

Introduction to *Lessons From the Mouse*

I had just become an employee at Walt Disney World – or, as they say at Disney, a cast member. Imagine how exciting this was for me, an eager nineteen-year-old steeped in Disney lore and now wide eyed at the start of new-hire training. It was the summer of 1979. I had just finished a year of college and thought it would be pretty cool to work at Disney World. I was ready for some magic. So, I hopped in my beat-up, rusted-out Oldsmobile and headed south from Burlington, Vermont, on the twelve-hundred-mile drive to Orlando, Florida. I slept in rest areas along the way and dreamed about my grand summer adventure. At that time, I was planning to go back home in September. But I never did. I fell in love with Disney World, decided to finish my education in Florida and make Orlando home.

It wasn't love at first sight, mind you. My very first day of training was, to say the least, sadly eye opening. I was "cast" to work at the 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea attraction. We new employees were touring the park behind the scenes, and just inside the fluorescent maze beneath the Magic Kingdom, I spied Mickey Mouse entering the employee cafeteria. But it wasn't the cute, approachable Mickey I was used to seeing. This one was a dreadful hybrid, half cartoon rodent and half woman. It really was rather unsettling. Nearby, like a scene from a horror movie, the severed heads of Tigger, Goofy, and Donald Duck – frozen in artificial mirth – stood watch on special poles. Farther on in the starkly lit maze, two Jungle Cruise skippers cursed an absent co-worker. Around a corner, Cinderella, cigarette dangling from her lips, adjusted her bodice and chatted up another half-dressed Mickey. I thought, "There's more than one?"

Then, my trainer led me from behind the scenes onto the set, from Disney underground – the employee areas where guests weren't allowed - to Disney above ground - the park where guests experienced the characters, the rides and the shows. Ah! This was what I remembered! Here was the magic I had traveled so far for. Here, everything was right. Fairytale characters were totally costumed and playing their parts convincingly, floating and posing among smiling guests who clicked their cameras and lined up for Peter Pan's Flight.

That day, I began to understand Disney's magic, an understanding that deepened over the next two decades. It was, I realized, really just a blend of ordinary elements – imagination, hard work, attention to detail, and creativity. But like some preposterous confection, these commonplace ingredients were what created extraordinary experiences for Disney guests. That caught my attention.

I stayed at Disney World for twenty years. I stayed because I knew I was part of a great organization, and I knew I would learn important lessons. Now, as a customer service speaker and consultant, I find that I still use what I learned there every day.

Why Another Disney Book?

Several books have already been written about the Disney way, so why write another one? Good question, especially since some of those books are excellent. But I felt there was a gap in the Disney literature. Most of the books out there were written by people who had never actually worked at Disney or were written from the perspective of senior management. I thought there

was a need for a Disney manual written by someone who had actually worked on the rides, controlled the crowds at parades, stood in the rain for hours telling guests Space Mountain was closed, and even had to reprimand Goofy for poor attendance. In my version, I peel away the veneer to show the day-to-day operation, warts and all. The book includes lessons I learned as a front-line cast member as well as a member of the management team.

How do I know these lessons can translate to success in other organizations? In my speaking, training, and consulting work, business leaders often tell me about one of their employees who previously worked as a Disney cast member. These leaders always rave about this employee's customer service abilities, work ethic, and attention to detail. One executive told me, "I'd love to send every one of my employees to work at Disney World for a few months."

But for me, the most meaningful example of all is that of my oldest son, Danny. I insisted he work at Disney World for a summer because I knew he'd learn things that would benefit him for the rest of his life. And I knew that having the Disney name on his resume would not be a bad thing, either. He worked at Big Thunder Mountain Railroad in Frontierland that summer, and it was great listening to him share some of the same stories I had lived during my early Disney days. Lately, he's been working at a retail shop in Tallahassee while he attends Florida State University. Recently, I met his boss who told me: "Danny is our customer service champ. All of the customers love him." Even though he worked at Disney World for only three months, the lessons he learned there have stuck.

Over the past eight years I've helped many organizations apply the principles in this book – the principles I was privileged to learn at Disney. The results for these companies have been positive: improved customer satisfaction; reduced employee turnover; and increased profitability. (I readily admit it hasn't worked for everyone – it takes a lot of commitment to consistently apply these lessons, and some companies just want a magic pill that will suddenly improve their culture. Sorry, it doesn't work that way.)

It's Not Perfect

During a frustrating time early in my Disney career, my boss told me something I will never forget: "There's no such thing as a perfect boss or a perfect company. If you're looking for either one you're doomed to a life of disappointment." He was so right. At no time do I want to present the Disney organization as perfect or infallible. The company screws up just like every other organization, and, in the book, I have happily shared some of those mistakes. As I'm sure you know, Disney's blunders have been pretty well publicized. The recent Michael Eisner debacle is a good example. Or the challenges Euro Disney faced early on. The hits the company took on those little gems were mostly well deserved.*

Footnote:

*For the record, I'm a Michael Eisner fan. I was with the company before Michael arrived and we were in trouble. He along with Frank Wells revitalized the company and made it a major player again. Under his leadership revenues went from \$1.3 billion a year to over \$25 billion a year. It was only during the last few years of his tenure that things went a little haywire. It's my

opinion that if Michael had retired about six years earlier than he did he would've been recognized as one of the great CEOs of all time.

The things Disney does well, however, it does very well. Consistent focus on a few important factors has made it stand out as a company and created legions of diehard fans. The proof is that Disney World is usually ranked the single most popular vacation destination on earth.

How the Book is Structured

Lessons From the Mouse is constructed as a series of lessons because therein lies the secret to discovering Disney's magic – understanding and applying these ideas every day in a disciplined way. I believe the elements described in this book are at the very heart of what has made the place so successful.

The title of each chapter is a snapshot of the lesson within. At the beginning of each chapter, I explain how this particular lesson was taught and reinforced when I worked at Disney World and why it's important. I then show how the lesson applies to other industries by using examples from my consulting work and from conversations with leaders and employees of other organizations. The end of each chapter provides some questions and ideas for utilizing the lesson.

How to Use the Book

There are a lot of ways you can apply the lessons in this book. You might decide to use them to raise the bar of your own performance. You might decide to make each chapter a topic for a series of staff meetings to get the whole team involved. If you're really ambitious, you can use each chapter as a training module for the entire organization. Or you might simply open the book periodically to any chapter for a quick dose of inspiration. However you decide to use *Lessons From the Mouse*, the important thing is to put the lessons to work.

Anybody and any organization can employ these ideas. I've seen them applied by major research hospitals and by gas stations. I've seen bank presidents as well as truck mechanics put these principles to good use. It all comes down to commitment, consistency, and hard work.

All the best to you as you read and apply *Lessons From the Mouse*.