

Inside The Pixar Braintrust

A hallmark of a healthy creative culture is that its people feel free to share ideas, opinions, and criticisms. Our decision making is better when we draw on the collective knowledge and unvarnished opinions of the group. Candor is the key to collaborating effectively. Lack of candor leads to dysfunctional environments. So how can a manager ensure that his or her working group, department, or company embraces candor? By putting mechanisms in place that explicitly say it is valuable. One of Pixar's key mechanisms is the Braintrust, which we rely on to push us toward excellence and to root out mediocrity. It is our primary delivery system for straight talk. The Braintrust meets every few months or so to assess each movie we're making. Its premise is simple: Put smart, passionate people in a room together, charge them with identifying and solving problems, and encourage them to be candid. The Braintrust is not foolproof, but when we get it right, the results are phenomenal.

While I attend and participate in almost all Braintrust meetings, I see my primary role as making sure that the compact upon which the meetings are based is protected and upheld. This part of our job is never done because you can't totally eliminate the blocks to candor. The fear of saying something stupid and looking bad, of offending someone or being intimidated, of retaliating or being retaliated against—they all have a way of reasserting themselves. And when they do, you must address them squarely.

The Braintrust developed organically out of the rare working relationship among the five men who led and edited the production of *Toy Story*—John Lasseter, Andrew Stanton, Pete Docter, Lee Unkrich, and Joe Ranft. From Pixar's earliest days, this quintet gave us a solid model of a highly functional working group. They were funny, focused, smart, and relentlessly candid when arguing with each other. Most crucially, they never allowed themselves to be thwarted by the kinds of structural or personal issues that can render meaningful communication in a group impossible. After the release of *Toy*

Story 2 [when the Braintrust helped turn around a film in danger of foundering], the Braintrust evolved from a tight, well-defined group working on a single film into a larger, more fluid group. Over the years, its ranks have grown to include a variety of people—directors, writers, and heads of story—whose only requirement is that they display a knack for storytelling. The one thing that has never changed is the demand for candor.

Candor could not be more crucial to our creative process. Why? Because early on, all of our movies suck. That's a blunt assessment, I know, but I choose that phrasing because saying it in a softer way fails to convey how bad the first versions really are. I'm not trying to be modest or self-effacing. Pixar films are not good at first, and our job is to make them so—to go, as I say, "from suck to not-suck."

Think about how easy it would be for a movie about talking toys to feel derivative, sappy, or overtly merchandise driven. Think about how off-putting a movie about rats preparing food could be, or how risky it must've seemed to start *WALL-E* with 39 dialogue-free minutes. We dare to attempt these stories, but we don't get them right on the first pass. This is as it should be. Creativity has to start somewhere, and we are true believers in the power of bracing, candid feedback and the iterative process—reworking, reworking, and reworking again, until a flawed story finds its through line or a hollow character finds its soul.

"A basic truth: People who take on complicated creative projects become lost."

To understand why the Braintrust 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.

How do you get a director to address a problem he or she cannot see? The answer depends, of course, on the situation. The director may be right about the potential impact of his central idea, but maybe he simply hasn't set it up well enough for the Braintrust. Maybe he doesn't realize that much of what he thinks is visible on-screen is only visible in his own head. Or maybe the ideas presented in the reels he shows the Braintrust won't ever work, and the only path forward is to blow something up or start over. No matter what, the process of coming to clarity takes patience and candor.

At Pixar, we try to create an environment where people want to hear each other's notes (even when those notes are challenging) and where everyone has a vested interest in one another's success. 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. With few exceptions, our directors make movies 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.

You may be thinking, How is the Braintrust different from any other feedback mechanism?

There are two key differences, as I see it. The first is that the Braintrust is made up of people with a deep understanding of storytelling, who usually have been through the process themselves. While the directors welcome critiques from many sources, they particularly prize feedback from fellow storytellers. The second difference is that the Braintrust has no authority. The director does not have to follow any of the specific suggestions. After a Braintrust meeting, it is up to him or her to figure out how to address the feedback. Giving the Braintrust no power to mandate solutions affects the dynamics of the group in ways I believe are essential.

While problems in a film are fairly easy to identify, the sources of those problems are often extraordinarily difficult to assess. A mystifying plot twist or a less-than-credible change of heart in our main character is often caused by subtle, underlying issues elsewhere in the story. Think of it as a patient complaining of knee pain that stems from his fallen arches. If you operated on the knee, it wouldn't just fail to alleviate the pain, it could easily compound it. To alleviate the pain, you have to identify and deal with the root of the problem. The Braintrust's notes, then, are intended to bring the true causes of problems to the surface—not to demand a specific remedy. 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.

That doesn't mean it doesn't get tough sometimes. Naturally, every director would prefer to be told that his film is a masterpiece. But because of the way the Braintrust is structured, the pain of being told that flaws are apparent or revisions are needed is minimized. The film—not the filmmaker—is under the microscope. This principle eludes most people, but it is critical: You are not your idea, and if you identify too closely with your ideas, you will take offense when challenged. Andrew Stanton, who has been on the giving or the receiving end of almost every Braintrust meeting we've had, likes to say that if Pixar were a hospital and the movies its patients, then the Braintrust is made up of trusted doctors. It's important to remember that the movie's director and producer are "doctors" too. It's as if they've gathered a panel of consulting experts to help find an accurate diagnosis for an extremely confounding case. But ultimately, it's the filmmakers, and no one else, who will make the final decisions about the wisest course of treatment.

To get a clearer sense of how candor is delivered at Pixar, I want to take you inside a Braintrust meeting. This one followed an early screening of a Pete Docter film, then known as *The Untitled Pixar Movie That Takes You Inside the Mind*. [It's now called *Inside Out*, and is scheduled for release in 2015.] As Braintrusts go, this was a crowded one, with about 20 people at the table and

15 more in chairs against the walls. Everyone grabbed plates of food on the way in and, after a little small talk, got down to business.

Earlier, before the screening, Pete had described what they'd come up with so far. "What's inside the mind?" he asked his colleagues. "Your emotions—and we've worked really hard to make these characters look the way those emotions feel. We have our main character, an emotion called Joy, who is effervescent. She literally glows when she's excited. Then we have Fear. He thinks of himself as confident and suave, but he's a little raw nerve and tends to freak out. The other characters are Anger, Sadness—her shape is inspired by teardrops—and Disgust, who basically turns up her nose at everything. And all these guys work at what we call Headquarters."

That got a laugh, as did many scenes in the 10-minute preview that followed. Everyone agreed that the movie had the potential to be, like Pete's previous film *Up*, among our most original and affecting. But there seemed to be a consensus that one key scene—an argument between two characters about why certain memories fade while others burn bright forever—was too minor to sufficiently connect audiences to the film's profound ideas.

Midway down the table, Brad Bird shifted in his chair. Brad joined Pixar in 2000, after having written and directed *The Iron Giant* at Warner Bros. His first movie for us was *The Incredibles*, which opened in 2004. Brad is a born rebel who fights against creative conformity in any guise. So it was no surprise that he was among the first to articulate his worries. "I understand that you want to keep this simple and relatable," he told Pete, "but I think we need something that your audience can get a little more invested in."

14 Movies and 14 No. 1 Box-Office Hits

No movie studio can compete with Pixar's record of success.

Andrew Stanton spoke next. Andrew is fond of saying that people need to be wrong as fast as they can. In a battle, if you're faced with two hills and you're unsure which one to attack, he says, the right course of action is to hurry up and choose. If you find out it's the wrong hill, turn around and attack the other one. Now he seemed to be suggesting that Pete and his team had stormed the wrong hill. "I think you need to spend more time settling on the rules of your imagined world," he said.

Every Pixar movie has its own rules that viewers have to accept, understand, and enjoy understanding. The voices of the toys in the *Toy Story* films, for example, are never audible to humans. The rats in *Ratatouille* walk on four paws, like normal vermin, except for Remy, our star, whose upright posture sets him apart. In Pete's film, one of the rules—at least at this point—was that memories (depicted as glowing glass globes) were stored in the brain by traveling through a maze of chutes into a kind of archive. When retrieved or remembered, they'd roll back down another tangle of chutes, like bowling balls being returned to bowlers at the alley.

That construct was elegant and effective, but Andrew suggested that another rule needed to be clarified: how memories and emotions change over time, as the brain gets older. This was the moment in the film, Andrew said, to establish some key themes. Listening to this, I remembered how in *Toy Story 2*, the addition of Wheezy helped establish the idea that damaged toys could be discarded, left to sit, unloved, on the shelf. Andrew felt there was a similar opportunity here. "Pete, this movie is about the inevitability of change," he said. "And of growing up."

"Pete, I want to give you a huge round of applause: This is a frickin' big idea," said Bird."

This set Brad off. "A lot of us in this room have not grown up—and I mean that in

the best way," he said. "The conundrum is how to become mature and become reliable while at the same time preserving your childlike wonder. People have come up to me many times, as I'm sure has happened to many people in this room, and said, 'Gee, I wish I could be creative like you. That would be something, to be able to draw.' But I believe that everyone begins with the ability to draw. Kids are instinctively there. But a lot of them unlearn it. Or people tell them they can't or it's impractical. So yes, kids have to grow up, but maybe there's a way to suggest that they could be better off if they held on to some of their childish ideas.

"Pete, I want to give you a huge round of applause: This is a frickin' big idea to try to make a movie about," Brad continued, his voice full of affection. "I've said to you on previous films, 'You're trying to do a triple backflip into a gale force wind, and you're mad at yourself for not sticking the landing. Like, it's amazing you're alive.' This film is the same. So, huge round of applause." Everyone clapped. Then Brad added, "And you're in for a world of hurt."

An important corollary to the assertion that the Braintrust must be candid is that filmmakers must be ready to hear the truth; candor 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. Jonas Rivera, the producer of Pete's film, tries to make that painful process easier by "headlining" the main points of a Braintrust session—distilling the many observations down to a digestible takeaway. Once this meeting wrapped up, this is what he did for Pete, ticking off the areas that seemed the most problematic, reminding him of the scenes that resonated most. "So what do we blow up?" Jonas asked. "And what do you love? Is what you loved about the film different now than it was when we started?"

"What do we blow up?" Rivera asked after the braintrust meeting. "what do you love?"

"The way the movie opens," Pete responded, "I love."

Jonas raised his hand in a salute. "Okay, that's the movie, then," he said. "How we set up the story has to handshake with that."

"I agree," Pete said. They were on their way.

The most productive Braintrust sessions explore myriad trains of thought, in a way that is additive, not competitive. Take *WALL-E*, which was known, early on, as *Trash Planet*. For a long time, that movie ended with our googly-eyed trash-compactor robot saving his beloved droid, EVE, from destruction in a Dumpster. But something about that ending never quite felt right. We had countless discussions about it. The confusing thing was that the romantic plotline seemed right. Of course *WALL-E* would save EVE—he'd fallen in love with her the moment he saw her. In a sense, that was precisely the flaw. And it was Brad who pointed that out to Andrew in a Braintrust meeting. "You've denied your audience the moment they've been waiting for," he said, "the moment where EVE throws away all her programming and goes all out to save *WALL-E*. Give it to them. The audience wants it." As soon as Brad said that, it was like: Bing! Andrew went off and wrote an entirely new ending.

Michael Arndt remembers it was Andrew, meanwhile, who gave a Braintrust note on *Toy Story 3* that fundamentally altered the end of that movie's second act. At that point in the film, Lotso, the pink teddy bear and mean-spirited leader of the day-care-center toys, is overthrown after the toys' mutiny. But the mutiny wasn't believable, because the impetus behind it didn't ring true. "In that draft," Michael told me, "I had Woody giving this big, heroic speech about what a mean guy Lotso was, and it changed everyone's mind about Lotso. But in the Braintrust, Andrew said, 'I don't buy it. These toys aren't stupid. They know Lotso isn't a good guy. They've only aligned themselves with him because he's the most powerful.'" This sparked a pitched discussion, until Michael hit on an analogy: If you think of Lotso as Stalin and the other toys as his cowering subjects, then Big Baby, the bald-headed doll with one droopy eye who acts as Lotso's enforcer, was Stalin's army. A fix began to emerge. "If you flip the army, you get rid of Stalin," Michael said. "So the

question was, What can Woody do that will turn Big Baby's sympathies against Lotso? That was the problem I faced."

The solution—revealing that Lotso's duplicity had led Big Baby to be abandoned by his little girl owner—was all Michael's, but he never would have found it without the Braintrust.

You don't have to work at Pixar to create a Braintrust. Every creative person can draft into service those around them who exhibit the right mixture of intelligence, insight, and grace. "You can and should make your own solution group," says Andrew, who has made a point of doing this on a smaller scale, separate from the official Braintrust, on each of his films. "Here are the qualifications: The people you choose must (a) make you think smarter and (b) put lots of solutions on the table in a short amount of time. I don't care who it is, the janitor or the intern or one of your most-trusted lieutenants: If they can help you do that, they should be at the table."

Believe me, you don't want to be at a company where there is more candor in the hallways than in the rooms where fundamental ideas or policy are being hashed out. The best inoculation against this fate? Seek out people who are willing to level with you, and when you find them, hold them close.