Management Lessons from Creativity, Inc.

Ed Catmull

You can think of Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration as a book about Pixar or about nurturing creativity. But that is not all. It's a management book and tells us how we can effectively deal with the unseen forces that make our businesses less creative, less exciting and not-so-great places to work at. It is a book about allowing people to bring on their best, by creating a workplace and culture that values input—not from just those with designations; but from anyone.

If you've ever watched Pixar creations—who hasn't?—you'd want to know about this amazing place. Creativity, Inc. does a great job at showing you. Ed Catmull, who's been there from the start, shares this feeling of amazement himself. Says he: "Every morning, as I walk into Pixar Animation Studios—past the twenty-foot-high sculpture of Luxo Jr., our friendly desk lamp mascot, through the double doors and into a spectacular glass-ceilinged atrium where a man-sized Buzz Lightyear and Woody, made entirely of Lego bricks, stand at attention, up the stairs past sketches and paintings of the characters that have populated our fourteen films—I am stuck by the unique culture that defines this place. Although I've made this walk thousands of times, it never gets old."
That is part of what makes this book exciting. It is an unvarnished book about how one team made history by creating the first full length feature film Toy Story. Pixar did not stop there. They kept on making history. Catmull, who has been dreaming of animation movies for most of his life, and of making a full-length animated movie for 20 plus years till Toy Story came out, is ideally placed to share the lessons of managing creativity in the workplace. And he does so with incisive analysis and disarming honesty.

Many of the lessons in *Creativity, Inc.* come from the extraordinary efforts of a group of people to give wings to creativity. The three defining characters in Pixar’s history are Edward Catmull, John Lasseter and Steve Jobs.

In 1986, Edward Catmull became the president of "a new hardware company whose main business was selling the Pixar Image Computer... The only problem was I had no idea what I was doing," he says at the beginning of Chapter 3. It makes you want to read on, following him and discovering the lessons he learnt along the way.

If you begin the book by thinking Pixar is a magical place, you finish the book feeling a lot more admiration and respect, beyond the magical qualities.

Even the Pixar building is special.

Steve Jobs was a strong believer in face-to-face meetings. Jobs wanted the Pixar building—which has been named The Steve Jobs Building, after his passing—around a central atrium designed to encourage random encounters and unplanned collaboration. "There's a temptation in our networked age to think that ideas can be developed by email and iChat," Jobs told his biographer Walter Isaacson. "That's crazy. Creativity comes from spontaneous meetings, from random discussions. You run into someone, you ask what they're doing, you say 'Wow,' and soon you're cooking up all sorts of ideas."

In the words of Pixar's creative officer John Lasseter, "Steve's theory worked from day one... I kept running into people I hadn't seen for months. I've never seen a building that promoted collaboration and creativity as well as this one."

**Ugly babies and nurturing ideas**

From building design, to organization culture to holding meetings and inviting ideas, Pixar is a great case study in how creativity and new ideas can be given fertile ground to be born, nurtured and developed beyond their fragile, often misunderstood beginnings. And then how they can be turned into award winners and blockbusters.

Catmull's appreciation for leaving room and time for ideas to take root and grow came from his post doctoral days. "The leaders of my department understood that to create a fertile laboratory, they had to assemble different kinds of thinkers and then encourage their autonomy", says he. "They had to offer feedback when needed but also had to be willing to stand back and give us room. I felt instinctively that this kind of environment was rare and worth reaching for. I knew that the most valuable thing I was taking away from the U of U (University of Utah) was the model my teachers had provided for how to lead and inspire other creative thinkers. The question for me, then, was how to get myself into another environment like this—or how to build one of my own."
Many aspects of Pixar culture, and Catmull’s life philosophy come together to make Pixar this same kind of environment.

**Inspiration can, and does, come from anywhere.** If there are people in your organization who feel they are not free to suggest ideas, you lose. Do not discount ideas from unexpected sources.

**Make it possible for anyone to speak to anyone.** "A company's communication structure should not mirror its organizational structure. Everybody should be able to talk to anybody."

**Being open to ideas isn’t enough.** Getting people to engage and drawing on the collective brainpower is an active, ongoing process. As a manager, it is your job to coax ideas out and to keep pushing people to contribute.

**Beware of idea-rejecting stances.** "There is nothing quite as effective, when it comes to shutting down alternative viewpoints, as being convinced you are right."

**Share ideas early and often.** "Don’t wait for things to be perfect before you share them with others" says Catmull. "Show early and show often. It’ll be pretty when we get there, but it won’t be pretty along the way. And that’s as it should be." This is about acknowledging that most ideas begin their life as ‘ugly babies’. They begin to look better over time, with effort and energy invested in nourishing and protecting them.

“Our job as managers in creative environments is to protect new ideas from those who don’t understand that in order for greatness to emerge, there must be phases of not-so-greatness. Protect the future, not the past.”

**Problem solving**

Creativity, Inc. shows us an organization that focuses on problem solving. To begin with, Pixar culture borrowed many ideas from Japanese management techniques. This is how it embraces the idea that problem solving can become anybody's business and that the more people are invested in the idea, the better overall for everyone.

Other aspects of Catmull’s philosophy also contribute to make Pixar’s a problem-solving culture that boosts innovation. Humility and a keen awareness of human failure and limitations make this an insightful book. A pressing need for being realistic and avoiding arrogance and delusion—born of talent, position or success—threads across the book.

**The first conclusions we draw from our successes and failures are typically wrong.** Measuring the outcome without evaluating the process is deceiving.

**Change and uncertainty are a part of life.** Instead of resisting, we should build the capability to recover from unexpected events. "If you don’t always try to uncover what is unseen and understand its nature, you will be ill prepared to lead."

**Preventing risk is not the manager's job.** A manager’s job is to make it safe to take risks.

**Failure isn't evil.** It is a necessary consequence of doing something new. Taking such a stance naturally invites innovation and taking risks.

**Disagreement and fear should be understood and dealt with.** He says that "if someone disagrees with you, there is a reason. Our first job is to understand the reasoning behind
their conclusions." The same goes for fear in an organization. Managers should find what's causing it, understand it, and try to root it out.

**Challenges make us stronger and more creative.** "Engaging with exceptionally hard problems forces us to think differently."

**Empowering people**

In Catmull’s opinion, those who are “ultimately responsible for implementing a plan must be empowered to make decisions when things go wrong, even before getting approval. Finding and fixing problems is everybody’s job. Anyone should be able to stop the production line.”

He also reminds us that the desire to have everything run smoothly is a false goal because it leads to measuring people by their mistakes rather than by their ability to solve problems. Innovation and ideas can only grow within a culture of trust, respect and learning.

**Hire for potential:** "When looking to hire people, give their potential to grow more weight than their current skill level. What they will be capable of tomorrow is more important than what they can do today.

**Hire those who are smarter than you.** “Always take a chance on better, even if it seems like a potential threat.”

**Trust** doesn’t mean that you trust that someone won’t screw up—it means you trust them even when they do screw up.

When respect for ideas, people, reality and a problem solving culture come together, it creates a potent combination leading Catmull to declare that "New crises are not always lamentable—they test and demonstrate a company's values. The process of problem-solving often bonds people together and keep the culture in the present."

In a world that relies so much on appearances and often, self-bloated reputations, *Creativity, Inc.* succeeds in reminding us a simple truth: "*Excellence, quality, and good should be earned words.*" They should be “attributed by others to us, not proclaimed by us about ourselves”.

As far as management books go, *Creativity, Inc.* is a difficult book to summarize. But I hope I've given you a good idea of what you can expect from it. I hope I have inspired you to read the entire book.

*Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration*; by Ed Catmull and Amy Wallace. April 2014