

Creativity, Inc.

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| Ed Catmull, Amy Wallace | https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18077903-creativity-inc?ac=1&from_search=true&qid=QKcxJJxz0p&rank=1 | **** |

Overview

Ed Catmull, co-founder (with Steve Jobs and John Lasseter) of Pixar, started his career with the goal of creating computer-generated animation films. In that era of hand-drawn animation, nobody thought a computer could do such a complex task, so everyone rejected him. Even animation pioneers at Disney thought his idea was a pipe-dream. Despite such challenges, Catmull worked hard, persevered and eventually co-founded Pixar.

This book depicts his journey from the University of Utah (U of U) to George Lucas's Lucasfilms, eventually leading to his and John's collaboration with Steve Jobs.

While leading Pixar, Catmull won multiple awards that started with Toy Story and included many other giant-leap-forward performances such as Wall-E, Finding Nemo, Brave, Up, A bug's life, Ratatouille etc.

However, this book is less about the apparent success of Pixar and more about the unique culture that Catmull and his team have built at Pixar.

I believe this book has been singlehandedly responsible for changing my mindset about creativity and has been foundational for my leadership attributes. It showed me how leaders could build a culture where creativity thrives. I keep returning to this book multiple times and have refined and added (courtesy of Shortform) more to these book notes compared to any other book I have read.

My Summary

Ed Catmull, co-founder (with Steve Jobs and John Lasseter) of Pixar, started his career with the goal of creating computer-generated animation films. In that era of hand-drawn animation, nobody thought a computer could do such a complex task, so everyone rejected him. Even animation pioneers at Disney thought his idea was a pipe-dream. Despite such challenges, Catmull worked hard, persevered and eventually co-founded Pixar.

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Key Takeaways

Key strategic values to build a creative culture within a workplace:

- Promote candor.
- Embrace failure.
- Protect new ideas.

Few additional traits of a creative organization:

- A truly creative organization is willing to accept change wholeheartedly.
- It doesn't get flustered by random events. Instead, people make a habit of learning from them.
- Its leaders actively look for blind spots.

To sustain creativity in an organization, these eight tools are crucial:

- Hold frequent feedback meetings.
 - Promote research.
 - Create clear boundaries.
 - Combine art with technology.
 - Create an experimental space.
 - Put aside preconceived notions.
 - Use Postmortems.
 - Build learning opportunities and team-bonding experiences.
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Notes

Pixar's initial years

Initially, Pixar struggled as they were trying to do too many things, such as: making animated movies and selling the high-end Pixar imaging computer, which was not working out so well. So Catmull decided to stop selling the hardware and focus on filmmaking.

They made some good films but without much commercial success. However, big studios like Disney took notice. Pixar worked out a 3 - movie deal with Disney and started with Toy Story, John Lasseter's brainchild.

Toy story was a massive success. However, Catmull was not satisfied yet and was trying to figure out how to sustain the momentum. He was right in not letting the success go to his head as Toy Story 2 was in shambles even after following all the processes they established during Toy Story 1. It needed a heroic effort from the OG Toy Story crew to rescue the sequel. It eventually led Catmull and Pixar to redefine their strategy and develop key attributes to differentiate Pixar and make it the creative powerhouse we know today. These attributes are - Promoting Candor, Embracing failure, and Protecting the new ideas.

Promoting candor

A culture with candor can only happen if we are able to create a judgment-free environment. Catmull and the team at Pixar did this with braintrust

meetings and Pixar note days.

Braintrust meeting - Team members from different disciplines who were not involved with the movie directly will meet with the project's creative team to openly discuss ideas and critique the outcome so far. These meetings were not easy specifically for new people joining the braintrust team as they worried that they might step on somebody's toes. Here is where Catmull and other senior leaders stepped in to ensure that people feel free to share their POVs. To achieve this, they focused on the below principles:

- Open and honest dialogue is the foundation for the creative process.
- Open discussion is much more effective than formal feedback.
- There is no space for retaliation in a culture of candor.

It's not the manager's job to prevent risks. It's the manager's job to make it safe for others to take them.

In essence, these feedback sessions should:

- Include people from different disciplines - To prevent groupthink and bring diverse perspectives.
- Focus on identifying what is wrong, what is missing, what isn't straightforward and what makes sense - Catmull and the team did it with good note without attacking the person behind the product.
- bad note - There was no charisma in the scene. Your story lacks character.
- good note - The story seems to be stagnating here. Let's talk about how we can nudge it a bit.
- Prevent abuse of any role - If you sit in the lead role, then use that to make it easier for others to do their job.

Pixar's Note Day - On notes day, Pixar shuts down regular operation and run various discussion forums on ideas submitted by employees. The topic ranges from anything and everything under the sun. It could be highly technical or could be pantry related. So, where the Braintrust meeting

helps Pixar keep its product in shape, Notes day does the same for their culture.

Embracing failure

As per Catmull, failure is essential to any creative workplace. If you are not failing enough, it means you are not imagining big or trying hard. However, just because failure is essential doesn't mean it is easy to embrace.

When you remove fear, you normalize failure. To determine whether fear is normalized in your workspace, look at what happens when a mistake is found

- Do people come together to solve the problem, or do they go their own ways. If people come together and share the load, then fear of failure is not behind decision-making at your workplace.
- Do people take responsibility as a team, or do they search for whom to blame. If they search for a scapegoat, then fear of failure is in the driving seat in your workplace.

As a leader, the best way to remove the fear of failure is by admitting your failures and showing your vulnerable and human side to the team.

If you aren't experiencing failure, then you are making a far worse mistake: You are being driven by the desire to avoid it.

The other key ingredient of the culture without the fear of failure is trust. You build trust by treating your people as adults, letting them take risks and doing what they can. You build trust when you don't keep secrets or information hierarchy within your workspace. In this way, you promote transparency and tell your team that there is no hidden agenda.

A company's communication structure should not mirror its organizational structure. Everybody should be able to talk to anybody.

As a leader, one of the worst things you can do is let your team stagnate. Out of fear, some leaders keep planning without making progress. Or they kept waiting for the perfect idea to build on it.

That is not to say that planning is not essential or not to have a roadmap. Instead, Catmull suggests that a leader be the forerunner in taking risks, making decisions and not using a roadmap as an excuse for inaction.

| The cost of preventing errors is often far greater than fixing them.

Protecting new ideas

Ideas are fragile, and they need nurturing. When looking at new concepts and ideas, it is effortless to identify flaws and problems. Instead, as a leader of a creative organization, it is your job to nurture these ideas until they grow into full-fledged products.

| A singular idea isn't enough to create a great product

Embrace the mess. The creative process is not straightforward. It requires trial and error. So stay away from the honing beacon attitude at the start of a project. Let your team stumble and try new things. Trying to avoid the creative mess by nudging your team and confirming the solution in the initial phase does limit your team's creativity.

Balance is key. Catmull says that finding a balance between different disciplines and departments of your organization is one of the most active jobs you have to do as a leader, even if everyone is firing on all cylinders.

Growing through Change

Catmull's other pillar for successful creative work is the whole organization's (not just leadership's) willingness to accept change and anticipate random events. There are so many stories of the prominent organizations (Xerox, Kodak, Blockbuster, Toys R Us, Nokia, Blackberry etc.) who kept holding to the processes that worked for them in the past, and these behemoths are either underwater or barely holding on.

Don't always believe in the maxim, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." It is perilous, specifically in the long term. It doesn't mean you need to change for its sake. Keep in mind the processes created for specific issues but don't let your organization's creativity get stifled by too many processes and red tape.

Do not assume that general agreement will lead to change—it takes substantial energy to move a group, even when all are on board

Most of the time, people are afraid of changes because of one of the below two reasons

1. They have become good at what they do within those process constraints. They don't want to move out of those comfort zones.
2. Some people were behind the creation and adoption of these processes. So they feel like changing them is an attack on themselves.

This fear of change can cripple your team and can have disastrous consequences. Hence Catmull suggests having an open discussion about the need for change and embracing the learning curve to push and grow your team beyond the resistance to change.

Finding your blind spots

As per Catmull, Everyone has blind spots and discovering them isn't easy because their awareness lies outside your perspective. It is even more disastrous as a leader because people might not even bring them to your notice if they treat you deferentially. So Catmull suggests that as a leader, we all should:

- Don't believe in the hype. It feels nice to have people defer to you but don't let your ego get in the way. Ensure that you are receiving as accurate information as you can.
- Encourage candid conversation and contrarian views - When people are comfortable speaking up and raising their POVs, that is when you will most likely hear the truth.
- View these contrarian viewpoints as complementary, not competitive. Valuing these diverse perspectives will help you avoid overlooking critical issues.
- Don't have a know-it-all air with you. Accept that you might not know everything.

If you don't strive to uncover what is unseen and understand its nature, you will be ill-prepared to lead.

Sustaining a creative workplace

One of the biggest reasons for the decline in a creative culture is the inflexibility of people's perspectives. People become so fixated with their own worldview that they ignore any new information if it contradicts their views. Catmull suggests a framework driven by the below tools to expand your team's worldview

- Hold frequent feedback meetings - During the development process, frequent feedback sessions allows your team members to get a different perspective on their own work.
- Promote research - Research is essential to creation. Learning more about the center of your creative project will help your team produce a more impactful outcome.
- Create clear boundaries - Creating boundaries may seem counter-intuitive, but Catmull argues that it forces the team to think of creative solutions for challenging situations.
- Combine art with technology - Use new tech where you can. Technology can inspire creativity.
- Create an experimental space - Experimental projects give you the liberty to push the envelope on the art of the possible without worrying about profits too much. Pixar shorts are a well-known form of experimentation that has pushed animation tech even farther than their prominent films.
- Put aside preconceived notions - Be more objective and see things as they are rather than as you want them to be.
- Use Postmortems - Don't just finish the project and move. Please give it a shakedown, reflect on what you have learned, inform the wider team, and get better informed for future projects.
- Build learning opportunities and team-bonding experiences - It helps the team to open their world view and exposes them to newer experiences which we know is so essential for creativity

Mental models

Catmull recalls that it is terrifying at the start of a creative project as the team is not sure what the outcome will be. It requires mental fortitude and a certain level of ease with ambiguity. Catmull suggests a mental model helps out in such cases:

- Know what tools you have at your disposal - Identify your teams and recognize how their unique strengths are going to help you navigate the unknown
- Identify the external factors that are outside your control - Identify them and then file them away like turbulence in a flight that is insignificant if you stop bothering about it.
- Give yourself a goal if your final destination is not known. Catmull argues that having a goal motivates you to continue moving forward.

The goal point is where I disagree with Catmull, as I think goals give you a fake sense of accomplishment just by setting them and a more fleeting sense of accomplishment even when you achieve them. Instead, establishing a system ([suggested by another great writer Scott Adams of Dilbert fame](#)) might be a better idea.

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