO was recognized as the world's most effective network five times, and as Network of the Decade at Cannes Lions. Inducted into the Advertising Hall of Fame in 2022, he has taught guest classes at NYU, UNC, and Wake Forest University, appeared on CNBC, Bloomberg News, and The Today Show, and is a Chairman Emeritus of The Advertising Council.



Andrew J. Robertson

COMPANY BRIEF BBDO Worldwide (bbdo.com) is a leading global advertising agency network known for its unwavering focus on creativity and effectiveness. BBDO has built a reputation for delivering compelling campaigns that resonate across cultures and drive measurable results. The agency has consistently ranked among the top performers in global creative rankings, earning recognition from Cannes Lions, The Gunn Report, and Effie Awards. BBDO's client roster includes some of the world's most iconic brands.

Will you highlight your career journey?

I fell into advertising at 2:30 AM in a nightclub. I was grimly considering my future and asked the guy next to me, about whom I knew very little except that he had an Alfa Romeo, what he did for a living. He said he was an account director in an ad agency, so I decided I wanted to work in one. I managed to get three offers for trainee positions – two in account management and one in media planning at Ogilvy – which I took because

I liked the people who would be my bosses more. As I look back on it, I realize the single most important thing I did through my career – picked great bosses.

I moved into account management and then to J Walter Thompson where I became Deputy Managing Director before moving to WCRS as CEO at the absurd age of 29. After five years there, I moved to Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO in London where my 30-year career with BBDO began. In 2001, I was appointed CEO of BBDO North America and moved to New York. Then, in 2004, I became President and CEO of BBDO Worldwide, a role I performed for two decades.

In October 2024, the brilliant Nancy Reyes succeeded me as CEO, and I moved to Chairman.

How do you define BBDO's culture and values?

Soon after I became CEO, I decided that we needed to codify our culture – to take the intuition of our most successful agency principles and turn them into network-wide principles. I got 20 of our best people from around the world together for half a day to brainstorm and define the ten characteristics that best describe the people who do best in and do best for BBDO. I allowed half a day because I thought that if I allocated two days it would take two days. It took 40 minutes to come up with:

- They help make the work better
- Their clients love them (not just like or respect, love)
- They are hand raisers, not finger pointers
- They are closers who get to a “yes” or a “no” – not “through a meeting”
- They are radiators, not drains (they bring energy to the room)
- They are “we” not “me”
- They present well
- They pick themselves up fast when they've been knocked down
- They have a healthy paranoia
- They do the right thing

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new ways of operating. Ideas, ideas, ideas.”

Many years later, we added another:

- They actively seek out different

I knew they were right because they were rooted in the truth of who we are. I knew they were right because they moved into the vernacular of our network without posters being printed or t-shirts.

What have been the keys to BBDO's industry leadership, and how do you describe the BBDO difference?

Our conviction – and it is a conviction, not just a statement – to the power of creativity to solve big problems for our clients and thus add

real value to their businesses and differentiate ourselves from our competitors. This is central to who we are and, more importantly, how we behave. It drives our actions and our decision making.

You have to be a fool to say you don't believe in creativity, but saying it and living it are two very different things.

What interested you in writing the book, *The Creative Shift*, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

Businesses need ideas to thrive. Ideas for new products and services, for new experiences, new

routes to market, new ways of operating. Ideas, ideas, ideas. Contrary to what some leaders think, the people in those companies have the creativity to generate those ideas but, in many cases, the very things that make companies super successful – predictability, operational and executional brilliance, process compliance, etc. – conspire to suppress it. My argument is not that these companies should “change” what they are – what they are works, and matters. Rather that they should use the same discipline and operational excellence to intentionally design and engineer the conditions for those ideas to emerge when and where they need them.

I wanted to write the book to draw attention to this challenge, turn it into an opportunity, and give some practical advice on how to operationalize it. The most important principles are that you will get nowhere without a really well-defined problem; that to generate good ideas you're going to need a lot of bad ones; and that you should judge them like a banker – managing risk, not pursuing certainty.

What are the keys to striking the right balance between operation and exploration?

I don't think there is a balance to be struck. The implication of “balance” is that you can only have a bit more of one with a bit less of the other. I believe that you need to optimize for both. John Cleese said, “Creativity is not a talent. It's a way of operating.” I think that the key is to make exploration part of the operating system with all the discipline that implies.

How do you approach your management style?

I believe in leading from the front, not directing from behind. I would never ask anybody to do something I wouldn't do myself, and they know it. I assume positive intent in everyone, but verify. I try to act as an insulator, not a conductor, shielding my people, as far as I can, from pressure so that they can do their best work. And I believe that the only acceptable demeanor is that of plausible optimism. Pessimism gets multiplied, and blind optimism isn't just not credible, its disillusioning.

With all that you have accomplished in your career, are you able to enjoy the process and celebrate the wins?

Mack Brown won a National Championship as a football coach at the University of Texas. He left to go and be the head coach at UNC. He was asked why he had left a top four program for one ranked in the twenties. He replied that he had promised his wife he would enjoy it more – at Texas the pressure of expectation was so high that his range of emotions was from sheer relief when they won a game, to absolute depression when they didn't. There was no joy.

I can identify with that as it relates to winning and losing. But I would never trade the experience of the process, which I love, and the team you work with in a top four program for one ranked in the twenties. There's plenty of time to enjoy it by looking back when it's all over.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

Pick good bosses. And run toward the fires. Anybody can handle the easy stuff. ●

