

C.O.N.N.E.C.T. FRAMEWORK IN ACTION

Concrete Case Studies & Application Examples

CASE STUDY 1: PIXAR'S BRAINTRUST

How Candor and Connection Drive Breakthrough Innovation

Company: Pixar Animation Studios

Challenge: Creating consistently innovative, emotionally resonant films in a high-stakes creative environment

Solution: The “Braintrust” - a connection-driven innovation engine

THE C.O.N.N.E.C.T. FRAMEWORK IN ACTION

C - CARE: Intent Before Competence

- Ed Catmull, Pixar’s co-founder, made a critical decision: Steve Jobs—despite owning the company—was not invited to Braintrust meetings. Why? Catmull told Jobs: “This group works well together, but if you go to its meetings, it will change what they are.” Jobs agreed, recognizing that protecting the relationship mattered more than asserting authority.
- The care showed: Jobs trusted that John Lasseter and the story team “knew more about narrative than he did.” At Apple, Jobs was known for micromanaging every detail. At Pixar, he stayed out—because candor mattered more than hierarchy.
- Result: People felt psychologically safe to be brutally honest about what wasn’t working.

O - OBSERVE: Connection Starts Before Conversation

- The Braintrust developed organically from observing what worked. Catmull noticed five people—John Lasseter, Andrew Stanton, Pete Docter, Lee Unkrich, and Joe Ranft—had “a rare working relationship.” They were “funny, focused, smart, and relentlessly candid when arguing with each other.”
- The observation: Trust wasn’t built through personality compatibility—it was built through relentless candor without fear of retaliation.
- The design choice: They institutionalized what they observed. They made candor routine, safe, and systemic.

N - NAME: Name What’s Unspoken

- Catmull’s most famous quote: “Early on, all of our movies suck.”
- This isn’t self-deprecation—it’s naming reality. By explicitly stating that “our job is to go from suck to not-suck,” Pixar created permission to speak truth to power. The Braintrust’s entire purpose is to “root out mediocrity” and “push toward excellence.”
- The cultural norm: If you can’t name what’s broken, you can’t fix it. Fear of “saying something stupid and looking bad” gets addressed squarely when it reasserts itself.
- Result: Teams brought forward problems early, when they could still be solved.

N - NURTURE: Relationships Don’t Break from Conflict

- The Braintrust meets every few months to assess each movie. It’s not a one-time event—it’s a sustained investment in relationship and truth-telling.
- Catmull describes the meetings: “Frank talk, spirited debate, laughter, and love.” The relationship was nurtured through consistent, repeated encounters where challenge and care coexisted.
- Critical insight: Pixar’s consistency—its decade-long run of critically acclaimed hits—wasn’t luck. It was the product of a leadership culture built on trust, structure, and truth.

E - ELEVATE: Trust Gives Permission to Challenge

- Steve Jobs' role evolved. When he did participate in reviews (twice a month), he provided what Catmull called "an outside force." Jobs would "articulately and insightfully dissect the film." Catmull said it was "like a gut punch to the director"—but because the trust was there, directors listened and adapted their work.
- The partnership principle: If you can't challenge each other, you're not partners—you're just friendly.
- Jobs himself changed: According to Catmull, "We saw Steve change and change dramatically. He learned to be a partner, he became very empathetic... While he never lost his intensity, we watched him develop the ability to listen."
- Result: Excellence wasn't about being nice. It was about making each other better.

C - COMMIT: Trust Isn't Built When It's Convenient

- When Disney tried to impose its merchandising vision onto *Toy Story*, Jobs firmly backed Lasseter's creative team against these pressures. This was a departure from his "my way or the highway" approach.
- The trust was built when it cost something—when protecting the creative relationship mattered more than commercial pressure.
- Later commitment: When Disney acquired Pixar for \$7.4 billion, Jobs insisted that Ed Catmull and John Lasseter had to agree to the deal. He wouldn't sell unless the culture could be preserved. The entire acquisition was intentionally designed to preserve Pixar's culture.

T - TRANSFER: Build a Culture That Connects

- The Braintrust model transferred beyond two people. When Catmull took over Disney Animation after the acquisition, he didn't just copy-paste Pixar's structure. He worked to spread the same principles: candor, learning from failures, and empowering people.
- The challenge: How do you transfer trust without diluting it? They chose not to mix the people of the two companies, fearing cultural dilution. Instead, they worked to help Disney Animation rediscover its own version of the principles.
- Result: Disney Animation was revitalized—not by importing Pixar people, but by importing Pixar principles.

THE BUSINESS IMPACT

Financial Performance

- *Toy Story* (1995): Highest-grossing film of the year
- Pixar's IPO made Jobs wealthier than his Apple stake
- Disney acquisition (2006): \$7.4B
- Consistent track record: Decade-long run of critically and commercially successful films
- Innovation metrics: First entirely computer-animated feature film
- 23 Academy Awards, 10 Golden Globes, 11 Grammys
- Average box office: Over \$600M per film
- Cultural impact
 - Changed animation industry forever
 - Proved that connection + candor = sustained innovation
 - Model studied in business schools worldwide

KEY LESSONS

1. Connection came before the innovation. Pixar didn't succeed because they had better technology. They succeeded because they built a structure where truth could be spoken early and often.

2. Candor requires design, not personality. The Braintrust wasn't about hiring "candid people"—it was about creating systems where candor was safe, routine, and expected.
3. Trust overrides hierarchy. When Steve Jobs—the owner—agreed to stay out of meetings to protect candor, he demonstrated that connection matters more than control.
4. Innovation is about emotional permission, not ideas. As Catmull said, "all of our movies suck early on." The question isn't whether you have ideas—it's whether people feel safe enough to admit when those ideas aren't working yet.
5. Culture transfers through principles, not people. Disney Animation didn't succeed by hiring Pixar employees. It succeeded by adopting Pixar's commitment to candor and psychological safety.

CASE STUDY 2: W.L. GORE & ASSOCIATES

The Lattice Organization: 65+ Years of Innovation Through Trust

Company: W.L. Gore & Associates (makers of Gore-Tex, Elixir guitar strings, Glide dental floss)

Founded: 1958 by Bill and Vieve Gore

Revenue: ~\$5B (2023)

Employees: 13,000+ associates across 25+ countries

Structure: “Lattice organization” - no bosses, no hierarchy, no titles

THE GORE PHILOSOPHY

Bill Gore’s foundational belief: People are not fundamentally lazy and don’t need to be told what to do. They need to be trusted to work on what they’re passionate about and achieve goals they believe in.

The bet: If you design the organization for connection, innovation will follow.

THE C.O.N.N.E.C.T. FRAMEWORK IN ACTION

C - CARE: People Trust Intent Before Competence

- The sponsor system: Every new associate is assigned a “sponsor”—not a boss—who takes “a personal interest in the new associate’s contributions, problems, and goals.” The sponsor serves as both coach and advocate.
- Critical insight from one 20-year associate: *“You join a team and you’re an idiot...It takes 18 months to build credibility. Early on, it’s really frustrating. In hindsight, it makes sense.”*
- Why is this care, not just process? Because Gore values relationship over efficiency. They’re willing to invest 18 months in building trust because they believe that’s when the real contribution begins.
- The “waterline” principle: Associates can make any decision they want—as long as it’s above the waterline. Below-the-waterline decisions (those that could “sink the ship”) require consultation. This demonstrates trust in judgment while maintaining care for the collective.

O - OBSERVE: Connection Starts Before Conversation

- The 150-200 person limit: Bill Gore visited one of his facilities and realized he didn’t know everyone. His solution? Limit every facility to 150-200 associates to maintain “close-knit interpersonal atmosphere.”
- The observation: Connection doesn’t scale beyond Dunbar’s number (roughly 150 people). Rather than sacrifice connection for scale, Gore chose to multiply facilities while preserving intimacy.
- Result: 44+ plants worldwide, each maintaining human-scale relationships while achieving global scale.

N - NAME: Name What’s Unspoken

- The four principles (every associate knows them by heart):
 1. Freedom: Encouragement to grow in knowledge, skill, and responsibility
 2. Fairness: Commitment to fair treatment in all matters
 3. Commitment: Personal promises that bind the organization
 4. Waterline: Freedom to make decisions with consultation on critical issues
- These aren’t slogans, they’re conversation starters. When something feels unfair or when freedom is being constrained, associates have language to name it.
- One associate described it: *“I especially appreciate Gore’s commitment and courage to stay true to its core values and principles as it grows, matures, and expands globally.”*

N - NURTURE: Relationships Don't Break from Neglect

- The lattice as infrastructure: Gore's structure is described as "direct person-to-person communication without intermediaries." This isn't efficient—it's intentional.
- Why it matters: In traditional organizations, the lattice exists as an informal network underlying formal hierarchy. Gore eliminated the formal structure in favor of nurturing the underground connections.
- Time investment: New associates often have multiple sponsors as they move through training. The organization invests heavily in relationship-building because that's where knowledge flows.
- Result: *"It took a long time to get to know people and what they did, and to earn the credibility and trust required to be given responsibilities."*

E - ELEVATE: Trust Gives Permission to Challenge

- Natural leadership: Leaders at Gore aren't appointed; they emerge based on the willingness of others to follow. This is called "knowledge-based decision-making."
- The innovation example - Elixir Guitar Strings: A Gore associate working in medical devices noticed that a coating they'd developed for push-pull cables had interesting properties. On his own initiative, he wondered if it could be applied to guitar strings. He formed a team, they experimented, and Elixir guitar strings were born—now a market leader.
- The elevation: The associate wasn't told to innovate. The structure gave permission to pursue what interested him. The team formed because others believed in the idea.
- Performance evaluation: Associates rank and monitor each other, *"people who know what they have done and how they have interacted with others."* Peer accountability improves performance without relying on top-down control.

C - COMMIT: Trust Isn't Built When It's Convenient

- Staying private: Gore has remained privately held for 65+ years. This is a commitment to long-term innovation over short-term financial performance.
- The trade-off: Going public would provide capital, but potentially compromise the culture. Gore chooses to fund growth through profits, maintaining independence.
- The facility size commitment: Keeping plants under 200 people is inconvenient and inefficient—but Gore commits to it anyway because relationship matters more than scale.
- Walking the talk: One observer noted, *"people 'walk the talk' every day"* when it comes to values. When behaviors seem incongruent with values, they're addressed—because protecting the culture is non-negotiable.

T - TRANSFER: Build a Culture That Connects Without You

- The lattice transfers knowledge, not authority:
 - Emergent teams form around innovations
 - Teams develop, thrive, and dissolve as they accomplish work
 - Knowledge flows horizontally, not top-down
 - *"Anyone can discuss any issue with anyone else, up to and including the CEO."*
 - Individual mission statements: Each associate creates their own "personal commercial mission statement," reviewed annually; this transfers ownership of purpose from the organization to the individual
- Cross-functional collaboration: Each plant has different professions (engineers, chemists, salespeople) to support knowledge sharing. The structure intentionally creates collision opportunities.
- Sustainability: Gore has been profitable every single year since 1958, not despite the lattice structure, but because of it.

THE BUSINESS IMPACT

Innovation Portfolio

- Gore-Tex (waterproof/breathable fabric): multi-billion dollar brand
- Elixir guitar strings: market leader
- Glide dental floss: sold to P&G for significant value
- Medical devices, electronic components, industrial products
- Thousands of patents across four major product areas

Workplace recognition

- Consistently ranked among “Best Companies to Work For” (US & globally)
- Low turnover despite unconventional structure
- Attracts top talent who thrive on autonomy

Financial performance

- \$5B in revenue (2023)
- Profitable every year for 65+ years
- Self-funded growth (no outside investors)
- Global presence maintained while preserving culture innovation

Speed

- “Pound for pound, the most innovative company in America” (Fast Company, 2004)
- Faster time-to-market than hierarchical competitors
- Associates pursue 10-15% “dabble time” on passion projects

KEY LESSONS

1. Connection is infrastructure, not culture. Gore didn’t create a “nice” workplace—they built an innovation engine powered by direct relationships.
2. Trust scales through structure, not personality. The lattice isn’t about hiring trusting people—it’s about designing systems where trust is the operating principle.
3. Freedom requires a framework. The four principles (freedom, fairness, commitment, waterline) create boundaries that enable autonomy. Without the waterline, freedom would be chaos.
4. Innovation happens in the gaps. Elixir guitar strings originated from a medical device associate out of curiosity. The lattice creates space for unexpected connections.
5. Efficiency is not the goal—effectiveness is. Taking 18 months to build credibility is “inefficient.” But it’s effective because once trust is established, innovation accelerates.
6. Connection transfers when you design for it. New associates get multiple sponsors, facilities stay small, and everyone knows the principles. Connection doesn’t happen by accident—it’s designed into every practice.

SYNTHESIS: WHAT THESE CASE STUDIES TEACH US

- Innovation requires emotional permission, not just good ideas
- Both Pixar and Gore prove that the quality of relationships determines the quality of innovation.
- Pixar's Braintrust: Films "suck" early on, but people feel safe saying so
- Gore's lattice: Associates can pursue "stupid ideas" because trust gives permission to fail
- Connection is a design choice, not a personality trait
- Neither organization succeeded by hiring "collaborative people"
 - Pixar designed the Braintrust with explicit rules
 - Candor is valued, hierarchy is suspended
 - Gore designed the lattice with structure constraints
 - No bosses, 150-200 person limit, sponsor system
- The most innovative organizations aren't always the smartest – they're the most connected
 - Pixar: Technology alone didn't make them successful; connection + candor did
 - Gore: Individual genius doesn't drive innovation; the lattice enables collective (connected) intelligence
- Trust transfer beyond two people when you build systems, not relationships
 - Pixar: The Braintrust continues to function without Jobs; the principles transferred to Disney Animation
 - Gore: 65+ years, 13,000 associates, 25+ countries; the lattice scaled because it's structure, not personal
- If connection lives only with you, it dies with you
- Both organizations prove – the goal isn't to be the connector; the goal is to build a culture that connects

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Use these case studies to prompt reflection:

1. PIXAR QUESTION: Where in your organization do people feel unsafe naming what's "sucking"? What would need to change for candor to feel routine instead of risky?
2. GORE QUESTION: If you had to limit your team size to preserve connection, what number would it be? What does that tell you about the quality of relationships you currently have?
3. BOTH: Innovation happened because people trusted each other to try something new. Where is innovation stalled in your organization because trust is assumed, not designed?
4. CHALLENGE: Both Pixar and Gore made unconventional structural choices that protected connection (Jobs staying out of Braintrust, Gore limiting facility size). What's one structural choice you could make this week to prioritize connection over convenience?

THE C.O.N.N.E.C.T. FRAMEWORK IS NOT THEORY - IT'S PROVEN

- Pixar: \$7.4B acquisition, transformed the animation industry, sustained excellence over 25+ years
- Gore: \$5B revenue, 65+ years of profitability, consistently ranked best place to work
- Both prove that when you design for connection, innovation follows

The question isn't whether it works. The question is – will you design it?

"Connection is not an accident. It's the innovation infrastructure most organizations skip."