

Make Your Workplace A Magic Kingdom
Business Lessons From Walt Disney
By Kendra Trahan

Even though the name “Walt Disney” is synonymous with creativity and the Walt Disney Company is one of the largest and most successful media and entertainment corporations in the world, many business professionals scoff at the idea of embracing “the mouse” at work. In fact, depending on where you work, wearing a Mickey Mouse tie or watch to the office will not only be frowned upon, but it may also cause co-workers and managers to question your professionalism or challenge your credibility.

Despite corporate America’s negative view of all things Disney on the job, millions of people go to one of the many Disney parks for vacations each year, bringing home souvenirs and photos that they proudly display on their desk. And while some people may think that such Disney keepsakes are too whimsical or child-like for an office setting, the fact is that Mickey Mouse and all other Disney items represent the kind of success that many companies are striving for.

No matter what company or industry you’re in, seeing something Disney in your office should be a sign of excellence – a reminder to do your best, to think creatively and to reach for the stars. While Disney items are often frivolous and fun, they can also be reminders of great business principles that all companies should implement. Consider the following beliefs that enabled Walt Disney to create and build a multi-billion dollar corporation.

Hire the Best in the Field and Let Them Do Their Best

When it comes to hiring great talent, in many companies, one of two things often happens. Either the manager hires a great person for the job but stands in the new employee’s way, resulting in poor performance; or the manager feels threatened by a potential employee’s skills and hires someone else who is less qualified for the job. In either scenario, the company suffers.

Walt Disney was not a very good artist, so he hired Ub Iwerks to do the animations for him. Rather than feel threatened by another artist, Walt recognized his own weaknesses and sought out the best talent to help him succeed. At the same time, Walt knew he was good at sales, so he handled the sales end of his company. Walt believed that the only way to become successful was to have a great team on your side.

Rather than feel threatened by someone who may have a better education or more skills than you, welcome that person onto your team. Put your ego aside and pinpoint your weaknesses. Then, find people who are strong in those areas to help your company or department move forward. Always remember that the success a lone person can achieve is great, but the success a group of people working together can achieve is often amazing.

Internally Mine the Talent in Your Organization

While many companies do like to promote from within, they often have strict guidelines for promoting or reassigning employees. For example, salespeople can only be promoted if

they exceed their sales quota. The result is a frustrated employee who could shine in another area and greatly contribute to the company's bottom line...if only given a chance.

Walt Disney routinely "walked the studio" talking to his employees and learning what they were passionate about. He often took the time to notice what personal items they had on their desks, as he believed those items could tell him a lot about their strengths and what they could contribute to the company. For example, Walt noticed that one of his artists, Blaine Gibson, had beautiful sculptures on his desk – sculptures that he made himself. Blaine was a good artist and doing fine in his position, but Walt saw the passion for sculpting that Blaine had. Walt quickly reassigned Blaine to W.E.D. (known today as Imagineering). Today, Blaine is best known as the person who sculpted the faces in the Pirates of the Caribbean ride and all the American presidents for the Hall of Presidents attraction.

Look for the passions hidden within your employees. Do you have a salesperson who would make a great trainer? An accountant who would excel at PR? A maintenance worker who can create great sales copy? Keep your eyes open on what people can do besides their immediate job. Often their hidden talents and skills are just what your company needs to succeed in today's marketplace.

Empower Your People to Exceed Customer Expectations

Although many companies like to talk about "empowering their employees," the fact is that many workers feel very unempowered these days. They want to help a client or customer resolve an issue, but they have to go through so many layers of red tape that doing so seems near impossible. With the corporate focus on bottom line results and cutting costs, employees feel restricted on what they can and cannot do.

One of Walt's main objectives (and one of his teachings that lives on very strongly at The Walt Disney Company) was to always "Exceed Expectations." Walt inspired and empowered people to give more than what was asked of them. Even today, Disney employees can do what's necessary to meet a guest's expectations. For example, if a child orders popcorn and then drops it a few seconds later, the employee is empowered to replace that child's popcorn, free of charge.

Empowering employees doesn't mean they have free reign; it means they can do certain things within established limits and guidelines to make the customer happy. Therefore, take some time to outline what your staff can do in specific situations to exceed a customer's expectations. Then, let your employees do it. When you allow your employees to take care of customers in a respectful way, the business will take care of itself.

Create the Company of Your Dreams

While the genius and namesake behind the Walt Disney Company has been gone for more than 40 years, the principles and techniques he used to build one of the most successful corporations in America are still relevant today. So as you sit in yet another meeting discussing strategies for taking your organization to the next level, remember Walt's ideas from yester-year. They could very well propel your company into a very profitable future.