

***Creativity, Inc.* Book Review**

Rich Haglund - January 2020

“Trust the process” may not be the first thing you associate with creative enterprises.

“Unleashing creativity requires that we loosen the controls, accept risk, trust our colleagues, work through the path for them, and pay attention to anything that creates fear.” In his book, *Creativity, Inc.*,¹ Ed Catmull, President of Pixar and Disney Animation, asserts that doing these things won’t “make the job of managing a creative culture easier. But ease isn’t the goal: excellence is.”²

I’m going to share highlights from the book around two related issues: trust and conflict. “I have always been wary of maxims or rules because, all too often, they turn out to be empty platitudes that impede thoughtfulness. But these two principles actually seem to help our people: story is king [and] trust the process.”³

While Catmull shared what he learned about effectively managing in a creative enterprise, I believe the principles apply to any organization. Whether providing services or manufacturing products, your organization is creating things to serve a community. So, I encourage you to read the book and choose a few insights to apply in your setting.

The Brain Trust

Pixar, under the leadership of Catmull and John Lasseter, established, refined, and held fast to a key practice to communicate trust to individuals and teams. One of the most interesting things I learned reading *Creativity, Inc.* was coming to understand the dramatic changes that films went through over a period of years, before they became the award-winning finished products I saw as a consumer. Those changes were possible in large part because of two practices: an orientation for all employees to share incomplete work and the implementation of “the Brain Trust,” a group of creative experts from across the company that offered critiques to the director and staff of each film.

Catmull explains how hard and how crucial it is to overcome people’s fear of making mistakes. “People join us with a set of expectations about what they think is important. They want to please, impress, and show their worth. They really don’t want to embarrass themselves by showing incomplete work or ill-conceived ideas, and they don’t want to say something dumb in front of the director.”⁴

¹ Ed Catmull, *Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration* 295 (2014).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.* at 67.

⁴ *Id.* at 194.

Unleashing individual creativity and multiplying the creative effects of a group requires a level of trust many people may never have experienced. I was saddened to read Catmull's assertion that the fear of failure that hinders so much creativity begins in school.

For most of us, failure comes with baggage and a lot of baggage-that I believe is traced directly back to our days in school. From a very early age, the message is drilled into our heads: failure is bad; failure means you didn't study or prepare; failure means you slacked off or even worse – aren't smart enough to begin with. Thus, failure is something to be ashamed of. This perception lives on long into adulthood . . . All the time in my work, I see people resist and reject failure and try mightily to avoid it, because regardless of what we say, mistakes feel embarrassing.⁵

So, from the very start of working at Pixar, employees are taught "that everyone at Pixar shows incomplete work, and everyone is free to make suggestions."⁶ This removes people's embarrassment and they become more creative. In an environment where "everyone learns from and inspires one another," the creative process--though filled with mistakes and criticism--"becomes socially rewarding and productive." All of this is done "in the recognition that individual creativity is magnified by the people around you."⁷

The Brain Trust, unlike reviewers of products in other film companies or those in your lines of work, could not require changes. Instead, the Brain Trust shares "notes" which may or may not include suggestions. But, the Brain Trust has no authority. The director of the film being critiqued may take or leave or modify any of the Brain Trust's suggestions. "A good note says what is wrong, what is missing, what isn't clear, what makes no sense. A good note is offered in a timely moment, not too late to fix the problem. A good note doesn't make demands; it doesn't even have to include a proposed fix. But if it does, that fix is offered only to illustrate a potential solution, not prescribe an answer. Most of all, though, a good note is specific."⁸ The Brain Trust's operating principles reinforce the trust the company gives to the director of each film, the respect given to that person as the subject matter expert of the work that is the director's responsibility.

Doing these two things - getting individuals comfortable sharing incomplete work and creating the Brain Trust to offer non-binding feedback - overcame the tendency that exists in many organizations for the valuable candor to exist in the hallways instead of "in the rooms where fundamental ideas or matters of policy are being hashed out."⁹

⁵ *Id.* at 108.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at 103.

⁹ *Id.* at 105.

Conflict isn't competitive

Where trust exists, there will be conflict. “The key,” Catmull observes, “is to view conflict as essential, because that’s how we know the best ideas will be tested and survive.”¹⁰ Creating an animated feature film is a complex production that takes years to finish. Knowing that, it is important to also accept that we can’t anticipate and prepare for and overcome every problem. “The better approach,” Catmull believes, “is to focus . . . on techniques to deal with combining different viewpoints. If you start with the attitude that different viewpoints are additive rather than competitive, you will become more effective because the ideas or decisions are honed and tempered by the discourse. In a healthy, creative culture, the people in the trenches feel free to speak up . . . and help give us clarity.”¹¹

Balancing competing desires is essential to creating excellent services or products. In any organization and even in individual projects, there are different desires or priorities that often conflict. Assuming the best intentions of individuals and groups doesn’t diminish the fact that they will likely be pulling in different directions. The finance department will naturally be trying to make production less expensive and the IT department will be trying to make processes easier and replicable. But, “each group is focused on its own needs, which means no one has a clear view of how their decisions impact other groups.”¹² So, to counter that reality, leaders have to help “all constituencies recognize the importance of balancing competing desires—they want to be heard, but they don’t have to win.”¹³

Postmortems are effective, Catmull notes, if they force reflection, consolidate what’s been learned, teach others who weren’t there, prevent resentments from festering, and “pay it forward” by raising the questions that should be asked on the next project.¹⁴

It’s not about drawing better; it’s about seeing more clearly

Catmull spends significant time in the book explaining how skilled animators understand how our eyes and brains work and draw in ways that fill in the gaps our eyes don’t actually see. The point of helping people trust themselves and their colleagues sufficiently to share incomplete work and to offer candid feedback that may or may not be implemented is to help people see more clearly. And seeing clearly requires giving full attention to the present moment “without letting your thoughts and ideas about the past and the future [get] in the way.”¹⁵ When we do that, we “begin to trust [others], and, more important, to hear them. It makes us willing to experiment, and it makes it safe to try something that may fail.”¹⁶

So, at the start of this new year, what can you do individually and as an organization to see more clearly and create more excellent work to serve your community?

¹⁰ *Id.* at 139.

¹¹ *Id.* at 173.

¹² *Id.* at 137.

¹³ *Id.* at 138.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 216-217.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 222.

¹⁶ *Id.*