



**DIARY**  

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**OF A**  

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**CREATIVE**  

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**DIRECTOR**  

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**AN EXPLORATION OF THE ROAD TO GREATNESS**

- Heidi Ehlers

**DAVID DRUGA**

# DAVID DROGA

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At the time of the interview:

Worldwide Creative Director | Publicis Network

## HEIDI

Tonight is about the importance of goals.

Harvard University did a survey in 100 countries and they found that regardless of race, age, gender or status, people who set definable measurable goals with a timeline and a deadline are ten times more likely to achieve them.

Tonight is about 'yes', the power of that word, and a celebration of all the people that said 'yes' to make tonight happen. David Droga, who said 'yes' first. James Davis from Reginald Pyke and Untitled, who quickly said 'yes' to capturing this evening. Teresa Iezzi of Creativity Magazine who is here from New York to join us this evening, also said 'yes'. And every single person in this room who said 'yes' to coming this evening to help make that goal come true.

Thank you to you all for your repeated use of this small, yet very powerful word.

David is only 15 years older than these students.

In 15 years, David Droga has won 45 Cannes Lions including 2 Grand Prix. That's an average of three a year. His agency, Saatchi & Saatchi London, was chosen Global Agency of the Year by Adweek and Advertising Age in 2003, and Cannes Global Agency of the Year in 2002. He was chosen as the world's top Creative Director by Ad Age in 2002. He was voted one of Europe's most influential men under 40 in 2001, and one of America's Most Influential People Under 38 in 2004. He was Creative Director of Asia's most awarded agency in 1997, 1998 and 1999 by Campaign Brief magazine. And if that wasn't enough, he recently accepted the challenge of turning the Publicis network into one of the world's most awarded networks.

And he's told the world that he's going to do it.

Early reports are encouraging. In his first year at Publicis, the network won more Lions than they had won in the previous 10 years. Which is what he promised Maurice Levy when he accepted the challenge.

Now that's what I call having skin in the game.

Please show David how much we appreciate him sharing his thoughts and his time to help us launch Diary of a Creative Director: An exploration of the road to greatness.

David has put together a reel for us, an anthology of his career up to when he joined Publicis. The first spot, is the first spot he ever did. Do you want to tell us about that?

## DAVID

I've picked four spots from my time in Sydney – the first thing you'll notice is how dated they are, so I apologize for how dated they look – but the first spot is the very first TV ad I ever did, and it probably gave me an unrealistic perspective of advertising. The first one is for a radio station called Triple X and this was my first experience in advertising, and the brief from the client was (and I'm not exaggerating when I say this) "Just do something that makes people go, f\*in-ell." Seriously. That was the brief. The budget was \$2,000,000. So this was my induction into advertising and I thought, 'Oh...my...God. This is going to be the greatest career. All clients are easy, the budgets are huge.'

So that was the first spot. The second ad I did was for a company called Schwarzkopf which is a hair dye, and I really like this spot because for me what I try to do and with all my different jobs since then, is try to find relevant insights – real human insights into the market, and I just figured that every ad you see for hair dye and all that sort of stuff that appeals to women is so patronizing, it shows women flashing their hair and looking great and it's so artificial but I figured that in my experience that every time a girl had dyed her hair or cut her hair it's because she was pissed off, she'd just been dumped by a boyfriend or she'd dumped her boyfriend, it was like a life change thing. So this isn't about feeling great, it's about 'Screw you I'm going to change my life, and I'll feel good'. So that was the insight on that one, and then there's the Amnesty ad, and then there's a Tough Bind for Bayer. So these are the four spots you'll see from my time in Australia.

(The four spots were played.)

The thing I've been conscious of in my career is not to try and have a style, you got to give each client what's appropriate for them and as ridiculous as it is, something as shocking as the NSPCC (National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children) and something that's as irreverent as Club 18-30 or something that's as gritty as the Army, in my career whatever I've done I haven't wanted to be pigeonholed into one style of advertising, I really get off on finding what's the right tone of voice for the client – and that's just some of the TV -- and I wish I could have brought some of the print.

## HEIDI

Let's start at the beginning.

## DAVID

Good place to start.

## HEIDI

What initially attracted you to advertising?

## DAVID

I think it's a weird one, because I was really taken by the thought. To understand why advertising appealed to me, you have to understand my family. I was one of seven children, I have four other brothers, and all of them are very successful, very intellectual, they all have scholarship to Cambridge and blah blah blah and I really wasn't interested in the corporate world and all I wanted to be was a writer, I didn't care what I did. I didn't care if I was writing comic books, I didn't care if I was a journalist I didn't care if I was writing for TV, I didn't care. And someone said to me, 'You know, advertising is a great industry, you can write and see

the things that you create – not instantly, but pretty soon after that. I don't have the patience to write a book and I don't have the discipline to shoot a film, and I loved the thought of writing with someone else's money. So that was what attracted me to advertising.

**HEIDI**

I asked Neil French, who you befriended in Singapore, what his first impression was of you. He called you manically enthusiastic, effortlessly charming and most un-Australian-ly polite.

**DAVID**

I take offense at that.

**HEIDI**

How did you get your first job?

**DAVID**

Well again, my first job, it was a weird one. I applied for the dispatch department, working in the mailroom of an agency, Grey Advertising, and I got the job. I remember I got the job because I told the person who interviewed me a joke and made them laugh hysterically and got the job. And I remember I was delivering the mail, used to do the rounds -

**HEIDI**

So you had to be funny to deliver mail.

**DAVID**

Well I was insanely nervous, ridiculous, I was living at home, and I didn't have any money. And I thought: this so awkward! Maybe that was my joke. Thank God you didn't ask the joke – it was probably rotten. But yeah, that was my first job in 'advertising'. My first real push into the real world of advertising was I used to deliver the mail to the creative department, and while I was delivering the mail I used to check out the work lying around and think, "Oh that's sh\*t, I can do better than that, so now I'm going to do whatever it takes to get into a great one.

**HEIDI**

Tell us about your job advertising job, as a writer at Omon in Sydney.

**DAVID**

Well it was kind of weird. So I got this job, it was at Omon, and I was the first employee and it was started by three guys who were big-name young feisty creatives, 26 or 27, and again, I had no idea what it really entailed but I knew that it was going to be fun. And my first, it sounds like a cliché, but my first, they didn't even have a desk for me when I arrived - it was a pool

table, and, you know, that's what the agency was and my first brief was that TV commercial.

## HEIDI

Did you like advertising right away?

## DAVID

I was blown away, this is unbelievable, I can't believe it - literally it's been downhill since that first brief!

My second brief was actually the one for Bayer, which was suddenly a reality check, they tested everything, but I just loved it, I thought this is amazing, they're all good people, there just weren't a lot of business minded people. And a lot of it, as I look back on my career today I realize a lot of it was about time and luck, you just have to be at the right place at the right time and work with people who inspire you, and I just happened to be in this environment -- everyone was blooming and it became the hottest agency in Australia without us really knowing it because all anyone cared about was the work, and then one of the partners left, and when I was about 21 or 22, because I was really writing everything in the agency anyway, and they came to me and said, 'Do you want to be the Creative Director, we'll give you his share in the agency.' And I was like, "Oh yeah, sure". And still I didn't know what that meant. It didn't really change anything about what I did.

## HEIDI

What did you learn about yourself in that first job?

## DAVID

I think, which is very much the principle I was trying to get to, politics and corporate bullsh\*t tries to chip away at you, but it's about the people - there's nothing more important than the environment you're in and work with people that you will get on with during the bad times. I always base it on that, what are the people you would want to spend some time with when the sh\*t hits the fan - lots of people work in an environment where it's fantastic when things are all going well, for me I always base my decision on, do I want to work with this person if it all goes horribly pear-shaped, will I still want to have a laugh with them, because I'm always going to work with people that are better than me, or funnier than me.

## HEIDI

What was the first big career goal you had?

## DAVID

Well the first big career goal I had was to get my brothers off my back and my Dad off my back and legitimize what I was doing in the industry, and I just thought, again, if I'm going to be in this industry, I want to be the best at it.

You can't guarantee you'll be the most talented, that's something I couldn't guarantee, but I could guarantee that I'd work harder than anybody else.

So for the first six or seven years in Omon it was just terrible for my social life, I probably slept in the agency two or three

nights a week, I worked as long as it took, I mean I would literally force myself to write as many ideas as I possibly could so I would do stupid things like get art pads and fill it with a hundred squares, all the size of postage stamps, and I couldn't leave until I'd filled each box with an idea, even if I loved the first idea, you know, just to force myself to explore different ideas. I don't want to be in the industry forever, but if I'm going to be I want to be the best, so working harder - that was one of my first goals.

**HEIDI**

How long between that goal, and achieving it?

**DAVID**

Well I don't know, there's sort of different benchmarks. I mean the first commercial I did I got a D&AD Silver nomination and I got Australian commercial of the year, I had the most glorious time I suppose because I was the most awarded writer in Australia for seven years so it was pretty fun.

**HEIDI**

In your first job you were promoted to Creative Director. How old were you?

**DAVID**

22

**HEIDI**

Were there any question marks about that promotion in your mind?

**DAVID**

I had no idea what it meant, it was just like "yeah, okay". All that it meant - it didn't mean I was more powerful, all it meant was, you know, that the buck stops with me, where everything's going with ads, I was kind of excited about it. But I've never been smitten by power or maybe I just thought "now that's an interesting title" and maybe it sounded more legitimate, "well, now I'm the Creative Director."

No I don't know, as I said it was an unofficial environment. You suddenly realize and it's kind of a weird thing, and it's only now, you know I'm 36 now so it's a weird thing -

**HEIDI**

You're over the hill....

**DAVID**

Throughout my career I've always been the youngest this or the youngest that, so usually people that were reporting to me were, older than me, so I was really conscious that I didn't want to come across as an ignorant prat.

Whereas now the interesting dynamic is that most of the creatives that talk to me, they're much younger than me and they're

thinking, “I’ll have your job, you old hack.” The dynamics have changed, but I’ve always (whether it be, in those days, Singapore and London) tried to keep it very simple and human, you know I was never taken by being the boss, you know I think there are people that get seduced by being bosses, they think when they become the boss they have to take on certain characteristics of a great boss.

I think that’s ridiculous, you know I’ve always tried to keep the same everyday make up, you know be goofy when I’m goofy, be firm when I’m firm but I’ve never felt I have to ‘pretend’ to be a boss and I think a lot of Creative Directors, it’s really surreal, they take on this persona of being a boss means having to be an \*ss, or having your door closed, or have people scared of you and all that sort of stuff I think that’s just such a waste of energy, it’s just not a constructive thing to do – that’s my opinion anyway.

## HEIDI

I want to understand if there’s a competitive streak in you.

When I asked Maurice Levy the question, he laughed out loud and then wondered if it was a joke. Your assistant Deanna says you’ll shut down her Tetris game if she’s on her way to beating your high score, and when I asked Kevin Dundas who was later your MD at Saatchi and Saatchi London, he said, “Last year when England won the rugby, I immediately rang David to wind him up and his cell phone was off. Now I know he was sitting in a bar somewhere watching and if Australia had won he would have been phoning us all immediately. One moment afterwards I received a text message from Malcolm Poynton who is now CD of Ogilvy London that said, “Droga’s phone is off.”

So would you say you’re competitive?

## DAVID

I’m TOLD that I’m ridiculously competitive. As I said, I have four brothers so I literally had to fight for a place at the table and all that kind of stuff. I think I’m fiercely competitive, but I like to think in a fun way. You know, who doesn’t want to win?

And it’s worth mentioning that Australia is the greatest sporting nation in the world. No, no, we shouldn’t just toss over that. Seriously. I just want to share one statistic and then we can go back to the interview. In the Olympics we’re the third-most awarded in the world, in medal count, from a country of 18,000,000 people.

Come on Australia.

## HEIDI

He apparently became an expert on swimming when he thought that Australia had a chance in the Olympics. Apparently you’ll get behind any sport that you think Australia has a good chance at.

## DAVID

Even if I don’t think they have a chance. I love competition. I mean, I’m obsessed by... I mean I wouldn’t turn off her Tetris, I’m a bit pissed off at her for saying that, but I (trails off).

London was a very fun, competitive agency I remember spending two hours in a corridor with a couple of creatives trying to see who could spin the hoola hoop the furthest down the corridor and come back, and literally if I lost that I would go to bed thinking about it.

## HEIDI

What role has the pursuit of money played in your career?

## DAVID

Ah none. I've never chased money. I've always believed I should be incredibly well paid, but I've never made a decision based on salary. I always believed that I would work hard and earn my salary. I've never chased money. I think if anyone does do that, it catches up with them.

Trust me, when I'm negotiating I'm the shrewdest, hardest \*ss in the world, but my decision before I get to the negotiation has got nothing to do with money. I remember when I was at Omon I was making like 35 grand a year, and I think I was offered like 150 grand to be Creative Director of Y&R. Because to me that was more money that I could ever believe. Ever. But I just knew that it would be death of my career. I knew that I would quickly become an irrelevant person in this industry.

Do the work, do the work. If you do the work, the money follows. That's my fundamental belief. If you do the work, the money follows. Because there just aren't enough people who give a sh\*t about the work. And agencies will try to hang onto the people that actually deliver.

## HEIDI

Do you have a strong gut?

## DAVID

It's not always right, but it's one of the few things that I really trust and believe in. You know, I have a terrible attention span, I'm very vain, I have a lot of flaws, but I really trust my gut about creativity and work. And I'm not so arrogant to say that my gut is always right – I will try to stand by my decision and I'll also take responsibility if the decision is wrong.

## HEIDI

What does your gut feel like when something is right?

## DAVID

It feels very much like the first week that I was in advertising.

I just get so excited about it – when a team shows me something – I mean I get as excited now when a team shows me it still consumes my thoughts when I go to sleep at night – apart from Tetris and hoola hoops – is the nuance of an idea or an idea – I think about the war room, the drama, the politics and the hierarchy. I mean, I really do – it makes your day. I mean you can be having the sh\*ttiest week and one thing hits your desk, and one good meeting and the client buys it, it just changes everything.

This is such an insane profession, we're used to things dying around us, we're used to falling in love with things that are not going to see the light of day and we have to build up this resilience. I always say, if we were in any other profession I would get out of the business.

You know if I was a surgeon, and 9 out of 10 patients died, I'd be like, "You know maybe I shouldn't be in this industry." So I still get excited about that.

But you gotta trust your gut. Most people don't trust their gut and that's what's killing our industry is people don't trust their gut and they need validation from other people.

## HEIDI

A quote from Bob Isherwood, who hired you as CD for Saatchi Singapore and Regional Creative Director for Saatchi Asia: "When I put him into

Singapore, David had already run his own agency. I offered him one of two jobs: Creative Director of New Zealand and the other was Regional Creative Director for Asia. David said, "I think I've done the New Zealand job before. I've never done Asia. Asia is the bigger risk, I'd rather do that."

Most people avoid risk, yet you run towards it. Why?

## DAVID

Well I just think, again, you've got to take on the biggest challenge to stretch to see how far you can go. I think everything is a test – you know I'm like the average creative person – a really surreal mix of ego and insecurity – you have this thing where you stare at a pad and go, "Well I'm f\*cking great. I'm going to write something great." And this other little voice says, "Well, what if you don't?" And that's what makes you work until 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning.

I have always believed that you've got to test yourself, I have this thing where I'm always thinking I've had certain success in different markets, I want to make sure it wasn't a fluke.

I want to do things that leave a mark and quite distinctively. I don't want to be the guy that goes into 'x' agency and it's already great and just does the next, 15th great Levi's ad. I want to be the guy who builds something, to have some fun. So part of it's a bit of ego and part of it has to do with insecurity, and I definitely want to do something distinctive and test myself. I really like to know what limit I can go to. And I think you only get that by taking the risk of taking the jobs that most people wouldn't do.

## HEIDI

What was the risk in Asia?

## DAVID

The risk in Asia (I mean it's a great place, lifestyle was beyond believable) but at the time everyone was telling me, "The only markets you should consider after this, David, are you've got to go to London and you've got to go to America." And at the time I thought Asia is a market that is going to explode – before it was a destination for creatives who want to retire, not a place where someone goes to forge their career.

And I'm so grateful for what I learned in Asia.

It really gave me the confidence it gave me because I really threw myself out there, ran the place, surrounded myself with incredibly talented people, it was the UN, our creative department – people from China, America, Canada, Italy, Vietnam, and we all thought, we've got nothing to lose, we can create something great, my biggest goal was to make the Singapore office famous, to create an amazing environment.

When I look at Asia now, it's amazing, some of the best print work in the world is coming out of Asia – now I don't take responsibility for that but I feel like I contributed to that – to bring the confidence where it attracted the right people. I always say if anyone wants to get five years worth of work in two years, go to Asia.

## HEIDI

What questions did you want answered during your first interview for that job?

**DAVID**

I always keep it quite simple. I don't like meetings to go past 20 minutes. I have this 20 minute meeting rule so I said, "Let's cut to the chase. What are your expectations, what is going to be a huge success for you, what does the agency stand for, and will you give me your support?" And I said, "I don't want you breathing down my neck, but what are the highest expectations you have, tell me what they are."

And that was really it.

**HEIDI**

Did you have a plan?

**DAVID**

Yeah, I had a plan.

I wanted to build a culture and an environment. I wanted to put Singapore on the map. And it was kind of a weird thing. Because Singapore was such a small country, the agency became bigger than advertising, we became sort of celebrities for Singapore, it was insane.

But my biggest goal, when I was there became quite obvious when I was there. I thought Saatchi London was so arrogant and full of sh\*t and I thought the work wasn't that good, so my day to day motivation was "We're going to annoy Saatchi London in everything we do. We're going to be this tiny little pimple on their \*ss that just outdoes them in everything."

And we did it so well, they moved me to London.

**HEIDI**

What were the first three things you wanted to tackle when you took that job?

**DAVID**

I still remember actually. The very first thing I had a meeting with all the creative department and I wanted to know what their expectations were of me, I told them what my expectations were of them, talked to them about what is the hardest client – I knew I had to win their trust and show them that I was the real deal – so I surveyed the creative department, asked them what is the hardest client in the building? What is the client that no one wants to touch? So they coughed up a client.

Well I said that's the client I'm going to work on first.

And we did some nice work for that client. We did a really nice TV ad. And following that day, it changed the agency straight away, because every excuse about not being able to deliver good work was gone, because they thought, well we've now got the hardest client in the building who bought something really good, what else are they going to bitch about?

It was bloody hard work, it almost killed me but it made a really dramatic statement.

Because I didn't want to come in and work on the sexy thing. But that changed the whole framework and said, "Wow, sh\*t, he's serious."

## HEIDI

Do you ask your creative departments to communicate their goals to you?

## DAVID

Absolutely. It's massive. I think it's crucial that you understand what their expectations of you are.

We're supposed to be judging them every day. Their work, they're laying it out, and they're showing us their work.

But you know I'm not a big believer in talking people into staying. I think if people's careers aren't better off under you, then they SHOULD go. I think if people feel their careers are progressing and you care about them, then they'll stay. So I always try and find out, "What do you want to get out of this relationship, what's your expectation of the agency"

Funny enough, the only guy I fired, I fired one guy, I looked at everyone's books in the Singapore office just to get a perspective of the talent I had in the building, what they were about, and the guy I fired had the best book, which sounds really weird, and he was actually English and had quite an impressive book and he'd been in the agency for five years and nothing in his book was from Asia, everything in his book was from home, and I just said to him "You're the one person in this creative department who has tasted greatness. You're the one person in this creative department who knows what it is. You're not here for that. You haven't come to Asia for that. There's nothing in your book from the past five years. You have a different agenda. You can go and do that elsewhere. All the other people would kill to have your opportunities. So that was kind of weird.

## HEIDI

What was more difficult about that job than you were expecting? And what was easier?

## DAVID

Again it was kind of a surreal thing because I was 27 and Asia is very much an age-driven place.

To get respect with clients it very much cultural, and again how naïve I am, I was thinking, "Wow, I'm going to lie to the client and tell them I'm 28 or 29. No seriously I thought this up. "I'm 28."

The hard thing was also not to impose, which was a good lesson for me, what I thought I knew coming from Australia into Asia, because it was kind of irrelevant really.

There were certain principals I could take about creativity but I couldn't take any learning – because I'm a visitor to those countries, because I really wanted to understand them and their consumers and that was something I had to learn. It was really interesting.

## HEIDI

I'd like to introduce the subject of creative leadership with a quote from Kevin Dundas.

"Creative people trust him for two reasons: One, he won't ask them to do anything he wouldn't do and Two: they know that when he walks into a meeting with their work, he'll defend it, he doesn't fold, they know their work is in safe hands." And another from Duncan Marshall who you brought from Saatchi London to be your Creative Director at Publicis New York along with Howard Wilmot: "You can't let him down, because you know he won't let you down. People get behind him because he's very supportive and he's loyal to you and he's very good at generating a team with the same goals as his."

You're often referred to by Creative Directors when we discuss leadership. Why do you think that is?

**DAVID**

I like being a leader, because I like the opportunity to make things happen. I just think that if you take people's careers personally -- I don't have to worry about whether my name is on things or I'm writing the best ads -- I just think that if you make other people famous and their careers flourish then clearly that's going to reflect on you.

And at the end of the day I don't want to be the guy that sits at the end of the corridor with his door closed that everyone is scared of, but I don't want to be Mr. Popular either, I'm not stupid, I don't want people to like me because I'm the boss.

You gotta be straight with people. If you want people to be straight and loyal to you, you've gotta be straight and loyal to them. I do have high expectations of people that work for me. That's not to say that I'm not firm. I'm very hard. I'm fair, but I'm hard.

But if I'm going to tell someone to work a weekend, or expect them to work through the night, you can't do that and then say, "See you I'm going for dinner." They just don't believe in it. They should see you working your \*ss off. They should see you sweating things. They should see you taking things personally. I believe that. I just don't think the higher you go, the cushier it should get.

You know, people can do their own, but that's my thing.

If you want people to respect you, and go that extra yard, then you've got to do that for them and you've got to battle like it's your own stuff. And you've got to show that you're not so self-centered that -- you know I don't know why I never understood it -- but some Creative Directors they take all the best briefs for themselves. I think this is a waste of time, just go back to being a writer or an art director, or some Creative Directors get so upset that they have to put their name on it, so they might change a word or one little thing or make a suggestion and then want their name on it as writer or art director. That is so petty. I mean I can feel my influence in their work and some of the best stuff I feel that I've had a HUGE influence on, I just let it be itself. But people remember things. People remember the boss and that's the thing you know. If you're going to expect a lot from your employees they should expect a damn lot from you.

**HEIDI**

What was the first example of leadership in your life? Is there a time or an incident you remember?

**DAVID**

It's not about leadership, but I'll tell you anyway. It's about my brother. We were shopping for Christmas presents and my brother saw this gun, this pellet gun, and he was "Oh, I gotta have that pellet gun. David you gotta buy me that pellet gun. It's the best thing in the world." And I thought, "If he loves that pellet gun so much there must be something amazing about that pellet gun." So it came to Christmas and under the Christmas tree (I don't know what this has to do with leadership) I pulled out the present and it said, "To David, Love David."

**HEIDI**

You bought the pellet gun for yourself?

**DAVID**

I bought the pellet gun for myself. It has nothing to do with leadership. I just wanted to tell you that. THAT'S TAKING CHARGE OF THE SITUATION! Saving my brother from shooting his own eye out. That's what I was thinking.

## HEIDI

Maurice Levy called your leadership skills, “Le tour de main.” Translated, a turn of the hand. An expression used when discussing the great chefs whose skills go beyond the ingredients they use. It’s a touch, a feeling, one he believes some people are just lucky to be born with. What’s your opinion? Are we born with it, or can we learn it?

## DAVID

You certainly have to have a certain amount of self awareness. My mother calls me her ‘sensitive child’. No seriously. I actually care about how you’re feeling. I’m not paranoid about the fact that everyone must be happy, I actually care about people’s morale, I care about things in the office. I think leadership is being as interested in the part about what we do, as interested in everything.

I think you don’t have to be a hard \*ss to get people, you can get more done by motivation and being on their side. One thing I never did was play people off against each other and stuff. I guess it’s an advantage of being Australian.

Australians are pretty casual and straightforward and I think that’s also served me very well in this industry, it’s too boring to be a bullsh\*tter, it’s so boring. I’d rather be straight with someone. And I think people appreciate when you don’t bullsh\*t them. I think work could get done better and quicker. If I don’t like something I tell them I don’t like it, I tell them what I don’t like. Again, a lot of Creative Directors make that mistake they play the “Yes and No” Game. You know. “No, no, no, no, yes.” I always try and explain why I like something or why I don’t like something so they leave the room with something, knowing it’s approved or its not.

## HEIDI

What has been the most difficult leadership moment of your career?

## DAVID

There’s no question. Firing people is the worst. I hate it, and I’ve fired a lot of people. That’s the worst thing. I hate it. The first person I ever tried to fire – again when I was in Sydney, I was so nervous about firing him that I started laughing, and I thought I can’t fire anyone having just laughed for five minutes, so I gave up on it.

But it’s by far the hardest thing in this industry to do because if you fire someone they go home to their families...terrible. But it is a business and that’s the thing, people don’t have any hesitation if they have a better job to come and resign to you, so I always have to remind myself that it’s a business.

And also keeping it together and being optimistic when times are tough – but 100% it’s the re-trenching people or firing them.

## HEIDI

And what have been the most inspiring or heartwarming moments of your career?

## DAVID

The cultures, and seeing people’s careers grow. I was thinking about people who I’ve worked with since they first got into the industry. I was thinking how many people have I worked with who are now Creative Directors. And it was somewhere between 25 and 30 people who reported to me who are now running Wieden & Kennedy Asia, Fallon Asia, BPO Asia, O&M London, one’s just been made worldwide Creative Director of J. Walter Thompson, I have no right to have any personal credit, but I really like that. That I have had influence.

But fundamentally I always said that in the agencies I worked at a certain period of time where it was really fun, I always said, “We have to remember this time, because it might not get better than this. I’ve had certain moments in my career where I just thought, I cannot believe I’m getting paid for this. I literally laughed my \*ss off every, single, day in London. Other than the six months where I hated them all. Even on the worst days, it was an environment where it was more than just showing up and doing your job and going. You can’t force people to like people, not everyone has to be social, or a boy’s club or Club Happy.

## HEIDI

It helps.

## DAVID

Yeah, more than any individual pieces of time or ideas, it’s the certain people I worked with and whose careers I was part of. That’s probably the best.

## HEIDI

Then it was off to Saatchi & Saatchi London. What was the office like when you joined?

## DAVID

London was really another classic example of ‘why did you take that job?’, because all my friends were saying, “Saatchi London’s had its day, and it’s a big political minefield.” And my head was going, “Ooh, that sounds cool.” And it was a time when I was also talking to Fallon in America in New York, and Saatchi London, which was great because again it was the impossibility of it and can something turn, can it be bright twice that intrigued me. And there’s no question that in Australia I grew up as a Saatchi person and I was smitten by the Saatchi brothers and thought, “Wow” so the opportunity to go there....And London was a really depressed agency, it was a real political minefield, there were four or five Creative Directors all fighting for the Executive Creative Director job because there had only ever been two before. I still remember it was so awkward and cold, and when I first arrived they were shocked. I mean the English are a very very, very proud advertising nation. And I was 29 and I was the first foreign Creative Director in London and I was young and I’d come from Singapore and they were thinking, “Who the f\*ck is this guy? Who the h\*ll is this? We don’t know where he’s from, we don’t know anything about him.” So the tension was ridiculous. But it was SO bad – I remember meetings I had with the first floor Creative Directors who were these East End gangsters and they were in full suits and I looked like a dog’s breakfast. The tension was so high that again it made me laugh in my head and think, “Okay this is kind of weird isn’t it?”

So I called the whole creative department together, and there were 180 in the creative department and I just laid it out. I said, “This is who I am” and you’re probably thinking, “who the f\*ck is this guy?” and so you should. So I said, I’m here to judge you, and you should judge me. If I don’t deliver something for you, go, please go, you’ll go with my blessing. I’m not about politics, I’ll be loyal to my supporters.” It was a fundamental lay down of what I’m about, and made it very clear that they could come and talk to me about stuff. I just knew that from day one I had to win them over, I was never so arrogant as to think “Well I had the JOB, so they had to kowtow to me”. I was lucky enough to be given this opportunity, yes I was their boss, but I had to win them over and I had to earn their respect. It just became a gradual thing and I just began to win them over. In the first week, I had three days to produce an ad, it was that nursing ad, which is one of my favourites because it’s one the simplest things I’ve ever done, and after six months they opened up and developed this wit which was this pessimistic cynical wit – and they should have been like that, I would have been like that. If I was in Australia and some guy from Japan came over and they said this is your new Creative Director. I’d be like [gives funny look]. It was very weird.

I took out all the hierarchy in the offices, there were ghettos, I took all the groups out, P&G was being run in a ghetto, and I made that mainstream, made a point that there would be no star teams, you know how agencies have 'star teams' and they get all the juicy briefs, the glory briefs and everyone else picks up the slack and pays their bills. I thought that's bullsh\*t everyone has to feel that they had at least one opportunity on their desk at any time. If you work to make sure that everyone from the most junior to the most senior has an opportunity with their brief that is an opportunity for them to shine, they will gladly take on the really tough ones.

## HEIDI

How important is culture?

## DAVID

Culture is everything, I think. Culture is everything because it fosters the work really. I think from that comes an energy and hard work and confidence. Once you start getting a bit of confidence (and it doesn't mean cocky and arrogant) but once you get confident about the place and what happens, people become fiercely competitive – in a fun way. At Saatchi London, literally, creative teams would be sticking work up and other teams would come by and say, "Oh that's so good."

I think culture is everything.

## HEIDI

What are three things you can do to create the culture you want?

## DAVID

Be straight with your agency, your goals – don't feed people the same old bullsh\*t. Don't stand up and give them your token, "Well it's been a great year and what we're going to do is this..." speech. Find out what they want. Get a clear vision of what their expectations are. Celebrating victories. Taking the blame for when it all goes wrong. I like to make decisions. I feel I'm decisive. But if I make the wrong decision, it's on my shoulders, I don't go looking for a scapegoat. A lot of people are like that.

And culture is about that. And culture it gets to the point where it's the superficial things as well it's also environment in your office. It doesn't mean you have to have a wacky office but you can't be in these heinous environments where it affects your mood.

In London the offices hadn't changed in twenty years and I took all the budget and did over the reception and the creative department. I ran out of money for the rest of it, but just create an environment, it's doesn't have to be ritzy and expensive or witty and wacky and colorful, but also something that has energy and light and community, I remember one of the things I always tried to do which is almost impossible in a new job but I wanted to get the agency celebrating, so when I was in Singapore there were about 150 people, I would take the whole agency away to Phuket for the weekend, Thailand. Go to Malaysia for the weekend.

When I was in London I couldn't do it in London because there were 6 or 700 people, the whole creative department went to Amsterdam for three days, and this is a true story, I lost six creatives for a week. I took them to Barcelona for a weekend. I blew it, because I always I used to always try to push the limits.

Then I tried to take the whole creative department to Las Vegas and management went "Come on." But I believe in doing stuff together, and sometimes you have to force people to do stuff together, show people you want to invest in them, celebrate them, they don't want to know that all the money goes into the flash car you put into the car park.

**HEIDI**

How well do you think most agencies manage their own brand?

**DAVID**

Terrible!

Advertising agencies by and large are one of the worst. I mean look at house ads, look at the Christmas cards, they're terrible. We suddenly fall into the trap of everything we grind our clients for. MAKE THE LOGO BIGGER!!!! We don't do a good job at all, and there are very few brands that do. Which is a shame.

But my philosophy of that is: the best way to manage your brand is what you produce for your clients. Just do the best job for clients and every ad you do for them is an ad for you.

**HEIDI**

Give us your top three points in your plan to win Cannes Agency of the Year in 2002.

**DAVID**

I don't know if I had a plan. This was something I asked Isherwood when I moved to London, "What do you want me to do? In your mind, what is a success for you?" And he said, "Well you've got to make Saatchi London the creative hub of the ad world again." That was the primary goal. I said okay. He said, "You've got to make it famous and a destination agency for the best creatives, and I want you to win Agency of the Year in Cannes." So I said okay. I mean it wasn't as simple as "Well okay, see ya later." He was my boss, and I said "Okay I'll do it, but part of the deal is you let me do what I want to do and I don't want you breathing down my neck."

**HEIDI**

And what were the top three things that you tackled to make that happen?

**DAVID**

Just people, unity and a drive from the whole agency. I also set it up so that in the creative department it wasn't just creatives. I had the head planner sit on this side and the suits sit on this side, so that everyone knew it was serious, and did it across all clients, I'm not a believer in having just one showcase client, I believe in doing it across lots of clients. I didn't want to be the agency that does just that client.

**HEIDI**

People often remark at how quickly you do it. When people are trying to transform an agency they always say, "It takes time." I asked Kevin Dundas how you do it so quickly. He said, "He's willing to work long hours to spot the opportunities; he will surround himself with people really fast that can make a difference quickly; he's happy to take a decision; he's very solution oriented. Is there anything you'd like to add?"

**DAVID**

That's very nice of Kevin, that's what I'll say.

I just think we make our own timelines There's certain rules. I do think it takes three years to turn an agency around. I think the first year is about people and there's certain good will that clients give you because you're new in there. I think the second year is always the bumpiest year because that's when there's the fall out of people who are with you or not with you, clients who freak out, and the third year is always when it starts to gel. I just think we make our own deadlines. That's the crazy thing about our industry. Everybody here stares at the same blank piece of paper as I stare at in New York and what you put on the piece of paper can redefine your agency tomorrow.

**HEIDI**

Duncan Marshall had this comment about your creative eye: "When the work has been through David it always improves. He has an ability to spot a great idea in its embryonic stages but he's able to move on and dismiss a bad idea quickly."

How does decisiveness help?

**DAVID**

I think you have to be decisive. I think it doesn't help anyone to hum and hah around things or to not give someone an answer and say, "Well I'm not sure, let's do some more work." I think that just throws people into a spin. I think if you want solutions you have to be practical about stuff. You have to be ruthless about things. Like I said as long as you give justification for your opinion, but that's one of the few things I believe in myself is my eye for ideas. That's what I trust anyway, I'm flawed, but that's got me where I am, seriously out of all the other flaws and weaknesses and foibles I have are tolerated because I've got an eye for ideas. People will forgive you for anything if you deliver work.

**HEIDI**

Who was the first person you called when you won Cannes Agency of the Year in 2002?

**DAVID**

I think it was my mother.

**HEIDI**

What did she say?

**DAVID**

You have to understand my family. I shouldn't have called her because I should have known. Because when I was in Singapore, the Singapore office won the Ad Age International Agency of the Year. I called my mom. My mother is this mad eccentric Danish woman. In fact she's still a Danish citizen. She won't become an Australian until Australia becomes a republic. It doesn't matter she's been in Australia for 45 years. She's this fiercely independent, feisty as hell woman, whose only interest is us and the environment, she's an activist and she writes speeches for the Green Party in Australia, the only commercials she's ever liked of mine have been NSBCC. So I think I called her (and she's not taken by much because she's the mother of seven children) and said, "We've won

Agency of the year in Cannes.” And the first thing she said was, “What’s that?” “Well it’s quite a big deal. You know the Film Festival, well it’s not that.” And I think literally she probably said, “That’s nice. Did you hear your sister, blah blah blah.” Which is kind of what’s beautiful about our family.

## **HEIDI**

Kevin Dundas said that the day you won Cannes 2002 you knew you’d won in the morning. He said, “The three of us were terribly excited, myself, Dave, and then CEO James Ault. We agreed we would go our separate ways, and then meet for drink in my room at 7 and have some champagne and go. At 6 o’clock the phone rang and it was James calling to say, ‘Can we start now?’ So there we sat like three little boys going on our first date. And you know while we were up there on stage, the three of us, I knew our job was done, and the sad thing was I knew that was it and soon we would all be going our separate ways.”

Did winning Cannes Agency of the Year change the agency?

## **DAVID**

I don’t think it changed the agency, I think it validated what everyone knew in the agency, that it was a great place, and I think it just cemented that. I knew I’d done what they asked me to do, again it’s a classic example of culture. See what I remember about that year, what was much more enjoyable was not winning agency of the year, I mean it was great, but it was the party and the people. I mean I brought 35 people down from the agency, and we blew 20,000 pounds at the bar, and I remember other people saying, “I wish I was working with them.” They didn’t know what was going on or who we were. Not that we were drunk in any way. There was just so much fun and sincerity and essence. It was brilliant, it was ridiculous. We won 9 Golds, the Grand Prix, 3 Silvers and 2 Bronze. It was unbelievable. And we did it on 7 different clients. I saw all these different teams go up. It was great. It was brilliant, I loved that.

## **HEIDI**

Soon afterwards you did go your separate ways and Maurice Levy called offering you the position of Chief Creative Officer. How long did it take for you to decide?

## **DAVID**

Well actually I said yes to him in a day. I’m such a schmuck. Again the whole challenge sounded so ridiculous. I had told Saatchi I was going to go, because they didn’t really have a job for me. The only job was Bob’s job, I wasn’t going to push him out. They also offered to start an agency for me, and I said I wasn’t sure... So Maurice rang me and it was very surreal. He rang me and I was at home and I was sick, my whole family was sick, he rang me up five times and told me about the job, and I just thought again, wow, it was such a big, ridiculous challenge, I asked him “What do you want me to do?” I don’t just want a big headline, how do I know you’re genuine about this? And then I felt he was genuine, I agreed to do the job. Okay, I can see myself taken by the challenge, and if he’s genuine, well great.

## **HEIDI**

And you made a commitment to him. You said you would win more Lions...

**DAVID**

Just as a token to say yes, I said I'll win more Lions in the first year than you've won in the previous 10 years. He said, "Oh no no no, don't tell me that". Afterwards I thought Oh God, how am I going to do that? But then as I said my priority for the first year and a half is the people. To make sure to protect the good people we've got, or get the good people we don't have. The majority of time was spent recruiting new Creative Directors in London, Paris, Italy, Germany, Spain, China, India, Thailand, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Sydney, Seattle, New York.

**HEIDI**

I wish I'd met you a year and a half ago.

**DAVID**

And then we had to bring some people in. But you can't say you want to be creative and it's like, "Oh okay, we'll be creative then." It doesn't work that way. You gotta have people, be bold if you want to do it.

**HEIDI**

How many Creative Directors conferences have you had since joining Publicis?

**DAVID**

We've had five. All our Creative Directors get together to be honest with themselves. I think that's my big thing, I want us all to be honest with each other, let's look at our work, dissect it, and that's what we do, and I think our board is spectacular. Duncan's on our board, he's very good, you gotta have high expectations to get on our board and I think there's a community, and the best way to build a community to influence the culture of Publicis, I got to able to build a community and that creative board is ????? and it will start to spread out because I know what's happens when they have to share their thoughts.

**HEIDI**

You've always been known for sharing your thoughts, when the tendency is to cover your work and not let anyone else see. What's your philosophy behind that?

**DAVID**

I gave a speech in London recently, I happened to be on the phone with one of my brothers. He said, "What are you doing?" I said "I'm doing a speech in London." "what about?" "Oh I just want to be able to talk about my vision for advertising, where it's going." He said, "Why the h\*ll would you want to tell anyone what your vision is, don't tell anyone your secrets." I'm like, "I don't have any secrets, there's nothing I'm saying that is revolutionary, that people will be scribbling down on a piece of paper." I think that the more people in our industry that do better work, competitors, whatever, we all benefit.

I want all agencies to do good work, I want to push all our clients forward. The worst thing that could happen is that the agency that you're at it is the only decent agency in town. That's the worst thing that could happen. I like to talk. That's why I think people should help and prod and push. I think it's really important.

**HEIDI**

I asked Bob Isherwood what the biggest contributor to your success has been. He said, "His desire for stretch, but not at the expense of consolidation. Young people want to move too fast, too quickly. There are lot of people who get quick success and they turn out to be flash in the pans. I said to David, 'I don't' want that to happen to you. Not to have one quick success and move on. I want you to continue to repeat success, consolidate for two or three years, so that people know you're a consistent performer.'"

What do you think has been the single greatest contributor to your success?

**DAVID**

I think not being taken by my success. I've never taken it seriously. I mean I'm flattered, and appreciative of everything that's happened to me, I'm respectful of that, but I've never been caught up in the hype. It's great to do this, I love this, the fact that you're actually interested in hearing \_\_\_\_ (gestures I'm the man) that's bullsh\*t, you know what I mean? I always constantly try to do something that's better and improve. If there's a personal mantra of mine, it's "Live up to your own expectations." That's how I live my life. Live up to your own expectations and don't be a dick.

**HEIDI**

How far into the future can you see yourself?

**DAVID**

I hope I have a lot of time. Well, I'm getting hammered tonight, tomorrow I'll wake up with a hangover. To be honest I don't know how long I'm going to be in the industry. I think I'll be in it as long as I feel I'm making a difference, or I'm in the right job or I'm contributing, and if I'm not in this industry I'll be in an industry that's creative, I love the whole power of emotion and creativity, that's what I get off on. I like ideas where I'm manipulating emotions, I love influencing pop culture, all that sort of stuff so whatever it takes for me to do that, I don't know really. I hope I'll continue to have influence and not be marginalized. I don't want to be around for so long that I have to be pushed.

**HEIDI**

Do you think you've made a lot of sacrifices?

**DAVID**

Yeah. I've worked since I was 18. All my brothers went to university and partied for years. I sacrificed that sort of era of my life. A lot of Australians backpack and travel the world. I never did that. I mean I've traveled the world, but I've traveled to meetings. I think in relationships I've sacrificed a lot of time. I'm married, that's been incredibly harsh on my wife. You know it's valid. I'm a father, too, now, and literally it's been the first non-negotiable thing in my life. I had to take a hard look at myself. Yeah, I think I have made a lot of sacrifices. Definitely. I think I've made a lot of people very rich too. Bastards.

## **HEIDI**

As they do on Inside the Actor's Studio, I want to close with a few rapid fire questions, but before we do I want to close the way we opened with a quote from Neil French. "He's always been a nice bloke, but when he left Singapore, he made a special and unnecessary point of thanking me for my help and for paving the way for all ex-pats in Asia. He hasn't changed one bit. I hope he'll always be my friend. I truly don't care about his sparkling career I'm sure he's unstoppable. He's just a lovely bloke and that's far more important."

I think we would agree.

