

# FLAK CATCHERS

The ins and outs of the world of Hollywood and Silicon Valley has been the subject of many documentaries and books in the last 20 years as these industries boom. Some of the biggest business figures of our age have produced products or films that have become part of our childhoods but what do we know about some of the origin stories of these companies?

Robert I Sutton has studied the concept of 'flak catchers' in the workplace and writes about it in his new book, *The Friction Project*. In it, he gives an interesting example of a 'flak catching' moment in 1985.

In 1985, Pixar did not yet exist. The company, that later became Pixar, was known as The Computer Division of Lucasfilm. At this point, their future success was a long way off being realised and the Computer Division was under financial pressure. George Lucas, the founder of Star Wars fame, did not have faith in computer animated film. This was a problem for a team of people who did. Lucas wanted cuts to be made and so asked to see the Division leaders, at that time they were Ed Catmull and Alvy Ray Smith. Both men had a dream and talent. Catmull had dreamed of producing computer animated hit films long before that was a possibility in reality and Smith was the inventor who made computer animated films possible through his use of technology. There were ideas, potential and the will in abundance...but there wasn't the money.

George Lucas brought in Doug Norby as President to Lucasfilm. Clearly the company was under strain and Lucas wanted Norby to bring some discipline to the whole structure. As part of this new remit, Norby wanted to make staffing and budget cuts. Calling Ed and Alvy into a meeting, Norby made it clear that deep layoffs needed to be made and that they would be the ones making them to their team.

The two men didn't want to do it. They didn't believe in the cuts and instead, wanted to argue that any layoffs at this stage would only reduce the financial value that Lucasfilm could sell for. Surely, they argued, this didn't make good business sense – they would be better keeping the group together and keeping the value in the company.

Norby was not convinced by the argument and demanded that a list of names from the Computer Division were brought to him. Ed and Alvy continually refused to do it. Finally, Norby ran out of patience and demanded that the two men be in his office at 9am the following morning with a list of names.

At 9am the following morning, Ed and Alvy appeared at the office and gave Norby his list. The only two names on the paper? Ed Catmull and Alvy Ray Smith.

The men kept their jobs, as did the rest of the team. The team, who were now saved from layoffs, heard what had happened and pooled their money together to send Ed, Alvy and their wives on a night out on the town on them as a thank you.

A few months after this incident, the company was sold to a man for 5 million dollars. His name? Steve Jobs. The rest was history.

Ed Catmull went on to become President of both Pixar and Disney Animation. Alvy Ray Smith co-founded Pixar with Catmull.

## APPLICATION

The journey from the point the story ends, was not straight forward. After Steve Jobs took over, he and Alvy Ray Smith clashed in a huge argument known as ‘The Whiteboard Incident’ when Alvy wrote on a whiteboard that only Steve Jobs was allowed to write on. Things got heated and that led to Alvy leaving the business and, some commentators claim, being written out of the history of Pixar. According to people who were there at the time and some who are still involved in Pixar now, the story of how Ed and Alvy behaved to protect their staff still inspires people at Pixar today.

In any workplace there are tensions at times. There are difficult decisions to make, frictions that need to be worked through. There are internal challenges and external challenges and all of us sometimes have to do what Ed and Alvy did that day – we have to be ‘flak catchers’. In their book, Sutton and Rao describe what ‘flak catchers’ do:

- 1) Flak catchers serve as human shields, protecting their people from intrusions, distractions and idiocy from leadership above and anything else that undermines their performance or wellbeing.

If you have ever worked for anyone, you will know how this feels. Of course, no one makes decisions that are deliberately stupid, but sometimes at the highest level of leadership, we can’t always see the full implications of our decisions, and so a decision that was made with the best intentions, has unintended consequences. Unfortunately, it is the people below us who have to operate the decision who realise that it was a little stupid! We are all guilty of this no matter our age or experience. Every leader at some stage has made this mistake and has relied on flak catchers to make it good. We are ALL flak catchers though depending on our role.

If you are the Head’s PA, you regularly catch the flak of people who want appointments, have complaints, don’t see things the way the Head does. It is your job to catch it, calm it and to facilitate getting the Head where they need to be. If you are a Middle Leader, you are a flak catcher when your team don’t agree with the SLT decision and you, in the middle, take that flak for SLT.

When results drop or there is a critical incident or an inspection or a community scandal, the Head is a flak catcher for the whole school community. It is their face in the press, their comments in the articles, their job to calm tensions and bring resolution and not allow that flak to reach staff.

It would be great to live in a flak free world, but where there are people, there will always be flak! Taking this role seriously and being aware of the need for it is a good start to help us.

- 2) They protect people from things that may take or waste their time and stop them from doing the most important thing the organisation requires.

We need to be better flak catchers in this area. If you are the leader of a team and you can see that people are being taken away from the most important thing, you need to catch the flak. Note, I did not say ‘do all the work yourself’. If your job is to enable your team to work the most efficiently, productively and harmoniously as possible, then you have to catch anything that is stopping that and you have to tell the people who can help you do something about it. Sometimes we have to help protect people from themselves and offer them choices to do things differently. Sometimes we have to stop doing things or pause because people cannot possibly do everything. It is a flak catcher’s job to prioritise and to remove the noise that is causing interference. This is not a new concept: in 1967, Sociologist James Thompson said, “one of the basic things they do – or else – is to buffer the people who do the organisation’s core work”. Whoever these people are, they are the ones who need flak catchers.

### 3) They take the initial jolt.

As part of many of our jobs, we are expected to take the heat, turn difficult demands into clear expectations and protect people from a whole host of things. Sometimes we take the brunt of people's shock, sadness, disappointment, regret, anger or embarrassment. We are often the people they phone or ask to speak to. People may shout, cry, walk out, blame us or argue. Our job, in that moment when we are 'jolted' is to not make it worse. It doesn't mean we accept blame that isn't ours to accept or give concessions where none should be made or lower expectations that were clear and agreed. It does mean that as a 'first responder' we need to be equipped and in control of ourselves enough that we know how to get the situation under control. If you have someone in a position where they are the flak catcher and they make things consistently worse then we need to ask questions about whether they have had what they need in terms of training, support and experience or whether this role isn't the best one for them.

There are some flak catcher roles in schools that are highly paid and highly praised, and we need them. But there are also some crucial people in roles who are not praised enough. PAs, executive assistants, reception staff, attendance officers, site staff and community workers across our schools are often asked to take the flak of things that are not their fault but they are the difference between things being calm or being chaotic. We overlook these people at our peril. At every level of our organisation we need great flak catchers. We need to work together to be our organisation's lightning rods.

## QUESTIONS

- 1) Do the flak catchers in your organisation know the value they have? What could you do to tell them and make this clear to them?
- 2) Which roles in your school need protecting and why? Who is taking the flak that they shouldn't be taking because it is distracting them from the job that they have to do? What are the dangers to your organisation if we don't get this right?
- 3) You may be a flak catcher or be grateful to someone else who does this for you. What training or development may need to be in place so we can all do this better and ensure that when the dissatisfied come our way, we all know how to bring resolution?

Absorbing and deflecting issues when they first erupt is brave and requires a level headedness that should not be underestimated. It can feel like an unseen and thankless task, but you are a vital part of your organisation's success. On behalf of those people whose flak you are catching – thank you.



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