

## Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration

The point is, we value self-expression here.

Pixar leaves them feeling a little wistful, like something is missing in their work lives—a palpable energy, a feeling of collaboration and unfettered creativity, a sense, not to be corny, of possibility.

I believe the best managers acknowledge and make room for what they do not know—not just because humility is a virtue but because until one adopts that mindset, the most striking breakthroughs cannot occur. I

Unhindered communication was key, no matter what your position.

Like my classmates, the work I'd championed had taken hold largely because of the protective, eclectic, intensely challenging environment I'd been in. 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. 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

The lesson of ARPA had lodged in my brain: When faced with a challenge, get smarter.

Always take a chance on better, even if it seems threatening.

He used the phrase “insanely great products” to explain what he believed in. Clearly, he was the sort of person who didn't let

embarrassment—I remember being struck that a company as smart as Toyota could act in a way that ran so counter to one of its deepest cultural values. Whatever these forces are that make people do dumb things, they are powerful, they are often invisible, and they lurk even in the best of environments.

If we had done some things right to achieve success, how could we ensure that we understood what those things were? Could we replicate

them on our next projects? Perhaps as important, was replication of success even the right thing to do? How many serious, potentially disastrous problems were lurking just out of sight and threatening to undo us? What, if anything, could we do to bring them to light? How much of our success was luck? What would happen to our egos if we continued to succeed? Would they grow so large they could hurt us, and if so, what could we do to address that overconfidence? What dynamics would arise now that we were bringing new people into a successful enterprise as opposed to a struggling startup?

But one thing could not have been more plain: Figuring out how to build a sustainable creative culture—one that didn't just pay lip service to the importance of things like honesty, excellence, communication, originality, and self-assessment but really committed to them, no matter how uncomfortable that became—wasn't a singular assignment. It was a day-in-day-out, full-time job. And one that I wanted to do.

The other principle we depended on was “Trust the Process.”

While there are inevitably difficulties and missteps in any complex creative endeavor, you can trust that “the process” will carry you through.

That means it is better to focus on how a team is performing, not on the talents of the individuals within it.

Getting the right people and the right chemistry is more important than getting the right idea.

Ideas, though, are not singular. They are forged through tens of thousands of decisions, often made by dozens of people. In any given Pixar film, every line of dialogue, every beam of light or patch of shade, every sound effect is there because it contributes to the greater whole.

To reiterate, it is the focus on people—their work habits, their talents, their values—that is absolutely central to any creative venture.

To this day, we keep adjusting and fiddling with this model, but the underlying goals remain the same: Find, develop, and support good people, and they in turn will find, develop, and own good ideas.

To ensure quality, I believed, any person on any team needed to be able to identify a problem and, in effect, pull the cord to stop the line. To create a culture in which this was possible, you needed more than a cord within easy reach. You needed to show your people that you meant it when you said that while efficiency was a goal, quality was the goal.

More and more, I saw that by putting people first—not just saying that we did, but proving that we did by the actions we took—we were protecting that culture.

Parroting the phrase “Story Is King” at Pixar didn’t help the inexperienced directors on Toy Story 2 one bit. What I’m saying is that this guiding principle, while simply stated and easily repeated, didn’t protect us from things going wrong. In fact, it gave us false assurance that things would be okay.

Likewise, we “trusted the process,” but the process didn’t save Toy Story 2 either. “Trust the Process” had morphed into “Assume that the Process Will Fix Things for Us.” It gave us solace, which we felt we needed. But it also coaxed us into letting down our guard and, in the end, made us passive. Even worse, it made us sloppy.

Once this became clear to me, I began telling people that the phrase was meaningless. I told our staff that it had become a crutch that was distracting us from engaging, in a meaningful way, with our problems. We should trust in people, I told them, not processes. The error we’d made was forgetting that “the process” has no agenda and doesn’t have taste. It is just a tool—a framework. We needed to take more responsibility and ownership of our own work, our need for self-discipline, and our goals.

Once you're aware of the suitcase/handle problem, you'll see it everywhere. People glom onto words and stories that are often just stand-ins for real action and meaning.

Advertisers look for words that imply a product's value and use that as a substitute for value itself. Companies constantly tell us about their commitment to excellence, implying that this means they will make only top-shelf products. Words like quality and excellence are misapplied so relentlessly that they border on meaningless.

To ensure quality, then, excellence must be an earned word, attributed by others to us, not proclaimed by us about ourselves.

I should say here that even as I rail against "Trust the Process" as a flawed motivational tool, I still understand the need for faith in a creative context.

When we trust the process—or perhaps more accurately, when we trust the people who use the process—we are optimistic but also realistic. The trust comes from knowing that we are safe, that our colleagues will not judge us for failures but will encourage us to keep pushing the boundaries. But to me, the key is not to let this trust, our faith, lull us into the abdication of personal responsibility. When that happens, we fall into dull repetition, producing empty versions of what was made before.

the project proved not only that it was important to everyone that we weren't tolerating second-class films but also that everything we did—everything associated with our name—needed to be good. Thinking this way was not just about morale; it was a signal to everyone at Pixar that they were part owners of the company's greatest asset—its quality.

One way to do that is to replace the word honesty with another word that has a similar meaning but fewer moral connotations: candor. Candor is forthrightness or frankness—not so different from honesty, really. And yet, in common usage, the word communicates not just truth-telling but a lack of reserve.

So how can a manager ensure that his or her working group, department, or company is embracing candor? I look for ways to institutionalize it by putting mechanisms in place that explicitly say it is valuable.

People who would feel obligated to be honest somehow feel freer when asked for their candor; they have a choice about whether to give it, and thus, when they do give it, it tends to be genuine.

And without trust, creative collaboration is not possible.

Everyone is; societal conditioning discourages telling the truth to those perceived to be in higher positions.

When the stakes are high and there is a sense that people in the room don't understand a director's project, it can feel to that director like everything they've worked so hard on is in jeopardy, under attack. Their brains go into overdrive, reading all of the subtexts and fighting off the perceived threats to what they've built. When so much is on the line, the barriers to truly candid discussions are formidable.

No matter what, the process of coming to clarity takes patience and candor.

You are not your idea, and if you identify too closely with your ideas, you will take offense when they are challenged. To set up a healthy feedback system, you must remove power dynamics from the equation—you must enable yourself, in other words, to focus on the problem, not the person.

A good note says what is wrong, what is missing, what isn't clear, what makes no sense. A good note is offered at 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 to prescribe an answer. Most of all, though, a good note is specific. "I'm writhing with boredom," is not a good note.

Candor isn't cruel. It does not destroy. On the contrary, any successful feedback system is built on empathy, on the idea that we are all in this together, that we understand your pain because we've experienced it ourselves. The need to stroke one's own ego, to get the credit we feel we deserve—we strive to check those impulses at the door. The Braintrust is fueled by the idea that every note we give is in the service of a common goal: supporting and helping each other as we try to make better movies.

First, it takes a while for any group to develop the level of trust necessary to be truly candid, to express reservations and criticisms without fear of reprisal, and to learn the language of good notes. Second, even the most experienced Braintrust can't help people who don't understand its philosophies, who refuse to hear criticism without getting defensive, or who don't have the talent to digest feedback, reset, and start again.

Believe me, you don't want to be at a company where there is more candor in the hallways than in the rooms where fundamental ideas or matters of policy are being hashed out.

For most of us, failure comes with baggage—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—worse!—aren't smart enough to begin with. Thus, failure is something to be ashamed of. This perception lives on long into adulthood, even in people who have learned to parrot the oft-repeated arguments about the upside of failure.

Mistakes aren't a necessary evil. They aren't evil at all. They are an inevitable consequence of doing something new (and, as such, should be seen as valuable; without them, we'd have no originality). And yet, even as I say that embracing failure is an important part of learning, I also acknowledge that acknowledging this truth is not enough.

“fail early and fail fast”

“be wrong as fast as you can.”

To be wrong as fast as you can is to sign up for aggressive, rapid learning. Andrew does this without hesitation.

The better, more subtle interpretation is that failure is a manifestation of learning and exploration. If you aren't experiencing failure, then you are making a far worse mistake: You are being driven by the desire to avoid it.

There's a quick way to determine if your company has embraced the negative definition of failure. Ask yourself what happens when an error is discovered. Do people shut down and turn inward, instead of coming together to untangle the causes of problems that might be avoided going forward? Is the question being asked: Whose fault was this? If so, your culture is one that vilifies failure. Failure is difficult enough without it being compounded by the search for a scapegoat.

In a fear-based, failure-averse culture, people will consciously or unconsciously avoid risk.

They will seek instead to repeat something safe that's been good enough in the past.

How, then, do you make failure into something people can face without fear? Part of the answer is simple: If we as leaders can talk about our mistakes and our part in them, then we make it safe for others. You don't run from it or pretend it doesn't exist. That is why I make a point of being open about our meltdowns inside Pixar, because I believe they teach us something important: Being open about problems is the first step toward learning from them.

The reasoning behind this is simple: Experiments are fact-finding missions that, over time, inch scientists toward greater understanding. That means any outcome is a good outcome, because it yields new information. If your experiment proved your initial theory wrong, better to know it sooner rather than later. Armed with new facts, you can then reframe whatever question you're asking.

The antidote to fear is trust, and we all have a desire to find something to trust in an uncertain world. Fear and trust are powerful forces, and while they are not opposites, exactly, trust is the best tool for driving out fear.

Fear can be created quickly; trust can't.

When you instantly resort to secrecy, you are telling people they can't be trusted.

When you are candid, you are telling people that you trust them and that there is nothing to fear.

A better measure of our success is to look at the people on our team and see how they are working together.

Part of our job is to protect the new from people who don't understand that in order for greatness to emerge, there must be phases of not-so-greatness

With certain jobs, there isn't any other way to learn than by doing—by putting yourself in the unstable place and then feeling your way.

Once you master any system, you typically become blind to its flaws; even if you can see them, they appear far too complex and intertwined to consider changing.

Remember that while we are quick to assign patterns and causes to an event after it occurs, beforehand we don't even see it coming. In other words, while we may attribute to it a pattern later, random events don't come on time or on schedule.



From that day on, I resolved to bring as many hidden problems as possible to light, a process that would require what might seem like an uncommon commitment to self-assessment.

Which brings us to one of my core management beliefs: If you don't try to uncover what is unseen and understand its nature, you will be ill prepared to lead.

If we start with the attitude that different viewpoints are additive rather than competitive, we become more effective because our ideas or decisions are honed and tempered by that discourse

Most of us walk around thinking that our view is best—probably because it is the only one we really know.

This sounds simple enough—honor the viewpoints of others!—but it can be enormously difficult to put into practice throughout your company. That's because when humans see things that challenge our mental models, we tend not just to resist them but to ignore them.

The first step is to teach them that everyone at Pixar shows incomplete work, and everyone is free to make suggestions. When they realize this, the embarrassment goes away—and when the embarrassment goes away, people become more creative.

The oversight group had been put in place without anyone asking a fundamental question: How do we enable our people to solve problems? Instead, they asked: How do we prevent our people from screwing up? That approach never encourages a creative response. My rule of thumb is that any time we impose limits or procedures, we should ask how they will aid in enabling people to respond creatively. If the answer is that they won't, then the proposals are ill suited to the task at hand.

Companies, like individuals, do not become exceptional by believing they are exceptional but by understanding the ways in which they aren't exceptional. Postmortems are one route into that understanding.

“You can’t manage what you can’t measure” is a maxim that is taught and believed by many in both the business and education sectors. But in fact, the phrase is ridiculous—something said by people who are unaware of how much is hidden.

A large portion of what we manage can’t be measured, and not realizing this has unintended consequences. The problem comes when people think that data paints a full picture, leading them to ignore what they can’t see.

If fear hinders us even in grade school, no wonder it takes such discipline—some people even call it a practice—to turn off that inner critic in adulthood and return to a place of openness.

To have a “not know mind” is a goal of creative people. It means you are open to the new, just as children are.

As the composer Philip Glass once said, “The real issue is not how do you find your voice, but ... getting rid of the damn thing.”

“The best way to predict the future is to invent it.”

This sounds like the kind of slogan you’d see on a bumper sticker, but it contains hidden depths. Invention, after all, is an active process that results from decisions we make; to change the world, we must bring new things into being.

It’s a huge lesson: Include people in your problems, not just your solutions.”

If your goal is to make it easier and simpler, then don’t get in the boat.”