



# People Management Lessons from Disney

By Bruce I. Jones

During the first year Disneyland opened, not all of the employees who worked there were hired as Disney cast members. Walt had initially decided to bring in outside vendors to fill certain positions including parking and security. Soon after that decision he recognized he had made a mistake. “I couldn’t have outside help and still get over my idea of hospitality,” he said.

What Walt realized was that recruiting the right people and instilling in them your company culture is an essential part of building a unified workforce. He also created the model for hiring that remains the standard today—we hire for attitude, not aptitude. Today, Disney recruits, selects, and trains everyone who works with the company in the same way—whether cast members or third-party employees. Just as long-term care facilities integrate a wide-range of employees carrying out a variety jobs, Disney uses its unique corporate culture to unite all workers in a common goal: to help the guest.

Walt once said, “I tell the security police that they are never to consider themselves cops. They are there to help people. The visitors are our guests. Once you get the policy going, it grows.”

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? At *Disney Institute*, we help many organizations develop their own models and best practices for hiring and retaining highly-skilled employees who understand and convey the beliefs and values of the business to produce outstanding results.

## RECRUITING THE BEST

Disney cast members aren’t just hired for a job; they play a role in the “show.” Every aspect of the casting (hiring) process is a presentation of the Disney culture. In essence, Disney begins the training process even before a new cast member is hired. For example, the whimsy of the casting building is designed to ease the minds of anxious applicants, while communicating our rich Disney heritage.

Early in the process, candidates can view a film depicting what it is like to work at Disney. The film also communicates conditions of employment. After viewing it, a small percentage of candidates self-select out of the process. This is a good thing, since those candidates might not be “right fit” for the culture—and Disney might not be right-fit for them. This process not only saves time and money, but it leaves the applicants feeling good about themselves and our company.

During the interview process, casting professionals will base the hiring decision on work experience, personality and educational background. By the time they go through their interview, candidates will have a basic picture of the company’s culture and expectations.

The philosophies underlying the Disney approach have application to companies of any size. Consider the processes you are using and the messages you are sending to your potential employees. Are you communicating conditions of employment up front? Are you creating a positive environment that truly welcomes potential employees? Consider intriguing ways you can introduce applicants to your “conditions of employment” and your culture. You might simply write those on a piece of paper to share with potential applicants as was done by one small business owner.

## UNDERSTANDING EXPECTATIONS

A key factor in employee retention is making certain employees understand what’s expected of them, and why the “rules” exist.

A critical role of leaders is to communicate expectations to employees and for the communication to be consistent with actions. Communication is a reflection of the culture, so we ensure that the messages we send, the methods we use to send them, and the sources they come from, reflect the elements of our culture that we want to perpetuate.



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How well do your communication methods and messages meet your employees' needs? Disney uses many communications tactics to reach people globally—including newsletters, email and websites. We focus on the most effective way to communicate with cast members depending on the message. For example, we know cast members prefer to hear new information directly from their leaders.

Communication is a two-way street, involving the critical skill of listening. For long-term care organizations, if you want to find out what's happening in your operations, go to the experts on guest service—the people on the front lines. They have the most contact with residents, so they know what they most like and dislike. Your challenge is to ensure that everyone on the team has a voice and the opportunity to share ideas.

It's also important to show your employees how their efforts affect the overall resident experience—even if they don't interact with residents directly. When your staff sees the big picture, they also see how vital their roles are in the business. Teaching employees how they fit into your overall operation and demonstrating how their role contributes to your facility's overarching goal breeds unity and solidifies your corporate culture. We know this can be done because, at *Walt Disney World*® Resort alone, there are over 2,000 job classifications, but everyone understands the goal and operates on the same page.

## TRAINING FOR SUCCESS

Disney trains every cast member in the same way, no matter what job, and goes to great lengths to ensure that cast members understand the company's heritage and purpose. This helps them feel connected to the company, and to their jobs.

Everyone's first day begins in Disney Traditions, where the new vice president of sales may be sitting next to a housekeeper or a transportation host. Regardless of the job classification, whether full-time, part-time, or

seasonal, everyone goes through this same orientation process. Our facilitators for Disney Traditions are not professional trainers, but role model cast members selected through a rigorous auditioning process for a one-year program, delivering a couple of times per month as part of a rotating team. Having these operations people serve as communicators of company culture adds tremendous realism to what it is like to work for Disney.

After Disney Traditions, it's time for new cast members to transition to their individual roles where on-the-job training builds on this foundation. Much of this training occurs at individual departments and it is usually conducted by peers. We believe training is important enough that we will take our best cast members off-line to serve as trainers. It's continually proven to us that people train in their own image, so the end result is a team of cast members that is equally skilled and guest-focused. Training is reinforced through ongoing efforts, such as mentoring, continuing education, and leadership training, contributing greatly to a culture of excellence.

All of this is geared to help new cast members succeed in their role of delivering exceptional quality service. In addition, Centers for Excellence serve as local learning sites that offer a variety of technical, job skill, and interpersonal training courses cast members can take online free of charge.

## RECOGNIZING AND REWARDING EXCELLENCE

Our cast members are the ones making magic every day. If they weren't happy, it would be difficult for them to make our guests happy. We've found over and over that if an employee feels truly valued in his or her job, if they understand what is expected of them and feel they are contributing, they will go above and beyond to deliver great service.

Employees need to know *how* their work contributes to the organization's goals. Most of us feel better about our jobs when we know how we make a



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difference. Measure success and share those successes with your staff. Disney employs recognition tools including what we call Great Service Fanatic cards. These on-the-spot recognition cards praise cast members for going beyond the call and recipients are eligible for monthly prize drawings.

One of the best ways to recognize people is to ask their opinion. By listening and truly valuing their input, we build a relationship that retains loyal and successful employees. And, by building relationships, *information comes to you*. Walt Disney always said, “You never know where your next big idea will come from.” He was a big believer in getting input from all levels of the organization. We follow that advice to this day

But it takes more than just soliciting ideas. Employees need to know that you are truly hearing them. We have several ways of letting cast members know that we’ve heard their ideas. We’re honest about the fact that the ideas can’t always be implemented, but we always tell the cast members why.

Phil Holmes, vice president of the *Magic Kingdom*® Park at the *Walt Disney World*® Resort, keeps voicemail boxes for himself and his direct reports and publishes the numbers for all cast members in the park. Cast members are encouraged to call and give ideas, make complaints, etc. Holmes then publishes a “You Asked, We Listened” report detailing each request and giving the status of that request.

Measuring employee satisfaction at the organization level is critical in understanding how your employees feel about their job. Disney conducts its Cast Excellence survey every one to two years. Each survey includes sections where the employee can anonymously rate his or her leader and describe what’s working and what’s not working. In this way, leaders can focus on opportunities that will make the biggest impact.

The bottom line is, if your employees are upset, it will come through in how they treat customers. Walt Disney once said, “I think if there’s any part I’ve played the vital part is coordinating these talents, and encouraging these talents, and carrying them down the line.” He realized that his cast members are the lifeline of his company. Every business owns a cultural identity based on traditions, quality standards and shared values. Understanding how to nurture and channel the power of those elements is the most effective way to meet goals and retain loyal and successful employees.

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