

Professional Development the Disney Way

MICKEY IS EVERYWHERE, of course. There is the larger-than-life-size, walking-around Mouse himself, and there are his likenesses adorning everything from hotel soap to buildings. The familiar silhouette with saucer ears is also hole-punched on receipts and even pops up as list bullets in the written materials at Disney Institute, a state-of-the-art, idyllic campus where Disney University's external training programs—called, *guest programs*—are presented. But against the fantastical backdrop of the Magic Kingdom, Disney is quite serious about professional development.

Disney University's professional development programs aim to show other organizations how Walt Disney World Resort operates and what makes it all appear to work so seamlessly.

"Synergy is one thing we do really well at Disney," says Valerie Oberle, vice president of Disney University Guest Programs. An example of that synergy is combining business programs with personal-fulfillment courses at Disney Institute, and making it hospitable for family members to come along when people are there for the business workshops. The message is that Disney values a work-life balance.

But Oberle emphasizes that, for all the fun and fantasy, Disney has to deal with real, everyday issues—managing people, developing leaders, providing quality customer service, and orienting workers—just like other organizations.

At Disney Institute, everything is related to learning—from the professional development programs on such topics as leadership, people management, and customer service to vacation-type courses on gourmet cooking, clay animation, bird watching, and even relationships. There's a sports and fitness center, a theater with perfect acoustics, guest bungalows, and a day

On the heels of its 25th Anniversary

Celebration, Walt Disney World is

planning a new theme park and

gearing up its professional

development programs.

Discover the Disney Difference.

BY HAIDEE ALLERTON



VARGÖ

camp for kids—not to mention canoeing and golf. It's all part of what's called, *the Disney Difference*.

Right away, one difference you notice is the language. Visitors to Walt Disney World Resort and the Disney Institute are referred to as *guests*. Employees—42,000 of them—are *cast members*, whether they perform on stage or work behind the scenes, at whatever level. Periodically, desk denizens change places with Disney workers that meet and greet the public. All cast members, from vice presidents and directors on down, have to spend an afternoon as a Disney character. One such executive tells how in his stint as Goofy, he misjudged the length of his costume arms and knocked down a guest while trying to point directions. Fortunately, no harm was done. (He also says that you wouldn't believe how hot and heavy the costumes are.)

Hiring is done at Disney's *Casting Center*. The *show* is what Disney does—from the actual entertainment to providing friendly service to making sure that the *adventures* and *attractions* (not *rides*) are safe. At the core of Disney's internal training are *storytelling* and the *traditions*, through which new cast members learn about Disney's history—not from professional trainers, but from rank-and-file employees who relate their own real-life experiences working at Disney World and Disneyland. Some that knew Walt are still around to share their personal memories of the visionary man that began it all.

Walt Disney not only had true vision—after all, he turned some swamp land into a playland—he wasn't timid about putting vision into action. For instance, he didn't hesitate to halt production on *Snow White*—almost completed in black-and-white—to start over and take advantage of new color animation, at great expense.

At Disney University's internal-training facility (a rather humble-looking edifice compared to the Disney Institute), many new cast members get to watch the *Mickey Mouse Club* for the first time. (Disney hires a lot of 18-year-olds.) According to Jim Cunningham, program manager of business programs, all cast members learn three magic imperatives:

FUN FACTS

- ♥ Disney is the largest user of fireworks in the Western Hemisphere.
- ♥ Disney World Resort covers more than 30,000 acres, 8,300 of which are designated as a permanent wildlife conservation area.
- ♥ Each year, DW visitors consume more than 46 million cokes, 7 million hamburgers, 5 million hot dogs, and 5 million pounds of fries.
- ♥ Five percent of all photo processing done by Kodak in the United States is of pictures taken at Disney theme parks.
- ♥ Each year, 1,100 visitors that park in the Disney

World lot leave their keys in their cars with the engines running.

♥ The question that guests ask cast members most often is, "Where is the bathroom?"

♥ The second most frequently asked question is, "What time is the 3 o'clock parade?" (That's when friendly customer service is sorely tested. Disney has determined, however, that what the guest is really asking is, "What time will the 3 o'clock parade pass where I plan to be?")

♥ Walt Disney is not cryogenically frozen.

Program participants on a field trip to the Magic Kingdom.



1. Keep the park clean.
2. Create happiness.
3. Do your job.

The principles of Disney's internal training mesh into its outside programs, which stress values, vision, and a focused approach. Cunningham says that Disney knows that it always has to up the "wow" factor for repeat guests. "You're in second place if you meet expectations," he says. "You need to exceed them. We're convinced of that."

Tickets to success

Disney began developing its external training in 1984, with a professional development program for educators. By 1986, the Disney Approach to Business and Management programs were on board.

"Since then, one big change has been the customized aspect," says Judi Daley, manager of Disney University Guest Programs. Daley was one of the original 5,500 cast members when Disney World opened in Lake Buena Vista, Florida, in 1971. (In the ensuing 25 years, more than 100 million people have made more than 500 million



THE DISNEY DIFFERENCE

☛ A consistent theme is more important than a mission; mission statements just require updating. An example of a service theme is always making eye contact with guests.

☛ Empower staff and give them the tools to do their jobs. An example is the parking lot attendant who designed a system for helping guests find their cars when they forget where they parked them. (The attendant designed a chart that records within what time slot each row fills up. Then, any attendant can ask a guest what time he or she

arrived at the park and consult the chart to find the car.)

☛ Make sure cast members know the priorities and their order of importance: Safety, courtesy, show, and efficiency.

☛ Lateral moves within Disney are perceived as promotions and celebrated.

☛ In trying to remedy a service error, remember that the facts are negotiable, but a guest's perceptions are not.

☛ "Entertain and hope to educate, not educate and hope to entertain."

—Walt Disney



The Disney Approach to Quality Service: Customized for the Automotive Industry is designed for principals, managers, and supervisors of automotive-related businesses.

visits to the resort.)

Says Daley, "We recognized that people in different busi-

nesses have different needs. So, we give a sampling of some things we've done, such as modeling great service, that [participants] can adapt, not adopt. They say, 'OK, I understand how that might be beneficial for us even though we don't run a theme park or resort.'"

Daley says that the initiative to get serious about offering external training was prompted by the general shift in the business world to performance-based, measurable training. "There was a great emphasis in organizations on the right kind of training to yield results. So, we knew there was a market looking for specifics." Disney's leaders also recognized that Disney had the resources, the site, and the capability to show practices in action—a "living classroom," as Disney calls it.

Daley says that health care was one of the first industries to come to

Disney and say, "We have to look at the service Disney is providing. We might be able to translate to our business some things Disney is doing." Daley thinks that the reason health-care organizations became interested in particular in the Disney Approach to Quality Service is that the field is becoming more competitive.

"The difference now has to do with the reason people choose their health-care providers; it's all about relationships—with the respect, service, and responsiveness that have become important."

In speaking of the professional development programs overall, Daley says that Disney opens itself for others to look at how it does things. "We don't say, 'Here's how you might do it.' It isn't just theory; it's theory in practice. Hear, see, and scrutinize how we do it."

It would be hard to argue with Disney's success, as an entertainment business and as a customer service legend. One figure speaks for itself: 70 percent of visitors to Disney theme parks are repeat guests. As for internal professional development, many managers come from lower-level positions within the company. Valerie Oberle, for example, began her Disney career in guest relations in a clerical role.

Given its scope and size, Disney World could be considered a number of industries: entertainment, resort, food service, utilities, and transportation. Just for example, it operates almost as many buses as the city in which it resides. It also manages 16 hotels. Two acres of solar panels create much of the power for the Universe of Energy attraction. And the resort recycles more than 30 percent of its waste. (See the box, Fun Facts, to find out how much food it serves.)

The pivotal premise of Disney's professional development programs is that they have valuable lessons for all types of organizations. It's all in the application. Organizations can observe how Disney does things and then apply those lessons to areas where there are similarities.

The fun factor

Daley's answer to whether there's a conscious effort to make training fun at Disney is, "Always, always, always."



Program guests gaze on Cinderella's Castle.

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In fact, Daley says that she has made it her personal role to help make sure the guest programs are fun and that there are "unexpected surprises" at several turns during the workshops. She says that Disney knows that those surprises work—as when a guest interacts with a cast member or makes a connection between something Disney does and an area in his or her own organization.

Daley says that participants come to Disney University already in a playful frame of mind. "So, whether they're wearing suits or shorts, they're already in a mindset that they'll probably do things they'd never do in any other training program. They're ready. All we have to do is give them the cue."

But Daley points out that participants also say that they want specific take-away. And she says that Disney University recognizes that participants have to go back to their organizations with learning that justifies their time away. "We don't want anyone asking, 'Why did I go to Disney to learn that?' We don't want any 'disconnects.'"

To build in the element of fun, the program packages include guided field trips of backstage and on-stage areas to experience first-hand Disney World's business examples in practice. And participants get free theme park admission.

Of course, buried beneath the fun of the Magic Kingdom lie the underground tunnels, accessed by unobtrusive, unmarked doors tucked here and there among such attractions as Cinderella's Castle and known only to employees. The tunnels are where Chip and Dale heave off their furry chipmunk costumes to reveal the sweating, exhausted young workers underneath.

The tunnels naturally seem part of Disney's essential elements: show and theming. The hidden passageways allow for the show to be uninterrupted. A costumed cast member of Frontierland, for example, can walk through the park to take a break without wandering into Tomorrowland and disturbing its theme. The tunnels are also a conduit for transporting goods and removing trash, and they house such facilities as a laundry, wardrobe rooms, and rest areas for cast members. It's a looking glass sort of experience to step from the fantasy-based

world of the Magic Kingdom down into the sparse tunnels where the hard work is kept invisible from guests. Then, by simply opening a door, one re-enters the land of magic.

Magic answers?

Disney's culture may speak its own language, but its professional development programs talk the universal language of business: *motivational strategies, linking employees' behavior to organizational purpose, and contributing to optimal productivity*—just to pluck a few terms from the program descriptions.

But do the programs "walk the talk"? Craig R. Taylor, Disney University's director of business development, admits that at first the leadership program was a bit short of the mark. At least, that's the way some pilot participants saw it.

"They said it wasn't deep enough and focused too much on the top," says Taylor candidly. "So, we withdrew it, redesigned it, and invited the

pilot participants back for a free seminar. Many have returned on their own since then."

Adds Daley, "All we have to do is stay on track."

Tomorrowland

Being at Disney World is such an integral part of the professional development programs, one has to wonder whether Disney is exploring distance learning.

Says Daley, "People talk about the division of high-touch and high-tech. A lot of our success is based on high-touch: cast-to-guest interaction and cast-to-cast interaction. That might not translate if you don't experience it [in person]."

"The richest experience, in the future for our business, is probably going to be a combination of being able to access information and then getting ready for the learning, ready for the discovery—be it through printed materials, on site, or online. Not one or the other, but a combination."

Daley explains how Disney's unique concept of show is also part of the professional development programs. "We [take participants] to Epcot to focus on a service approach. Or if we're talking about the casting (hiring) process, you get to talk to someone in the casting area. So, you get to speak to a person with expertise in the area you're talking about. Then, we invite you to experience the whole property. Then we ask, 'What examples did you see?' So, it's all part of the design, which you can't do if you're in Toledo, Ohio."

Daley concedes that not every organization can afford to bring its employees to the Disney Institute, so DI has taken its show on the road—such as, presenting the Service, Disney Style program to chambers of commerce across the United States.

When asked whether distance learning will play a bigger part in Disney University's future, Daley says that it could serve as a follow up to on-site courses.



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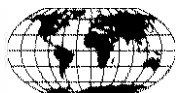
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Two new professional development programs at Disney University are Customer Loyalty: Keeping the Promise and Foundations of Leadership at the Walt Disney World Resort. The leadership program focuses on these areas:

- ▶ how to implement directives from senior leaders by leveraging personal strengths
- ▶ how to use leadership to uplift, empower, and inspire through consistently reinforced behaviors
- ▶ how to bridge the gap between "dreaming" and "doing" with a unique tool used at Disney World.

Disney University is also premiering two customized programs on quality service for the automotive and health-care industries.

Oh, and the new 500-acre theme park, Disney's Animal Kingdom, which opens spring 1998, will feature more than 1,000 animals representing more than 200 species.

So, what lessons can organizations that haven't participated in Disney University's programs apply? Says Daley, "The key concept in our internal programs is looking at distinctions so that cast members understand how their roles fit the whole pie. So, I'd say that organizations that are developing their own programs should look at their distinctions that really work. Focus on those differences and understand why they work so that participants can go back and ask what's similar in their areas that they can play off of."

Is there a lesson for individuals as well? When you think about it, the magic imperatives can apply to just about any setting:

1. Keep the park (your work area) clean.
2. Create happiness (be pleasant and helpful to customers and co-workers).
3. Do your job. ■

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