Strategic Uplift: Reframing the Role of the Client Services Director

Joanna Anthony, 11 August 2025

The Client Services Director is one of the most strategically under-leveraged roles in the agency world.

Too often, they're positioned as delivery managers rather than growth architects—excluded from board-level conversations despite being the ones who translate strategy into action, relationships into revenue, and complexity into clarity.

This needs to change.

Client Service Directors are not just executors. They are strategic operators, uniquely wired to both shape and deliver business ambition. When empowered, they drive growth across client portfolios, agency capabilities, and team performance. But when sidelined, agencies lose one of their most potent levers for resilience and relevance.

It's time to reframe the role—not as a catch-all for client chaos, but as a cornerstone of agency strategy.

The Problem: Misunderstood, Misused, and Undervalued

In many agencies, the CSD role is a paradox. It sits at the intersection of Creative, Planning, and Leadership—but its strategic mandate is often vague, its relationship focus confused with delivery, and its people leadership undertrained or underfunded. It's frequently the landing zone for every orphaned challenge that lacks a clear owner.

Agencies undervalue it. Clients resist paying for it.

Yet when done right, it delivers growth across multiple metrics.

The Opportunity: Strategic Redefinition

The CSD role deserves a strategic review—a redefinition of its purpose, boundaries, and measurable impact.

At its core, the role is designed to deliver commercial and relationship growth through successful project execution and future opportunity spotting. But to do this well, CSDs must operate across multiple layers of ambition and action:

- Balancing client expectations with commercial realities
- Navigating unclear briefs, procurement pressure, and fractured decision journeys
- Monitoring past performance, managing present delivery, and anticipating future risk

The good news? Client Service leaders are wired to do. Not just think, but act. That's what makes them indispensable. But too often, they're excluded from shaping the very strategies they're expected to deliver.

That must change.

Three Accountabilities That Define Modern CST Leadership

Client growth and CST performance live in three dimensions:

Strategy. Relationship. Service Leadership.

When these align, client longevity and agency resilience follow. And aligning them is the job of the Client Services Director.

1. Strategy: Connecting Value to Growth

Client strategy is business strategy. It's about aligning the agency's offer with what the client values—value that justifies spend, builds trust, and earns long-term commitment.

The CSD's strategic role is not to own all the answers, but to connect the dots:

- Decode client ambition — read between the lines of briefs, feedback, and unspoken needs
- Translate agency capabilities into tailored relevance — make the offer feel indispensable
- Weave in trends and context — not to generate insights, but to make them actionable
- Elevate the conversation — ask better questions, frame the debate, and steer toward business outcomes

Internally, this means:

- Shaping business strategy so teams are equipped to deliver
- Translating strategic goals into meaningful action
- Collaborating across leadership to activate growth

CSDs must be empowered to challenge, clarify, and co-create strategy—not just execute it.

2. Relationship: Trust That Drives Outcomes

"Relationship-building" isn't a personality trait or a lunch. It's the outcome of strategic clarity, foresight, and responsiveness.

Great CSDs lead teams that earn trust by:

- Anticipating tension points — and defusing them before they escalate
- Helping clients shine internally — giving them the language and confidence to sell our work
- Managing relationship risk — avoiding misalignment, ambiguity, and credibility loss
- Clarifying fuzzy briefs — saving time, energy, and goodwill

Trust is not soft. It's strategic currency. And CSDs are its stewards.

3. Service Leadership: Turning Execution into Credibility

Client service leadership shows up when things unravel. Shifting goals, stakeholder churn, service hiccups, team fatigue—these are the moments that test agency resilience.

Skilled CSDs respond by:

- Tackling conflict in ways that deepen trust
- Making complexity feel navigable
- Communicating with clarity and confidence at all levels

- Coordinating cross-functional delivery so the client experiences one agency, not five
- Empowering CSTs to speak for the client with empathy and precision

Service leadership is the glue that binds strategy to execution. It's what turns delivery into reputation.

Closing Reflection: From Delivery to Direction

Client Services leadership sits at the intersection of client ambition and agency promise. It's not just about managing relationships—it's about steering growth, shaping strategy, and designing teams that build trust and deliver results.

So, the question is this:

Are you, as a leader of the client service function, invited to shape business strategy and empowered to influence how client growth is achieved?

If not, it's time to redesign the role.
Not as a support function—but as a strategic force.

Let's talk.

Contact me on hello@joannaanthony.com to set up a free consultation.

I help creative agencies and inhouse Creative Ops teams translate strategy into systems, behaviours, and results. As a client service and change specialist with 30+ years' experience inside agencies, I am skilled at 'making it happen'.

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