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If your stunt coordinator falls asleep in an important meeting, you can expect trouble later, says Hollywood executive producer Sheri Singer. In this episode, Singer and Stanford Professor Bob Sutton talk about the value of worry in the workplace. Singer, executive producer of 37 made-for-TV movies including "Halloweentown," says that in the fast-paced, budget-crunched world of moviemaking, she's learned to keep a watchful eye for problem people on her film projects—and to trust her gut about small behaviors that may signal major problems.



Transcript

- The best moment of a producer's life is the day they get the call that they got a film order.. And everything else from there is a series of solving problems, and yeah -- - It's just one problem after another (laughs) - It's just all day long every day until after it either airs or is in the theaters.. - Friction is a huge psychological burden.. - Without Friction we would not have fire and we would not have sparks.. - I gotta get a knife.. (laughing) I gotta hide it.. Gonna end up spending a lot of time ruminating.. (static buzzing) (R&B music playing) - Hi, I'm Bob Sutton.. I'm an organizational psychologist and Stanford professor.. And this is the Friction podcast..

(gentle R&B music playing) On today's episode, we're joined by Executive Producer Sheri Singer.. Sheri has produced 37 made-for-tv movies, including the Disney Channel hit "Halloweentown." Sheri is also my cousin and one of two people in the world who still call me Bobby.. We invited Sheri to the podcast because she is a master diffuser of inefficiencies and obstacles.. Sheri has an uncanny ability to sense when projects are about to go off the rails.. And she has a practiced talent for finding the right maneuver or application of grease to keep projects on budget and on time.. (R&B music plays) So we were talking about this a little bit before we started.. One way for, since as I say, a lot of our listeners are interested in startups, essentially you are constructing and guiding a temporary organization to make the film, right? - Yes, so I guess I've done about 37 of those.. - So it's like building a summer camp or something and then taking it down or something.. - That's exactly what it's like.. It's like the circus..

And actually, the funny expression is, there's a place, some people call it base camp, but when you're making a movie, any sized movie, there's a place where everybody's trailers are parked.. You guys have probably driven by and seen this, where some of the big trucks are and where the catering service is.. In Canada they call that the circus.. (Bob laughs) So it's actually, and I shoot a lot in Canada, so it's actually very appropriate.. But you know, now it's like, my husband likes to say, the best moment of a producer's life is the day they get the call that they got a film order.. And everything else from there is a series of solving problems, and yeah -- - It's just one problem after another (laughs) - It's just all day long every day until after it either airs or is in the theaters.. But in terms of putting together the circus, the most germane thing to what you seem to talk about on your podcast is that you are putting together.. Like, some of the people know each other, and they've done other shows together.. And that's common because someone will recommend someone else, 'cause you're looking for an audio person or you're looking for something.. But sometimes the bulk of the people have never worked together before..

- Okay, so you bring together a bunch of strangers, who -- - And there's no margin of error in television.. Like when you have, if you say, "Okay, I'm gonna shoot this movie in 20 days," you better shoot it in 20 days.. Because what's going to happen is, if you go over budget you've gotta figure out some way to get that money.. And it's very, these are done, all of them, just about.. Except for a really huge HBO movie or something that has a much bigger budget.. They're all done on smaller budgets.. And they're doable.. But they're doable because people have to step up and bring their A game.. - Okay, so you're starting to put together the circus.. What are the red flags you see that something's going wrong and you've gotta fix it? 'Cause to me that's a lot of the, some of it you can do it up front, but -- - Some of it you don't know until you have these people..

- So you can't predict.. - You know, I carry this big albatross, which is that I figure out immediately when somebody, there

are warning signs like, I'll give you a perfect example.. A movie that I did last year, we had a lot of stunts in the movie.. And the stunt coordinator was at the big production meeting the week before we shot.. He fell asleep.. (Bob laughs) And I desperately wanted to fire him immediately, but I had a Canadian partner who just wouldn't do it.. And they're the ones holding the copyright in that case, so I had no choice.. And he did finally get fired, but he got fired when it was so close to when the big stunts were coming that we had a major scramble job.. So my albatross is, I get it, I don't know why.. I just get it right away when I see that I have a problem..

I'm observant, I watch what people say in meetings, I listen to if a ball drops.. And I'm not very forgiving, because I've got one shot.. And it's not fun, who wants to fire people? I'm really a nice person.. But I also get it, it's not like a series where you may be making 10 or 12 episodes.. If one episode isn't great, hopefully the next one is and you can make the changes then.. You've got one shot.. - We had Patty McCord, who was head of HR at Netflix for the first 14 years.. Actually they had much less time pressure than you do.. That was what her philosophy was, "You're doing great until the moment I fire you." "No advance warning, boom, you're gone." - Well you would ideally give someone advance warning.. But if you're doing a movie that has three or four weeks of preparation, it's called prep, and then another three or four weeks of shoot, you can't wait very long..

And they have to leave.. - So that's sort of the talent part.. What are some of the other things that you look for, either to stop trouble from happening in advance or when things go wrong, what are some of the other classic problems? - This may surprise you.. One of the other classic problems is, your talent goes into hair and makeup every morning.. And if they don't come out in time, your day starts out and you're late already, right? The person is sitting in there for too long and you're 45 or 50 minutes late and you haven't started.. If you wanna talk about going through a shoot day, that's the first thing that can go wrong.. The second thing, and this is much harder to deal with, is you have a director, let's say, who doesn't get the scene fast enough, who is polishing a lemon.. At a certain point you've got enough to just keep going.. (Bob laughs) And you can't get them.. I recently had a situation with a director that was basically two hours behind all the time..

And then what happens at the end, and the only thing you can do is either fire them in the middle of production, that's the one, you can replace a lot of crew members.. But the director is tough.. And you have to have a real reason to not breach their contract.. So once that starts to happen, again, the executive producer's the pest.. - You're shooting in 20 days usually? - 15 to 20 days.. - So you've really just gotta go.. - Yeah, yeah.. - That's incredible.. So it is interesting, one of my favorite academic articles is called, "Bad is Stronger Than Good." Once we wrote an article called, "From Bad to Great." And our argument was, people who want excellence don't focus on the positive as much as just getting rid of the negative.. And the degree to which I'm hearing that in your story is that you know what the movie looks like when it's going right, and the warning signs you gotta deal with..

(R&B music playing) So one other source of friction, which I've heard you talk about a little bit, is your studio or other investor.. Do they every get in your way, or do you have to -- - That can happen.. The main problem once you're under way with production is, you have to send what are called dailies, or they used to be called rushes, and they're what you shot that day.. And if they start giving you, the worst thing they can do in a TV schedule is not watch for a few days.. And suddenly you get these notes about, "Can you reshoot this?" Or, "We didn't really like this." And you've gone to another location, you can't go back to that location.. And you just tell them, I mean most of them are getting more sophisticated now, so you tell them, "You know what, we can't do that, "but we can fix it in post "by putting in some additional lines "or cutting something out." So it becomes a negotiation.. Sometimes there's nothing wrong with what you're sending them, but sometimes they feel like they have to give you some criticism.. And the thing that they, oh, you don't have enough close ups, that's the famous one.. Network executives used to be trained when their movies would come in.. If they didn't know what else to do, to say, "It's too dark and there's not enough close ups." (Bob laughs) That's when you know you're dealing with somebody who doesn't really know what they're doing..

And so you tell them that you fixed it, whether you fixed it or not.. - Really? - Yeah, I mean you don't always do that.. You do that with somebody that you can tell is not giving you particularly appropriate notes.. - This reminds me of the famous story about David.. Michelangelo, the famous statue that many of us have seen.. That was a commissioned piece of art, and Michelangelo shows this piece of marble which somebody had worked on 50 years before and he sort of picked up and finished.. It took him years to finish.. And the mayor of Milan comes up and tells him that it looks good but the nose is too big.. And the apocryphal story is, he climbs up on the ladder with a hammer and he hits the nose.. And he has just powder in his hand and the dust flies..

And he shows it to the mayor and the mayor says it's fine.. - And he says, "That looks good now." (R&B music plays) Are there any other sort of synchronization issues you have? Because I have the sense of all these different parts that you're like the director, they all have to be integrated.. What are other important points of coordination or synchronization in the process? - I feel like the two biggest problems in a movie are, the acting isn't coming through, or you're not making your days, which means you're slopping scenes over and you're carrying a lot of scenes over.. And that happens a lot.. And sometimes you can put them in on the end, and if you've saved money other places you can add a day and shoot the stuff that you didn't manage to shoot.. And you have to pick very carefully, okay, we're not gonna make the day.. What should we not shoot? - Okay.. - And is there another location we could shoot this in? Or can we fake this? Or just put up a wall, 'cause someone's on a phone and try to match where we can't come back to.. Or can we shoot it on a stage? You have to make those decisions sort of

daily.. - Okay..

- And particularly if you have a director that may be very talented but is slow.. - Okay.. I love how much the speed is sort of one of the themes of this.. If you're not sure, go faster.. - Well that's probably true in most cases.. Because usually when someone is slow, when a director is slow, they feel they are not getting what they want the scene to look like.. Either because they don't like the way the lines are delivered, or there's something off about the lighting, or there's something off about the writing and they may or may not know that.. Which is why it's nice to have an executive producer who is seasoned, because you can usually help them fix their problems.. - When do you interject and say, "We gotta slow down." - Well, I can tell you -- - This is very Friction.. - There's two parts of the process..

One is while you're writing the script, which is, because by the way, if you don't start with a good script, it's very unlikely that your movie's gonna be any good.. Or you can make up for it with a big cast.. But underneath it, it's all on the page.. - So that's where the struggle, and the rewriting is worth it.. - Yeah, and so sometimes you have to take the time to not turn the script in fast or just because you wanna make a deadline or you wanna get your film ordered fast.. I mean I'm in the middle of one of those circumstances right now, although it hasn't started.. The executive that I'm working for right now is gonna go on maternity leave -- - Well that's a real deadline.. - And we're just starting to get, the writer has just gone to first draft.. So I've laid out a schedule, because I wanna get the movie ordered to green light before she goes away for a few months.. (Bob laughs) But I'm gonna have to realize, once I start seeing the script, if it's not ready, I will not come..

I don't do that.. I don't say, "I don't care if it's not as good "as it could be, I just wanna get the movie made." I don't do that.. But some people do, and that's one place where it's really worth it to slow down.. The flip side of that is you don't wanna take months.. Because you've gotta strike while the iron is hot.. If you have a project they really care about, you don't want it to sit there.. Anyway, so that's one place.. And I guess when there are problems once you're shooting, if there are problems on the set or you lose a location, sometimes this, I was shooting a teen vampire movie last year and we wanted to shoot one of the big set pieces.. And we were gonna shoot in this magnificent modern winery inside.. And they never completely confirmed, so that was another one, I kept telling the location manager, "Give me a backup, I'm worried." And he didn't get me a backup..

And then three days before we were supposed to do a huge vampire prom scene, they're gone! They don't want us to come.. So besides wanting to choke the guy, we then had to really take a step back and say, "Okay, can we reconceive what we had in our minds "for what this was supposed to look at?" It really helps when you need to think creatively.. When you need to think out of the box and you need to solve a problem by not replacing it with the exact same piece, that's when you have to take the time.. - Okay, well that's straight out of Danny Kahneman's book, the Nobel prize winner in economics.. When you get in a cognitive minefield, that's where you've gotta stop and think.. - That's interesting.. - Sometimes the best thing to do is, don't do something, just stand there.. So that's when those moments come out.. (R&B music playing) - And by the way, producers in television, movies, do not make any money unless the movies goes.. So the writer gets paid, so I've spent my whole life praying..

Because the writer gets paid, and the writer makes a little more money if it gets made.. But there are very rich, particularly feature writers out there, that have never had a thing made.. Because they'll get maybe a bonus or a piece of the back end if it goes, but they still get a chunk of change just to write.. - So a lot of our listeners are in software companies.. So you may have a company that's never successful but you've still gotta have people to write the code.. It's sorta the same thing.. And there's a lot of people have written a lot of code for companies that have never made a dime.. It's a similar sort of thing.. - Yeah, very similar.. So now you're going through a period where you're trying to satisfy what the network, or the end user in this case because now we're doing VOD and all sorts of other end users, but where the end user wants to see certain things in the story..

And you want to see certain things and the writer wants to see certain things.. And that's where the creative friction, if you're with the right people.. And sometimes you're not.. Sometimes you get a dictator from the end user who just says, "This is the way "you're gonna tell the story." - So this is actually something we've explored on some of our other podcasts, this creative friction.. What, to you, are the symptoms that it's healthy, the give-and-take, versus it's just destructive, it's painful and undermining the quality.. - Destructive is basically having somebody dictate to you what you're gonna do, even when you respectfully say, "But what if we did this instead?" Or, "This feels more organic." Or, "I think this would work better." And they just, - You will do this.. - You're in a room with somebody that, yeah.. The one that's healthy is, maybe you get a note from an end user saying, "Oh, I would really like to see this happen." And then you open it up for the writer and the producer to say, "Well what if we tried this?" Or the writer, particularly, will say, "Well, I get what you're looking for, "but can I do this instead of this?" And you go through this conversation and you end up with something better.. And that's always better.. Obviously the only risk to that is too many cooks in the soup..

So you wanna try to keep the number of people, and you can't sometimes, down.. - So when you have a too many cooks problem, or you have a dictator problem, you've gotta find the sweet middle of that, it sounds like.. - Exactly.. (disco music plays) - So one of the interesting sort of subtexts of what we've heard so far is that, you as the executive producer are there from the beginning to the end, but different groups come and go.. So you're the only person who sees the big picture and has to manage the handoffs and everything.. How do you make that happen? - And also get on the same time frame, get in the

urgency of what has to happen.. Generally if you're hiring people who have ever done the job before, they know the drill in terms of the timing.. They really do.. But in terms of having like minds and being able to creatively mesh, that is perhaps the biggest soft skill that I would say, for me, is in a producing job.. Because you have to pick people, and if you don't already know them because you've worked with them several times before and you're hiring new people, you have to spend some time with them to figure out, what do you think about, it's almost like casting, right? How will the chemistry be? How would this cinematographer work with this director? And you hire an assistant director..

You usually let a director pick a couple of their key positions themselves so that they're all on the same page.. But you also have to hope you're on the same page with the director.. And you basically collect people that you cast, in a way, in the key positions.. - So one thing that's sort of interesting there.. There's some research on Hollywood and how the social structure works, which is that there's the temporary organizations, the circus you put together, but there's actually a lot of stability in the network at the next level down of the people who do everything else.. The directors, the cinematographers, and everybody else.. Do you have sort of a standard list of people that you draw from, or a standard network? - You try, I mean, I've done that.. But I've also tried to move away from that.. - Oh that's interesting.. - I'll get into wanting to use the same writer..

Like, I've just sold something new.. And I like the writer who's writing the one I'm telling you that I wanna get ready before the maternity leave, but we talked about it and said, "Oh maybe," and she also just wrote something for this executive.. So now it's like maybe we should try someone else.. And I tend to like to use the same people, but I've also had experiences, and not that long ago, where I did two movies in a row with somebody, and the experience was terrific on the first one and not so great on the second one.. And with wanting to bring in more diversity, you end up not doing that as much.. Historically there has been a stable of directors, of cinematographers, you still want people, not for everything but for most things, you need people that are experienced and have the kind of credits you're looking for.. Because that's how you know whether you're probably gonna make your schedule.. Bringing in somebody who has never worked under certain constraints is a risk.. - That is a risk.. It is interesting that you bring up that diversity point..

Just last night I was having dinner with a local executive, I won't use her name, but she's an African American woman who is on a board with six white guys, and they were trying to pick a new CEO.. And she was describing how just automatically each one of them had the guy, "I know the guy, I know the guy." And it was some white guy who was in their network.. And she said, "I said to them, not only do I think "that these are not the right people, "if we always behave like this and pick the people who, "the white guys picking the white guys in your network, "nothing's ever going to change.. "Let's talk about it." And it is interesting, because that's one of the downsides of just always drawing on the same network.. I've not heard it expressed quite like that from somebody who was in the board room.. And they actually picked a female CEO and that was one of the reasons.. So that's sort of interesting.. - That's cool.. (R&B music playing) - Sheri, it's so great of you to come up here to Stanford and to join us for the Friction podcast.. It's been a delight to talk with you..

Thank you very much.. - Thank you.. (R&B music playing) - If you take one thing from Sheri, I hope you'll see that being paranoid isn't always a bad thing.. Honing an ability to anticipate and prepare backup plans can help keep your team moving even through the most difficult times.. Please spread the word about the Friction podcast.. Rate and review us on iTunes and share your favorite episodes with your colleagues, your family, and even your therapists.. On the next episode we'll be joined by Sam Yen, who was former head of design thinking at SAP, which is a large global software firm.. Sam will talk about the challenges of implementing large scale change and reducing friction in that huge corporation.. And now for the final tangent.. - In my first movie, actually, I had, I'm not gonna tell you who he was but he was very very well known at that time, one of the leads, and I was pregnant..

And I was like four or five months pregnant when we shot.. And he kept saying things to me like, and he was complaining, he was a big complainer, so I would hear him out of my earshot complaining about something.. So I would go up to him and say, "Can I fix, "what's going on?" "Can I do something to help you?" And he said, "I don't wanna bother you in your condition." And so I think if I, and he basically treated me that, he just pretended that I wasn't the executive producer.. And I think that if I could obviously do that over again, I would have been a lot stronger in saying, "I don't have a condition, "and I'm the guts behind this movie "and I'm the one that got the rights.. "I'd be happy to talk to you about any problems, any issues, "but the buck stops here." (R&B music plays) - We can't do this without you.. Tell us, what's driving you crazy? And what are doing to make life better in your organization, for yourself, and for the people that you work with? Please send us your Friction stories, tips and tricks.. We'd love to hear from you via Twitter @ECorner or please send us an email at stvp-ecorner@stanford.edu.. The Friction podcast is a Stanford eCorner original series brought to you by Stanford Technology Ventures Program and Designing Organizational Change.. Friction is produced by Rachel Julkowski and Alli Rico.. Jake Smith and Stife Studios are our editor and audio engineers..

Susie Allen and Victoria Johnson are our writing and marketing team.. Danielle Steussy is our designer and digital products manager.. And I'm Bob Sutton.. Thanks for joining us.. This is the Friction podcast..