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Inside the Braintrust

Ed Catmull, *Disney/Pixar Animation*

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Ed Catmull, president of Pixar and Disney Animation Studios, explains the highly effective concept of the "Braintrust," which comprises a group of passionate peers who advise filmmakers during the production process. Key to its success is that the group has no authority, and that absolute candor and trust must be in place, Catmull says.



Transcript

Well the brain trust is something we happened on accidentally. John was the director and he had four people around him who were very focused and funny and really driven and they were passionate about the film itself so they would have intense discussions, but it was never personal. And they basically went through three films together, and this was so successful that as other people were coming out we would add them to this thing and then as I understand they started to call it the brain trust. So there was something about having colleagues giving notes to each other that worked really well. So we tried to apply the principle to other groups, like with our technical groups and others, and we found that it didn't work as well. So then we had to go back and look at it and say, okay what's actually going on here that's making this group work better than just a collection of smart people. Which is, for a lot of people a brain trust means you get your smart people together in a room, you discuss it. So that's not what I mean. So one of the things we realized is that the brain trust had no authority. They could not tell the director what to do.

So when somebody else was directing and now John is a member of it, he could not tell him what to do, I couldn't tell him what to do, Steve couldn't tell him what to do. And the consequence of that is that the director, the person responsible, was not coming into the room in a defensive posture knowing that this group could screw him over. Alright, so it changed the dynamics. But then we had to pay attention to a lot of elements of the dynamics. Because in our case we need a lot of candor about what works and what doesn't work. And what we found, and this is true in most places, is there are good reasons why most people hold back and they don't say what they think. They don't want to embarrass themselves, they don't want to embarrass other people, they want to look good in front of other people, they might want to grand stand. There are all sorts of personal emotional reasons that get in the way frequently, and most of the time actually they won't admit that they are there. So our view as the managers was not to actually examine the idea at the time, it was to sit back and examine the dynamics of the room. Because if the dynamics are working they are going to solve the problem.

So rather than me get caught up in a problem, I wanted to look and see if they are all saying what they think? And the result is we got this group which on the whole has done completely remarkable things. Every once in a while it doesn't work, it collapses. And every once in a while magic happens. But by setting it up and paying attention to it, we've got something where on the whole it does a remarkable body of work. Yes, so one of the things I do when I teach is actually show a little film that Brad Bird first actually told me about. It's the extra material in the Incredibles, and it's this team fighting over various things, and really constructive conflict. And when I show it to executive audiences, which I do all the time, they say that's great, in our organization that would never work. So do you have any - can it actually work some place other than Pixar? Okay, so I know we're running out of time here. Here's the thing, I have a lot of views about various things from failure and risk and so forth which I believe very strongly in. They can read the book if they want to read more.

Yes. So but with all that theory I was also very aware that I am also subject to dilution just as other people can be or are, so we could be successful for reasons that we don't see because we're all together and we don't fully acknowledge what somebody contributes. But eight years ago, Disney came in and bought Pixar. And at that time they asked John and me to run Disney Animation. So we made the decision that we were going to keep these two studios completely separate. That they are not allowed to do any production work for each other whatsoever. So now we had a group that was failing and demoralized and led poorly. So there were these great films of the 1990s, basically it was four, and they were culturally changing: the Little Mermaid, Aladdin, Beauty and the Beast and the Lion King. And then it went downhill. So we walk in and basically the process people have taken over and since process is important, they'd think about how to lower costs and get everything running smoothly and so forth.

And they made bad film after bad film. So for us it's like how often do you actually get to take your principles and apply them to an entirely different group of people? And I knew almost nobody there. So we determined to turn them around. So we worked with them, we taught the principles, it took a while. The fact is all the stuff sounds good, but like a lot of things that sound good they depend upon trust and trust is something that takes a while to earn. And usually what it means is, you have to go through some screw ups together and some failures and mess ups, and then still be there for each other. And when you are there for each other you really begin to trust each other, then begin to apply the principles. Now, they've made six films since we've been there, all six have been critical successes, and we dramatically altered everything from top to bottom in the way they thought about it and the principles and the philosophy. And then finally they had the big commercial success which was Tangled, which is the biggest film since Lion King. Then Wreck it Ralph was a big success, and Frozen just became the highest gross animated film in history.

So here's the key thing. It's largely the same people who were there when they were failing. And the things that they couldn't do in terms of like being honest or candid with each other or figuring out how they thought about problems and failures, those same people learned those things and they altered their behavior. They are a different group of people together. And it was actually an amazing and gratifying thing. It is amazing and gratifying. And the other thing is, because we kept them separate - like nobody could say - like they couldn't say Pixar rescued them and likewise Disney didn't bail out Pixar, because we kept them separate. But they evolved into having very different personalities. The brain trust has a completely different mindset. But they're both extraordinary, they are the best groups that I know off and they are very different from each other.