

Left: founder David Ogilvy.
Right: Ogilvy created
Dove's 'Campaign for Real
Beauty' and the 'Travel
Yourself Interesting'
advert for Expedia

Ogilvy & Mather

"Managers were avoiding tough conversations"

Why media execs needed to stop sidestepping conflict to steer the agency through difficult times

You probably didn't need to follow the histrionics of *Mad Men's* Don Draper et al to know the ad industry has a reputation for employing its fair share of difficult egos and creative directors not afraid of broadcasting their ire for all to hear. So it might surprise some to learn that an L&D solution was needed at Ogilvy & Mather, one of the UK's largest advertising, marketing and PR agencies, because staff hadn't been confrontational enough.

"When I first arrived in 2012, Ogilvy was very much a 'nice place with nice

people'," says Ross Bartlett, the agency's UK group head of L&D, of staff

who were probably closer to founder David Ogilvy's mantra that his business had 'gentlemen with brains'. "But this was creating a real problem. Managers weren't having tough conversations with people, especially new joiners. Instead of confronting poor performance issues towards the end of their probations, they were being brushed under the carpet. Later on, we were finding we'd kept people we probably shouldn't have."



Bartlett says the training is producing better leaders



The launch of a global initiative to create 'the model agency', which was delivered through three streams (Accelerate, Stretch and Pace), gave Bartlett the opportunity to introduce bespoke training, in conjunction with Consensio Partners, that uses actors to simulate tricky situations, and then train managers with the skills they need to face difficult topics. "Our managers had never really had formal training," says Bartlett. "And it was showing: in some areas we had 20 per cent attrition."

He adds that learning to deal with potentially inflammatory conversations is becoming increasingly necessary: "Ogilvy's last growth figures were 0.6 per cent, so people will not be getting the pay rises they might be expecting, and managers need to be ready to deal with that situation."

As well as talent management heads saying they're seeing fewer bad hires fall through the net, line managers are reporting being in a better place mentally. "One of our managers admitted she was ready to leave Ogilvy because she felt she wasn't getting career development," says Bartlett. "Pace gave her the confidence to talk to her bosses, and now she's got a new business unit to run. The programme costs several thousand pounds per head, so just keeping this person – it would cost £5-10,000 to replace her – means the learning has already paid for itself."

The learning is so important, and so integral, that it was the CEO who launched it to the rest of the company. "We want people to really feel like they're professional managers," says Bartlett. "A second theme that resonates is that people don't have to feel like they must overreact – even if they're raging inside. They can simply channel their energy and their new learning into having more appropriate conversations. If people can show a bit of serenity, not only can they lead better, but they can feel better about themselves too."