New creative directors bring chaos for in-house designers

We spoke to employees at luxury brands like Givenchy, Bottega, and Celine to understand the toll these ever-more regular changes take.

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2024 was an absurd year for luxury fashion. Let's take a moment to remember the number of creative director changes: Moschino, Valentino, Canada Goose, Calvin Klein, Lanvin, Blumarine, Ports 1961, Sergio Rossi, Givenchy, Tom Ford, Celine, Dries van Noten, Bottega Veneta, Chanel and Loewe. At this moment, Carven, Margiela and Fendi are all without new appointments, and changes at Jil Sander and Versace beckon.

For most of us, this was little more than the subject of idle chit-chat at fashion week. For the in-house design teams at many of these brands, however, the changes have

brought chaos. When the exciting news breaks of a creative change for a brand, the impact on the larger workforce is rarely considered: redundancies, insecurity, layoff survivor guilt, increased workload, and lack of vision often become the reality. This is hardly a new phenomenon, but with creative directors moving more and more frequently, a culture of fear is becoming the norm.

Over the past three months, we have spoken with 20+ current and former designers of all levels across brands including Louis Vuitton, Burberry, Givenchy, McQueen, Bottega Veneta, Celine, Chloé, as well as industry professionals in talent acquisition, recruitment and psychology. We spoke with the designers on the basis of anonymity, allowing them to talk freely about their experiences. The resulting story illuminates a systemic issue much bigger than just one brand or group.

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A certain nepotism

The word nepotism gets thrown around much lately, mostly when we want to bemoan Hollywood actor kids who have a leg-up. The Merriam–Webster dictionary defines nepotism as follows: *favouritism (as in appointment to a job) based on kinship*. Yes, there are good arguments for fashion industry nepotism on both sides of the aisle. Humans are, first and foremost, social beings: we exist in groups and are geared to build meaningful relationships. Naturally, we feel safe with those we trust and desire to keep these connections close to us. The problem is when team overhauls happen as frequently as they do today – not the usual five to ten-year contracts of the recent past – genuine talent and hard work can get overlooked in favour of familiarity and loyalty to the creative director.

Creative directors who have been in the game for a long time are more likely to have built a larger team that they trust. It takes time to get to know your people. But both young and old will experience anxiety arriving in a new role with all eyes and the weight of business expectations on them. "Most creative people are insecure on some level, and when they come in, they're so exposed, and they're so raw, they just want to have a safety net around them of people that they know and people that they love and they trust," ███████ says. The general consensus is that it's acceptable and

understandable for a creative director to bring their 'right hand'. The question is: how much should existing employees be honoured? How much nepotism is allowable?

No fair chance

Most of the time, in-house designers are not being given a fair chance to stay on. "When a new creative director comes in, the next day, they wipe everybody out without getting to know who fits and who doesn't," ███████ says. "Some creative directors bring their entire team, and they don't even meet anyone who's already there," ███████ adds. Many have complained to us that existing design teams are not assessed based on their work and capability to adapt to the incumbent creative director's vision. In some circumstances, no portfolio reviews take place; no effort is made to meet the designers to discuss their past work and how they might fit into the new team.

This is echoed by a designer who works for a Paris-based house that recently saw a new appointment: "The creative director only works with people they've hired. It seems like they don't want to work with the old team." ███████ mentions there's an unwillingness to engage with their existing team, knowing full well they will be laid off.

Elsewhere, there have been mentions of ageism and looks-based favouritism in who gets to stay: "They got rid of everyone who was older in the company," ███████ says. "They kept the young people, especially boys who are good-looking. It was just too much of a coincidence."

A clean-slate 'new vision'

What has happened in several brands over the past couple of years, is that incoming creative directors and HR don't take key designers into consideration. "Creative directors need to be collaborative and open-minded," ███████ says. "Dumping the whole team without understanding the functionality of a brand doesn't work."

Take this one brand; its greatest strength is outerwear. Several designers who were key to this core revenue-generating pillar and who had worked in this division for five-plus years were let go without proper justification. This is not only a blow for the designers; it also undermines the business operations as the company loses know-how of a crucial category. They were then replaced by designers with lesser competence and knowledge – essentially a double loss for the brand.

"Sometimes after layoffs, they regret it," ███████ says. "They start chasing designers at the same level as the ones they had, and can't find them. Then they have

to get less good ones." This is where HR could play a pivotal role. However, as a talent acquisition expert shares with us: "I've seen situations where HR didn't stand up for the team at all. They just want to please the new creative director and their vision."

Secrecy that undermines existing teams

In November, we heard of a Paris house that operates a secret studio in London, where a new team works on collections. This came as a complete surprise to the existing team. "Prototypes are being launched in London without the Paris atelier even being aware of it," ██████ says. "The head of couture in Paris wants to leave because things go behind her back." A designer who worked for a different brand added to this, "Some people have been hired for the same position and designers within the company don't know about it. They just find out randomly through finding things in a letter box, for example, or packages being taken."

"We found out about the secret studio. Our head of couture now wants to leave."

At one big Parisian house, a "whole new team literally arrived two days after [the old team had] gone, and it was people who'd been in other big comparable companies," ██████ says. "Those people would have been hired six months before. And then they all told me, 'Oh yeah, we've been working on the next collection for three months in secret'. So [the leadership] made it look like they'd given that team a season to adapt, but they hadn't. They had no intention of ever keeping any of them anyway."

Reassuringly, secret projects don't seem to be the norm. As Mathias Ohrel, director of m-O, a talent hunting agency for the creative industries, told us: "We've worked on quite a few of the creative director positions over the last 15 years, and we never, literally never, were mandated for a secret project with a shadow team. We've heard about this situation, but we were never solicited for a context like this."

Redundancy is the word of the year

Designers aren't actually fired because that creates legal complications, particularly in France, where labour laws are strongly in the favour of the employee. Instead, redundancy. "It's a casual word now. It holds no value because of how much it's been used and abused," ██████ says. Firing, layoffs, redundancies: it's all semantics with the same effect.

"As long as you throw the word 'restructuring' in the mix, then it's fine, yeah?"

A design director elaborated on her experience of the term: "Redundancy is the cheapest way for the company to fire someone. If they want to fire someone, the first thing that they try is redundancy. If they can't prove redundancy, they have to start inventing something else, or they have to raise the [designer's] settlement. Another thing they do is change the job title slightly. For example, firing a *senior designer* and then hiring a *senior designer pre-collection*. And as long as you throw the word 'restructuring' in the mix, then it's fine, yeah?"

She continues to explain how she's seen this play out practically with her former colleagues. "They give you a deadline to agree to the settlement. If you don't sign the settlement within a week, then the settlement will decrease. You won't get the enhanced package, just the normal one, which is basically your notice period. These big corporations have the best lawyers on the market. Obviously, everybody goes for the settlement because how can a junior designer afford lawyer fees? You might as well just accept what they give you because it's gonna be so much more expensive for the poor employee getting fired to do a legal battle."

Junior designers bear the brunt

What frustrates ▮▮▮▮ – who works at a London–based label – is when this happens to juniors and assistants. "When you do [redundancies] with the kids, this is what pisses me off. They become insecure because they think they are not good. They can see that they're being thrown out, and then people that are more junior than them get hired, and they get bigger titles. They get a bit disgusted with the system too early. If they have a great package [job settlement], they can look for another job for six months, doing their portfolio. But when they get three months notice, it's so stressful, because, like tomorrow, you need to start harassing people to get a job. Who gets the most abuse is always the young people; the people that honestly worked the most hours and the hardest."

Another designer, ▮▮▮▮, who works at an LVMH brand, has similar feelings. "When you're just a junior designer, they don't really care." ▮▮▮▮ shares this frustration: "In terms of severance, you get paid a certain amount of money, depending on your team and longevity. If you're a junior and you've only been there a

few months or a year, it will be virtually nothing." For recent graduates and those fresh to the industry, it sets a precedent for how they will anticipate the future.

At the same time, juniors are the most adaptable within the company. One designer guessed that because she was junior – with a more malleable aesthetic and knowledge or lack of hierarchical allegiances – she'd probably be keeping her job during the upcoming changes, and it was the senior people who would be let go first.

A 'permanent' contract becomes meaningless

Another important factor in this discussion is the diminishing sense of security that permanent contracts provide for designers. If the industry standard for creative directors becomes shorter and shorter tenures, that has a knock-on effect on employees from top to bottom of a brand.

"There isn't much difference between freelance and employee," ██████ says. "The only difference is when they want to have you, and they don't want you to work for anyone else. Think of how sometimes a knitwear or shoe designer works for a couple of brands at the same time, and they maybe have their own studio. I wish I could do that in womenswear because then it's really fair. I do a project for you and you can fire me tomorrow, but I'm also free to work for someone else. Instead, they chain you as long as they want, and then in one day, you can be out with nothing."
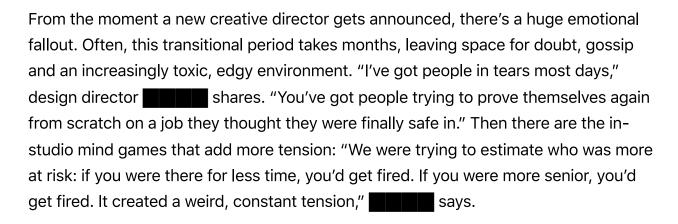
Gaslighting and mobility

Or, you can be slowly pushed out. In one big French house, they tee you up to leave gradually, ██████ says. He called it "even worse" than actually getting laid off. What he has seen happen is that if the company no longer wants to work with a designer, they might operate in such a way as to make the person look incompetent. Why? Well, French laws. By making them look like they aren't doing their job properly – which superiors achieve through withholding information or changing their managers to those who don't communicate – the company has a 'valid' reason to make them redundant.

We've also heard of a designer who was made to travel to factories non-stop, impacting her life so significantly that she was pushed to the brink, and quit. She was aware that the brand wanted her to leave and subsequently changed her work tasks.

Another, somewhat more forgiving tactic is that of 'mobility' within a conglomerate like LVMH. As ██████ explains, that's essentially an internal move. "Normally, you volunteer, but sometimes they kind of force you to do it. That's what happened to

[our current] womenswear team – they're all on mobility right now. They still come to work but they've been given the option to leave. The brand wants to bring in new people."

Workload increase, loss of motivation

From the moment a new creative director gets announced, there's a huge emotional fallout. Often, this transitional period takes months, leaving space for doubt, gossip and an increasingly toxic, edgy environment. "I've got people in tears most days," design director ██████ shares. "You've got people trying to prove themselves again from scratch on a job they thought they were finally safe in." Then there are the in-studio mind games that add more tension: "We were trying to estimate who was more at risk: if you were there for less time, you'd get fired. If you were more senior, you'd get fired. It created a weird, constant tension," ██████ says.

"I have designers in tears most days. They thought they were finally safe in their job."

The layoffs at one particular brand happened with such predictable frequency that they infamously became known as *Firing Fridays*. With this void of staff, the remaining designers' workload doubled. "It was really hard because you have to pretend you're not affected while covering for others who've left," ██████ says. Before the creative director change, if there was a shortage of staff, there were temporary adjustments to pay or bonuses. "This time, there were no discussions, and there was so much work to do that it was incredibly hard to think about anything else. But for sure, we knew that [new] people were coming in, and they were being paid double or triple of what we were paid."

It's in situations like this where work satisfaction and quality of output feel most connected. "It became very isolating," ██████ continues. "You were alone with your thing. I was working in my department and I had no idea what was happening in the other ones. It's really hard to imagine who you're dressing if you have no information of what the shoe is. I was really working in some sort of vacuum. I'd lost this connection to the rest of the teams." Gradually realising that this wasn't temporary, she decided to pay attention to other brands who were calling her with job offers. "I realised it might be like this for years," ██████ says, "and I didn't know if I could keep giving so much."

A design director echoes this loss of motivation for the job they loved. "It's hard to hold your head up when you're killing yourself to pivot overnight. I remember one night, I saw a friend of a friend. I wondered: 'What are they doing downstairs? Oh... they're interviewing for my job.' That's a real kick in the teeth at 7 pm when you've got another three to four hours of work to do, and you know that on the other side of the fence, you're not actually trusted."

Job scarcity

One particularly heavy burden that many designers lament is the potential need to relocate for work due to a creative director change. Designers are expected to pack up and go wherever – a structure that favours the young and childless. "It's sad when people have families, and when people then have to move cities," ███████ says. "I was in Paris for 10 years. Obviously, you always hear about people leaving a company. In Paris, you go next door; they're all in the same area. You don't even have to change the metro line. You're just going to a different door, from Chloé to Givenchy. But in London, it's tricky because you don't have much choice if you're working in luxury."

One designer who is currently being asked to move countries is struggling to make up their mind: they've got a child and a mortgage. Another, ██████, spoke about an Italian colleague in London who is in the midst of uncertainty: "What choice is she going to have if she doesn't find a job after one month? She's going to have to move back to Italy." ███████ added to this: "It was very difficult to see people leave. Whether it was people I worked with very closely or not, even people I actually didn't enjoy working with. At the end of the day, they're all people, with families, people that have very recently moved to the country only for this job. I found it really hard to process."

Layoff survivor guilt

"The people who stayed were traumatised after witnessing their colleagues get fired," ██████ says. "No one protected them or supported them afterwards." This is a sentiment that gets repeated over and over, by virtually every designer we've spoken with. There's a term for it in psychology: layoff survivor guilt.

"No one protected us."

It can leave surviving employees in a state of stress, constantly fearing they might be next, while the loss of colleagues often creates feelings of grief and isolation, weakening bonds and diminishing their connection to the workplace. Increased workloads for remaining staff can lead to burnout, as they struggle with physical and emotional exhaustion. But it doesn't feel like designers can speak with HR – a department often seen as untrustworthy and there to protect management. In our conversations, we have heard no mentions of emotional support offered through counselling, employee assistance programs or support groups. The ones who stay are seemingly left to their own devices, alone in their grief and continued, multifold stress.

The awkward 'race' to prove yourself

There's another scenario: you're all still on the same team, but an internal catfight for survival starts to take place. One designer describes how this plays out, "People are like: if I can just have a little bit more air time in front of the creative director, then maybe they will see me as a different role than I actually am today. The creative directors don't know that you did a shit collection last time, or had a bad review last year, or that you don't get on with your line manager."

Or your team survives, but your own position is changed from one day to the next, as ██████ mentions: "You're happy to go to work, and then suddenly it all gets changed. You're still going in the same door in the morning, into the same building, in the same company, but you're suddenly thrust into a completely different position that you wouldn't have accepted in the first place."

The flip side

A talent acquisition expert and several designers spoke of the flip side, too: designers wanting to leave when a big change happens due to a misaligned vision or knowing about the incumbent creative director's work ethic and ensuing chaos. A common train of thought is: yes, we're not working until 3 am, but we're working without vision. And I'd rather work with a vision until 3 am than no vision until 6 pm. "We shouldn't underestimate their drive, and how attached you get and why you join an adventure," says the talent acquisition expert. "They often move countries, leave their lives, settle in a new city for a vision, and then that is abruptly changed overnight." █████ shared that when Virgil Abloh passed away, many designers wanted to leave because they had joined Louis Vuitton for Virgil's vision. When the vision changes, it leaves a void for them, too.

The waiting

Then there's that weird period in between creative directors. When one has left but another hasn't been announced or is yet to arrive. One studio has been in limbo for six months. "We are lucky to be in France, so certain things have to be done in order for us to get fired," ██████ shares. "We are quite a young studio; most of us have been hired here right after or during our school internships, so we are not an expensive studio. My guess is they will keep us for now. But the uncertainty is a bit destabilising. As we do not have a head of design or a head of collection, no one is communicating with us about the coming months. Ever since the creative director left, information has been very, very slim. So it is a great place for creative minds to invent whatever theory there is, which is a dangerous spot for a studio to be in."

The designer goes on to reflect: "It has been honestly quite a miracle that we have managed to still work and deliver two collections, albeit small and very commercial, but nonetheless good work without tearing each other apart, with the tiniest budget. As there is no one to steer the boat, we have been left to our own demise. Thankfully, we are a big, but very united studio. But yes, overall, they forget that an entire studio is left behind after a creative director's departure."

The role of leadership

It's too easy to lay the blame solely on creative directors. Firstly, it's a structural and normalised problem in the industry. Secondly, it's often the CEOs who enable this behaviour. As ██████ says: "They allow creative directors to do whatever they want because they think supporting them unconditionally will deliver results. But someone needs to be there telling creative directors: don't do this, don't do that, keep these people. But they don't." ██████ adds to this: "Someone should manage creatives and show them what works, but instead, they allow them to operate this way, giving them whatever they think they need."

"They're not highly motivated or passionate. They just want to keep their job."

Designers also believe that HR is complicit in this and that they don't rise to the challenge of supporting teams. The culture of fear persists. "HR didn't stand up for the team at all," ██████ says. "They're not highly motivated or passionate. They just want to keep their job."

From a business perspective, the current strategy isn't sound, either. People need time to discover each other within a team, and constant disruption damages the brand and the new creative director. "Starting over from scratch every time is unsustainable," ██████ says. And, as we have seen, laying off big chunks of a team that understands the functionality of a brand means a loss of continuity and institutional knowledge. Another designer feels that frequent changes in leadership mean having to constantly pivot overnight – as a consequence, it's hard to build a strong identity or long-term trust with consumers.

Possible solutions

The designers we spoke with have some ideas. "Instead of firing the team right away, new creative directors should be given time to meet the team, assess their work, and decide who fits the vision," ██████ says. A solution could be to introduce a retention norm within the workplace, like when Raf Simons went to Dior and was given a year to get to know the team before he could make changes. "It was a fair process and allowed time to understand who fit and who didn't," ██████ says, who interviewed for a role during Raf's tenure. "The way things were done at Dior shows that better processes are possible. It's up to the leadership to ensure stability and fairness during transitions."

Another suggestion: hire an in-house ethicist. "Nobody protects the people who get fired or those left behind," says ██████, who was frequently shocked by her bosses' attitudes towards employees and the casual and callous decisions they made that had a tremendous impact on individuals' lives.

"After 30 years in this industry, I can't believe the things I've seen."

While we're still incredibly far off from AI and robots replacing designers, we need a fairer human-centred approach. "If the industry continues to treat people as disposable, we risk losing the best talent, who will either leave fashion entirely or refuse to work under these conditions," ██████ says.
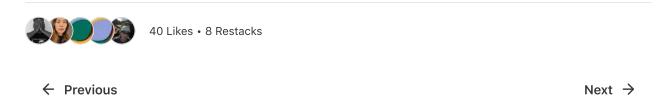
"The creative industries are high on expectations and low on support. Never underestimate the power of peer support," says Almuth McDowall, professor of Organisational Psychology at Birkbeck University of London. Some of her suggestions for improvement are to "create employee resource groups for protected

characteristics (for carers, for neurodivergent people, ethnic minorities) and get invested in allyship. Hold leadership to account and make the business case for positive change. Every time someone leaves or is sick, valuable knowledge walks out of the door.

Stress needs to be addressed through primary measures: good job design with clear expectations. Educate yourself about what good work and a good working environment should look like. Research tells us that when job demands are excessive, and work demands are high, then engagement is low (so people are not invested in their work), and burnout is likely. Is this really what the industry wants and needs?"

"After nearly 30 years in this industry, I'm like, I can't believe some of the things I've seen," ██████ says. "And when I tell other people who work in other industries, they're just like, 'Wow, your industry is so toxic.'" The status quo doesn't have to be this way. As ██████ says: "This culture starts from the top."

By Jorinde Croese

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