

Delight case study: Pixar



Photo - Loren Javier on Flickr

A brief history of Pixar

Pixar was first known as The Graphics Group, one third of the Computer Division of Lucasfilm which was launched in 1979 with the hiring of Dr. Ed Catmull. In 1986, Apple CEO and co-founder of NeXT inc., Steve Jobs, bought the company for around \$10 million from George Lucas, founder of Lucasfilm. The now-independent company's new name was inspired by its primary product, the Pixar computer.

After producing several award-winning computer graphics and animation software packages such as RenderMan and CAPS, Pixar's animators produced a few mind-blowing TV ads. In 1991, Pixar signed a \$26 million deal with Walt Disney Feature Animation to design and produce feature-length animated films. In 1995, Pixar Animation Studios released *Toy Story*, the first feature-length animated film created using only computerized graphics. *Toy Story* and its successor, *Toy Story 2*, as well as *A Bug's Life*, were huge hits for both Disney and Pixar, beloved by audiences and critics alike.

Pixar has received nine Academy Awards to date and, as outlined in its 1996 annual report, Pixar succeeded because it was well aware of the pitfalls of filmmaking:

Though Pixar is the pioneer of computer animation, the essence of our business is to create compelling stories and memorable characters. It is chiseled in stone at our studios that no amount of technology can turn a bad story into a good one.

Skills immersion

Pixar University is the core of the company's workplace agenda. Every employee is encouraged to put four hours a week toward their Pixar education, whether they're accountants, marketers, animators, production assistants or even security guards. The university offers over 110 courses on filmmaking, sculpting, painting, drawing and creative writing. So why teach a cook to paint? The company chef, Luigi Passalacqua said, "I speak the language of food, now I'm learning to speak the language of film."

Why teach drawing to accountants? Because drawing class doesn't just teach people to draw. It teaches them to be more observant. There's no company on earth that wouldn't benefit from having people become more observant. - Randy Nelson, Former Dean of Pixar University

It helps them to do their job and get away from their job. - Adrienne Ranft, Manager at Pixar University

Pixar teaches every employee the skills essential to their company's core business.

Immerse your employees in the skills essential to your company's core business.

What can you do to immerse your employees in the skills that are essential to your company's core business?

Office decor

Pixar's office decor is inspired by their core business and their employees. On the outside, the building is plain and unassuming. Inside, beautiful paintings and photographs from Pixar movies or employee's personal collections line the hallways. Stunning life-size figurines of the characters featured in Pixar's animations are dotted throughout the buildings. Different offices boast different themes, from the *Under the sea* theme from *Finding Nemo*, to the *Toys* theme from the *Toy Story* series, and warm lighting adds to the ambience.

The building's architecture focuses on maintaining Pixar's culture, characterised by the cross pollination of ideas across diverse specialities. The large atrium is the first thing you see upon entering the building. It allows for spontaneous meetings and conversations between colleagues. The social hangouts for staff members are positioned around this area. The Pixar store, the mail room, game room with TVs and video games, a free cereal bar, and a cafe with picnic table seating all provide opportunities for Pixar employees to meet, discuss ideas and socialise. Pixar understands that in order for their employees to produce creative work, they must be immersed in a creative, fun environment.

Pixar's office decor reflects the company's core purpose and its employees' personalities, stimulating employee creativity and enthusiasm to meet the company's core goals.

Change your office decor to remind your employees of the company's core purpose.

How can you change your office decor to remind your employees of the company's core purpose?

Change your office decor in a way that has a positive effect on productivity.

What changes can you make to your office decor so that it has a positive effect on productivity?

Intentional inclusiveness

Pixar's leaders, Ed Catmull and John Lasseter, embrace and display a concept they refer to as intentional inclusiveness, which means to make every employee feel as if they are a valued part of the Pixar family. Lasseter and Catmull only hire other leaders (such as Brad Bird) who embrace this ideal as well. At Pixar, tens of thousands of ideas go into producing the movies from start to finish. Ed Catmull says that everyone needs to contribute their ideas, everyone's work matters and everyone makes a difference in the quality of a film. Pixar employees from the bottom up are more involved in projects than employees in other organisations, and are often reminded that senior management values their contributions. They therefore put more effort into their work, cooperate more eagerly with management, and trust their leaders. These are all factors that contribute towards productivity, quality, creativity and innovation.

Pixar leaders and managers make their employees feel like valued members of the company's organisational community.

Make your employees feel like valued members of the company's organisational community.

What can you do to make your employees feel like valued members of the company's organisational community?

Everyone is an innovator and collaborator

Disney and Pixar believe that innovation comes from within the employees in an organisation. But just because one employee has come up with a great idea, it doesn't mean that he/she is the only innovator in the company. Pixar understands that different people innovate in different ways. One person may have a great idea for a movie, but the next may come up with the most cost effective way to make that movie. Everyone's idea counts, and Pixar delights their employees by acknowledging those ideas and using them where appropriate.

At Pixar, everything revolves around the storyboarding (a method of storytelling created by Walt Disney), which is the process of literally putting up the story on a board. The storyboard artists draw a frame that represents each shot in the film and these are pinned up so that whoever is contributing can work on developing the story on a conceptual level. In most film companies, the executive producers and directors attend the daily storyboarding meeting. At Pixar everyone participates and contributes to the story at these daily meetings. Open discussion takes place about how they can constantly improve on what they're doing.

...I don't just see the movie when I see the movie, I see all the great people who worked on it and all their hard work, because they could not have worked any harder. - Brad Bird

Pixar encourages their employees to collaborate on projects, which stimulates creativity and innovation.

Encourage your employees to collaborate on projects when appropriate.

How can you encourage your employees to collaborate on projects when appropriate?

Pixar empowers its employees to continually contribute their ideas.

Empower your employees to continually contribute their ideas.

What can you do to empower your employees to continually contribute their ideas?

Loyalty and compassion

The camaraderie between colleagues, managers and leaders at Pixar is tangible, even to people coming in from outside. Anthony Lane, a writer from the New Yorker, said that "The key to Pixar, I came to realise, is that what it seeks to enact, as corporate policy, and what it strives to dramatise, in its art, spring from a common purpose, and a single clarion call: You've got a friend in me". Not every company would like to have this friendly, compassionate and loving atmosphere, but at Pixar, many of the staff members have known each other for years and have developed deep bonds over reaching shared goals and seeing dreams realised. Bonds that are a lot stronger than a bigger paycheck or hefty perks from some other company.

One very clear example of this was when, during Pixar's early days, Lucasfilm president Doug Norby pressed Ed Catmull and Alvy Smith (Pixar's co-founder) to lay off quite a few people due to financial constraints. The two couldn't bring themselves to do it, but Norby was unmoved. The two men showed up in Norby's office the next day with a list of names as per his instruction. They threw the list on the table. It only had two names on it. Ed Catmull and Alvy Ray Smith. Norby was forced to retain the staff because the leaders refused to let their people down.

The people at Pixar are my best friends. Not only do I want to see them every day – I can't wait to see them every day – but, when my wife, Nancy, and I make a list of whom we are going to take on vacation, the top group is Pixar. We just want to be together all the time. - John Lasseter

Pixar demonstrates friendliness, compassion and loyalty to its employees.

Demonstrate friendliness, compassion and loyalty to your employees.

What can you do to demonstrate friendliness, compassion and loyalty to your employees?