

# “ HELP ME HELP YOU”

Once upon a time, I, like millions of Americans, enjoyed the communal pleasures of Pod Culture.

My work space was attached to five identical, cozy pods. A completely normal construct, but one with no privacy. You could hear your colleagues sneeze, giggle and digest their lunches. You could smell their lunches too, which was not so pleasant on the days when “Bob” ordered his salami sub. You could hear every personal conversation, and everyone heard professional discussions as well.

One of my former pod-mates enjoyed broadcasting his business calls on speaker phone. We got used to overhearing the highs and lows of mundane assignments, and for the most part ignored it all. Once, this pod-mate – let’s call him “Jonathan” – had a very bad day. A massive logistical operation seemed to be teetering on the brink of disaster. He was talking to someone in another city who was trying to clarify directives to complete his assignment. Every time this person asked a logical question, it was met with what I can only describe as quivering hysteria, or silence. Jonathan was shutting down, and slamming the door on possible new paths to success.

What caught my ear on that day was the calm, clear voice on the line saying, “Jonathan? Jonathan, don’t hang up the phone. Don’t hang up the phone, Jonathan. Let me help you, Jonathan.” This went on for about 40 minutes, and I hate to admit it, but I found the whole thing somewhat comical – the man behind the disembodied voice was clearly at his wit’s end, but trying to stay rational to find a way forward.

Everything worked out, thanks to the persistence of that voice on the phone. Indeed, I learned a year later that it was my husband-to-be talking Jonathan through the crisis, and making me laugh long before I ever met him. But beyond that bizarre coincidence, the whole affair reminded me of my favorite scene from the movie *Jerry Maguire*, in which Tom Cruise’s character begs his client to try something new to grow their collective business. “HELP me help you. Help ME help YOU!!” We’ve all been there.

For example, I was there when I attended a coffee klatsch hosted by a Very Important Person somewhere in the mists of time. This person was taking time from their busy schedule to generously interact

At times of uncertainty, it’s always tempting to fall back into the familiar. But when it comes to creating unscripted content that’ll cut through, working together to take smart risks is necessary, says **Gena McCarthy.**



with a mix of people at the company. As they held court, they admitted how much they hated a particular series and thought it was awful and just shouldn’t exist.

I nearly choked on my danish when I realized they were discussing one of my shows, and within minutes it would be my turn to talk about it. When I mentioned the title, the silence was deafening. And instead of defending the show, I think I mumbled the polite equivalent of “Thank you ma’am, may I have another.” But I was really thinking, “You’re welcome.”

A colleague who also attended the session followed me into my office and began laughing. He told me that in his 25 years in the business, he’d never witnessed anything like that. Seeing me feel guilty and bad about a hit show stunned him.

That particular show may have diverged from the comfortable norms, but it was regenerating an amazing brand that needed some help in the ratings. The network team had the courage and conviction to try something different, and

the risk paid off in performance and profits. In *growth*.

When so many platforms are ravaged by the winds of industry change, it’s always easier to stick with what’s tried and true. Work with only known and proven IP. Eliminate all risk. I understand. I’ve done it myself. But I also know there’s still room to simultaneously take bold creative swings. It’s the only way to remain relevant.

Now, as the head of a production label in discussions with buyers, I’m channeling the words of Mr. Maguire. Help us help you. Take a mitigated risk on new talent. Take a Bryce Harper swing on a loud, fresh concept that excites you. Let the producers you trust be that calm, clear voice that helps navigate the crisis in partnership with you. There are always ways to protect performance and the bottom line, but without innovation, nothing grows.

And it’s definitely time for unscripted to grow again.

*Gena McCarthy is the president and founder of Unconventional Entertainment, a part of Sony Pictures Television.*