

Credit: Ryan Moore

Don't weaponize these principles

Nine methods for scaling creative decisions



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Even the best intentions can lead to unintended consequences.

There was that Australian farmer who, two centuries ago, released a few rabbits for a hunt — and ha, whoops, [now the island nation is overrun](#).

Or how about the time Babs tried to suppress an aerial photo of her Malibu estate but, in the attempt, inspired tens of thousands of people to download that very same pic of her expensively coiffed shrubbery. There's a name for that unexpected result: [The Streisand Effect](#).

They haven't yet given a name, though, to the karmic turnabout that occurred when [Metallica made a documentary](#) intended to reveal their nuanced personal lives, but succeeded only in revealing that Lars Ulrich is a wildly bogus wanker.

Unforeseen shit: it happens.

You can't always predict every consequence of your actions, and anybody who says differently is trying to sell you a palm reading, a crystal from Goop, or something that rhymes with Lought Theadership.

This is all very much known, and you may easily find more examples in your local library's copy of Wikipedia: [see Unintended Consequences](#), [Law of](#).

When corporate principles go bad

It will surprise exactly nobody that the law of unintended consequences has legal fiat over growing a business, too.

As a leader you could, for example, try to instill a culture of efficient top-down management — only to end up stifling creativity.

Or, you could let a thousand Adderall-powered flowers bloom, only to spend all your time herding very inspired cats.

Or consider this: We went to a meeting with a large company once, years ago. The company was famously successful. According to lore, their company values played a large part of that success. Every employee knew the values, and several invoked them in our meeting.

The problem, though, was that the employees used the values against each other to make argumentative points. The company had created a successful business with hard-working, values-driven employees, but the unintended consequence was the employees used those values against each other like cudgels.

That terrified us. And it made us wonder: how do you inspire good decision-making amongst your employees without stifling their creativity, or inspiring competitive animosity? Too often, the answer to this question is “culture.” But what does “culture” mean, exactly? The word has a whiff of the rhetorical dodge about it or, perhaps, a whiff of startup culture Antoinette: *let them eat Foosball*.

Creating a better set of principles

We're a creative agency. We create a lot of products. Websites, messaging strategies, ad campaigns, all that. No matter what we create, what underlies all of those jobs is a process of making creative decisions.

That is, ultimately, what every organization is. Some agencies make creative decisions with Photoshop. Some agencies make creative decisions with tweets. Some agencies, like ours, make creative decisions with mental models, strategy frameworks, and empathy maps.

But no matter which tools you use, exactly *how* you make those decisions begins <points to noggin> up here. That, to borrow [a former Xerox CEO](#), is why employees are your company's greatest asset and competitive advantage. You're not simply hiring a designer or writer or marketer; you're hiring a process of making decisions. You're not hiring a noun; you're hiring a verb.

And so, if you're building an organization, the question then becomes: how do you manage those decisions as you grow? How do you make it *more likely* that employees will make the *best decisions* the *most often*?

One possible answer — our answer, at least — is principles of work.

It has been said that our time on this planet is a process of making decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Principles can help us make those decisions better.

But be aware: creating the right principles is no easy task.

Firstly, principles shouldn't be vague imperatives, like “be a team player”. I mean, sure: most people are keen to “be a team player” — but what does that *mean* exactly? You're asking for a lot of work to be done by the verb “to be.” One person's team play is another person's license to overzealously throw away the perfectly good leftovers sitting in the company fridge.

Conversely, principles shouldn't be vague virtues, like “honesty” and “respect.” That equates a principle to a static and unchanging thing, almost like a place on a map. But principles aren't a destination (Integritytown! Honestville!). Rather, principles are a method of traveling. It's one thing to aspire to “respect.” It's quite another to understand how to make decisions that foster feelings of mutual regard.

And that's the point: principles should be a manual for making decisions.

Or, better: *Principles are a heuristic that help employees consistently make the best possible decisions without supervision*.

The “without supervision” part is most important.

For why, we borrow the magic of that administrative Merlin, [Herbert Simon](#): As they grow, all organizations experience a tension between at least two administrative principles: the principle of [unity of command](#) and the principle of [specialization](#). Unity of command says hierarchies are intended to increase efficiency (CEOs direct VPs, VPs manage directors, etc). But the principle of specialization says that efficiency is supposed to increase as employees and departments specialize (marketers know best how to market, developers to develop, etc.). The two principles conflict when, for example, a specialized department or effort comes under supervision from an unspecialized manager, and thus those specialists require supervision from a second, knowledgable specialist outside their direct reporting structure (this is the origin of “dotted line reports,” i.e., having two bosses). In this structure, how is the organization supposed to make efficient decisions?

The lazy answer is “instilling a good culture.” That ignores the problem of defining, communicating, and managing that culture.

The naive answer is “we'll only make good hires.” That ignores the challenge of defining a hiring heuristic, and the realities of time pressure.

The answer that scales is “empowering every employee to make the best decisions.” As the agency grows, so, too, should the employees' ability to operate and make creative decisions. Principles are the scalable templates that help you verb your work. Our principles are below.

Which brings us to the final point: We're trying to build a good company. A kind company. A company that values the work and the person. But we know — thanks to that Australian farmer, Lars Ulrich, and the indomitable Babs — that even the most carefully built systems lend themselves to unforeseen consequences. Like, you know, employees using these decision-making guidelines against each other.

So in an effort to circumvent that most dire of consequences, we included one final mandate:

Whatever you do, don't weaponize these principles.

Make relationships before things

All work begins with deciding what kind of relationship you want to have with your audience. And, the work that you do is accomplished through relationships — either between people or between design elements. When creating, pay attention to how people and elements relate to their neighbors. Understand those relationships and you will understand how any system works.

Humans are happiest when they have a sense of purpose, mastery, and autonomy. In your work here you should identify your purpose, strive for mastery in your domain, and feel empowered to make creative decisions. Stay curious, learn forever.

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Consider the whole human

We are more than our job titles. We are also fathers, mothers, children, and friends. Practice empathy in your regard for how others work and feel — within our agency, and with our clients. Actively look to balance your personal life and work so that you can satisfy your commitments to the most important people in your life.

Seek the most interesting challenges

We do our best work when a project intrigues us and sparks our curiosity. Often, these qualities mean that the project is also challenging. Strive to find the odd-sized problems and tackle the largest obstacles. The path forward is the path through resistance.

Find better explanations

Like many things in this world, creative work is a process of making decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Work tirelessly to reduce that uncertainty by questioning authority and assumptions, testing your ideas, and embracing constructive criticism.

Aim for outputs, optimize inputs

Within a closed system, there are at least two types of goals a person may set for themselves: an output and an input. An input is a task, an output is the sequence of that task. Begin with the output in mind, but work tirelessly to optimize the inputs so that your work becomes consistent, repeatable, and reliable. You can always change your inputs to create a better output, but the reverse is never true.

Get to useful quickly

Time is precious. So are results. In all endeavors, whether it's an internal project or a client engagement, we must have a bias for generating results. Avoid [analysis paralysis](#).

Look at your fish

Insight often comes not from noticing something new, but in noticing something that's been there all along. Always look closely at your surroundings — your office, your work, your ways of working — and ask: “What haven't I noticed yet? What can I help improve?”

Do nothing but your best work

We are successful to the extent that we help our clients succeed. Thus our responsibility is to bring them our deepest thinking, most considered approaches, and most compelling work. Impress your harshest critic. Create work that will over-deliver on its usefulness and will be beautiful for years to come — nothing else.

Don't weaponize these principles

These principles help us all to consistently create excellent work in a fun and respectful environment. Don't use them against each other.



Steve Bryant

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Steve specializes in content strategy, branded content, product development, and editorial operations. Yes, he'd love to get a drink.

 @stevebryant

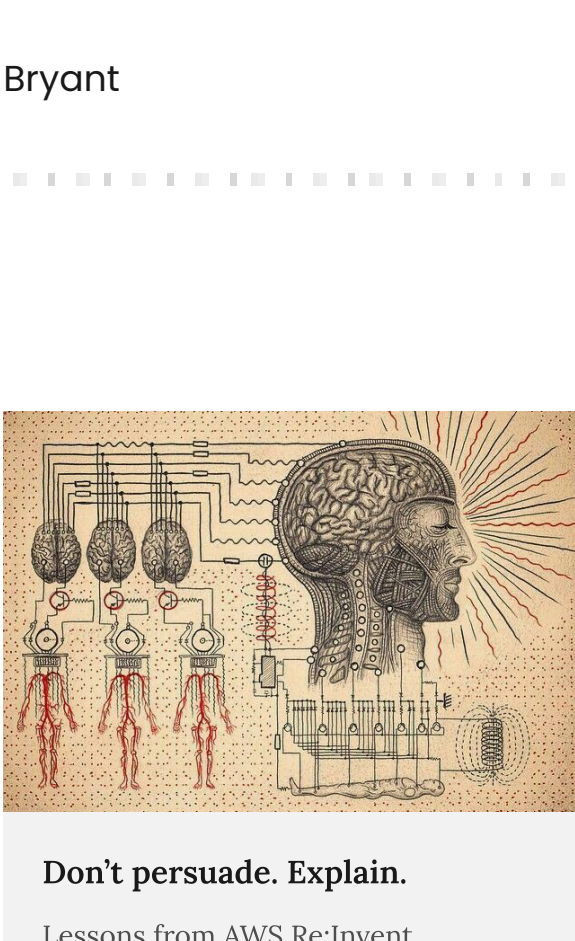
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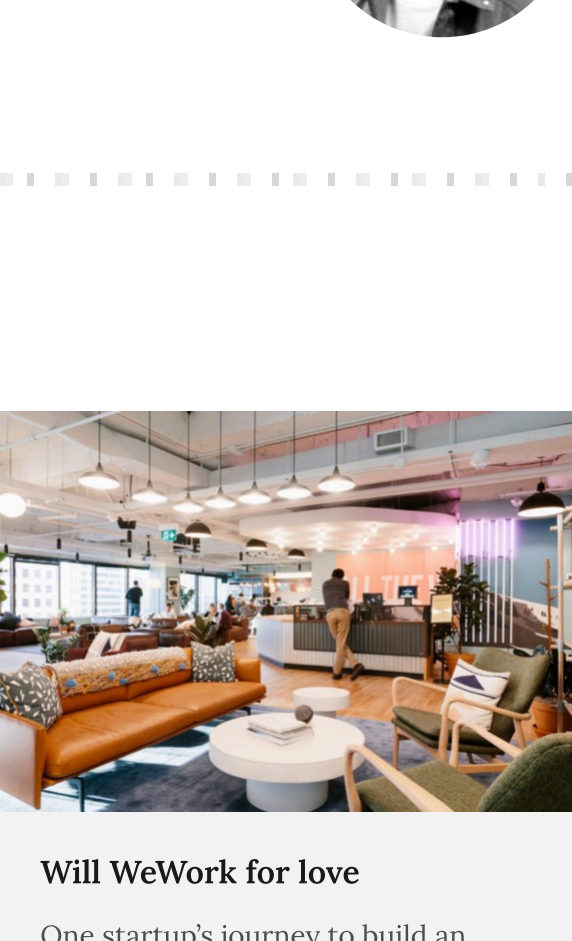
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