

Creativity, Inc.

Most of us love the offerings of Pixar. With such titles as Toy Story, Monster's Inc., The Incredibles, and even Luxo Jr. (the little lamp short that found its way into the Pixar logo), Pixar has provided us with entertaining, touching, and poignant films that have found their way into pop culture. Ed Catmull, president of Pixar Animation and Disney Animation shines a light on the creativity process at Pixar. Be warned, it's not all fun and games, and as the pressure of timelines mounts, the animation company can become a pressure cooker of stress and panic. And if you've ever been under any kind of pressure to come up with a creative presentation or idea, you know stress and pressure is like water on the creativity fire!

Make no mistake, the creative process is a balance of many things, yet the entertainment industry is pressured toward meeting deadlines, budgets, and story-telling quality. It's a mixed bag for certain, and Catmull demonstrates how Pixar fosters a culture in which creativity is allowed to thrive even in an atmosphere that could become creativity's kryptonite.

The front-end of the book is loaded with information from the beginning of Catmull's career and the beginnings of Pixar. Conflict, and challenges abound as Catmull describes the difficulties both financial and interpersonal that jeopardized the delicate balance required in a creative environment. Reworking stories, building innovative technologies, and meeting the challenges head-on gives some good context for the reader.

Establishing Pixar and the appropriate culture for success is not unlike creating the right circumstances for achievement in almost all organizations. A theme that seems to permeate most good leadership material includes the concepts of honesty and candor, and Catmull dedicates a chapter to a discussion of these values. Continuing on a theme of psychological safety, the idea that honesty and candor can and must exist in a healthy organization becomes clear. For a moment, imagine teams and staff members that could communicate in candid terms without exacerbating existing wounds and insecurities. Teams of people who care most for the success of the team and their colleagues can exist in this culture of honesty because they talk with empathy, and with others' best interests at heart. Harkening back to Patrick Lencioni's first dysfunction of a team, lack of trust is a foundational impediment for teams that perform well. This too, is what Catmull is communicating in an effort to demonstrate the best of cultures for success.

Creativity, Inc. is an experience to read. Chocked full of secrets and failures of Pixar, including the near loss of an entire production, the honest reveal from Catmull shows the behind-the-scenes difficulties and happenings that the typical movie-goer is unlikely to know about. But the book certainly shines a light on the difficulties of the successful culture. For those of us that think there's a utopian answer to a great organizational culture, the jig is up. There isn't a utopian solution, but a typical answer we all should have expected is that as human beings work together, the messiness of relationship, egos, insecurities, and motives seem to come out and interfere in the final product. In the end, if we can work through the chaos of developing healthy relationships there are few things organizations and teams won't be able to conquer.

By the way, my favourite Pixar quote? Buzz Lightyear: "I don't remember eating that!"

(Credit to Ed Catmull, Creativity, Inc., Random House, 2014)

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