

Every Child Is An Artist

What do Disney television honcho Anne Sweeney and internationally renowned education theorist Sir Ken Robinson have in common? Ideas for unlocking creativity in both children and adults.

Disney/ABC Television^[1] group president is one of the most powerful and forward-thinking executives in the entertainment business, but in the presence of Sir Ken Robinson^[2], he of the ur-TED Talk^[3] about how schools kill creativity, she's Princess Leia, she says, crying out, "Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi, help me!" (Disney owns the *Star Wars* franchise now, so it's cool.) Sweeney laughs as she says it, but she's clearly delighted to be hosting Robinson at her Los Angeles home, where the two convene on her patio for tea and conversation. The two explore how Sweeney's life mirrors the themes in Robinson's new book, *Finding Your Element*^[4], discuss the sneaky genius of being a leader who's a teacher, and muse about how to maintain the soul of an artist as we grow up.

Anne Sweeney: When I saw your TED Talk, I was struck by the story of the little girl who couldn't sit still in the classroom. The teacher turned to the parent and said, "Get her into ballet lessons." It's that realization that when you don't go toward the obvious, you go deeper into the person and really look for her potential.

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Sir Ken Robinson^[5]: Did you have any idea when you were a kid that this is what you'd end up doing?

AS: No. I was a theater kid who loved the arts, played the piano, played the flute. My parents had three very different kids to raise. My sister was good at sports and my brother . . . we used to call him Nature Boy. He just lived outside.

KR: I'm often asked how parents can help kids find their way. What did your parents do?



Anne Sweeney's 3 Rules for Being a Great Leader

1. Show up^[6]

"Walk around the halls. Eat in the cafeteria. When you show up, it means you are paying attention. It means you want to make sure people know how their world connects to the bigger whole."

2. Hold everyone accountable for each other^[7]

"We are stapled together. We live and die by each other's successes and failures."

3. Communicate as a person, not simply as a boss

"Have a conversation. Don't have it be a reporting relationship."

AS: I think it's the positive side of indulgence. They made sure if there was a production in town, we went. I tried out for every play, and they never said, "No, don't do it, because it's going to be a pain to pick you up after rehearsals." They insisted upon creating opportunities for us. When my high school brought back Latin, my parents--they're retired educators--were so excited. "Of course you're going to take Latin," they said. And I said, "But none of my friends are." So there were two of us, two freshmen, and I had a terrible time, absolutely terrible. I remember saying to my mother one day, "You think I'm smarter than I am." And she looked at me and said, "You don't know how smart you are."

KR: It's important to note, especially for parents, that there just isn't a straight line between what you do at school and what you go on to do. I argue in my new book it's like being on the ocean. You keep correcting your course according to things that happen to you. And we end up writing a résumé^[8], which makes it look like it was a plan. There was a study by a professor at Duke University looking at the degree majors for leaders in 500 companies in Silicon Valley. Forty percent were in math, science, or engineering, but 60% were in the arts and humanities^[9].

AS: Really?

KR: It's a really important point because the education system is being strangled^[10] by this culture's standardized testing. It's leading school districts to cut arts and humanities programs. There are lots of kids now who never get to pick up an instrument, never get to perform in a play. There's a nationwide project called Art on a Cart, where people push these trolleys with crayons and papers because there's no art in the schools. They go from school to school pushing the cart, do some art with the kids, and then move to the next school. Because there is this perception that somehow these subjects aren't relevant: We've got to get the kids through the tests so that we can get competitive again economically.

AS: Right. STEM^[11] [science, technology, engineering, math studies].

KR: It is the most toxic attitude, really, because these school restrictions are being brought in what politicians believe to be the interest of the economy, but actually companies need people who can think differently and adapt and be creative. A company like Disney--in fact all companies--depends on this great multiplicity of talents.

AS: This is where the "Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi" comes in, because how do you do that?

KR: The continuum, as I see it, starts with imagination^[12]. It's the most extraordinary set of powers that we take for granted: the ability to bring into mind the things that aren't present. It's why we are so different from the rest of life on earth. That's why we're sitting in a beautiful building, drinking from these cups. Because human beings make things. We create things. We don't live in the world directly; we live in a world of ideas and of concepts and theories and ideologies.



AS: But do you think there's a point where we get off track? Picasso said, "Every child is an artist," but does there come a point where we lose sight of that? And how do we get it back?

Sir Ken Robinson's 3 Rules for Being a Great Leader

1. Adopt a growth mind-set^[13]

"If you're always thinking about possibility, you'll find it. You'll keep creating the

future."

2. Create your own life

"The 'element' is where natural aptitude meets personal passion. It's great if you're in your element at work, because you get energy from that. But for people who aren't, finding this elsewhere is important."

3. Unlock others

"People get locked into their job descriptions^[14]. If you create a culture where they feel encouraged to unleash their various talents, they're more engaged."

KR: We do, but you're asking the right question: How do you tap into that? It's what you're saying about your parents. If your parents hadn't encouraged you, maybe required you, to play the piano and the flute, how would you know if you could have done that? We have all these latent talents, but you need circumstances to show it. You have people sitting around with all kinds of untapped potential. In Venezuela, kids across all the favelas and barrios are provided musical instruments for free. They go through a rigorous program called El Sistema^[15], funded by the government, and it's produced extraordinary results. These kids from the slums are playing Bach and Mozart and Beethoven. This has produced a generation of classical musicians, including Gustavo Dudamel, the director of the L.A. Philharmonic. But for that scheme, these kids would have gone the rest of their lives never knowing they could do that.

AS: When I was in graduate school [at Harvard Graduate School of Education], I had a wonderful professor, Dr. Robert Kegan, who did a lot of work on adult development. He wrote a book, *The Evolving Self*^[16]. And he became one of the pillars of the way I manage, based on the very simple belief that adults continue to learn. Too many times adults walk into situations and people have already put them in a box: "Oh, you write comedy." Or, "You're the development woman." And it's not just our profession. It's hard to look at someone and say, "What else is inside?"

KR: How did you realize that you could lead in this way?

AS: I wanted to be a teacher at one point, but I got into kids' TV. My first big job in TV

was as an assistant to [program manager] Gerry Laybourne at Nickelodeon. She was a former teacher and was about all of us learning. One day she said to me, "I'm going to negotiate to buy some movies. Sit across from me and write down everything I say, and I will tell you what the person on the phone said." This is 1981, so no speakerphones. Oh, it was hilarious. Then she mapped it out, not only the dollar amounts but the story of how the deal was made. This was like one-room schoolhouse training. That's how I learned to negotiate. I remember thinking it was just so much fun. A good leader should focus on making sure everyone is being given the tools to do their job, not just expecting—*poof!*—that they're going to produce great work.

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KR: You seem to be a very centered, calm person.

AS: On a good day. Yes.

KR: To some extent the style of leadership you describe is because of the sort of person you are; you couldn't be somebody else anyway. But what keeps you centered?

AS: Art has been good for my soul. And it's been good for my brain. I think I'm a better painter now than I was a musician growing up. You struggle to see things and translate an image through your hands to a canvas. Some weekends are just mind-blowingly difficult. I've ended up with a huge headache because I was struggling over how to express a face. I've become obsessed with portraiture, deconstructing faces and putting them back together. And in some way, that has helped me at work in deconstructing problems: Looking at them from different angles and realizing that sometimes when you turn something upside down it's easier to figure out than if you were looking at it straight on.

KR: How often do you paint?

AS: I paint every weekend without fail.

KR: That's what finding your element^[17] is all about. You get energy from it. And you get that from your work and from your art.

AS: You're so engaged you hate to leave it. If you have a great day at work and you've been hit with all these great ideas and there's a lot of excitement on your team, your

mind doesn't turn off. For years I've kept a pad of paper and pen by me at night, because things just occur to you.

KR: A lot of creative thinking doesn't happen by forcing it^[18]. There's this whole other processing that goes on if you leave it.

AS: It's interesting you say that because a couple of weeks ago I just had time on my hands. I never have a couple of hours in the office that aren't totally scheduled. And I just asked a couple of people to come in and sit. And they came in, they all had their notebooks or their iPads. After about half an hour, everybody relaxed and realized no, this really isn't a meeting. This is really just sitting around, talking. When they left, I thought it was one of the most enjoyable meetings, maybe *the* most enjoyable meeting, I'd had in a long time. I loved how much we're going to accomplish because we had this very unstructured, very meandering conversation about many different things.

KR: Would it work if you made that a regular thing, or is there something about it being impromptu?

AS: I think you could make it a regular impromptu thing. But I don't think we allow ourselves a lot of that. We keep ourselves on schedules and agendas. There's a lot to accomplish. But there's something about introducing a new process^[19] that helps.

[Photos by Pamela Littky]

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