

APRIL 2014

McKinsey Quarterly



Building a sense of purpose at Pixar

Ed Catmull

The cofounder of Pixar Animation Studios recalls how a serious organizational rift led him to a new sense of mission—and how it helped Pixar develop a more open and sustainable creative culture.

I wish I could bottle how it felt to come into work during those first heady days after *Toy Story* came out. People seemed to walk a little taller, they were so proud of what we'd done. We'd been the first to make a movie with computers, and—even better—audiences were touched deeply by the story we told. As my colleagues went about their work,

every interaction was informed by a sense of pride and accomplishment. We had succeeded by holding true to our ideals; nothing could be better than that. The core team who had joined us in 1994 to edit *Toy Story* immediately moved on to *A Bug's Life*, our movie about the insect world. There was excitement in the air.

But while I could *feel* that euphoria, I was oddly unable to participate in it.

For 20 years, my life had been defined by the goal of making the first computer-graphics movie. Now that this goal had been reached, I had what I can only describe as a hollow, lost feeling. As a manager, I felt a troubling lack of purpose. *Now what?* The act of running a company was more than enough to keep me busy, but it wasn't *special*. Pixar was now successful, yet there was something unsatisfying about the prospect of merely keeping it running.

It took a serious and unexpected problem to give me a new sense of mission.

For all of my talk about the leaders of thriving companies who did stupid things because they'd failed to pay attention, I discovered that, during the making of *Toy Story*, I had completely missed something that was threatening to undo us. And I'd missed it even though I *thought* I'd been paying attention.

Throughout the making of the movie, I had seen my job, in large part, as minding the internal and external dynamics that could divert us from our goal. I was determined that Pixar not make the same mistakes I'd watched other Silicon Valley companies make. To that end, I'd made a point of being accessible to our employees, wandering into people's offices to check in and see what was going on. John Lasseter¹ and I had very conscientiously tried to make sure that everyone at Pixar had a voice, that every job and every employee was treated with respect. I truly believed that self-

assessment and constructive criticism had to occur at all levels of a company, and I had tried my best to walk that talk.

Now, though, as we assembled the crew to work on *A Bug's Life*, I discovered we'd completely missed a serious, ongoing rift between our creative and production departments. In short, production managers told me that working on *Toy Story* had been a nightmare. They felt disrespected and marginalized—like second-class citizens. And while they were gratified by *Toy Story's* success, they were very reluctant to sign on to work on another film at Pixar.

I was floored. How had we missed this?

The answer, at least in part, was rooted in the role production managers play in making our films. Production managers monitor the overall progress of the crew; they keep track of the thousands of shots; they evaluate how resources are being used; they persuade and cajole and nudge and say no when necessary. In other words, they do something essential for a company whose success relies on hitting deadlines and staying on budget: they manage people and safeguard the process.

If there was one thing we prided ourselves on at Pixar, it was making sure that Pixar's artists and technical people treated each other as equals, and I had assumed that same mutual respect would be afforded to those who managed the productions. I had assumed wrong. Sure enough, when I checked with the artists and technical staff, they *did* believe that production managers were second class

and that they impeded—not facilitated—good filmmaking by overcontrolling the process, by micromanaging. Production managers, the folks I consulted told me, were just sand in the gears.

My total ignorance of this dynamic caught me by surprise. My door had always been open! I'd assumed that would guarantee me a place in the loop, at least when it came to major sources of tension, like this. Not a single production manager had dropped by to express frustration or make a suggestion in the five years we worked on *Toy Story*. Why was that? It took some digging to figure it out.

First, since we didn't know what we were doing as we'd geared up to do *Toy Story*, we'd brought in experienced production managers from Los Angeles to help us get organized. They felt that their jobs were temporary and thus that their complaints would not be welcome. In their world—conventional Hollywood productions—freelancers came together to make a film, worked side by side for several months, and then scattered to the winds. Complaining tended to cost you future work opportunities, so they kept their mouths shut. It was only when asked to stay on at Pixar that they voiced their objections.

Second, despite their frustrations, the production managers felt that they were making history and that John was an inspired leader. *Toy Story* was a meaningful project to work on. The fact that the production managers liked so much of what they were doing allowed them to put up with the parts of the job they

came to resent. This was a revelation to me: the good stuff was hiding the bad stuff. I realized that this was something I needed to look out for. When downsides coexist with upsides, as they often do, people are reluctant to explore what's bugging them, for fear of being labeled complainers. I also realized that this kind of thing, if left unaddressed, could fester and destroy Pixar.

For me, this discovery was bracing. Being on the lookout for problems, I realized, was not the same as *seeing* problems. This would be the idea—the challenge—around which I would build my new sense of purpose.

While I felt I now understood *why* we had failed to detect this problem, we still needed to understand what people were upset about. To that end, I started sticking my head into people's offices, pulling up a chair and asking them for their view on how Pixar was and wasn't working. These conversations were intentionally open ended. I didn't ask for a list of specific complaints. Bit by bit, conversation by conversation, I came to understand how we'd arrived in this thicket.

There had been a great deal riding on *Toy Story*, of course, and since making a film is extremely complicated, our production leaders had felt tremendous pressure to control the process—not just the budgets and schedules, but also the flow of information. If people went willy-nilly to anybody with their issues, the production leaders believed, the whole project could spiral out of control. So, to keep things on track, it was made clear to everyone from the get-go:

if you have something to say, it needs to be communicated through your direct manager. If animators wanted to talk to modelers, for example, they were required to go through “proper channels.” The artists and technical people experienced this “everything goes through me” mentality as irritating and obstructive. I think of it as well-intentioned micromanaging.

Because making a movie involves hundreds of people, a chain of command is essential. But in this case, we had made the mistake of confusing the communication structure with the organizational structure. Of course an animator should be able to talk to a modeler directly, without first talking with her manager. So we gathered the company together and said that going forward, anyone should be able to talk to anyone else, at any level, at any time, without fear of reprimand. Communication would no longer have to go through hierarchical channels. The exchange of information was key to our business, of course, but I believed that it could—and frequently should—happen out of order, without people getting bent out of shape. People talking directly to one another and then letting the manager find out later was more efficient than trying to make sure that everything happened in the “right” order and through the “proper” channels.

Improvement didn’t happen overnight. But by the time we finished *A Bug’s Life*, the production managers were no longer seen as impediments to creative progress but as peers—as first-class citizens. We had become better.

This was a success in itself, but it came with an added and unexpected benefit: the act of thinking about the problem and responding to it was invigorating and rewarding. We realized that our purpose was not merely to build a studio that made hit films but also to foster a creative culture that would continually ask questions. Questions like: 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? 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 start-up?

What had drawn me to science, all those years ago, was the search for understanding. Human interaction is far more complex than relativity or string theory, of course, but that only made it more interesting and important; it constantly challenged my presumptions. As we made more movies, I would learn that some of my beliefs about why and how Pixar had been successful were wrong. 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,

Brad Bird



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“Making a film, you have all these different departments, and what you’re trying to do is find a way to get them to put forth their creativity in a harmonious way. Otherwise, it’s like you have an orchestra where everybody’s playing their own music. Each individual piece might be beautiful, but together they’re crazy.”

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Brad Bird is the Academy Award–winning director of *The Incredibles* (2004) and *Ratatouille* (2007). For more about Pixar’s creative culture, see our 2008 interview “Innovation lessons from Pixar: An interview with Oscar-winning director Brad Bird,” on mckinsey.com.

excellence, communication, originality, and self-assessment but was 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.

As I saw it, our mandate was to foster a culture that would seek to keep our sight lines clear, even as we accepted that we were often trying to engage with and fix what we could not see. My hope was to make this culture so vigorous that it would survive when Pixar’s founding members were long gone—a culture enabling the company to continue producing original films that made money, yes, but also contributed positively to the world. That sounds like a lofty goal, but it was there for all of us from the beginning. We were blessed with a remarkable group of employees who valued change, risk, and the unknown and who wanted to rethink how we create. How could we enable the talents

of these people, keep them happy, and not let the inevitable complexities that come with any collaborative endeavor undo us along the way? That was the job I assigned myself, and the one that still animates me to this day. ○

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This article is excerpted from Ed Catmull’s book, *Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration* (Random House, April 2014).

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