Context to the nugget conversation

Amy speaks about the nuances involved in giving and receiving feedback so that it is productive. She speaks about the practices at Pixar where they strive hard to create a climate that is conducive for healthy feedback on a project. She also shares a small but powerful nuance in the way she interacts with her PhD students when they submit their drafts.

Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Moving on Amy, I also liked your description of Pixar's Brain Trust process where candor is at the core of sharing constructive feedback. So, I wanted to talk a little bit about feedback, right, and about the nuances involved in getting candor in the feedback context whether it's a team feedback session or a one-on-one feedback session. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Amy Edmondson (Amy): Sure, one of the keys for effective feedback that we all understand but often fail to deliver on is that you are critiquing the behavior, you are critiquing the project, you are critiquing the work not the person. And that's a subtle but powerful point because I think, ultimately everyone wants to do good work and they want to be seen well by their colleagues and especially by their managers. And so, if you can discipline yourself to really be concrete and focus on what doesn't work about the work or about the behavior, most people will come to that and counter with a genuine appreciation that it's hard for you to say but useful for them and useful for the team to get that information. Pixar does a particularly good job of this. And of course, what they do is create these lovable, engaging, creative movies that children and adults alike really enjoy and they appreciate part of their ability to do that, so they appreciate no movie would ever like, no book, no anything would ever be perfect in its first draft. So, in a way they have already framed the work in a specific way to say, we know this is going to be bad but what we need from you is where is it bad, where do you get bored, where do you find it not credible, where do the characters not look real to you and so forth. So, you are asking people, you are asking people in a very explicit formal setting around a table to really speak honestly about what they like and what they don't like and it works because they put these guidelines in place like we are critiquing the project not the person, everybody's voice matters and all movies are bad at the beginning and they get good because of this process. So, the process becomes something that people buy into and that's important because I am not saying because it isn't that it's easy, that it is not easy for human beings to give each other critical feedback but we are willing to do it when we care enough to do it and when we are doing it in a concrete and timely way.

DJ: Hmm. The other thing that struck me Amy was very often we think that the role of creating safety while giving feedback often rests with the feedback giver but I think there's a role that the feedback receiver can play in creating the climate of trust and safety to receive constructive

feedback. Like you said, the way the prototype is framed to say, of course, we know this is just a first draft and there are mistakes and feel free to jump in. So, I think this I found that very…

Amy: With my PhD students they will often say give me an ugly draft but that's what I want, right? Because I don't want them to waste too much time trying to make it perfect because they might, you know, they would be perfecting sentences and punctuation on material that's not quite good enough yet, right? So, you give me your ugly draft, right, that's what I want. And then the ugly draft is this wonderful starting place from which they can get better, from which we can together get better so… but by deliberately using the word ugly it lowers that tendency that the stakes and the tendency toward perfectionism.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Interestingly enough, Pixar came up in one of my earlier conversations at the podcast with Prof Kartik Hosanagar (KH) of Wharton. He speaks about how some large companies manage to stay agile and nimble despite their size and he speaks about Pixar in that context.

KH: *"I usually go to a very interesting setting to illustrate how that could be done. Pixar is the setting that I personally love. Pixar is in the movie industry, as all of us know, and this movie industry is a blockbuster-driven market. It's very hard to predict what will be a blockbuster. A typical movie studio releases 10 movies and one of them is a blockbuster. Pixar, on the other hand, has released about 13 or 14 movies so far, and every single movie is a blockbuster. So, how is it that a company in an industry with such low odds of success can consistently produce these great hits? It's because they have such a system in place. Every time they try and make a new movie, it's not the big guys in the company saying, OK, this is our next topic. It's a bottom-up process where every employee can contribute an idea. They have a process wherein all of them vote on each other's ideas, and a movie worth pursuing emerges through this kind of a democratic process. So, I think, they have created such an organization, such a culture. They have tried to make it not too hierarchical, despite their size. So, these are some of the lessons that are applicable for any organization trying to build an entrepreneurial culture."*

DJ: Fascinating to see a company like Pixar churning out hits at this kind of a rate when the market failure rate is much much higher.

I also love the nuance in the way she seeks her drafts by framing it as ugly drafts. Saying that takes the pressure off the person on the other side I guess. It is such a minor but a powerful point.

End of nugget transcription

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Nugget from Kartik Hosanagar that is referenced: [Building an entrepreneurial culture](#).

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- 78.03 Amy Edmondson - Impact on leadership transitions
- 78.04 Amy Edmondson - Calculus of silence
- 78.05 Amy Edmondson - Traits that drive psychological safety
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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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