With

How to build a 'Braintrust', Creativity Inc, Ed Catmull (2014)

People who take on complicated creative projects become lost at some point in the process; in the blindness of passion, compassionate feedback from respected peers can help creative people recover perspective. In order for this feedback to be welcomed it needs to: 1. Be candid; 2. Honour the sovereignty of the artist; 3. Be in service of the bigger purpose or idea, not ego or personal agenda.

The Braintrust is one of the most important traditions at Pixar... It varies in size and purpose, depending on what it has been called upon to examine. But always its most essential element is candour – without the critical ingredient that is candour, there can be no trust. And without trust, creative collaboration is not possible...

To understand what the Braintrust does and why it is so central to Pixar, you have to start with a basic truth: *People who take on complicated creative projects become lost at some point in the process.* It is the nature of things – in order to create, you must internalize and almost become the project for a while, and that near-fusing with the project is an essential part of its emergence. But it is also confusing. Where once a movie's writer / director had perspective, he or she loses it. Where once he or she could see a forest, now there are only trees. The details converge to obscure the whole, and that makes it difficult to move forward substantially in any one direction. The experience can be overwhelming.

All directors, no matter how talented, organised, or clear of vision, become lost somewhere along the way. That creates a problem for those who seek to give helpful feedback. How do you get a director to address a problem he or she cannot see? ... The process of coming to clarity takes patience and candour.

We have tried to create an environment where people want to hear each other's notes (feedback), even when those notes are challenging... we give our filmmakers both freedom and responsibility. For example, we believe that the most promising stories are not assigned to filmmakers but emerge from within them. With few exceptions, our directors make movies that they have conceived of and are burning to make. Then, because we know that this passion will at some point blind them to their movie's inevitable problems, we offer them the counsel of the Braintrust.

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How to form a 'Braintrust', cont.

(An important difference from other feedback mechanisms) is that the Braintrust has no authority. This is crucial: the director does not have to follow any of the specific suggestions given. After a Braintrust meeting, it is up to him or her to figure out how to address the feedback. Braintrust meetings are not top-down, do-this-or-else affairs. **By removing from the Braintrust the power to mandate solutions, we affect the dynamics of the group in ways I believe are essential...** The Braintrust's notes are intended to bring the true causes of problems to the surface – not to demand a specific remedy.

Moreover, we don't want the Braintrust to solve a director's problem because we believe that, in all likelihood, our solution won't be as good as the one the director and his or her creative team comes up with. We believe that ideas – and thus, films – only become great when they are challenged and tested. In academia, peer review is the process by which professors are evaluated by others in their field. I like to think of the Braintrust as Pixar's version of peer review, a forum that ensures we raise our game – not by being prescriptive but by offering candour and deep analysis.

'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... **to make a great film, its makers must pivot, at some point, from creating the story for themselves to creating it for others.** To him, the Braintrust provides that pivot, and it is necessarily painful.'

An important corollary to the assertion that **the Braintrust must be candid** is that **filmmakers must be ready to hear the truth**; candour is only valuable if the person on the receiving end is open to it and willing, if necessary, to let go of things that don't work.

It is natural for people to fear that such an inherently critical environment will feel threatening and unpleasant, like a trip to the dentist. The key is to look at the viewpoints being offered, in any successful feedback group, as additive, not competitive. A competitive approach measures other ideas against your own, turning the discussion into a debate to be won or lost. An additive approach, on the other hand, starts with the understanding that each participant contributes (even if it's only an idea that fuels the discussion – and ultimately doesn't work).

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How to form a 'Braintrust', cont.

The Braintrust is valuable because it broadens your perspective, allowing you to peer – at least briefly – through others' eyes.'

You don't have to work at Pixar to create a Braintrust. Every creative person, no matter their field, can draft into service those around them who exhibit the right mixture of intelligence, insight and grace... Seek out people who are willing to level with you, and when you find them, hold them close.