

Creativity, Inc.

ED CATMULL ON HOW CREATIVITY IS FACILITATED AT PIXAR

The article summarizes the core thoughts and principles of the book *Creativity, Inc.* by Ed Catmull on the question of how permanent, professional creativity at the highest level becomes possible.

The book *Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the unseen forces that stand in the way of true inspiration* (Catmull, 2014, Ill. 1) is more than the usual retrospect of a highly successful businessman. Ed Catmull (Ill. 2), one of the 3 founders of Pixar and president of Disney Animation, concisely summarizes the life philosophy behind his creative work with the aid of episodes from the history of his company. For someone from the US-American area he also speaks uncharacteristically openly about crises and failures and what they mean in terms of developing projects.

The subtitle of the book, which has so far only been published in English, is also Catmull's goal: to overcome the unseen forces that stand in the way of true inspiration. The following article is a summary of core thoughts and guiding principles on the question of how permanent, professional creative output at the highest level becomes possible.

PIXAR'S CORPORATE PHILOSOPHY

"Take risks, and errors are good"

"Creativity demands that we travel new paths that lead us who-knows-where. That requires us to step up to the boundary of what we know and what we don't know." (Catmull, 2014,

p. 224) To this end it is essential to take risks and make mistakes (ibid., p. 23, p. 108 ff.). If creative professionals are to dare to do this on a permanent basis, the basic prerequisites are, inter alia, that they know that new ideas are valued and that they will not be condemned for making mistakes. Correspondingly, mistakes are regarded as a natural and necessary step in the creative process. This is expressed in sentences such as "Fail early and fail fast" or "be wrong as fast as you can" (ibid., p. 109, quoting Andrew Stanton). The aim is not to avoid mistakes but to profit from them as quickly as possible. Catmull even reverses the common connotation "Failure is bad" (ibid., p. 108) to the following extent: "If you aren't experiencing failure, then you are making a far worse mistake: You are being driven by the desire to avoid it. And, for leaders especially, this strategy – trying to avoid failure by outthinking it – dooms you to fail." (ibid., p. 109)

"Share your ideas"

In its early phases Pixar quickly found its own way of dealing with ideas and knowledge. In a world in which most firms had a culture of strict confidentiality (ibid., p. 24 f.) Pixar published its most recent developments and results as early as possible. The benefit gained through transparency and suggestions from peers was much greater than the costs of the inspiration another firm might have drawn from the results. Internally, too, sharing ideas in their early, far from perfected, state with others became a basic principle: "Don't wait for things to be perfect before you

share them with others." (ibid., p. 318) In addition to the benefit gained through mutual enrichment and the advantage of being able to recognize problems at an early stage, it is the expression and principle of a working atmosphere that fosters creativity, for security, self-confidence and openness are prerequisites for creative action. Insecurity, fear, and trying not to give anything away, on the other hand, inhibit creativity (ibid., p. 315 f.).

"Trust in people"

During a phase when the company was growing and the pressure of time and resources was increasing, Pixar introduced an "oversight group" with the aim of speeding up processes and working towards greater financial

advantage (ibid., p. 202). It quickly became clear that this not only provoked resistance and paralyzed creativity, but ultimately it also incurred extra costs. Correspondingly, the creative principle of personal responsibility, which had been developing up until that point, now became more apparent as the corporate principle: the aim was to give space for development back to the artists and control back to the editors. “Trust the process” (ibid., p. 66 ff.) and above all “trust in people” (ibid., p. 79) became the core principles of management. Implementing these ideas not only significantly increased work motivation but also the output. The basic principle here was: “You don’t have to ask permission to take responsibility.” (ibid., p. 51)

“Recapture your ‘beginner’s mind’ and be open to everything”

With every experience and all the knowledge gained with it, people construct inner models of the world. This influences and constrains their approach to new subjects and defines their professional actions. Whereas this is (also) definitely helpful in many professions, a stagnant world view in creative production obstructs the view of what is new and significant. It is therefore also important to constantly reflect on and challenge one’s own existing world views and concepts (“preconceptions”), and to foster openness and curiosity: you should recapture your “beginner’s mind” (ibid., p. 222) and be open to everything.

THE PRINCIPLES OF PRODUCTION AND WORK

Over the years specific principles and working processes have endured at Pixar.

Dailies

The working day in the animation department usually starts with the “dailies”, the presentation of working

drafts. This is not about presenting perfection or colleagues negotiating their status, rather about seeing images in context and getting feedback. It is a type of master class that allows you to see yourself and your own work in broader contexts. It is about openness and above all about an appraisal of the work, for all participants can be sure of their colleagues’ applause. What comes out of this is that the day starts energetically with good will and team spirit (ibid., p. 192 ff.).

Research trips

Research trips are carried out when the creative team is looking for inspiration for an authentic framework for a current film. They also help challenge preconceived notions and clichés. For *Monsters University*, a film set in the leading training institute for nightmare monsters, for example, directors, producers and writers made excursions to the campuses of MIT, Princeton, Harvard, UC Berkeley and Stanford. Observing and participating on location, the creative team discovered details about everyday life at elite universities, and this is what makes a

difference to the quality in the detail of the animation (ibid., p. 195 ff.).

“Story is king”

Pixar’s goal is clearly formulated: the end product, the film, is the goal, and this must be of the highest possible quality and sophistication. The guiding principle here is: “Story is king” (ibid., p. 66 ff.). That means that neither technological possibilities nor technological limitations nor, for instance, merchandising considerations should be allowed to fundamentally influence the story in itself. All departments and people and their actions are subordinate to the greater goal: producing a great story.

Quality as a whole and in detail

The implicit quality criteria of a good story at Pixar include involving the viewer in such a way that s/he can empathize with the dilemma in which the main character finds him/herself (ibid., p. 72). In order to achieve this, the “line of tension”, each individual story beat, each “emotional punch” is polished with fervor.

Reworking, reworking and reworking again

“Early on, all of our movies suck” (ibid., p. 90), as Catmull puts it. This has the great advantage that neither the individual nor the team have to pretend they have the perfect product from the start. The film is always steered “from suck – to not-suck” (ibid., p. 90), which can only be achieved through forceful and tireless revision.

“Creativity is more like a marathon than a sprint”

Braintrust

Every few months the storytelling of every current film project is discussed right from its early stages in the “braintrust”. This is a group of experienced, engaged colleagues who specifically identify problem areas

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(for example, with the basic concept, the story beats, etc.) and propose solutions. In these rounds of reflections participants are expected to be prepared to provide honest (“candor”, *ibid.*, p. 104) but always constructive feedback (“language of good notes”, *ibid.*, p. 104). The focus is on the film and not any personal agenda (*ibid.*, p. 85 ff.). The people selected for this feedback process have to be professionals who have themselves been involved in similar creative processes. Above all, though, they must be people who “(a) make you think smarter and (b) put lots of solutions on the table in a short amount of time” (*ibid.*, p. 105).

Investing in staff and working atmosphere

Pixar’s wares are creative products that are constantly among the highest ranking successful films and achieve millions in revenue. *Monsters University*, Pixar’s fourteenth film, has, by 2013, already earned more than 740 million US dollars (*ibid.*, p. 276).

To achieve this, purposely only the best creative professionals are selected, teams are carefully put together, and people are supported in their development right across the different life phases through mentoring programs, through fostering new ideas (*ibid.*, p. 131 ff.) or through trainee programs.

To make this possible on a permanent basis, the working atmosphere, various possibilities for continual training, and opportunities are specifically addressed in order to ensure that staff have a healthy and fulfilled life despite doing intensive, time-consuming and energy-consuming work in a media production company. In addition to various sports on the company site and continual training courses in perception or yoga, a “personal project day”, for example, was introduced in the Tools Department: 2 days every month everyone is allowed to do whatever interests them at the time using Pixar’s resources (*ibid.*, p. 280 f.). These kinds of investment pay off in the long run (*ibid.*, p. 78).

THOUGHTS ON MANAGEMENT

At the end of the book Ed Catmull summarizes his guidelines for the management of creative cultures at Pixar in 33 points (*ibid.*, pp. 315-319), e.g.:

- “Always try to hire people who are smarter than you. Always take a chance on better, even if it seems like a potential threat.”
- “There are many valid reasons why people aren’t candid with one another in a work environment. Your job is to search for those reasons and then address them.”

- “Likewise, if someone disagrees with you, there is a reason. Our first job is to understand the reasoning behind their conclusions.”
- “It is not the manager’s job to prevent risks. It is the manager’s job to make it safe to take them.”
- “The desire for everything to run smoothly is a false goal – it leads to measuring people by the mistakes they make rather than by their ability to solve problems.”

Ed Catmull’s book offers more than just exciting, anecdotal insights into the production world of major animation films. He formulates thoughts and principles that describe how we can permanently enable successful creativity at management level through positive staff appraisal, courage, and also intelligent reflection. A book that can be wholeheartedly recommended to anyone working in children’s media. ■

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REFERENCE

Catmull, Ed (2014). *Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the unseen forces that stand in the way of true inspiration*. New York: Random House.

IMPRINT

Published by: Internationales Zentralinstitut für das Jugend- und Bildungsfernsehen (IZI) at Bayerischer Rundfunk

Editors: Dr. Maya Götz, Birgit Kinateter M.A., Dr. Elke Schlote

Set by: Text+Design Jutta Cram, Spicherer Straße 26, 86157 Augsburg, Germany, www.textplusdesign.de
Printed by: Druckerei Joh. Walch GmbH & Co. KG, Im Gries 6, 86179 Augsburg, Germany
ISSN 1862-7366
Translation of the German contributions by Anja Löbert & Dr. Timothy Wise (Textwork Translations)

Address of the publisher: Internationales Zentralinstitut für das Jugend- und Bildungsfernsehen (IZI) Rundfunkplatz 1, 80335 München, Germany
Telephone: +49 (0)89/5900-42991
Fax: +49 (0)89/5900-42379
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