



Creativity Inc. by Ed Catmull

Book Summary

This book is a fascinating guide to how Ed and the Pixar management team managed to shape, reform and maintain a highly creative and supportive company culture. The book spans the complete history of the business, capturing the the formation of the company, Steve Job's crucial financial investment in "the dream", and the merger with Disney animation studios. Catmull overs up some very practical advice as to how one could curate an open, healthy and supportive environment that respects and encourage constructive and well-intentioned challenge. Some of the key takeaways are that:

- **Braintrust Meetings:** this is a core team of people from across the business that are expected to be highly engaged in the decision making process and to openly challenge others in a manner that focusses on the problem/issue, and not the person (as is often the case).
- **Research Trips:** copying is a guaranteed path to mediocrity. Originality and authenticity stems from knowing the subject and the setting inside out. Research trips and human design thinking is imperative to excellence.
- **Power of Limits:** Imposed limits can in certain situations simply impede progress and remove flexibility and decision making authority from individuals. Structured flexibility is key.
- **Short experiments** are an inexpensive way to screw up. Mistakes should be welcomed (that is how we grow and develop).
- **Learning to see:** It is important to actively work to see things as they are and not what things are supposed to look like in our mental model of the world. You can learn to set aside preconceptions (think about the drawing workshop analogy).



- **Post-mortems:** it is important to consolidate what's been learned, teach others who weren't there, don't let resentments fester, use the schedule to force reflection and pay it forward.
- **Notes Day:** Real and meaningful engagement is powerful. Solutions to problems or issues that haven't even been realised will be offered up willingly. If an activity such as this is to be undertaken, it needs to have full buy in from the top and a commitment to act upon the input. The tone set is critical.

In the final chapter, Catmull brilliantly discusses some of the core maxims he has come to use as the basis of his management style. Each “nugget” of advice is of course context dependent, and may not apply under certain circumstances, but if you are interested in creating a challenging, supportive and intellectually driven business, it'll be difficult to come across a more down-to-earth, honest and concise guide to developing and leading a good business (in the sense that every employee wakes in the morning excited and grateful for who they are working with and the problems that they are working on solving).

- Give a good idea to a mediocre team, and they will screw it up. Give a mediocre idea to a great team, and they will either fix it or come up with something better.
- Always try to hire people who are smarter than you (even if they are a potential threat).
- There are many reasons why people aren't candid with one another in a work environment. Your job is to search for these reasons and then address them. Ask for people to “help you understand..”.
- If someone disagrees with you, there is a reason. Your first job is to understand the reasoning behind their conclusions and to address those issues first.
- Activities such as the Braintrust meetings or Notes Day, reinforce the idea that it is okay to express yourself (even when you are critical of a business decision) and to engage in improving how the company does what it does.



- If there is more truth in the hallways than in meetings, you have a problem.
- Sharing problems is an act of inclusion. Employees will respect this candour and respect.
- The cost of preventing errors is often far greater than the cost of fixing them.
- Failure is a necessary consequence of doing something new.
- Show work early and often.
- Engaging with exceptionally hard problems forces us to think differently.