

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 210: ED CATMULL

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide tools and strategies for climbing the S curve of Learning™ in your professional and personal life, stepping back from who you are to slingshot into who you want to be.

I'm your host, Whitney Johnson.

Today, our guest is Ed Catmull, co-founder of Pixar, former president of Disney Animation Studios and author of the New York Times best-selling book, *Creativity Inc.* Why did we invite Ed on the podcast? Part of it's Pixar, the magic of Pixar, but the real reason for me is his magic with people. Throughout the span of Ed Catmull's career, he has made it possible for people to do their best work. He's made it possible for people to disrupt themselves and when they get to the top of that S curve to keep climbing. For those of you who remember *Inside Out*, I "lava" you, Ed Catmull, along with millions, possibly billions of other people.

**Whitney Johnson:** Ed, I am so delighted to have you on the podcast today and I want to start off by asking you a question about management. So my late mentor, Clayton Christensen, said, "I have concluded that if you want to help people, be a manager. If done well, management is among the noblest of professions."

So will you share with us one or two formative experiences for you as a manager?

**Ed Catmull:** When I started, I had no intention whatsoever of being a manager. In my mind, I was a technical person with an artistic background and I was good at research and I had a list of research projects that I wanted to work on. I had come up with some fundamental advances in computer graphics, and I have this goal of making a film. Because I had that clear goal, I couldn't get a job, because nobody was interested in supporting it. But through a series of things, I ended up running a research lab at New York Tech and I was the first person hired so I, in fact, became in charge. And so I began hiring people, but because my mental image was that I was a researcher, I came up with some theories about how to manage and how to hire people so that I wouldn't have to do very much work. So, the theory was I'm just going to hire people who are self-motivated and that they don't need a lot of guidance. So, within 5 years, we grew to be about 40 people. And while I made a number of decisions that were correct in the process, a few years into it, I realized that I boxed myself into a position that was hard to get out of. And I realized that a lot of my theories tend to start off with were just plain wrong. Well, I was in five years, and this is when George Lucas hired me to bring high technology into the film industry. And it was like a do-over time. So I could think, "OK, what did I do that worked, what didn't work?" And there are a couple of lessons that came out of it to begin with. One of them was that managing and working with people and, and seeing the fears and the psychology

and all those things was really interesting. And it wasn't that the technology wasn't interesting. It was like, "Oh, this is interesting, too." And the second thing I realized was a third of my theories or ideas were just plain wrong.

I was wrong more than I thought I might be. I mean, nobody would ever say, "I'm going to make perfect decisions." You say, "I'm going to be wrong somewhat." But I would say, "I was actually wrong more than I thought I was. And that will probably be true when I go to Lucasfilm."

And it was. And it actually became something for me going forth was that I'm always wrong about the third at the time. Always. And I found this to be helpful, just to say, "There's a bunch of stuff I really don't know and somebody has viewpoints. They can see things that I can't see." As I went to Lucasfilm, I also noticed another change, and that was with the friends I've been with for a long time, they all felt perfectly comfortable talking with me about anything they disagreed with or with problems, but with newer people as I had published more and I was now in a higher position, there were some of the new people, not all of them, who treated me differently. They were more careful and I recognized that it was because of my position. And now, we got to know them, we got past that, but it was just became aware of that, that, in fact, is your position changes or you get to be better known, you've got to listen, understand, and then try to get beneath the first things they said. And this means you have to listen carefully too.

**Whitney Johnson:** You said a couple of really important things here. Number one is that you realize that people need to actually be motivated to do the work and you can't tell when you interview them if they're motivated or not. You also discovered that one out of every three sort of supposition you have is going to be inaccurate.

**Ed Catmull:** Yes.

**Whitney Johnson:** Is that right?

**Ed Catmull:** Yes.

**Whitney Johnson:** OK, and then there was a third thing that you just said, that I have forgotten it already. Oh, I remember. You think as a manager that you're getting the truth and you're not necessarily getting the truth because people are actually treating you differently than they're treating everybody else. Is that accurate?

**Ed Catmull:** Yes.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, what did you do to get people to start actually telling you the truth, that you could see what's actually going on as opposed to the face that people were showing you?

**Ed Catmull:** I think the first thing to note was just the realization that if people come and say something that, let's say you don't agree with or they're pointing out a problem to you, these are your colleagues. They're not saying it without a reason. They may not see something that you see, but I know for sure they can see things that I can't see. So, even if they're not correct in their assumptions, it's really important to listen. Just spent time talking and listening to people to understand what's really going on, and then you develop a kind of trust relationship because then you're not worried about your position or somebody judging you. And it's a good experience. And I just appreciated that and learned to, to add that to whatever else I had.

**Whitney Johnson:** You know, it's interesting hearing you say that you just enjoy the experience of interacting with the people around you and, and this idea that over time it can become very much like a family. It's really lovely.

**Ed Catmull:** It's like a family. You've got all sorts of issues that can come up. First of all, you bring the people in because you trust them. In other words, is telling them stuff that they know is pretty confidential and it's difficult. When Disney acquired Pixar, at that time, there were leaks in the press and in blogs around the studios about things going on in Disney, driving people crazy there because somebody was leaking all these secrets and all the problems that they were having. When I was made the president of Pixar, after this went on for a little bit and this is going on, so I just called the whole coming together we at a theater in Glendale. Down in, near L.A.. I just got up in front of them and I had an unexpected outcome from giving this little talk. And what I said to them was that when we make our movies at the beginning, they're a mess. They just don't work. They've got all kinds of problems with them and

they know it's a mess. And then they present it to the brain trust, which are the other creative leaders within the company who typically aren't on that project. And when they present this mess, they're pretty vulnerable and the people around them are trying to help, but essentially they're talking about everything that's wrong, but these people are trusting that brain trust is there to help them and they can talk about all the problems. And when the meeting's over, they've got to go back to their crew and explain the problems to the crew and trust the crew as they work out these problems. We have to trust each other. If somebody talks to bloggers or reporters or people outside the company, they break that trust. The unexpected thing was the whole place erupted in applause.

**Whitney Johnson:** Wow.

**Ed Catmull:** So, what that meant, was that the one or two people who were doing the leaking, it wasn't what I said, what they heard was that everybody else was pissed that somebody was leaking. That their colleagues really cared. And it stopped and never happened again.

**Whitney Johnson:** Wow.

**Ed Catmull:** And at Pixar, at 35 years, we never had leaks.

And I've said things, man, if they have gotten out that I could have gotten burned badly. I would usually talk about things I probably shouldn't have been talking about. You're sending a message that you trust them. You know, it's like in a lot of companies, they prep the meeting. If they got something difficult, they get together very carefully. Everybody can smell it. Everybody knows there's problems anyway, if you don't acknowledge the problems or the issues, then you don't care or you don't see it or you're not smart or you're stupid. There are all sorts of things that come with the fact of not acknowledging what they can already see.

**Whitney Johnson:** Do you remember an event at some point in your career where you discovered, "Oh, it's OK for me as a leader or a manager to talk about when things aren't working?" So you'd have this play out at Pixar over dozens of years. You went to Disney, you talked about what had happened, but do you remember when early in your career you said, "Oh, this is actually a good thing to talk about what's not working?" Or is that just a consequence of being a scientist by training? And scientists talk about things that aren't working

**Ed Catmull:** Initially the group of like four people then it grew slowly, so right to begin with or like, we're your friends talking with each other. It wasn't a conscious effort on my part to say, "This is the philosophy I'm going to take." It's just that we're talking. What I was doing though, was observing what took place over time as new people came in and how they came into the culture. I would step back every once in a while I try to think, "But, OK, what's going on here and what are the signals that are being given?" I'm still a big believer in that one has to pay attention to the signals that you give to people and one of them, of course, is just being honest about what you can see. At Pixar, we have some people who are unusual, and I believe that every group should have somebody who is unusual. They kind of push the edges. Now, I don't mean edges in the sense that in terms of the things that might hurt people or something like, that's not acceptable. But we had some people who did things that are just strange and odd and weird. If everybody did that, you probably wouldn't have a functional environment, but in fact, if you've gotten a few people who do it, and everybody knows it, then you send a signal to everybody that, "Oh, actually, the tent's kind of large here." And the other is, people do make mistakes and when they make mistakes, you actually, you talk about them, you address them, but you don't get rid of the person, you do something and or make them feel terrible. They already feel bad.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, yeah.

**Ed Catmull:** You don't want to make it worse.

**Whitney Johnson:** Was it *Toy Story* where you lost 90 percent of the film?

**Ed Catmull:** Yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** *Toy Story 2?* Were you just tell that story. I mean, it's just so astonishing. You must tell it. What happened?

**Ed Catmull:** *Toy Story 2* as a whole was, for me, the defining moment for the character of Pixar. [inaudible] third movie, because everything went wrong. We had to restart the movie review, redo the story, changed leadership and all of our theories about how to make movies just were wrong. We had to fix it on the fly. That was no matter of saying, "Oh, I was boxed into a corner. I'll fix it next time." No, we have to fix it at the time. So, in the midst of this high stress thing, somebody accidentally hit something which started to delete all the files. In the operating system, there is a thing which is what's called R.M. Star, that removing everything from this point on down. Somebody did it and they were on the wrong directory. And so essentially they were deleting the whole system and so the thing do, you go to the backup and then we discovered that the backup systems weren't working and hadn't been checked. Now we have a group that's responsible for the backups. And now this case, you can say, "OK, here is somebody that's responsible for it. And this didn't work." So the wrong things were happening. In this particular case, as luck would have it, the lead supervising technical director was a woman who had a baby. Since she was in charge, she had to have a computer at home, so we put the entire film on her computer, so that she could be at home to work with people. The Internet support wasn't as fast in those days. So, she was now back at work, but she had a copy at home. And then when we realized that, we then sent somebody out, they got her computer, wrapped it up in blankets, put it in the back of the car...

**Whitney Johnson:** Like a baby, right? Swaddle the computer.

**Ed Catmull:** What she had there was basically what saved the film. Now, at this point, we don't know who removed the system, but it was clear to me it was an accident. And if they knew that they did it, they were so embarrassed, they couldn't say anything. OK, what more is there to do? They'll be more careful in the future. And for the system to say, "OK, we didn't do the right thing there," and so they just fix the system. But you didn't have to actually say or call on the task or point fingers or anything like that. They just knew that, oh, they didn't have good things in place and they took care of it. They completely changed.

**Whitney Johnson:** Your system.

**Ed Catmull:** Of Course.

**Whitney Johnson:** Did someone ever discover who did it?

**Ed Catmull:** No.

**Whitney Johnson:** Or not try to discover it? But did a person ever realize that they did it?

**Ed Catmull:** I don't know. And we didn't ask. That was part of the message was mistakes happen, that was a close call, but we move forward. Accountability is something that we need to have, but it shouldn't be used as a weapon against people, and it often is.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, yeah, like you said, this litmus test of your culture, it's the observed behavior you had talked about, "It was OK to have setbacks," but now you had to prove, "Yes, it really is OK to have setbacks" and allow people to make mistakes.

**Ed Catmull:** Yeah. And I have seen places where they do say the words.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, yes.

**Ed Catmull:** OK. But it's not true.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

I would love to now switch gears a little bit. One of the things that I thought was really interesting in your book that you talked about mental models that allowed you to navigate the unknown. At one point, you used a stampeding horse where you were riding bareback and another point you talked about a balancing board atop a cylindrical roller as ways of navigating through the unknown. One of the models that I developed, after working with Clayton Christensen, was this S curve of Learning. And you're probably familiar with the S curve, and it helps you understand how quickly an innovation will be adopted. I had this "aha" that it could also help you understand how you learn and how you grow and how you develop. So whenever you start something new, you're at the base of that S and you're not going to know what you're doing, so growth is going to feel really slow and then you're going to get into the sweet spot. You're in this groove. You know exactly what you're doing. You feel very exhilarated. And then you get to the high end. You're in mastery. You've figured it all out. You're very good, but you're starting to feel a little bored. And so you need to do something new. But when you understand where you are on that S curve, it allows you to manage the frustration and sometimes the impatience and even the boredom that you might feel. And so what I thought would be fun to do is talk about those three different phases and use that as a lens or a framework to talk about the next few questions that I have for you. And my first one is tell us about an experience when you were on the launch point of the curve. You were doing something brand new. What was that? What did it look like and feel like?

**Ed Catmull:** I think the time when I felt the most completely out of my depth was when we spun out from Lucasfilm for Pixar. Steve Jobs bought us and now the president of a company, and I have never been the president of anything before. Steve had never worked with a high end product before. He didn't actually have any instincts for it. Our head of marketing had never marketed a hardware product before. We had never actually manufactured anything. And now we've got this check for five million dollars in the bank as we form this company. And we have to figure all this out and none of us know what we're doing. It's pretty clear we're at the beginning of the S curve. And at the time, of course, it meant I had to read a lot. And what I found was most the books were really relevant. I learned something from a lot of them, but the other thing was we called presidents because I had friends and Alvy Ray Smith is co-founder of Pixar with me. I had friends who were presidents for the company. So we called them up, ask for advice. And the one thing they all said was that, "No matter how hard you think it is, it's harder than that."

**Whitney Johnson:** That was encouraging.

**Ed Catmull:** And the thing was, they were right. It was harder than I thought it was going to be. Having been told that it was going to be harder than I thought it was going to be. It was just figuring things out along the way. So this is now the beginning of Pixar, but it was learning over a fairly long period of time because things kept going wrong. And we got to the point where we were given the chance to make a feature film with Disney. In essence, we stepped off of the one learning curve onto the beginning of the next learning curve. And when we started working on *Toy Story*, nobody had ever made a computer graphics animated film before, but nobody in our team had ever even made any film before, even an animated film. Or redirect, we made shorts and some commercials, so we had to figure out everything, both technically and in management, and we did. So we were now at this sweet spot again, like we were learning really fast. It was not only intense, it was a gratifying process as we went through this learning and with every one of these learning curves, I get some lessons. So, by the end of *Toy Story*, we had a lot figured out and it was only when we finished the film that we realized a lot of what we figured out, we had wrong. And I mentioned it with *Toy Story 2*, a third film, is where it challenged everything and turned to a number of other ideas upside down.

**Whitney Johnson:** So when you're doing something completely new and you feel like you're somewhat out of your depth, what are some hacks that you have for managing that uncertainty? And in addition to these mental models, do you meditate? What do you do to help you manage through that and stay in a place of learning as opposed to a place of performance or anxiety?

**Ed Catmull:** I didn't actually start my meditation practice until later, but by nature, I'm fairly calm and I always pause a bit. But the other was I did understand that since I didn't know what to do either than other people shared the responsibility, that it was fairly easy to just give the trust. The most gratifying thing in my entire career always was just a visceral feeling, is to go to various meetings and the people in these meetings weren't looking at me saying, "What are we going to do?" They're saying, "What are WE going to do?" They own the problem.

**Whitney Johnson:** "What are WE going to do?" And it wasn't the royal "we," it was the real "we."

**Ed Catmull:** The real "we."

**Whitney Johnson:** So as a manager, let's flip it now, what is the value in hiring people who are inexperienced, who are at the launch point of that S curve? What value have you seen? I know you talked about interns and short films and maybe you want to talk about that or something else, but what have you found is the value in having people that don't know what they're doing yet?

**Ed Catmull:** When you go through the process, you bring people in because you think they've got the potential. Now, sometimes you hire people who are very experienced. I will say, in *Bug's Life*, we made a mistake. Other people were doing the hiring. So sometimes, even when you're right, if you're the manager, you actually have to let people do things their way, but they only wanted to hire experienced people. To this day, still, the concept kind of bothers me because *Toy Story* was made with everybody was inexperienced. So they just gone through it. Why were they just wanting to hire only experienced people? So as we geared up for *Bug's Life*, we had to add people because we were also starting to work on *Toy Story 2*, so the crew had an increase. So, they went out and I hired people and they hired people they could get who are available from the special effects industry, which is located largely in L.A. Now, the problem I have with that is that the people who are really good in the effects business are not going to be leaving their companies. Their companies are doing everything they can to keep them. They're their stars. The ones who are easily available actually are typically the B players, and I don't want to overgeneralize because there all sorts of reasons why people want to leave. Some people wanted to come to Pixar and so forth, but the fact that they are experienced actually was not a good criterion. You've got this experience you're in, you don't have enough yet. It's the wrong criteria for hiring somebody. You hire somebody because you believe that either they're way above the line and you want them or their arc is heading the right direction, even if they're below the line. The arc is far more important.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Ed Catmull:** So the end of *Bug's Life*, we had more people that we had to let go than we ever did with any other film since.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, the way I think about it from an S curve perspective is that when you hire people at the launch point, if they were a stock, because I have a stock background, you basically are looking at capturing all of that upside that can come. Whereas if you hire someone who is at the high end, then the value, if you will, is priced in. And so there's not a lot of upside in terms of that person that you're hiring. And so you always want to, as you say, hire them closer to the launch point of that S curve.

**Ed Catmull:** The reason you hired them is because you believe they can do it. If you approach it and say, "OK, we're hiring here, you can do it." Then I find, we're almost always right.

**Whitney Johnson:** One of the things that you said at the very beginning of our conversation was sometimes you don't know how to hire people who are actually going to be motivated, that are going to work hard, and it almost sounds like you're hack for solving that is just hiring someone who's passionate, who's technically strong and then saying to them, "You can do it." And then encouraging them that they can do it and trusting them and then it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**Ed Catmull:** Yeah, I should say also, I've always been careful to check the references. For H.R. reasons, you can't give a bad reference to people.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yes.

**Ed Catmull:** So the measure you have is "What's the excitement of the person who's giving you the reference? If they say, "You'd be absolutely crazy if you didn't hire this person," that's meaningful.

**Whitney Johnson:** Will you go ahead and read this one quote from *Ratatouille* and it's Anton Ego and share that with us? Because I think it does encapsulate what people need at the launch point of that S curve.

**Ed Catmull:** Ratatouille is the kind of film that would not pass the elevator test. If you were to describe quickly why you should make this film, everybody would throw you out. And I believe that we should always be doing something always and making some films that would fail the elevator test. When you take out something really hard, though, it forces you to be more creative, to sell, to solve harder problems. So with that, we made some changes. Brad Bird, who had made *The Incredibles*, we brought Brad Bird in and Brad completely rewrote the script. Ironically, the final movie of Ratatouille was the fruition of the original idea that was pitched by a different person, the originators, a delightful man, extremely creative. He's the one that directed the look of the whole film. But there are some problems they would get stuck on. So even those delightful and a really great guy, he was stuck in this eddie. So Brad came in and liked the idea.

And so when I first heard this, I was blown away because it's such a great quote.

He said, "The work of a critic is easy. We risk little, yet enjoy a position over those who offer up their work and themselves to our judgment. We thrive on negative criticism, which is fun to write and to read. The bitter truth we critics must face, is that in the grand scheme of things, the average piece of junk is more meaningful than our criticism designating us, but there are times when a critic truly risks something. And that is in the discovery and the defense of the new. The world is often unkind to new talent, new creations. They need new friends."

Something I believe in strongly is that you protect the new, the things that are unusual. You give them space and you don't judge too soon. It may not go anywhere you don't know for a fact, but you have to trust it, you can't let it fit into the existing mold. As you know, in companies they typically got existing business model with people trying to defend that model.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. So I think what I'm going to do is I'm going to jump. We talked about the launch point. I think I'm going to jump to mastery for just a second because you just opened that door. So let's walk on through that. When you get to the top of that s curve, Clayton Christensen would say that people keep doing the same thing they've always done because that's what made them successful. And so why would they change? And then you said something that I thought was interesting, which is we oftentimes have very little ability to distinguish what's successful and why it's working versus, you know, what isn't working and what we should discard. And one of the things that you talked about and maybe share this example or something else is when you realize that Woody wasn't working, that Woody wasn't likable. And how did you get people to this place where they were very invested in what they were already doing and get them to be able to give that up and to move on.

**Ed Catmull:** In this case, we had a team of four or five creative people working on *Toy Story* who really were amazing. They were actually the sort of the core of the concept of the brain trust. And I will say that there was some luck in that that particular group of people were so extraordinary. Now we actually drew the wrong conclusion from it. And that is these were just the four people we got together. They were magical in the way they worked with each other. And so when we worked on *Toy Story 2*, we thought, "We'll put a couple people that we think have got the potential." And so we put together this team, but they didn't jive. They were actually at odds with each other. And it was a little baffling because, and this is a case where the trust, you give them time and you should do that, if somebody isn't doing it, then your job is to help them, to get them there. And usually you get them over, but sometimes you don't. And this is a case we didn't, and I think it's because we assumed incorrectly that because the first group worked so well that the second group would work just as well. So it was a wrong assumption. And when you make the wrong assumption like that, you're actually hurting those people who you put in that position. If you give them the help and you can't get them through it, that is an embarrassing thing. It's a very visible position to me if you're a director of film. But at the same time, you have to take the risk. So this is this balancing act where you have to take the gamble they're going to do it and you have to live with the fact that every once in a while it isn't going to work. And that you bear some of the responsibility because either you didn't help them enough or they weren't capable and you didn't recognize it, but we, we learn from each one of those. And that particular group recognized that Woody was a problem, but they were getting pushed one way and one person down at Disney who was influential at the time, who wanted something edgy. And then when we put it together and the people of Disney were saying, "We don't kind of like this." So at that point, this group got together to rethink it. So it doesn't matter what their intents were. It's like the actual outcome wasn't working. At Disney, they said, "We're going to halt production." So now we're in a halted production state. Our company is dependent upon figuring this out.

**Whitney Johnson:** So this wasn't a gentle conversation? This was, "We're stalled. We got to fix this."

**Ed Catmull:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, we're screwed.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. OK.

**Ed Catmull:** So, the view they came back with was they didn't like him either. So they said, "Let's not take the suggestions. Just tell the story that we want to tell." And it was at a time for Disney, because Disney had these three major peaks in history. Walt Disney was alive and it went downhill, and then when Eisner Katzenberg came in and then with *Little Mermaid*, then they had four culturally impactful films. And they were all musicals, and then they started to go downhill. But during this peak, a mistake was made, by people who are no longer there, was that there is a formula for animated movies and the term was, "It's the new American Broadway." So when I started with *Toy Story*, they wanted to be a musical, have the sidekick, the whole thing is essentially the formula. Right away, John and Andrew and Lee and Joe didn't want to do that. So then they are pushed to this edgy direction. And then when I wasn't working, they said, "Well screw that. Let's just do what we want to do." So they reboarded the film. Then put together the reel. We mock up our movies for comic books with...

**Whitney Johnson:** Graphic novel style.

**Ed Catmull:** Yes. So essentially you're watching the movie, but you're seeing a drawing every two to five seconds, something like that. And when they went through that and they showed it down at Disney turned everything around, but they knew what the problem was. If you look at it, *Toy Story* isn't just a movie. That whole group of people figuring this out and at the same time trying to understand, "What does it mean? Who are we? How do we get in this movie?" Because the movies only make sense if they're drawn from the people who make them. You go from a formula, that's not original.

**Whitney Johnson:** There's no connection to it.

**Ed Catmull:** Yeah. So, the part of the lessons of those first two or three films was that of research, because the people who make them really know filmmaking. So it's really easy to fall into the language of films. What we learned was that when you do research, what we're really saying is, "Go out and find something you didn't know." And the other thing is you have to put some of yourself in, which means you have to be vulnerable and honest with each other about problems, because those are the kind of things that are more human and you want those in the movies and a lot of people don't quite understand is our movies aren't made for children. Walt Disney understood this too. They're not made for children. People forget that children live in an adult world and they're wired to try to figure out what's going on in the adult world. We make our films for adults. You make them accessible. And what makes them interesting is kids can look at them because they're trying to figure out the rules so other things work. So we want to tell those kinds of films, but at the same time be meaningful for adults. So we're fully aware and *Toy Story*, for instance, that a lot of the gags don't mean anything to children. These are adult references.

**Whitney Johnson:** So we talked about mastery. What advice do you have for people who are managing masters? Who are really good at what they're doing and either you want them to continue to do what they're doing or it's actually time for them to do something new? What have you done? When you've got a person, you're like, "It's time for them to do something new." How have you managed that?

**Ed Catmull:** Sometimes it's just to ask them if they want to do something new. Because there are some people who want the mastery and to get the craft a better and better so as their mental image of themselves.

**Whitney Johnson:** Right.

**Ed Catmull:** And there are others who've done that. And then let's go do something else. And I'm actually more on that camp. We got to this point when Disney acquired us, the company was actually pretty afraid because they're worried about the bureaucracy of Disney coming in. But I was pretty excited because I knew that I had a number of

ideas about how these things work, but they could be wrong and a lot of things could be working because of things that people were doing that made things work that we didn't fully acknowledge or understand or appreciate.

**Whitney Johnson:** Mm hmm.

**Ed Catmull:** And if you take the principles and you apply them to a different group of people, then you find out, "OK, which of these are principles that work and which are dependent upon the people?"

**Whitney Johnson:** You talked a little bit earlier about the brain trust and how important it is. For people who want to have a brain trust in their organization because they know it will help the creative process, they know it will help them be better, what advice do you have for creating a brain trust?

**Ed Catmull:** Our brain trust was created to fill a particular need, and that was as we got to be the third film around *Toy Story*, we were becoming more successful than Disney. I always believe it's important to have good pushback. So when we started, Disney was our push back, but if we became very successful, it would actually weaken their ability to push back because the people would be more dismissive of it. The notion was that the brain trust would then become the pushback for the other films that were being developed. That was the theory behind it. Now, it evolved over time. It turns out that if you're pushed back, it's intimately with the group all the time, but it actually also seizes to be pushed back.

**Whitney Johnson:** Right.

**Ed Catmull:** So ultimately, we ended up and it turns out, Steve never went to a brain trust meeting. When we had our board of directors meeting, that's when he would see the film. And that's what he would give his comments. And his value was he was the powerful push back. It was an amazing phenomenon to watch because I'm in all these meetings over all these years, all of these brain trust meetings, all the meetings with Steve and a movie would have a problem. Typically Steve would always call me the night before we're going to have a board meeting and he's going to see the movie. And part of my relationship with Steve's was giving information. I would give him my opinions, but I would never tell him what to think and I wouldn't hold things back to try to guide his opinion, because he's too smart for that. So he'd meet with the director and the producer after the screening.

He would start off by saying, "You can ignore everything I say because I'm not a filmmaker." And then give his comments on the film. Now I can tell you, because I was in all of these meetings that Steve never, ever said something that had not already been said by somebody else in the brain trust before.

**Whitney Johnson:** Ever?

**Ed Catmull:** Ever. It was funny to watch it and hear him swear that he was telling them new things when these other people had, in fact, told them. After a while, they learned to ignore each other so they could tune out each other. That's why I always knew this external force. But as it evolved over time, it stopped being a group of people and it was a way we ran a certain kind of meeting. We run that meeting in a certain way. One of them is in that room, they're all peers.

**Whitney Johnson:** Ah.

**Ed Catmull:** OK.

**Whitney Johnson:** No matter what.

**Ed Catmull:** No matter what. They're peers. The group and the room and nobody in the room has the authority to tell the director what to do. Now, that's a tricky thing to pull off, because regardless of what I say, there are people who are more powerful than others.

**Whitney Johnson:** Mm hmm.

**Ed Catmull:** So one of the rules is that the people who have very powerful voices are supposed to shut the hell up for 10 to 15 minutes. And the reason is if a powerful voice says something, it sets the tone and then people then judge what they say against what they hear.

**Whitney Johnson:** So let me see if I can recap what you just shared with me. So one of the, one of the challenges in order to drive the creative process forward is there always needs to be a foil, some, something that's going to push back. Sometimes, Steve Jobs was that foil. Sometimes colleagues were that foil, but they got used to listening to each other. So you needed to build a process that would be the foil itself. And I'm hearing you say people have to treat each other as peers. There's no authority in the room. Everybody is truly equal. The people who do have more power outside of that room have to enter the conversation, not start the conversation. Be direct in what you're saying, listen and listen some more, and then don't make any changes immediately. That's what I'm hearing.

**Ed Catmull:** Yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** What you're saying then is that any organization can do that. Any team can do that. It takes a lot of work. If you're willing to have people look at the idea and then have someone who was playing the role that you played or Jim Morris is now playing, which is to not look at the idea, but to watch the people and watch the process and facilitate the process.

OK, I have two final questions for you. One is what was useful for you in this conversation today? So one of the things I like to ask at the end of every coaching session is, as you were thinking, as you were processing, what stood out for you, that you're not just having to deliver information to me. There's something that you thought of or an "aha" that you had as you were talking.

**Ed Catmull:** I hadn't thought in terms of the S curve applied to each stage. I was very aware of the change in position, but I hadn't thought in terms of that rate. I thought about, S curves a lot, but I hadn't actually applied it in that way.

**Whitney Johnson:** Interesting. Penultimate question is you've jumped to a new S curve. You went into retirement two years ago. What are you doing on your new S curve? What's it like? How does it feel?

**Ed Catmull:** I've been busier than ever. I do some consulting. I am revising my book. I've got all the ideas. But the problem is just it's hard work to consolidate it all down into what I want. I was aware that the book ends on notes day, but actually the notes day was the beginning of a very educational process we went through, a transformative process and then other things that I just personal clarity. I don't know if I can express it, but in terms of how one deals with the unknown, I've always find it hard to express, but I do think that one of the great wastes of talent of our age or of any age really is that we undervalue the things we don't see.

I can never be another gender and I can never be another ethnicity and I can't be raised in another culture, which means their experiences that I will never have and I can't pretend I'm going to have it or I'm going to be broad enough to understand it. There's just things I, I won't know, but I can have trust. That people out there bring something of great value, even if I don't know what it's going to be.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, your brand new S curve is busier than ever doing lots of consulting. I think I read somewhere that you're doing investing and now you're also making revisions. So you're not going to do a second book, you're going to revise Creativity Inc, is that right? Or it's still undecided.

**Ed Catmull:** I've decided to do it. It's just in my ability to procrastinate is enriched by all these other opportunities that are happening around me.

**Whitney Johnson:** There you go. So someone is going to have to give you a deadline and say, "This film isn't working. You've got to go redo it." Maybe that's what you need, is you need the constraint of a deadline.

Wonderful. Thank you so much for being with us.

**Ed Catmull:** All right. Thank you, Whitney.

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I could easily spend all day sharing with you takeaways, but I will limit myself to just six, because I am embracing my constraints of time.

So Number one. I started with the quote from Clayton Christensen that, "If done well, management is the noblest of professions." Ed Catmull had no intention of being a manager. He was interested in technology, but then he discovered people are interesting, too. I think that's true for most of us. We start with, "I want to do something, but then discover there isn't much we can do without someone helping me."

So put people first. I don't know about you, but first on my to do list every morning, it usually involves tasks, not people. It's something I really have to work at. Someone who does this exceptionally well in addition to Ed Catmull is Hubert Joly. We interviewed him in episode 165 of the podcast. Really good stuff around putting people at the top of the to do list.

Number two. I was struck by his willingness to not know, to be wrong. The seventh accelerant of our personal disruption framework is to be driven by discovery, which means we're willing to walk into ambiguity and the unknown. Most of us, at least, I tend to think, "I'm pretty good at this." Walking into the unknown thing of being uncertain, except that when I start to look at the things that I do when I'm uncertain, like micromanaging, which I do a lot would suggest, would indicate that I am not as good at walking into the unknown as I thought I was. So what if we started our day with, "There's a bunch of things I really don't know." What if we were willing to perpetually be at the launch point of the S curve?

Number three, trust. After I heard Ed talk about sharing what was happening with his team, sharing things that might actually burned him, I decided I want to do that, too.

I want to extend trust with our team. So what did we do? Something simple, but it was confidential. We pulled out the cover of our new book and we showed that to our team, said, "It's still confidential." And we extended the trust and that trust has been returned.

Number four. That story about when they lost most of *Toy Story 2*, astonishing. Defining and crucible moment. Management is the noblest of professions. If done well, we can really change people's lives. My question for you, my question for me is, can I be that person when things go wrong that I don't blame, I just say, "OK, we made a mistake, we'll fix it." Can we be that person when things go wrong?

Number five, hire for potential. Hire at the launch point of the S curve. Remember, we have the download [whitneyjohnson.com/hiring](http://whitneyjohnson.com/hiring) if you want help with this. And I loved what he said, how the arc is the most important. Then when he said if people aren't succeeding, if they're not gaining traction on this new S curve, ask yourself, "What responsibility do I bear? Is it that they weren't capable and I didn't recognize it? Or is it that I didn't help them enough? What am I doing or not doing to help my colleagues succeed?"

Number six. I'm thinking about what makes a great film and how he said, "You have to put some of yourself into it." That's on my mind, because the book that I'm working on, I know it seems like I'm still working on it, because I am. But we had our peer review and some of the initial comments that came back were, you know what? I can't see enough of you in it. And I recognize now is that when I'm uncomfortable, I sometimes intellectualize as a way to

distance myself so that I feel safer. And yet he said if any movie, any book or anything is going to have an impact, we have to put a piece of ourselves into it. Which reminds me of one of my favorite quotes from Emerson, "Rings and jewels are but apologies for gifts. The only true gift is a portion of myself."

Thank you again to Ed Catmull for being our guest. You don't know this, but I had wanted to have you on the podcast for some time, but I was too chicken to ask. My friends, my truth tellers dared me to ask, and now here you are. Absolutely lovely.

Thank you to all of you for listening. Thank you to our team, Emily Cottrell, Whitney Jobe, Steve Ludwig, Melissa Ruddy and Nancy Wilson.

I'm Whitney Johnson  
and this is Disrupt Yourself.