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JONES JONES ADVERTISING: THE EDDY LINE

Lauren Nicolaas wrote this case under the supervision of Julie Gosse solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In September 2020, Halle Findlay, people manager at Jones Jones Advertising (Jones) had just finished a morning canoe trip with her daughter. The water had been calm but busy, with otters looking for breakfast. Following this adventure, Findlay put on her face mask and bought a large coffee and a small hot chocolate at the local bakeshop. As she and her daughter drove home, Findlay reflected on what had been the strangest year of her life.

A year ago, Findlay had hired two promising young graduates onto the Jones team. Four months later, she had made some modifications to the organizational structure, which were expected to benefit new employees working at the agency. Two months after these modifications had been introduced, the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) had been identified in Canada, greatly affecting the small firm. Jones was now dealing with some difficult organizational issues: one assistant was about to resign and another was not performing up to standard. Findlay knew something had to be done to get everyone back on track quickly.

The FIRM

Jones was an advertising agency based in Squamish, British Columbia. It specialized in tourism and travel advertising and served a wide variety of clients. Jones employed roughly 30 people and had a beautiful office overlooking the Tantalus Mountains.

In 2006, the Bearoff Group (Bearoff), a large advertising conglomerate, had decided to spin off several advertising firms with the goal of allowing each of the new agencies to be more nimble and creative, while providing customized client services. Each of the new firms had control over internal policies, organizational structure, compensation, and firm strategy. Jones was one of these derivate firms under the Bearoff umbrella. After some initial hurdles, Jones’s last decade of operations had been very successful. Though the partners at Jones always knew that Bearoff could override the firm’s decisions, Bearoff had never made a point of doing so.

**ADVERTISING FIRM STRUCTURE**

Jones was divided into two distinct groups, Account Services and Activation Services, based on the services each group provided. People who worked in Account Services were called strategists, and people who worked in Activation Services were called activators. An additional aspect of the business was client acquisition, but this was the exclusive responsibility of the three partners (see Exhibit 1).

**Account Services**

The account services team at Jones was involved in marketing strategy, but its members were not high-level marketing strategists. Firms who hired Jones already had concrete target markets, solid products, and had already made pricing and placement decisions. Strategists at Jones were responsible for creating and refining detailed promotional strategies.

Clients met first with the accounts team to discuss their challenges and the type of advertising they wanted. Account Services determined the best strategy to meet the clients’ needs, making decisions such as choosing the best combination of print advertising, television advertising, and out-of-home[[1]](#footnote-1) advertising for the specific client. Strategists also developed messaging and channelled distinct advertisements to refined target groups, and they were responsible for most communication with the client. The best strategists were creative thinkers as well as organized project managers.

**Activation Services**

Once a plan had been developed by the strategists and approved by the clients, the activation services team was responsible for executing the advertising strategy. Activators spent most of their time analyzing and optimizing advertisements and making decisions regarding the volume of advertisements by region, with targeted release dates. Additionally, activators were responsible for bidding on advertising space on behalf of the client. Depending on the medium, this bidding process could involve significant contract negotiations with large TV channels, newspapers, and billboard providers. Each week, activators would perform a thorough analysis of each advertisement’s performance and adjust their bidding accordingly to ensure that the client was getting the best impact per dollar spent. The best activators were not just great negotiators; they were detailed oriented and analytical, and they saw value where others did not.

Intergroup Dynamics

The corporate culture within the two divisions was very similar. Both sides had managers who used a very hands-off style. While the work done at Jones required considerable critical thinking, the agency had a concrete structure that allowed for smooth operations. The type of work performed did not vary much from client to client or from year to year. As such, managers liked to give their teams space to work. There were no fixed work hours at Jones. Instead, the company prioritized finishing the work, and employees could come and go as they pleased, as long as they completed their tasks. This being said, most employees worked in the office from 8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. each weekday.

There was a good sense of camaraderie on both teams, and most of the employees were friends outside of work. Ensuring that staff felt like part of the team was a very important step in the socialization process Findlay oversaw for new employees. However, despite having similar cultures, the two divisions did not have much overlap. A member of Jones’s staff, speaking about friendships between accounts and activation, said, “Honestly, I just don’t spend a lot of time with activators. It’s not that activators and strategists don’t get along; we do! It’s just that . . . we don’t have very much in common.”

The career paths of strategists and activators was very well established (see Exhibit 2). Employees with good performance were promoted faster, but promotions occurred only once a year, in October. This allowed Findlay and the team to coordinate all of the role shifts at the same time.

**THE NEW HIRES**

In September 2019, Jones had hired two new assistant media staff members (AMSs). Andrew Chen was hired onto the accounts team and Greeshma Kher was hired by the activation team. Both Chen and Kher had newly graduated from the University of British Columbia, in media studies and economics, respectively. Though they had never met in school, Chen and Kher became friends after moving to the small town of Squamish to start their careers. After work, they were often seen together grabbing a pint at the brewery or rock climbing on the steep, local crags, or cliffs.

By November 2019, the new hires had been fully integrated into their teams. Chen and Kher were both thriving in their respective roles. Chen said, “The work is tough and sometimes boring. That’s what it means to be an AMS; it’s grunt work. But I get to be in the room! I get to observe and learn from the team, and a year from now, I’ll be an associate. It’ll be me driving client conversations.”

**THE NEW STRUCTURE**

In October 2019, Findlay had attended several Bearoff sessions about organizational structure. These sessions outlined the benefits of different structures and reviewed the structure of each spinoff firm. While at the sessions, Findlay had also discussed the benefits of cross-training staff with several colleagues from other firms.

Two years ago, another Bearoff firm had stopped hiring AMSs into separate divisions. Instead, the firm had hired several AMSs to help with both sides of the advertising business. After one year, those being promoted to associate roles could choose to work in either the activation group or the accounts group, depending on their preferences.

Findlay could see the benefits of this shift. New employees would gain a holistic view of the company’s operations while also gaining a better understanding of their own strengths. Findlay thought back to her year as an AMS. The role had been tedious and repetitive, and it would have been nice to have had more variety.

Findlay presented her thinking to the other managers and the partners. They all agreed that cross-training the AMSs would be very beneficial for both the AMSs and the firm as a whole. In early January 2020, Findlay informed Kher and Chen that they would now be completing work for both the activation and the accounts divisions. They would each report to two managers and two senior associates—one from each side of the firm. Findlay held a question and answer session for all involved to ensure everyone had a clear understanding of the required changes.

**SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES**

The first month of the new AMS structure change went better than Findlay could have imagined. The managers in both groups agreed that there were significant benefits to this kind of cross-training. They also saw the benefits of added flexibility, with a second assistant available to each department at those times when the workload was substantial. The AMSs seemed content to see both sides of the business but stayed relatively silent about the new structural changes.

In late February, about two months after Kher and Chen had inherited their new responsibilities, Findlay was making her usual rounds in the office, saying hello to staff before lunch. When she walked by Chen’s desk, she noticed that he was browsing through some old advertisements. Findlay asked Chen what he was working on, and he replied that he was not working on anything as he had not been assigned any work for nearly two days. He had asked both of his managers if they had any work for him, but they had both said there was not anything for him to do.

That same night, Findlay came back to the office after dinner with her wife to retrieve her cell phone, which she had left behind at the end of the workday. Upon entering the office, she found Chen working at his station. “I guess you found some work,” Findlay said. Chen explained that he was just compiling some new bidding data for the Arts Museum advertisements. Findlay smiled, remembering the occasional late night she’d put in as an AMS. She looked at her watch; it was almost 11:00 p.m.

Since the new program had been in place for two months, Findlay scheduled a check-in meeting with Robert Malfy, the manager of the activation division, and Chris Price, the manager of the accounts division. In the meeting, Findlay was informed that the new AMS initiative had initially been beneficial for both Kher and Chen. Both employees had been willing to introduce the tasks of their respective divisions. Malfy said that Chen was just as good as any activation division AMS, and Price spoke equally well of Kher.

However, Kher and Chen had recently been seen arguing over new assignments. It seemed that the associates were assigning too much work to the AMSs, and this was resulting in increased tension for these rookie employees. The managers had also noticed that work was being submit late. Malfy and Price assured Findlay that they would talk to the associates about assigning work evenly.

Despite this assurance, Findlay had a nagging suspicion that the managers had not told her the full story. Findlay made investigating and understanding the underlying issues in the new structure her top priority, hoping this would set her AMSs back on track. She still believed wholeheartedly in the merits of this system; she just needed to make some adjustments to get the team working together.

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared that COVID-19 had become a global pandemic.[[2]](#footnote-2) By mid-July, there were over 13.6 million confirmed cases worldwide, 108,000 of which were in Canada.[[3]](#footnote-3) During the first months after the pandemic was declared, governments introduced many restrictions to limit the spread of the virus. Beginning on March 20, BC Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry ordered all non-essential stores and services to close. As a member of Jones’s staff said,

I recall that Friday in March very clearly. Our partners had suggested we all work from home so we could test out our technology—you know, in case we had to stay at home for a few weeks. By lunchtime, rumours were spreading that a return to the office would be optional. At 3:00 p.m., the partners announced that no one would be allowed into the office for the foreseeable future. In that firm-wide phone call, someone asked about layoffs; they didn’t have an answer.

Within a week, clients’ spending at Bearoff firms plummeted. With international visitors banned from entering the country and local travellers reluctant to leave their homes, the tourism and travel industry was projecting some of the biggest losses to result from the COVID-19 global pandemic.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In early June 2020, Bearoff announced to all of its agencies that a return to the office would happen in January 2021, at the absolute earliest. Bearoff also announced a firm-wide salary and promotions freeze and several layoffs. The Jones team was lucky because none of the layoffs had affected the firm; however, fears of additional layoffs and salary reductions from Bearoff loomed large.

**THE NEW NORMAL**

Daily operations at Jones were affected greatly in the first four months of the pandemic. Each of the accounts and the activation teams held daily virtual meetings at 9:00 a.m. to discuss the day’s work and the team’s progress and to create a sense of structure and routine for employees. In these virtual meetings, it was common to see interruptions from children and pets alike; this was all part of the “new normal.”

At first, the workload was slow as clients grappled with the effects of COVID-19. Then, quite quickly, clients started asking for thought leadership.[[5]](#footnote-5) Everyone was looking for answers, but the unknowns surrounding the duration of the pandemic meant that answers were limited. Clients wanted to know how local consumers were changing their behaviours.

In July of 2020, the firm was busier than it had ever been. As Canada slowly reopened its economy,[[6]](#footnote-6) clients began asking for rapid advertising plans to try to profit from what was left of the summer. As Kher said,

We were reinventing everything we knew. We were so accustomed to using historical data to make decisions, but there was no data for this! How much should we bid for a commercial spot on an NHL [National Hockey League] game? The game was in the middle of August, and it might or might not happen because the league could be cancelled at any moment. No one would be watching at the pubs; pubs were closed. Then again, it was likely that more people would be watching at home because there was nothing else to do. So how much was that worth? These weren’t easy questions.

**THE MEETINGS**

In early September 2020, Findlay started her week of quarterly updates. It was important to her to check up on each employee’s progress and satisfaction. She had skipped these meetings in the last quarter because of the COVID-19 disruption, so she had not spoken to most of the staff one on one in over six months.

Her first meeting was with Kher. The Skype call was short and uneventful, and Findlay noted that Kher seemed tired and even slightly disinterested in the meeting. Later that week, her call with Price was much more concerning: Price spoke highly of Chen but seemed less impressed with Kher – and he noted that things were busy under current circumstances (see Exhibit 3). Findlay was not surprised to learn that Malfy and Price had not spoken about the AMS challenges, since everyone at the firm had had much to think about, but she wanted to make the AMSs a priority because they were the future leaders of the firm.

The next day, Findlay had meetings with Malfy and Chen where she learned that Chen was overwhelmed and Malfy believed Chen was not performing up to standard (see Exhibits 4 and 5). Findlay had had no idea that Chen and Kher had been working so much. Her meeting with Kher was starting to make more sense; the AMSs were both burnt out. Yet Findlay wondered how the perceptions of Chen could vary so much between divisions. Price and Malfy were both excellent managers, and they used a very similar leadership style. Chen was smart and capable, so the discrepancy between Price and Malfy’s opinions did not make sense.

Findlay had a virtual wine night with some of her office friends that evening. It was always nice to catch up on the workplace gossip. Someone mentioned that Kher had booked a personal day[[7]](#footnote-7) for the next week. There was a rumour that she was interviewing for a job with another firm.

**WHAT COMES NEXT?**

After meeting with Chen and Malfy, and after hearing the rumour about Kher, Findlay’s head was spinning. She wondered why this organizational shift had not been more successful. Other Bearoff firms that used the structure didn’t seem to be having these same issues. Findlay wondered if there was anything she could do to change Kher and Chen’s career paths at Jones.

Findlay sighed as she looked around the unfinished basement that would be her office for the foreseeable future. She had enhanced the space by hanging some of her children’s drawings and adding better lighting, but like so many things these days, it was far from perfect. Similarly, there was no perfect solution to the issue of Chen and Kher, but there had to be something she could do to improve the team dynamic at Jones.

Exhibit 1: Organizational Structure

Partners

Account Director

Account Manager

Account Manager

Account Supervisor

Account Associate

Assistant Media Staff—Accounts

Administrative Assistants

*Halle Findlay* People Manager

**Administrative Group**

Finance

Manager

IT Manager

*Chris Price*

Account Manager

Activation Director

Activation Manager

*Robert Malfy* Activation Manager

Activation Manager

Activation Supervisor

Activation Associate

Assistant Media Staff—Activation

Source: Created by case author.

Exhibit 2: The Typical Progression of a Jones Employee

Source: Company files.

Exhibit 3: Excerpts from Findlay’s Skype call with Price—September 9, 2020

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Findlay:** | I know that things have been incredibly busy; how’s the team holding up? |
| **Price:** | It’s been alright. The team is doing their best, but the work is tough. We can’t follow protocols or models anymore; everything we do is completely novel. |
| **Findlay:** | Yes, it’s been tough all around. How are the associates and AMSs holding up? |
| **Price:** | Oh pretty good. I must say that having two AMSs around has been really beneficial. The team and I really like Andrew: he’s a good guy, and he does better work than some of my associates. Greeshma is nice enough; she gets her work done. |
| **Findlay:** | Okay. Last time we spoke, Greeshma and Andrew were having some difficulties balancing the workload. Is that still happening? |
| **Price:** | Oh man, that feels like a lifetime ago. I don’t think that’s still going on. It’s hard to tell nowadays—not like I can see it happening. |
| **Findlay:** | I suppose that’s true. Have you talked to Robert recently? |
| **Price:** | No, I don’t really email him unless it’s to exchange client data, but he has not noticed any further issues. He would have said something to me. |

Source: Created by case author.

Exhibit 4: Excerpts from Findlay’s Skype call with Chen—September 10, 2020

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Findlay:** | I know that things have been incredibly busy lately, but I want you to know that the firm recognizes and appreciates your efforts. Chris speaks very highly of you. I have not had my meeting with Robert yet, but I’m sure he will say the same things. |
| **Chen:** | Yeah, thanks. Things have been really busy lately for everyone, I’m sure. I spoke to Chris a few weeks ago about getting some more strategy work, and he gave me a few more opportunities, which have been great. Unfortunately, the activation side has been equally busy. Most days, I am online until around 10 p.m. |
| **Findlay:** | Really? That doesn’t sound right to me. I know everyone is working more, but I thought most people were putting in a few extra hours here and there—nothing crazy |
| **Chen:** | Well, it’s usually just Greeshma and I left online that late. One manager will text me around five to ask me where the day’s work is. Odds are, I haven’t started it because I was doing other work for the other side. I’m just really struggling to prioritize. Not only that, but most of the work from the activation division is vague and confusing. I feel like I have no idea what I’m doing, so it takes twice as long. |
| **Findlay:** | But surely you can gauge from the client meetings what’s going to be most important versus what can maybe wait? |
| **Chen:** | I haven’t been to a client meeting since March. The managers decided that that was too many people in a Skype call. Even then, there’s too much work; I don’t have time to go to client meetings. |
| **Findlay:** | Wow, Andrew, I had no idea. Everything is such a mess right now. Sorry, I’m not making excuses. I do want to try and make this right. |
| **Chen:** | May I be candid, Halle? I came here to be a strategist. I’ve learned a lot, and when my chance comes, I’ll be a [darn] good strategist. We both know that chance isn’t coming this year, whether I deserve it or not. You’re not going to promote me, and you’ll ask me to do another AMS year. Between the amount of work and the low pay of an AMS, it is going to stop making sense for me to do this. |
| **Findlay:** | I know. And I appreciate your honesty. Sincerely, thank you. I’m going to think about this and talk to your managers about workload planning. |

Source: Created by case author.

Exhibit 5: Excerpts from Findlay’s Skype call with MALFY—September 10, 2020

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Findlay:** | Are you finding that your staff has enough guidance these days? I know it’s hard, given the remote work situation, and I want to offer my support if you need it. |
| **Malfy:** | You know me: I’m a pretty hands-off manager. Trust your people, give them clear goals they can strive for, and let them do the rest. That continues to work for us. The team has been producing awesome work, and they have been very creative in how we can find value for our clients, despite the lack of data. My team knows that I’m available any time they need guidance. We’re keeping those lines of communication open. |
| **Findlay:** | Makes sense. Just make sure you’re checking in with your staff now and again. You have to be a bit more purposeful with it now that we can’t just gossip by the water cooler. |
| **Malfy:** | I totally agree. |
| **Findlay:** | I also wanted to talk to you about the AMSs and the new organizational structure. |
| **Malfy:** | Oh yeah. I wanted to talk to you about this too. Greeshma is doing great work for us. She has really taken our new challenges in stride, and I have been very impressed with her modelling. I do think she is overworked, though. We have her doing so much for the activation side, and I do not know what the accounts side has had her doing. |
| **Findlay:** | Good to hear that Greeshma is putting out great work. What about Andrew? |
| **Malfy:** | Andrew started so strong, but has really fallen behind. His work has been mediocre at best, and he always seems to be busy doing something else. Honestly, he seems like a smart guy, but he does not know how to prioritize. His work is always coming in late. |
| **Findlay:** | Okay. Are we giving Andrew clear instructions on how to prioritize in the daily meetings? |
| **Malfy:** | Andrew only comes to those meetings every once in a while. As I said, it always seems like he’s busy doing something else. If you ask me, the guy’s a bit of a slacker. Maybe he has just taken this work-from-home thing a little too far. |
| **Findlay:** | I see. How often are you and Chris meeting to discuss AMS workload? |
| **Malfy:** | We haven’t met for a while. You know how busy things are right now—and the work is pretty ad hoc anyway. Besides, Greeshma is managing just fine. She knows how to prioritize and is putting out stellar work. I give her a task, and she figures it out. She does the work on time and knows how we like the work done. I just do not trust Andrew the same way. |

Source: Created by case author.

1. Out-of-home advertising was promotional material that people engaged with outside of their homes (e.g., billboards and bus advertising). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jamie Ducharme, “World Health Organization Declares COVID-19 a ‘Pandemic.’ Here's What That Means,” *Time*, March 11, 2020, accessed July 15, 2020, https://time.com/5791661/who-coronavirus-pandemic-declaration/. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Worldometers Info, “Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic,” Worldometer, accessed July 15, 2020, www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kathleen Harris, “Gutted by COVID-19, Travel and Tourism Industry Pleads for Aid from Ottawa,” CBC News, August 10, 2020, accessed September 10, 2020, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/travel-tourism-covid19-1.5680813. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A thought leader is someone who is recognized as an authority in a certain field. These leaders are often asked to put out expertise and best practice information for their specific field. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Provinces reopened in stages over the course of the summer of 2020. These stages dictated what businesses could reopen to the public and at which times. International travel to Canada was still heavily restricted. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Personal days, like vacation days, were days off work that could be used for any personal reason and did not require explanation. Employees at Jones had five personal days per year. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)