

BOOKS

Sims' 'Little Bets' opens door to a why-not-try mentality

BY MATTHEW CROWLEY

If you want to work better and boost your creativity, author Peter Sims has two big suggestions: try, try again, and try everything.

In "Little Bets, How Breakthrough Events Emerge From Small Discoveries," Sims suggests that giant leaps comprise dozens of small steps. Sims, who earned a master's of business administration from Harvard, shows how smash-hit Pixar animated features develop from thousands of storyboard drafts; Chris Rock's jokes are culled from stand-up test-runs; and how Frank Gehry's famous buildings start with dozens of crumpled-paper-and-polystyrene foam models.

Sims' brief, bright little book brims with why-not-try positivity. He reminds us not to sweat unpredictability, because it happens, and that faulty forecasts can waste more time than they save. He also lets interesting minds show us that the ride to a result is where the fun is.

Echoing Robert Fulghum, Sims suggests that essential lessons on risk-taking start in grade school. Sims cites Stanford University professor Carol Dweck's research showing that adults' perception of performance influences fifth-graders' approach to studies. Students praised for intelligence in

**Well Read**

"Little Bets, How Breakthrough Events Emerge From Small Discoveries," by Peter Sims, 224 pages, Free Press, \$25.

puzzle-solving (that is, told, "That was a good score") drifted toward fixed mindsets. Perceiving that scores mattered ultimately, the research found, these students chose easier tasks in future rounds.

However, he writes, 90 percent of students praised for effort (told, "You must have worked really hard"), developed growth mindsets. They chose more challenging tasks in future rounds, were likelier to take puzzles home for tinkering, and performed better overall.

Sims suggests that ability-over-process overemphasis also inhibits grownups. Therefore, at Pixar, for example, lead technologist and President Ed Catmull and Chief Creative Officer John Lasseter show a willingness to experiment and take criticism for ideas. Lasseter says, "There's a lot about this process which I

find mystifying still."

Sims suggests a "yes, and" technique to keep inhibitions down and ideas flowing. For a couple who are planning an evening, for example, partner A would plan to see a movie ("Midnight in Paris," maybe), partner B would plan a postmovie activity (yes, and, we can watch "Late Night with David Letterman") partner A would plan a nightcap (yes, and we can eat popcorn), and so on. A "no" anywhere in the chain — any swipe at Woody Allen or extra butter — kills the conversation and stops the ideas.

Staying open to possibilities may prevent trouble later, Sims suggests, because problems emerge as we go, not as we start. The waterfall method, a one-big-step tactic in which senior managers plan a project and hand it down the worker chain, he suggests, hampered software makers and automakers. Bosses, clever as they are, can't forecast everything users will need.

"By the time a company ... finishes a two-year project," Sims writes, "The world may have changed."

Although he's hardly the first to say so, Sims reminds us that since creativity is about connecting ideas, broad experience gives us more on which to build. He describes how Pixar's story team went diving to see how light filtered through

water and how fish swam to plan for "Finding Nemo." And it went on road trips with Michael Wallis, the author of "Route 66: The Mother Road" to prepare to make "Cars."

Broad experience also pays off, Sims writes, because we never know what knowledge we will use. A calligraphy course at Reed College, for example, paid off for former Apple Chief Executive Steve Jobs when he developed the fonts for the first Macintosh computer a decade later.

Achieving excellence takes lots of trial, Sims says. Pixar's animation team challenges itself eagerly and increasingly with every movie, he writes: 27,565 storyboards for 1998's "A Bug's Life" gives way to 45,356 for 2003's "Finding Nemo," 69,562 for 2007's "Ratatouille" and 98,173 for 2008's "Wall-E." And though creative people can accept failing as they develop ideas, the fear of flopping never completely fades. When he starts new projects, Gehry, for all of his success, still fears he won't know what to do, Sims writes.

So, if an idea fails at first or you feel misunderstood, don't despair, Sims would say. Just consider it progress.

Matthew Crowley is a copy editor for the Las Vegas Review-Journal. He can be reached at mcrowley@reviewjournal.com or 702-383-0304.

TIME TO BRING OUT THE BIG GUNS



Your Most Effective Weapons for
Tough Times

reviewjournal.com and

