

"The success of the Disney University serves as a leadership blueprint, applicable in any organization." —Captain D. Michael Abrashoff (Ret.), bestselling author of *It's Your Ship*

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How

DISNEY UNIVERSITY

Develops the World's Most
Engaged, Loyal, and
Customer-Centric Employees

DOUG LIPP

LESSON 3

It Takes Art and Science

The Attractions Don't Break Down, and Snow White Never Has a Bad Day

To try to keep an operation like Disneyland going you have to pour it [money] in there. It's not just new attractions, but keeping it staffed properly, you know . . . never letting your personnel get sloppy. Never let them be unfriendly.¹

—Walt Disney

Walt Disney got off the Jungle Cruise boat and wasn't happy. In fact, something was terribly wrong. The problem was with the skipper of the boat Walt had observed. The skipper hadn't done his job properly, and that simply wasn't acceptable to Walt. Yes, the skipper ran the boat safely, so that wasn't the problem. Yes, he had recited his script line for line, so that wasn't the problem. It was something else. It was in his delivery; he hadn't acted his part with as much enthusiasm as Walt wanted. He lacked energy and showmanship.

Ron Dominguez, who retired as executive vice president of Walt Disney Attractions, was the supervisor of the area where Jungle

Cruise is situated. “We got word that Walt was furious that he got a lousy spiel on Jungle Cruise, and he let my boss, Dick Nunis, know just how upset he was,” Ron explained.

“Walt told Dick, ‘I want the skippers to act as if every trip on the Jungle Cruise is their first trip. I want them to act surprised when the hippos suddenly rise out of the water. The skippers need to be as surprised as the guests.’ ”

At that point, Dick, Ron, and the whole Jungle Cruise team started a marathon training program to ensure that all the employees knew the script and performed their roles with the appropriate enthusiasm.

Ron went on to explain that he and Dick Nunis “immediately began assessing the spiel of each skipper. We rode with each of them. After the ride was over, we sat on the Jungle Cruise dock and critiqued their performances, specifically, their enthusiasm. Walt had a tendency of popping in unannounced on Sunday afternoons, so we were determined to be up to speed by the time of his next visit. Walt’s message to us was, ‘The best is never the best, and pay attention to the smallest details.’ ”²

Balancing Art and Science

Walt Disney and Van France knew the importance of achieving and maintaining a balance of art and science. Building and maintaining Disneyland—the attractions, restaurants, shops, and arcades—is just the starting point: the science. Maintaining the feel of Disneyland and employee morale is the art. Combined, they create a powerful differentiator from the competition: the stores, restaurants, resorts, and amusement parks vying for the same customers and employees. Van, Walt’s equal at being a taskmaster, incessantly promoted the art of friendliness. Walt and Van, the cheerleaders for balance, wouldn’t tolerate Disneyland falling into the trap plaguing so many of its competitors:

- *Keep the park clean.* The competition isn't as focused on cleanliness. Their rides are dirty, and the grounds are full of litter. Their employees' uniforms are wrinkled or stained.
- *Keep the park well maintained.* The competition may have faster rides, but they aren't well maintained and frequently break down.
- *Keep the park friendly.* The competition may have plenty of employees, but they aren't well trained; they don't know the answers to customers' questions, plus they aren't as friendly.

Walt's ride on the Jungle Cruise, along with his scathing comment, is a clear example of his focus on the upkeep of the park and the importance of maintaining both the art and the science of the show: never let the rides suffer from a lack of proper care, keep the property clean, and keep it friendly.³ Cast members and leaders at Disney properties refer to this process as keeping the property and show fresh.

Keep the Park Fresh

The term fresh encompasses Walt's strategy for keeping Disneyland relevant and competitive, the never-ending pursuit of perfection. Walt's philosophy of keeping the park clean, fresh, and friendly extends to every cast member and every attraction. Timely upkeep of attractions keeps them fresh. Continuous development of cast members keeps them fresh, engaged, and enthusiastic.

Ten years after Disneyland opened, Walt reinforced his commitment to keeping Disneyland fresh. During the tenth anniversary celebration, Walt thanked his pioneering group of imagineers and staff for their hard work in making Disneyland successful. However, he closed the evening with this comment:

I just want to leave you with this thought, that it's just been sort of a dress rehearsal and we're just getting started. So, if any of you start to rest on your laurels, I mean, just forget it.⁴

Disneyland was a decade into an unprecedented run of success, and Walt referred to it as a “dress rehearsal.” Walt’s admonition to his leaders to avoid resting on their laurels underscores the need for constant improvement and attention to the details. Resting on one’s laurels is the equivalent of getting stale, a condition not acceptable to Walt. He expected the exact opposite: keep Disneyland fresh by constantly maintaining the property, keeping it clean, updating attractions, and ensuring that every cast member receives world-class training.

Sharing the Stage

From its inception in 1955, Walt, Van, and the leadership team knew that the unique environment of Disneyland would pose new challenges to the company. For the first time in the history of Walt Disney Productions, the audience and the actors would be sharing the stage, with the show constantly evolving. Until Disneyland came along, the team at the Disney Studios worked solely in film production. As Walt Disney says:

A picture is a thing, once you wrap it up and turn it over to Technicolor [film labs], you're through.⁵

Not in the Disneyland environment. Unlike a conventional theater, where the distance between the audience and the entertainers on stage doesn’t allow for close inspection, at Disneyland those being entertained would be in direct contact with the entertainers. In effect, not only were the guests invited to join the entertainers onstage, they were allowed to closely inspect both the actors and

the set. This did not allow for cheaply built stage props, shabby Disney character costumes, and heavily made-up entertainers.

The new entertainment environment of Disneyland also brought forth the question, just who are the “entertainers”? Van and his initial team of trainers wanted everyone to understand that “when you’re on-stage, you’re an entertainer,” a term not limited to those in direct contact with guests such as those parking cars, serving food, operating attractions, and performing as the famous Disney characters. It would also include maintenance personnel, the grounds crew, and the custodial cast members, who during operating hours would be scrutinized by guests and therefore were as much a part of the show as were the others. This unique environment creates unprecedented challenges and opportunities for many cast members to perform two jobs at once:

- Maintenance and grounds crew cast members are trained to extend a helping hand to lost guests.
- Custodial cast members (sweepers) learn that taking pictures of families leaves a lasting and positive impression.
- Security cast members know the power of addressing a child by name.

The Disney University staff constantly reinforces the message that cast members perform multiple roles. Picture the following:

Leslie, a security cast member, spots a child, bends down, and asks, “Hi, Jamal. Are you having fun today?” This brief interaction creates a moment neither child nor parent will ever forget. How do they know the child’s name? (*Hint: Cast members are constantly on the lookout for children wearing Mickey Mouse ears caps. The children’s names are usually embroidered on the front of the cap.*)

“We Want to Meet Snow White”

One of the first lessons learned by all cast members is, “Disneyland itself is the star; everything else is in the supporting role.”⁶ In other words, no divas allowed. A cast packed with potent supporting-role talent can be responsible for the success of a production, but the converse is equally true: An actor cast in a supporting role (not the lead) can destroy a play created by the world’s best designers, producers, scriptwriters, and construction crews. An off-key singer in a seemingly insignificant role can distract the audience from the beauty of the set and the skills of the other actors. At Disneyland, all cast members know that regardless of their role, they can make or break the guests’ experience.

No one knows who originally came up with the following story—a powerful and fictional one—that Disney University trainers relate during orientation, but it has Van’s fingerprints all over it. The image it creates in the mind of every cast member is potent, unambiguous, and everlasting.

Pretend just for a moment that a family of five has just passed through the main entrance at Disneyland or Walt Disney World. They have been traveling for hours by car, bus, or airplane, and Mom and Dad are exhausted; the three kids are beyond excited. In fact, the kids have been amped up for the last three months, ever since they learned of their Disney vacation. They have been talking nonstop, saying, “We can’t wait to meet Snow White to get her autograph and photograph.”

Fast-forward 30 minutes. Now everyone is finally in the park.

Mom and Dad are having their first cup of coffee, and the kids are scrambling around, looking for Snow White. Then they see her. She looks as beautiful as they had imagined.

The kids rush toward Snow White for her autograph—they will get it! Surrounding Snow White, the kids are all pulling on her cape and screaming, “We want your autograph,” “We want your autograph!”

Let’s take it to the next step.

Pretend Snow White is fed up with their noise and is having a bad day. She had a tough commute this morning, and the Seven Dwarfs are late to work. Snow White is in a foul, foul mood. In a fit of rage, she spins around, glares at the kids, and barks, “Leave me alone. Can’t you see that I don’t want to be bothered?” To make things even worse, Snow White has a cigarette dangling from her mouth. Her wig is pushed way back on her head, and her dress is wrinkled and dirty.

At this point, what is the effect on the kids? Are they still thrilled to be at Disneyland? Do you think Mom and Dad, watching this scene from a distance, are saying to each other, “Gee, isn’t it great that Disney keeps this place so clean? I heard that a virtual army of employees comes out every night to fix the rides and scrub away dirt, fingerprints, and clumps of gooey gum on the ground. I love this place.” Is this what they are saying to each other?

Of course, newly hired cast members always get a good laugh out of this story. At first it sounds like a ridiculous scenario. Could anyone ever imagine Snow White being so rude or looking like such a slob? What about cast members in more supporting roles working in the parking lot, the restaurants, or the retail stores? They too, with a frown or caustic tone, can ruin a guest’s day, much the way one off-key supporting-role singer can detract viewers from the otherwise flawless execution of a musical.

The Disney University staff then asks orientation participants to think of other scenarios in which they themselves have been the customer, patient, or client. It is always an eye-opener for trainees

to find out from one another how often they come into contact with service providers who are as inattentive or rude as our imaginary Snow White.

Know the Job and Do It with a Smile

Even the most recent graduates of Disney University training know the importance of art and science. Friendliness and technical competence are a formidable combination. For the cast member playing Snow White, this means two things:

- *The art of being Snow White.* She receives extensive training about how to handle the reality of performing while surrounded by the audience. Snow White knows she will have to interact with guests of all ages and be friendly. Her interpersonal expertise ensures that she won't view these interactions with guests as bothersome interruptions.
- *The science of being Snow White.* She has to become Snow White. She has to know every movement portrayed by Snow White in the classic movie. Her technical expertise helps transform her into the character.

Far too many organizations have difficulty attaining this balance of friendliness and technical competence. The process of developing employees who know the job and can do it with a smile escapes too many corporate training departments. Companies that tolerate technically competent but rude employees (or indifferent employees) will suffer. Of course, smiling employees can't make up for an outdated product line or flawed technology. Putting all one's eggs in either the science or the art basket will eventually drive away the people who really matter: good employees and valued customers. Walt's message to the Jungle Cruise crew was clear: The advanced technology and well-maintained operating system that

makes the attraction so compelling is just part of a complex puzzle. The lifelike lions and hippos, the compelling sound track, and the tropical plants fill in part of the puzzle. The boat, expertly painted to make it appear old and rusty, is another piece. So too is the clean safari-themed costume provided to the skipper. Finally, the skipper's enthusiastic delivery of the scripted spiel completes the picture. All these interlocking pieces when combined deliver an enchanting experience to the guest. This adventure can be undermined instantly by an unenthusiastic cast member. The Disney University keeps Walt's and Van's message alive. Amazing things happen when art and science are given equal billing: attractions operate consistently, and Snow White has only good days.

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