

Steering an agency through trying times

 By [Katlego Mashishi](#)

30 Dec 2021

I moved from my comfort zone in a corporate marketing department into a high-pressure, fast-paced agency environment at a time that Covid-19 was resetting the rules for everyone. Since joining Idea Engineers as managing director in May, I've needed to learn the terms of engagement at a time they are constantly changing. Talk about a baptism of fire.



Source: www.unsplash.com

As we all know, these are tough times for most PR and advertising agencies. Many companies have gone out of business, and those that are left standing have cut their marketing budgets to the bone. Joining the agency world at this time has challenged me to take calculated risks to keep the business running profitably and to resume revenue growth.

There can be strength in vulnerability

In these uncertain times, what I have found is that embracing discomfort and vulnerability can be a strength for a leader. No one knows everything and none of us can predict the future. Becoming comfortable with this uncertainty is the key to making good decisions—especially the ones that are hard to make. It's also essential to pivot when you get something wrong.

Leaders cannot expect or pretend to always be right, and admitting this fact makes us vulnerable. However, we can be open to listening, understanding and embracing that we operate in a volatile environment. I have found that this openness helps me to quickly correct course if a tactic or strategy isn't working, and to adjust our plans or the way we work when external conditions change.

This agility is more important than ever in a world of accelerated change, with digital technology reshaping consumer behaviour, ways of working and how our clients operate. We have needed to become fully digital—a transition that isn't always easy because it challenges longstanding norms in our industry.



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While protecting and growing the bottom line is important, it's also crucial to remain aligned with the purpose of the business and to create an environment where people can thrive. I've found that taking risks, based on careful synthesising and testing the information at hand, is key to achieving the best results.

Making tough calls

One of the tough calls we made this year was parting ways with a prestigious client. Despite looking fine from a revenue point of view, the relationship wasn't working out for either party and the negativity was starting to affect the team's work experience. Cutting ties has released energy to focus on other clients and strategic concerns.

We've also needed to start thinking about growth in new ways. The industry is going through a massive transformation as clients embrace digital marketing, and we've needed to upskill in online channels and ways of working. Given the fierce competition for new accounts, we increasingly emphasise growing with existing clients and offering them a single-stop solution for their marketing needs.

Empathy matters more than ever

Another key lesson we've taken from the pandemic is that the people factor is more important than ever. Dialling up compassion and empathy is really important during a time that has demanded sacrifices from everyone. Clear and regular two-way communication engenders the sense of psychological safety people need to perform under pressure.

Working directly with creative people, especially, was a new experience for me. In this environment, it's all about managing the quality of the creative output rather than driving for pure efficiency. Getting the right balance between structure and space to create is a challenge when managing a team of brilliant ideas people.

ABOUT KATLEGO MASHISHI

Managing Director at Idea Engineers

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