Managing the Creative Process

General Session: Discussion
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Clark Library, The Aspen Institute

Speaker:
Peter Rummell, Chairman, Urban Land Institute & Former Chairman, Disney Imagineering, U.S.

Transcription:
Taylor Gannon, Assistant Marketing Coordinator, Global Spa & Wellness Summit

PETER RUMMELL: Let me try and get everybody to sort of shift their heads a minute and come down from the really interesting presentation on global issues, because I want to talk to you about something more mundane, but will hopefully have some take-home value for you. As opposed to strategy and vision, I want to talk to you about a process – a process I have learned over the years and I think is important.

I think we all know the hardest thing about change is actually making it important, making it happen. For the next 20 minutes I want to talk to you about change and how you can make change happen in your organization, and how you can take an idea and make something out of it. So for the next 20 minutes, let's assume you are not Steve Jobs, but that you have a company that you wanted to change, that you wanted to innovate, that you want to make things happen. I want to talk to you a little bit about my experience and how you do that.

Let me start with some definitions; the definition of a great idea versus a creative process. We have all had great ideas – they usually involve a bunch of friends, a relaxed environment, nine times out of 10 a bunch of wine. Somebody starts talking about a fabulous place where they want to go on vacation, and all of the sudden, everybody is excited about it, and they want to do it. Or somebody else read this great article about a new business opportunity, and they know just enough about it to be dangerous, they talk about it, and all of the sudden, everybody decides that they really want to do something about it. Everybody, before they leave that night – Fred commits he is going to call a travel agent and book the flights for everybody, Mary says she is going to call her banker/investor friend, they are going to put a deal

together, and everybody is going to invest. We've all had that experience. We've also had the experience of getting up the next morning, going to work and completely forgetting about the entire thing. What you have just had is a good time with friends – you may have had a good idea, but you have not been part of a creative process.

What does it take to capture this idea, to harness this energy that was obviously evident, and turn it into something that you can hear, play, see, feel, do something with. This is not my definition but it is a good one – "creativity has been called having an original idea that has value" – and I like that. Doesn't necessarily mean commercial value, but value that, at some time, you can do something with.

What I want to do is take you through a process, a process that I have been part of managing to see how creative process breaks down, and how you can use it in your own business. I don't want to minimize the idea process that I just talked about because that is where everything starts. One of the first things you have to be able to do as a manager of that process is to anticipate that a great idea can come from anywhere. My favorite example of that was in Disney. We had a group of 15 people brainstorming, we realized we needed another water park at Walt Disney World, the one we had was too crowded. But we didn't want to do another Robinson Crusoe or deserted island theme. So we had all these imagineers together to try and decide what to do, what we could do that would be creative, fun and different. We have been together for hours, and we were just drawing a blank. One of the guys went to the bathroom and as he was coming back, he walked by a cubicle of a guy for some reason [that] had a collection of snow globes – about 25 tacky snow globes. He went and picked one of them up, walked back into the room and looked at the rest of the group and said, "What if a freak snowstorm came through central Florida?" That was the birth of Blizzard Beach, which was the second water park at Walt Disney World.

The other thing you need to think about is that it takes nerve to walk into the room with a snow globe and say, "What about a snow storm?" in central Florida. There was a significant risk that he would have been thrown out of the room, booed out of the room, or made fun of. You can't be afraid to be wrong. You've got to have the courage of your convictions; you've got to have the willingness to say, "I think this is a good idea." Sometimes the willingness of a good idea can come from anyplace, and you've got to be smart enough to be able to recognize it. I can tell you from my personal experience that the bolt of lightning, the snow globe, is a rarity. More typically, something starts in one form, the notion gets tugged at, it gets pulled, it gets bent, it gets repainted, it gets redefined, and it ends up in some altered state what then becomes known as the "idea."

The challenge in running a creative process is the exercise in creating a climate that encourages that free flow of back-and-forth ideas, but it's also a constant struggle in establishing a space that allows that free flow to happen. There's another caveat I think is important here: What I'm talking about is creativity in a creative process, what I am not talking about is how Robert Frost came up with stopping by the woods on a snowy evening, or how John Mayer writes the lyrics to his music. The creative process I'm talking about is what it takes to create a physical product, or something that has to operate, which is what all the people in this room do. I'm not talking about creative writing or the self-expression process. There has been a lot written about that recently including a really smart booked called *Imagine* by a guy named Jonah Lehrer. He spends a lot of time talking about how you position yourself for that creative spark. I know just enough about that to know that it is a very different process, and I frankly agree that, to some degree, that you are either John Mayer or you are not, and you just need to put up with that.

I'm talking about the process that we do to run our businesses, improve our businesses, to create a new idea. To maintain the environment that creates that creativity, I think there are at least three things that you need to think about. First, as I mentioned, you need an environment that says, "I'm not going to laugh at you. I'll laugh with you, but I'm not going to laugh at you. And I'm going to listen." You need an environment where smart people are comfortable kicking things around. By smart, I don't necessarily mean the people you know with the highest IQs. Speaking to those who won't listen is worthless in this kind of a process. You need people who are inquisitive, exuberant, and people who are, more than anything else, are willing to listen to somebody else, absorb what they say, process it, and then do something with it. It's got to be an environment that invites risk-taking, and it allows failure – even big failures.

The creative process by definition is an inventive process, and as somebody said this morning, it's impossible that all ideas are going to succeed. There was a great quote this morning about failure and big failure, that's the kind of thing [you've] got to have. At Imagineering, we had an idea fair every year, which I didn't understand in the beginning, but I got to be a huge fan of. We looked at projects that were in the archives that had not been approved or had failed for some reason, and we brought them back. I think it improved two really important things. Number one, some of those projects that didn't get approved were done by some of the smartest teams of imagineers. So that reinforced the fact that smart people, good people and talented people can fail.

The other thing it did, is we found that if we brought ideas back that have been put on the shelf two or three years ago, lots of times things fail not because it wasn't a

good idea, [but] they failed because the time wasn't right. They failed because the politics weren't right, they failed because the circumstances weren't right. The net result is that it makes you paranoid to ever throw anything away – we were packrats, and Disney was paying for it. Everything we did, whether it was approved or not, [was] tied up, bundled up and put on a shelf, so we could look at it again. If you are going to be in the idea process, you need a self-storage room.

The second thing you have to learn is in order to make this process work, there has got to be an enormous diversity of ideas. People say, "That guy had the creativity of an accountant," – well, accountants have a valuable place in this process, but you can't leave a bunch of accountants by themselves. You've got to put a storyteller with them, a marketing person, a graphics person, and somebody else so that you can round out the crowd. The accountant is going to add valuable input, but only if that is balanced by the other things that the group brings you.

The third thing that you need, which is complicated, is what I call protection during the incubation process. One of the most frustrating things for people that don't understand the creative process is to be told, "You don't know when we'll be ready." One of my senior Disney people used to say, "You can't schedule inspiration. All you can do is have an inspirational in your schedule." I think that is right. If you try to force a decision, if you try to make something an arbitrary timeline, there's an enormous risk of failure. I have seen ideas killed that way. It happens because somebody was able to interrupt the process and say to the group, "Okay, show me what you got," before they are really ready. Businesses are about schedules, and I understand that, but the creative process doesn't run itself a schedule, and if you don't imbed that into your thinking when you start the process, you're destined for a problem. If things go right, you will be done early, but it is equally possible that you will not be. If you develop a culture that, within some reasonable limits the ideas obey their own timeframe, then your chances of success are much greater.

Let me stop here and make an observation I think this is important. I've talked about this over the years a lot, but this is the first time I've had this conversation with a group since the death of Steve Jobs. In the creative world today it is impossible to have a conversation about creativity without Job's name coming up. He's such a force in that area, that everybody's question in that area is, "How do your forces match with the way Steve Jobs did business?" I only knew him slightly; he came to us for some real estate advice. I spent a little time and made two observations. One is that he is a great listener; he'd just ask endless questions, and he then took the answers and did whatever he wanted to do. I think it's important to understand that this worship, this sort of celebration of Jobs, comes with a price in respect to him: The truth is that

most of us – I'll bet there aren't more than 40 or 50 Steve Jobs in this room – it's just not the way people are normally wired; he was a unique, careful person.

The next step in that process is sort of the opposite of what I was just talking about. There is a creative flow that goes on; the challenge is, when do you stop that process? That is one of the critical decisions in any creative process. Art has been defined as getting something where you like it and leaving it that way. So whatever the dynamics are, there has got be a point where someone says, "Stop." You then have to move to the next major point in the creative process. The first point was coming up with the idea in the first place; the second one is the point where we try to convert the idea into a set of action steps. Typically there will be a point where there is some summing up, and then there are some assignments to do, so that the idea can be broken down into component parts, and people can be working on them. This assignment phase is incredibly risky. If the assignments aren't made carefully, if the idea wasn't really an idea yet, if you stopped too soon, then the assignments will be un-executable. They will contradict each other, or it will just be too vague to make the next step worthwhile.

As soon as you start the transition from the pure idea stage to the process stage, the environment also has to change. For all the freedom and loosey-goosey of that first phrase, the free holding, no hold bars, everybody talks kind of an environment, its important now that you start to introduce boundaries, fences and constraints. When you start assigning tasks to individuals, you will start to get questions back about schedules, budgets and deliverables. The nature of your answer is going to start to find parameters and constraints that are a healthy part of this process if they are introduced at the right time. Do I have 60 days to do this or six months? Do I have a million-dollar budget or a 10-million-dollar budget? As soon as you tell somebody that they only have a million dollars to do something, you have taken an ocean of alternatives off the table. If you are at the right place in that process, then doing that makes your process more efficient and allows you to move on to the next stage. As the process matures, you have got to have these boundaries, or you will never get beyond the idea stage.

It's also important during this stage to keep what I call a reference point, a guideline, something that you can keep going back to. As the team starts to take its different assignments and going off in different directions, there has got to be a true north of some kind that is your guide post, the single sentence that defines your idea that you can keep coming back to. I found that great ideas can get widdled, deluded, changed, not through bad intentions, but through the inevitable incremental changes that occur during this stage. If you don't have a way of going back to it, you are going to stray.

I'll give you an example from my history in Disney. It's a project called Euro Disney, now Disneyland Paris. The original idea for Disneyland Paris was to take the Disney Theme park, the Magic Kingdom, and plop it in the middle of what was then the wealthiest population concentration in the world. There were 350 million people who lived an hour- or two-hour drive from Paris. That was the idea, Disney theme park in the middle of an enormous population. The concept was right, unfortunately, as we entered the execution stage, we got confused and caught up in a whole bunch of stuff. We started to build a mega resort with a huge number of hotel rooms, as opposed to staying focused on the theme park using this population. We overbuilt the hotel because we got all caught up in the vision of it, and we thought we were smarter than everybody else and lost the integrity of the original idea. Fortunately because it was Disney, and they had financial sustaining power, we were able to endure, and the places are a success today because we had that ability, but we lost the reason why we went there, and it was an expensive mistake.

There's another major point, which I think is common in most of the processes I have seen. To define it as the point somewhere between the top of the second, or the bottom of the third inning, or fifteen minutes into it if you play soccer. It's when all the teams have come together, the idea has begun to gel, there's a real sense of progress, and you can see that things are finally coming together. Enough of the original idea is still intact that the integrity of the concept is there and then – boom – out of left field comes something. The lawyers say that they can't patent it, the engineers say there is no way to work, and your construction manager says it's 20 percent over budget. Whatever it is, you are never exactly sure where it is going to come from, which is why it is called a surprise, but there is going to be one. It's inevitable. The secret obviously is not to panic. This is one of those times when having been through the process 40 times is really valuable. The first thing you have to do is pull everybody back together, look at where you are, check the assumptions, understand what those early assignments were and how they were executed – it's almost an autopsy of the project up to date to understand where you are. It takes communication like you have never communicated in your life and listening to everybody's point of view. There's usually a way through it, but expect it, you can't budget for it, you can't plan for it because you don't know how long it is going to take to correct it, but just know it is out there.

There is one last thing that is fundamental to this practice. Companies, even creative companies, are definitely serious places about making money, shareholder value, stock price, bank loans and all those other things. My own experience with the creative process is that it completely breaks down without a sense of humor. If you can't have the ability to laugh at yourself, if you don't have the ability to laugh at other people, if they don't have the ability to be laughed at, then you are not a valuable part of the

process. It sounds silly, it sounds trite, but I've seen things destroy people that just get so caught up in what they are doing that they forget that there's got to be this large dose of humility and the sense of humor that goes along with that.

Finally, you can tell this is sort of my Disney mentality, but I think this is important for any business, I think it is important for anybody who runs a business, particularly someone who is looking at new things as a way to add something to the business. I would generally put it under the category of, "Does it fit the franchise?" Any company has to decide what its strengths and its weaknesses are, what its franchise should be and how these new ideas strategically fit into that franchise and reinforce the franchise. Or, if you decide that something you are going to do is a big enough idea and worthy enough, that you are going to step outside that franchise, then do it very consciously, and make sure that you have examined all the possibilities of that. There are all kinds of business opportunities around, there are all kinds of ways to make money, but if it doesn't reinforce what you are doing, then adding it to what you are doing is an enormous risk.

That's a walkthrough of the process, it's a complicated process, but I think if you don't think about it as having steps of some kind, then to a lot of people, I find it becomes a challenge to start because they think if they are not Steve Jobs, they could never do something like that. That is just not true. There are people who are more creative than other people, but there are lots of ways you can aid your process by thinking about what you are doing and by being careful by how you move from one step to another.

I got married late in life, so I have young children for someone for my age. People accuse me all the time of comparing everything to childrearing – maybe that is just because it is on my mind a lot, but in my mind, childrearing is the ultimate creative process. It's incredibly rewarding, sometimes very scary, sometimes unpredictable, but in the end a hell of a lot of fun.

Thank you very much.