FlexOps

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How to get consistent delivery in an agency without reviewing everything yourself

By Ross Brown, FlexOps

If you're reviewing every piece of work before it goes to a client, I think the way out is to give the team 3 things. They need a delivery system they can follow, a clear owner at each stage, and a way of making decisions that doesn't route back to you. Then you agree what "done" looks like at each stage, and you step back gradually.

Read this online at flexops.co/resources/consistent-delivery-without-reviewing-everything

When an agency owner needs this

The owners who need this are usually dissatisfied with the quality of the work the agency is producing. It's often because they've stepped out of delivery, or they're no longer involved in the process, and they're at least somewhat annoyed by what they're seeing going out of the door.

If your ambition is to grow the business, though, reviewing everything isn't sustainable for most people.

There's a word I listen for that tells me a lot about how an agency operates, and it's "sometimes". Sometimes things happen like this. Sometimes it goes smoothly. Sometimes we'll do it this way. Sometimes I do it myself. When I hear those things from an owner, it's usually a sign that there isn't much of a system in place for how the agency functions, and it's typically 1 of 3 situations.

- The systems don't exist.
- They exist, but they aren't being followed.
- They exist, but they need serious work.

3 things to check before you write anything down

What looks like a process problem is quite often a leadership one, and no amount of documentation will fix these, so I'd look at them first.

- **Owner dependency.** The agency runs through you, for every decision, however small or large.
- **The wrong clients.** If an agency is working with clients it shouldn't be, it's going to feel chaotic, and an SOP won't fix that. The client scorecard is where I'd start with that one.
- **No clarity.** The team doesn't know what they should or shouldn't be doing, and that grey area is what you end up seeing or feeling as chaos.

What it looked like for an agency I worked with

A client I started working with was reviewing every single piece of work before it went out. By the time we finished working together, they weren't reviewing any of it.

That didn't happen by dropping tools and hoping the team would work it out. The people were already in place, and what they lacked was ownership and clarity. So we built 3 things.

1. A delivery system the team could follow.
2. Clear owners at each stage.
3. A decision-making process that didn't route back to the owner.

That gave them the structure. What remained was the owner learning to disconnect, and that happened gradually. I wouldn't expect any owner to be fine overnight with no longer being needed in a key area of their agency.

What helped was building the owner's perspective and experience into the team and the system they'd use. The team learned why certain things mattered, why something had changed and why something else needed to be better.

How to define what "done" looks like

I'd describe myself as a recovering perfectionist. What I've learned, through my own business and through working with agencies, is that done is done, and in most cases that's 10 times better than perfect. That's hard for creative minds, because they often have a standard, a vision and a way things should be. I'm not saying you should stop striving for exceptional work, but there are steps along the way, and sometimes you need to get things over the line to keep everything moving.

When people hear "done is better than perfect", what they're usually afraid of is work being rushed out of the door, with corners cut and quality dropping. What I mean by done is done well, so it meets the brief, it's delivered on time and the client is happy, and that's what you're aiming for.

So the question to ask is what "done" looks like. If the team doesn't know, they'll keep reworking things, second-guessing themselves and each other, and missing deadlines while they chase perfection.

Map your delivery stage by stage

I'd write out each stage of delivery, from the brief landing to the work going out, and for each stage note 3 things.

- **Who owns it.** That should be a named person and not "the team".
- **What "done" looks like** at that stage.
- **Who decides** if something is off.

Then share it with whoever owns each stage. The core delivery system is 1 of the 3 systems I'd build first in any agency, and there's more on that in the 3 SOPs to write first.

What to do when you spot something

Once the agency no longer relies on you, there's the challenge of keeping it that way. What tends to happen is that 1 day, out of nowhere, the owner dives back in to take a look at how something is doing. 2 hours later they're checking every line of code, or every piece of content published in the last quarter. They fix things they know could be better, and they close the laptop at some ungodly hour with a smile on their face.

In reality that hasn't helped much, and when it happens every other day the owner falls behind on what they said they'd do. So when you do spot something, I'd do 3 things with it.

1. Log it, with the date, what you noticed and which stage or owner it relates to.
2. Bring it up the same way the team does, which means at your next 1:1 or team meeting and not on Slack at 10pm.
3. Let the right person take it from there.

How long it takes

It can take a lot of time, and it depends on what the agency does and what your involvement was. We could be talking about 3, 6 or 12 months to get the agency to a place where it's capable of delivering to a certain standard without you being involved.

I think that really frustrates owners, and understandably so. It also puts a lot of emphasis on training time, which is probably something a lot of owners don't focus on.

Where owners get this wrong

The thing I'd stress most is how often you'll see the owner stepping back in to do things or fix things, and that's probably where it goes wrong. It's a very natural thing to do, and it's the main reason the old pattern comes back, which is why I'd use the log above.

The second is writing SOPs when the real issue is 1 of the 3 I covered earlier. If the agency runs through you, or the clients are wrong, or nobody is clear on their role, documentation won't change much.

The third is harder to hear. If the agency isn't capable of running to a high enough standard without you, that's a different question and it needs more digging. You might be telling yourself that it's about quality, and that nobody else can do it the way you do. Maybe that's true. I don't think, for most people, it's going to help you get where you want to go.

Questions owners ask about this

How do I stop reviewing every piece of work in my agency?

I'd build 3 things first: a delivery system the team can follow, a named owner at each stage and a way of making decisions that doesn't come back to you. Then step back gradually, stage by stage. Depending on the agency, that could take 3, 6 or 12 months.

Why is the quality of our work inconsistent?

In my experience it's usually 1 of 3 things. The systems don't exist, they exist but aren't followed, or they need serious work. Before fixing any of those, I'd check whether the cause is owner dependency, the wrong clients or a lack of clarity for the team.

What is a definition of done?

It's a short, written description of what finished looks like at each stage of delivery, so that the person doing the work knows when to stop and hand it on.

What should I do when I spot a mistake in the team's work?

Log it and raise it the same way the team would, at a 1:1 or a team meeting, and let the person who owns that stage deal with it. I'd try hard not to fix it yourself.

If you'd like a hand with it

If you'd like to talk through where delivery is getting stuck in your agency, drop me a note or, by all means, book a call. The Agency Health Check will also tell you whether delivery is the area to start with.