

Charlotte Beers at Ogilvy & Mather

Creating Change and Rebooting a Corporate Legacy

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CMN 1100 Organizational Communication (CRN: 40019)

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Spring 2025 – CPS Semester, Full Term

March 23, 2025

Charlotte Beers was appointed CEO and chairman of Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide (OMW) in April of 1992, and resigned in September of 1996. During this short four-and-a-half-year period, Beers led an effort that resulted in nothing short of a revolutionary cultural shift – not only at Ogilvy & Mather, but within the advertising and marketing industry more broadly. While doing so, she successfully utilized some of the most essential principles in organizational communication.

How does a single leader – an outsider, no less - achieve a revolutionary cultural shift at an old school advertising agency? That sounds daunting enough; add to that the significant resistance at OMW to new ideas created by a locally autonomous structure unaccustomed to centralized guidance or control. There is no single simple answer. The task was challenging, to say the least, and the transformation was not yet complete at the end of Beers' tenure, but an array of techniques, conditions, and approaches made it possible for Beers to succeed and point OMW in a direction that revitalized the company, and recaptured their financial and professional success in a fundamental way.

When Beers became CEO of OMW, the agency was coasting – and slowing. OMW was deeply respected, and historically, very successful. Inertia was still carrying them forward, but they were using up their goodwill and potential for continued progress, and beginning to show signs of stagnation. OMW was struggling with internal fragmentation, fading client relationships, and an outdated operating culture, which affected morale, employee dedication, and ongoing potential for success. They needed a new way forward.

Beers' approach to leadership was refreshingly different. She sought to connect with the people at OMW, and motivate them emotionally, rather than work strictly on a performance-based and operations-based structure. She applied her knowledge of people and how they think and feel about things to motivate them to helping her achieve the transformation OMW needed to survive and thrive.

One of the most important ways in which Beers was able to convince people at OMW to apply themselves towards the goals she was establishing was by framing her efforts against a backdrop of respect and sensitivity to everything the company had already achieved. Beers was empathetic to the possibility that people were proud of the work they had done at OMW, and she consciously, deliberately, and proactively extended respect and active communication. She expressed admiration and respect for the legacy of OMW and David Ogilvy, even while working to change the

structure and approach in an aggressive way. This emotionally intelligent and authentic approach helped to defang the natural and understandable resistance to change, making the company more receptive to her ideas.

Once OMW employees were more ready to apply themselves to working in a new way, Beers understood that a coherent and compelling vision, philosophy, and direction would help to unite the company and get everyone working together. The philosophy also needed to be one that would succeed in the marketplace, draw OMW's customers back, and chart a clear path towards a future that would continue to support growth and success. The vision had to inspire both internal and external audiences - clients and employees alike - to believe in Beers' vision of a new sense of purpose and a new strategic direction. It sounds like a difficult task, and it was. Beers wasn't merely rebranding the agency; she was working to reshape its internal culture while convincing the outside world that Ogilvy still mattered.

Charlotte Beers' leadership at Ogilvy & Mather is a flagship example of how organizational communication, emotional intelligence, and vision can be brought together to transform even a resistant corporate culture. She did not rely solely on top-down mandates; she engaged with people. She used respect, language, and vision to direct people and their professional reactions towards the achievement of a new direction and corporate identity.

While her tenure was relatively brief and some of the work remained unfinished, the trajectory she set reestablished OMW's relevance and set the company on a functional path to success and growth, recovering the ground they had lost, and more.

There is far more to discuss in Beers' story than can be covered within the format of this assignment. The questions I find particularly interesting are about Beers' thought process:

- How much of Beers' approach was intentional and planned, and how much was instinctive and built on the fly?
- Was Beers' style a deliberate leadership strategy, or an extension of who she naturally was? Did she see emotional connection as a tool—or as a central concept integral to organizational communication?
- Where did Beers' concept for "Brand Stewardship" and all the additional elements that suggests come from? Almost every company in the world now talks about "branding" using an extended definition that goes way beyond logos and colors, encompassing customer

experience, philosophy, values, even brand affection and emotional resonance. Did Beers intend to revolutionize everything, or was she just lucky?

The Harvard Business School study is a compelling account of how Beers' vision, understanding, and respect for people gave her the ability to unify a tired old organization, reinvigorate its staff, and restore OMW's relevance in the advertising industry. Beers' revitalization of OMW stands as a unique and spectacular achievement, but the single most compelling question that occurs to me is:

Is it possible someone is so brilliant that they can engineer a turnaround something like this deliberately, or does that someone also need to get lucky?

References

McGinn, K. L. (2002). Charlotte Beers at Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide (A) (Case No. 9-495-031).
Harvard Business School.