Art Department CONFIDENTIAL

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Over the last five years, I have led a GDC roundtable for Lead Artists and Art Directors. It was during the discussions with this group, that I realized there were a large set of commonalities between our experiences whether we came from a 500 person publisher or a 5 person studio.

In this presentation I have attempted to encapsulate what I consider to be some of the condensed wisdom of these sessions and much of this material is applicable to other fields within the games industry. I'm going to start by presenting some of the challenges set before a contemporary game art department and then cover what I consider the most critical.

All of these challenges come from real stories that came out in these groups – sometimes painful, funny or painfully funny in retrospect.

- ☻ Challenges:
    - ☻ Increasing complexity and amount of content
    - ☻ Increasing quality of the competition
    - ☻ Continual software and tool evolution/revolution
    - ☻ Budgetary and schedule pressures
    - ☻ Fostering an energized and creative environment
    - ☻ Management of increasingly large teams
    - ☻ Lead Training
    - ☻ Attracting, training and retaining talented people
    - ☻ Managing difficult personalities and under-performers

Revolutions and evolutions

The first four issues are very closely related in that they put direct stress on the amount, cost and quality of the artists and software we employ in our departments. Art Directors must find the right balance for their studios – assuming for the moment that they have limited budgets and time.

When I joined the game industry in 1995, an aspiring artist only needed to know a simple 2D paint program like Dpaint and have the ability to draw and paint. I only had a smidge of the latter, but it was enough to get me in the door at a small developer. Within a year, these 256 color paint skills I had mastered were obsolete in favor of rendered 3D sprites. Within two years or so after that, real-

time 3D hit my studio and a new skill set was required. The specific timelines differ from studio to studio depending on gaming genre and platform, but the fact is that if you have over twelve years' experience as a game artist, your skills have had to evolve about every two years and you've undergone a fundamental production revision at least once. This requires us to have a continual focus on training – most of which is done on the job by necessity. This turns out to work pretty well, particularly in larger departments where the opportunity to learn is more available. The one area where I think game developers fall down is in the lead training and that will be addressed in detail below.

The increase in asset complexity has had the result that not only does it take far longer to create a given asset, but frequently that multiple artists, each with specific specialties, are required to produce a single piece of game art. This results in multi-layered dependencies, more review check-in points, tool needs and pretty soon someone makes an MS Project file.

Along with this has come a healthier and highly skilled field of competitors which not only pushes us to create better and better graphics but also creates competition for resources which drive up salaries and can cause production issues if finding the right talent is an issue. The upside is that this helps us quite a bit in that we learn from seeing each others work, and our vendors and software providers continually leapfrog each other to provide better services and products.

Hand in hand with the growth of the industry and the expansion of project budgets (by a twenty-fold or more multiple since I joined) come additional business pressures. Games must be increasingly more impressive, but still with an eye to keeping development costs to a minimum. Schedules have not expanded dramatically in the last 10 years due to many market factors like console lifecycle, technology advances, and of course the almighty quarterly expectations of the financial people. A highly anticipated game which slips a quarter can have a negative impact on the publishers' stock price which can dwarf your entire development budget.

Fostering an energized, creative environment

This really sounds easy to say. You have a group of creative, talented artists who are focused on making great game art. The culture should create itself as long as the Director doesn't muck it up too much. The reality is that it does take management attention to create the proper environment for artists to thrive. One aspect of the issue has to do with "artists" and their work habits, and the other factor is the nature of game project cycles.

No two artists want to work in same environment. Some want the privacy and total control of their workspace that only individual offices can provide. Others prefer to work in and around other artists and/or graphics engineers. I do not think there is an ideal answer to this question, but I have a preference for the

latter. I think the opportunities for "casual mentoring and learning" are greater in a communal workspace. I also believe that the greater opportunity to give and receive peer feedback is a very positive element in an art department.

The benefits of a shared space do have limitations. The maximum number of people in a space needs to be considered carefully to avoid high noise levels and "movement" distractions. There is no ideal number for a given space; it all depends on the size of the area and distance between workstations and also the culture of the studio. When considering a large communal workspace it is important to consider some sort of "noise" policy, find ways to limit movement distractions eye-level height dividers and set aside some private areas available for phone calls and small meetings.

One area where most artists will agree is that they want restrictions and limitations – both technical and aesthetic – to be expressed clearly and as early as possible. There is a perception among some, particularly non-artists, that we want the opportunity of unfettered creativity and are thus hesitant to place guidelines or expectations out there until they see the first efforts of an art team. In my experience, that hasn't proved wise. Very few things are more destructive to an artist's morale than to have completed a solid piece only to find that the A.D.'s or designer expectations were not clearly stated.

And the final artist work habit aspect, which can sometimes be a delicate matter, is providing consistent, complete and clear feedback. Three C's; very easy to remember. Asset feedback, whether given by a director, or lead needs to be consistent – consistent with previous direction and with the goals of the visual style and also consistent in the source. This last point is very important in large team structures where there might be a management chain of command who all have the *opportunity* to give an artist some direct feedback. This should be studiously avoided. If your project structure calls for an animator to have work reviewed by an Animation Lead, that's where it should come from. This is certainly not to say that the Lead Artist, Art Director, Project Lead, Producer – whoever – should not be able to give feedback. They should, they simply should route the comments appropriately. It may sound Byzantine or "corporate" but from my experience, on both sides of screw-ups on this point, it is amazingly frustrating for artists to work in such situations.

The last two C's, complete and clear are fairly obvious but important. Asset feedback should consider all visual aspects that require comment. A common mistake is to spot a glaring error, comment and send the artist off revising without reviewing other more minor areas for editing which could have been addressed but will now be revealed at the second pass. Again, frustrating for the artist. Likewise, clarity is essential. If you cannot clearly express your expectations for improvement on an asset, get another pair of eyes on it and solicit opinions for a path to improvement. Saying, "Something about that just doesn't look right…" is not going to cut it.

A final intangible on feedback is that every artist listens and responds to feedback a bit differently. Some react very defensively at first, and then acknowledge your issues, while others welcome critiques as opportunities to improve. In any case, few will be ecstatic to hear that in some way, you don't like what they did. It is helpful at this point to have some tools in your bag that allow you to critique everyone's work without it all ending in arguments or hugs.
It helps to lead with the positive:
"I like the edge flow around the nose and mouth, that's really hot. Now overall, the face needs to get a lot closer to the look of the concept drawing."
And end with clarity:
"The forehead needs to be broader and the eyes should be closer together. Also, you need to get rid of the seam at the neck. The rest is good to go."

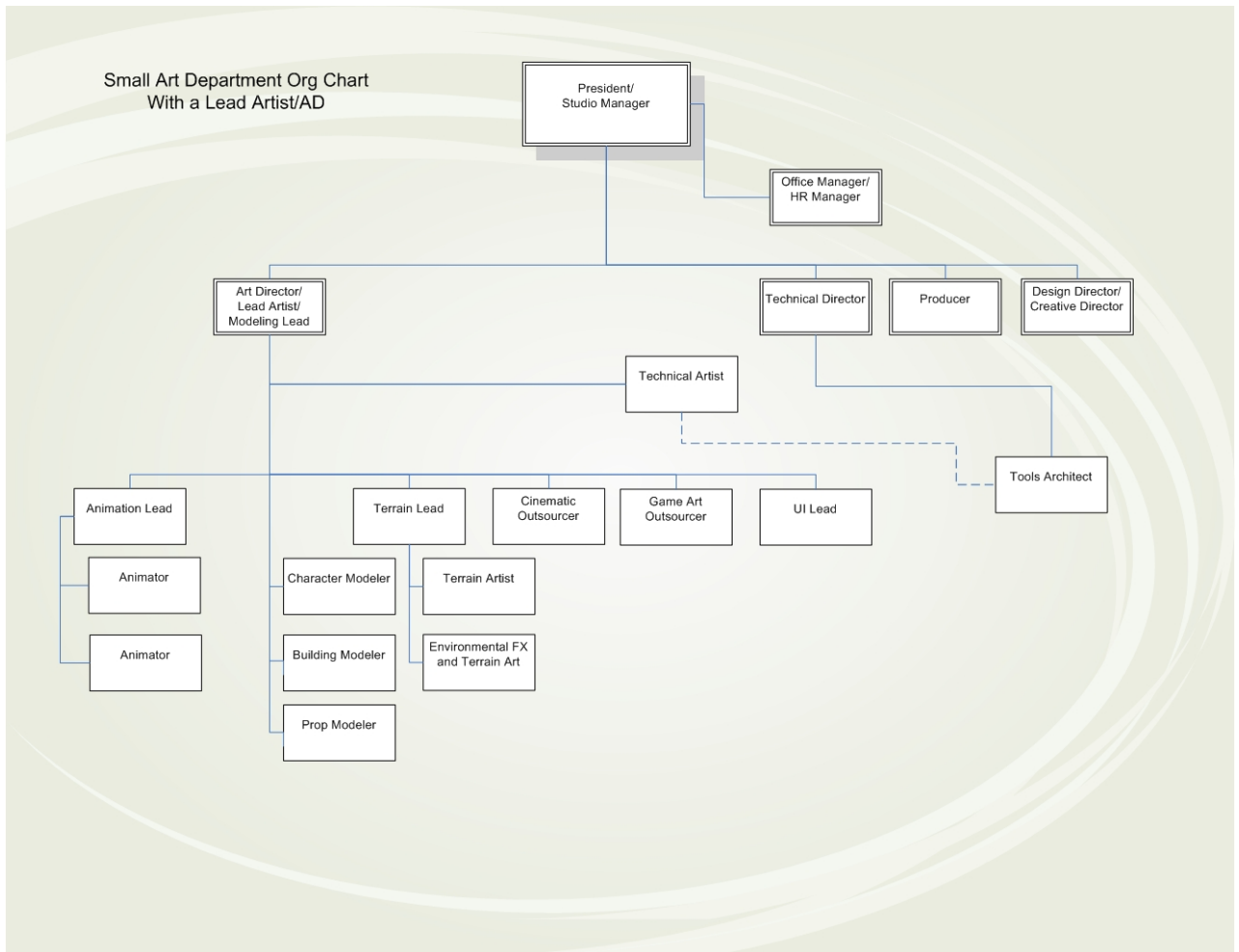And also, remember to regularly give positive critiques when appropriate.

Art teams working on game projects have some special considerations that many others don't. Our projects tend to be longer affairs, have considerable dependencies on engineering and design and also have more narrow areas of specialization. The result is that game artists need to be good communicators and have good communication tools and practices in place, and they need to be able to stay focused over many months of a potentially repetitive routine.

As an Art Director, you need to be flexible when a valued artist tells you they're sick of UI work and want to move into modeling or some other area assuming that they are qualified to do so. At the same time, when your sole UI artist, that you hired a year ago for that role, tells you they're sick of it, you may have to consider a more measured response.
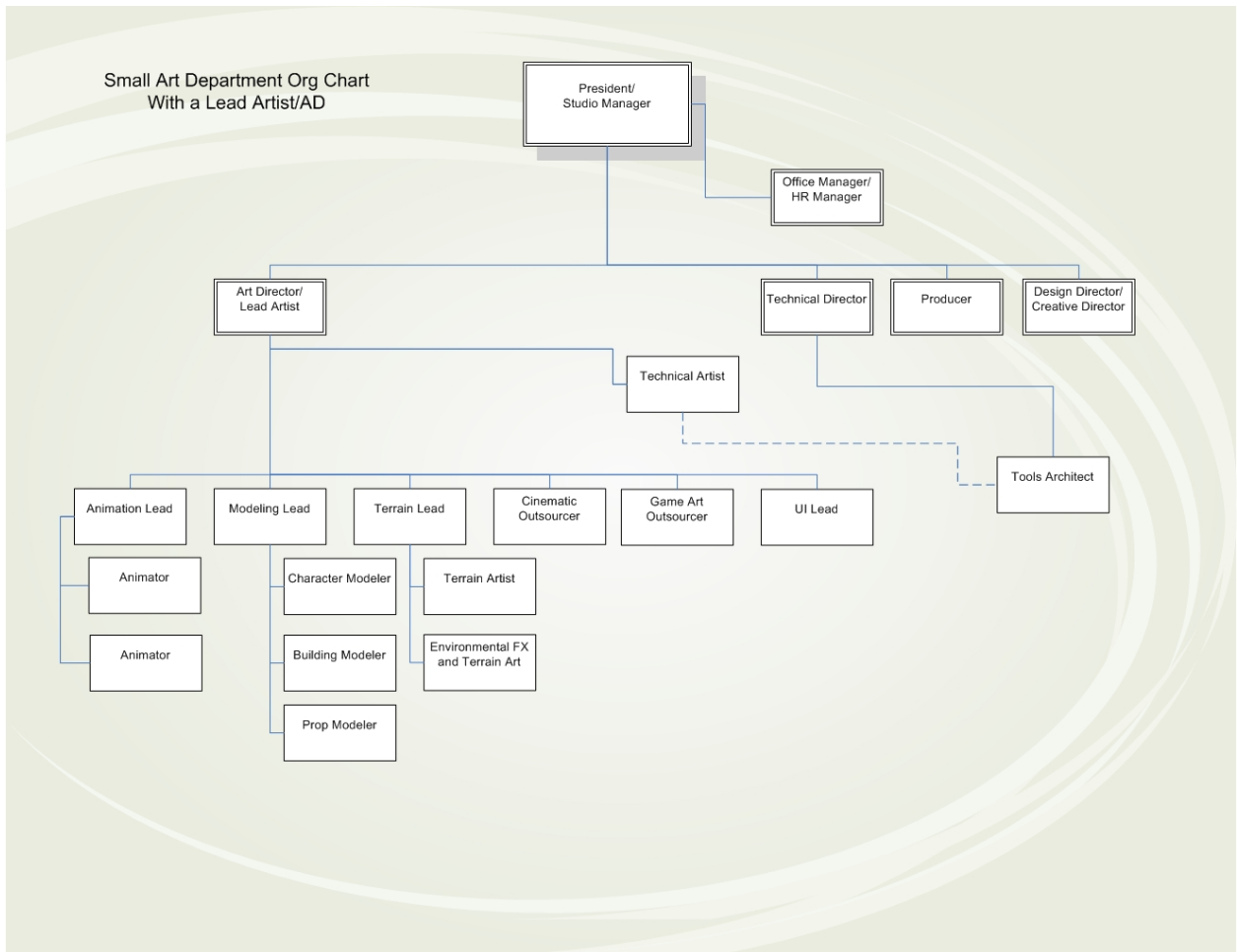
Management of increasingly larger teams

Over the last twelve years of my professional life, I've seen game art teams grow exponentially in size. We are now at a point where the asset needs of next gen titles are so complex and numerous that few studios are willing to risk bringing on more artist headcount and thus increasing their studio burn rate beyond anyone's comfort level. What number that is depends on the studio, some giant publishers choose to retain hundreds of in-house artists, while others opt for outsource solutions to meet their project needs.

Even if a studio opts for outsourcing solutions, odds are that they are already larger than they might like to be and need to manage bottlenecks. Below are some sample organization charts which illustrate some of these issues.

Small Art Department Org Chart
With a Lead Artist/AD

President/
Studio Manager

Office Manager/
HR Manager

Art Director/
Lead Artist/
Modeling Lead

Technical Director

Producer

Design Director/
Creative Director

Technical Artist

Tools Architect

Animation Lead

Terrain Lead

Cinematic
Outsourcer

Game Art
Outsourcer

UI Lead

Animator

Character Modeler

Terrain Artist

Animator

Building Modeler

Environmental FX
and Terrain Art

Prop Modeler

Above illustrates a small studio whose Art Director/Lead Artist has nine direct reports, departmental and project responsibilities.

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Building Modeler

Environmental FX
and Terrain Art

Prop Modeler

The addition of a Modeling Lead helps the project picture, but there still won't be much time able to be devoted to departmental issues.

Large Art Department Org Chart
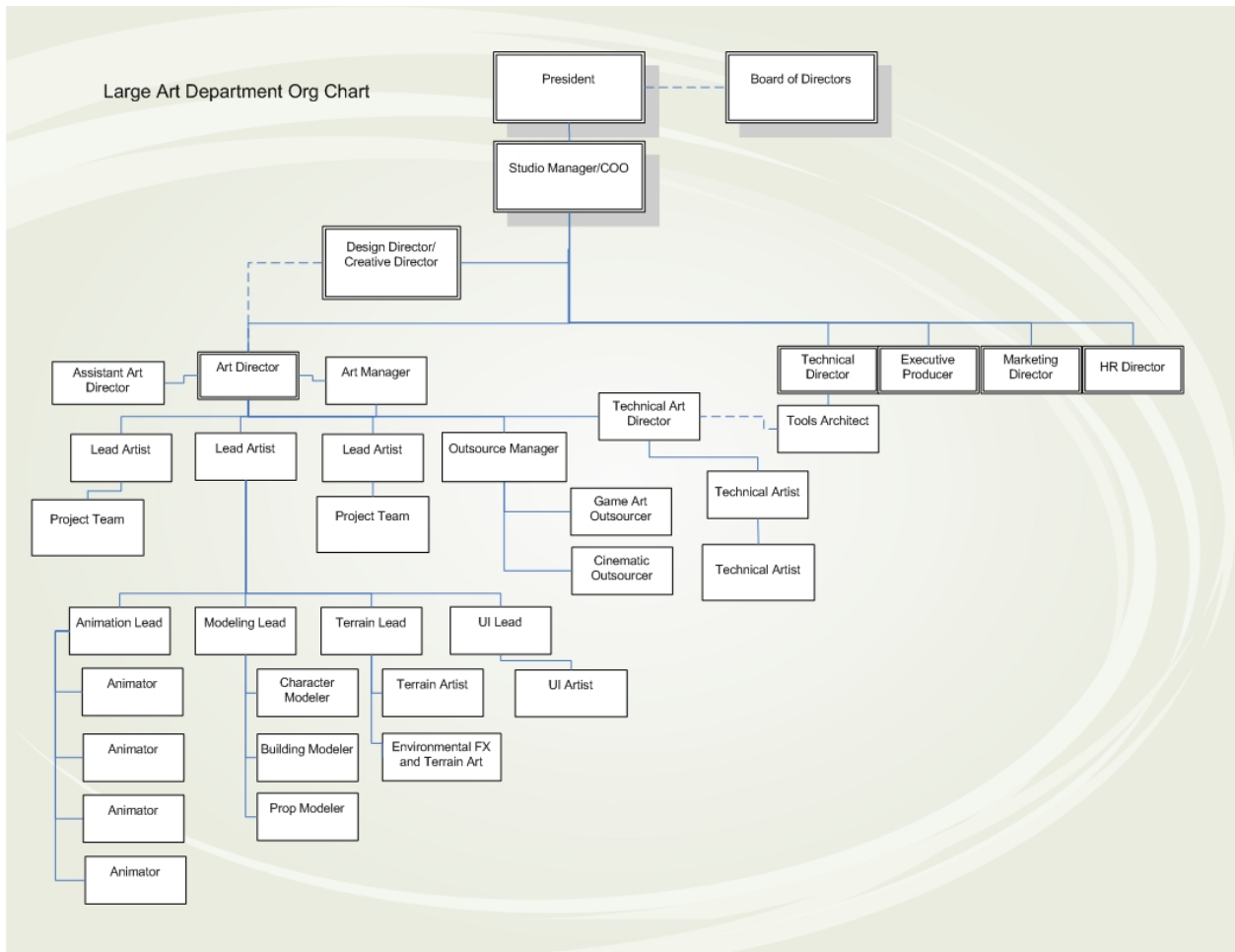
Here is an example of a 3 project studio which, managerially speaking, is planned well for further growth.

Basically, the key to avoiding bottlenecks is to limit direct reports in ratio to how much production work you expect from a given role. Conversely, you can also determine how much production work can be expected from a Lead based on the number of reports. There is probably a more scientific approach, but there are way too many variables for me to do it justice. My rule is that, any lead with more than three direct reports, such as a Lead Artist with three Specialist Leads, plus their inherit commitment to communication with other project leads (constituting another report) should allow them to devote no more than 30-40% of their time to production tasks and they should not be responsible for any critical path tasks. As a director, you have to enforce this and choose leads who can delegate effectively. I've seen way too many great artists become leads and take on too much production work. They ended up burned out, hating the lead role and one even left the industry over the amount of work he felt he had to perform.

Lead Training

Having seen Leads, and not just Art Leads, perform their jobs poorly and witness the results to them, the project and the department, it dawned on me that we should more carefully consider the criteria for being a Lead and then offer much more support to those we place in this role. Too frequently, we choose Leads based on the quality and quantity of their production efforts on the last project. This is a poor practice, and it even sounds like a poor practice and yet, we see it happen over and over again.

What we should do is choose Leads based first on observed leadership potential and simultaneously, adopt a dual path of advancement within our departments which equally rewards artists who advance their art skills to become our rockstar production artists with those who opt for a leadership role on our projects. This will remove one incentive for artists who feel that they need to be a lead to advance their careers. Because ultimately, this paradigm does a disservice to our project teams and very potentially to the artists involved.

Once we have chosen a Lead, we must provide management support to that person equivalent to what we would give a green artist sitting down in front of their first production asset. This person needs to very quickly understand a new role and set of responsibilities including; project reporting, scheduling, asset review, style guidance, team morale and probably a few others. Time management will become more of an issue for them and they will find that as they have less time to devote to production, their technical skills may erode over the course of a long project.

I recommend providing access to generic management training seminars. These vary widely in their quality but if you do some research I'm certain you can find a good one in your area. As generic as they are, there are many, many universal personnel management issues which will provide new Leads with new language and new tools to deal with their changing role. Such a seminar can also function as a milestone in a mindset shift from a production to a leadership mentality.

All this sounds straightforward enough but the fact does remain that leadership roles *are* a recognized advancement step in our industry and our culture generally and it will take work within your company to change that mentality.

Attracting, training and retaining talented people

The best Art Department in the industry requires the best artists and leads. Finding them, training them and keeping them around are some of the Art Director's most challenging jobs.

Attracting talented people requires a number of factors, many of them, sadly, outside your direct control. First and foremost, your company has to have a reputation for putting out great games. Nobody wants to work for a loser. And your studio should at least not have a negative reputation for treatment of employees. You don't need to pay the most to get the best talent. People choose companies for many reasons including; the opportunity to work with industry leaders, location, specific project role that is offered, genre or quality of their games, and certainly many more.

It's very hard to find people with the right skills who are going to be the right fit for your studio. But once you do find them, it is critical to retain them, we've probably all seen the statistics that show how expensive it is to hire for an unplanned vacancy.

Training and retaining the best people are areas where you do have more direct control. I believe people stay in their present job as long as they: enjoy their work and the people they work with, are doing good work for which they are recognized, compensated appropriately, and are learning. This latter aspect is not something that the games industry needs to worry about. We *have* to learn constantly and at breakneck speeds. If you, as the A.D., can facilitate that in as many ways as possible, you are creating a more retentive environment.

You can do that by assigning one-on-one mentoring as needed, encouraging peer reviews and scheduling monthly departmental training sessions led by Senior Artists in your department.

Attention to company morale, team dynamics, keeping to scheduled personnel reviews are all aspects of creating a positive professional atmosphere. And always remember, while managers believe that more than 70% of employees leave for more money, 88% of employees say they leave for reasons other than money.[1]

One of the biggest reasons is that they don't like the job that their boss is doing.

[1] *The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave* (Amacom, January 2005)

Managing difficult personalities and under-performers

What we really mean here is finding ways to consistently get the best possible work out of everyone in your department regardless of skill level or personal eccentricity. When considering this set of personnel, we are presuming that they are there for a reason.

What constitutes a difficult personality as it relates to a work setting? We are talking about a set of behaviors including but not limited to:

- Egomaniac
- Blamer
- Lazy/unfocused
- Oversensitive
- Unhygienic
- Disrespectful

Approaches to these types of behaviors must be swift and decisive; left unchecked they can wear on the morale of a department and company.

For the under-performer, the Art Director or Lead must first determine the cause of the problem. In my experience there have been four issues:

- inadequate technical skills
- poor workflow methods
- over-thinking, overworking tasks
- in the wrong role for their skills

The response to each will be of course slightly different depending on the circumstance but all measures taken should involve greater mentoring and supervision, an evaluation and then a follow-up period.

The most successful art departments will be those that can leverage every ounce of potential from every member and provide every opportunity for every artist to create better work – and that's our job.

Managers are measured not by what they produce but by what their people produce and as such the ideal manager should be constantly seeking to ensure their teams are encountering no obstacles, have the appropriate resources to do their job and are receiving good direction and feedback.