

# Cool Head Prevails...

## Roland Palmer Keeps It *ALL* Together



He is a busy manager in a hectic workplace with looming deadlines, projects that change by the minute, scads of customer contacts, staff who rely on him for immediate logistic and creative decisions, and a day full of frenetic moments and unplanned twists. Yet he orchestrates it all, keeps it coordinated and moving along, like a maestro in perfect charge of his symphony of greats.

I'm talking about Roland Palmer, operations manager for Vermont Design Works, a full service graphic and web design marketing company – where things move (and change) at the speed of...commerce. They deal with dozens of projects with scores of variables each day. Everyone is busy doing seemingly separate work yet our hero, Roland, gracefully pulls it all together. Voila, one project is done and two more are started.

Read on to learn how Roland - cool, calm, and collected - keeps the information flowing, the people working, the clients delighted, and the creative juices surging!

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*Well Roland, first things first... how do you keep all of those projects moving forward at once?*

Service. I pay attention to everything. I have a strong background in customer service. I'm always focused on my employees, my boss and my clients. You have to be able to listen, understand and take action. I keep track of the details – the small items.

*What's involved in coordinating so many activities at once?*

It's about having really open lines of communication. As the starting point, I have a regular team meeting each morning to outline the day. I break down and prioritize each team member's direction and focus for the week and update it daily. I am constantly checking in with the staff. I do a detailed weekly report (three pages) outlining the status of every project and every open contact that the company has. I'm constantly re-prioritizing throughout the week. This can be very stressful for our team members, but one has to be fluid. They are exceptionally adaptable people and are able to juggle. We're all jugglers. My job is to catch the balls before they hit the ground. I actually did take juggling in high school!

*It seems that you approach this on a very personal scale. How important is that?*

Very important. I see every person as an individual. It's nothing I learned in school or college; it's a skill that I have and I use it to the utmost power. When it comes to working with and motivating people, it's all very personal.

*Speaking of college, what did you study?*

I majored in business management and administration, and also in computer science. This helped me develop my attention to detail. My preference, however, is the human element of business so I've sought positions that include a lot of people contact. Currently, I manage VDW. I've managed a bookstore and a data acquisition team before I came to VDW.

*How do you think your clients would describe you?*

Professional, friendly, but not cold or distant. I really listen to them. When they contact me I always have or get them the answer. Sometimes I redirect them to other resources if I cannot help them out. They can call me about anything.

*Roland, what motivates you to come in and perform so intensely every day?*

I tend to lean toward the chaotic and the unorganized because that's where I see my strength is. The operations manager job really works for me. It allows me to hone the skills I know I have and also expand on them. I like to be personally challenged. I know that things are going to be crazy, but I gravitate toward that. I'm in an environment where things are constantly changing. It keeps me wanting to go into work the next day. A good example is how I fill my spare time. I volunteer with nonprofit groups that need organizing – reining things in and getting them under control. I help people get established and set up systems, making everyone else's life easier, so when I am no longer there, they are better able to function. I know I'm really good at that.

*How would you describe your relationship with your staff?*

Equal. That's the first word that comes to mind. Although we all have titles on our business cards, I consider our group a team and we each have our own set of skills, unique background, and history. This helps VDW be a successful company. Each team member is great at what they do and our environment is such that they continually hone their skills, expand their knowledge and learn from one another. For example, our newest team member, our creative director, is impressed at how I interact with clients and hopes to gain similar skills. I become really motivated to help her reach this new performance level. I become energized when someone notices my ability and says, "Wow, I see this [professional quality] in you."

*How do you keep your staff inspired?*

By celebrating them! By finding every opportunity to celebrate them. I am the conduit through which all the clients communicate with our company. Part of my job is passing along all the good feedback immediately. I make a point of recognizing them in front of the whole group. It tends to build an atmosphere of us all feeling connected – like a team.

*What do you think motivates them?*

(thinking)...that's a tough question. What's coming into my head are the words: sense of place. If you were to ask each of the employees what motivates them, none would say money. I think the reason we're so effective as a team is that VDW gives them a sense of place – a place where they can grow and develop and discover new things they never realized they could do. They can say, "I go to work every day because I like where I work. I know with certainty that I contribute every day and I make a difference." I've looked to create a sense of place in all of my jobs. I know how important it is. I try to create that environment so the whole team gets that same deal. It has impact. They know they help our clients do better business.

*What types of employee "issues" do you typically have to deal with? How do you handle things when they don't go right?*

For this group, the hardest thing is remembering as a manager that they do have a life outside of VDW and keeping that in perspective. Every manager deals with this differently. I often step in and juggle things around to help them out. They really appreciate it and in turn really put out. Because the team also rises to these occasions, I can always make sure the workflow proceeds. We rarely have any personality conflicts. We are a small group and things are pretty above board.

*How would you describe your leadership style?*

My leadership style...it's funny...because when you study leadership, you read the textbooks and learn about different leadership styles. I've defined my own style of leadership. It goes back to equality. I don't see people in levels. My style tends to be one about mutual respect and mutual learning. Everyone I interact with has

something they can contribute. Some of the words that come up when I think about leadership style are active listener, team approach, compassion, and understanding.

***Being so cool, calm, and collected, what is your stress threshold?***

It's pretty high but... my threshold varies day to day. I communicate changes in my threshold with coworkers and clue them in if I'm having a really bad day. Every once in a while when more than one person is having a bad day, it increases the stress level around here and there are disconnects. That's really hard for me. My job is to let it sort out and that can be challenging. Rarely, if a client is dissatisfied with our work, that's stressful also. It's important not to focus on what's wrong, but to regain your footing and pay attention to all of the other things that need to be done. Things always turn out fine.

***How do you de-stress when you need to?***

Believe it or not, the easiest way for me to de-stress is to be alone – to be in my own space – where I don't have to think of anyone but myself. These moments are jewels but I don't have a lot of them. I might weed my garden for an hour or have a movie night (and ignore the emails and ringing phone). The decisions I make are all about myself. That's how I re-energize.

***If you had a suggestion for your workers, what would it be?***

My one suggestion would be that each one of us does the best that we can possibly do every day and take time to recognize our accomplishments.

***If you had a suggestion for your clients, what would it be?***

It probably would be to trust. Our work here is creative. And because it's subjective, everyone sees it differently. Part of my job is to quickly and efficiently try to understand my client's point of view. Occasionally I may think I'm doing exactly what they want yet ultimately may not have understood. Clients should trust the process of discovery and remember that we have their best interest in mind. Our goal is to provide the highest level of service we can. If they could trust us (in light of previous bad experiences they may have had) we can prove that we are worthy of it.

***Any advice for the readers of this article?***

Hmmm. Yes, believe in yourself, know your skills and limitations, and find a way to be passionate. Passionate about work...about life itself. That's what keeps you going into work everyday and on that occasional weekend. Be passionate.

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