Truths Mickey Told Me: Lessons from Disney

By Jerry Manas, PMP

As a lifelong learner, I'm always looking for fresh approaches, especially when it comes to achieving excellence through—and with—people. I often look for stellar models to glean ideas from, and so I recently sought out offerings from the Disney Institute, the learning arm of the Walt Disney organization. It did not disappoint.

The track I attended focused on the Disney "Keys to Excellence" and covered their practices in the areas of leadership excellence, cast excellence, guest satisfaction, and loyalty.

As project managers, we are in a service business, whether we realize it or not. We deal with internal clients, external customers, team members, and other stakeholders every day. As such, we have a unique opportunity to foster excellence in our people, products and services, and leave a memorable trace. And who better to learn from than the Disney organization, whose quality and services are legendary?

Let's look at some highlights from the institute's sessions as it relates to the project management profession and leadership in general.

Leadership Excellence

Every leader is on stage, and is telling a story about what he or she values. This is one of Disney's most fundamental truths. As an example, Disney Institute facilitators ask attendees which values Simba from The Lion King held dear. Most people, familiar with the story, typically call out characteristics such as family, loyalty, and responsibility. Then comes the kicker of a question: How do you know? Certainly, Simba never said, "These are my values." We know because of Simba's behaviors. The lesson from Disney is this: We judge ourselves by our *intentions*. Others judge us by our *behaviors*. We as leaders must decide which values are important to us, and we must strive to exemplify those values in our behaviors. Every action we take sends a message.

Engagement also matters. It is of course valuable to craft a vision of the end state for our projects, but we need people's engagement in order to effectively achieve the vision. The earlier we involve them the better. Many projects fail because employees and/or customers were simply not engaged adequately or early enough. To rectify this, Disney suggests using passionate stories to incite interest, distributing decision-making authority, and ensuring that your structural models (i.e. organization, process, and measures) are aligned with your culture. If your desired culture says "teamwork," but your processes and measures are geared toward individual achievement, there's a mismatch.

Don't pigeonhole people by their job descriptions. Everyone on a project should be working together for the betterment of the project, even if that means crossing boundaries to perform an action out side of their domain. At Disney's theme parks, it's not uncommon for a chef to come out of the kitchen to speak to a child, or a janitor to stop what he or she is doing in order to help someone with directions. Any employee (called "cast members" at Disney) will pick up trash upon seeing it. We need to bring this same mentality to our projects. The "it's not my job" syndrome is much too prevalent, and is detrimental to success.

Cast Excellence

According to Disney, successful organizational cultures are pre-defined, goal-oriented, and clear to all. People do not have to stop and think about the culture. It's ingrained. To build a successful culture, we must be specific about which traditions should be honored and what language should be used (for instance, Disney's use of the terms "cast" and "guest" send a strong message about values). We must give situational examples of behaviors that demonstrate the values we expect, especially when it relates to customer touch points.

Most importantly, we must establish *prioritized service quality standards*, and it should be simple. Disney has four, in priority order:

1. Safety
2. Courtesy
3. Show (e.g., guest experience, themes, costumes)
4. Efficiency

Note that efficiency, while important, comes after the others. Walt Disney never wanted to sacrifice safety, courtesy, or show, for the sake of efficiency. At any service decision point, it was clear to all—and still is—what criteria should be used for making the decision. This is where the proverbial rubber meets the road regarding value-based decision-making, and allows us to create a more empowered and engaged team. As Roy Disney said, "When values are clear, decisions are easy."

A strong service quality model boosts the customer experience and the employee experience, which are core elements in the profit chain. An empowered employee with a clear decision path is a more satisfied employee. Satisfied employees perform better, leading to higher internal service quality, better products, higher external service quality, and ultimately, higher revenue. Disney keeps its cast members happy through fun rewards, contests, and an engaging work environment. Generally, they recognize people in four areas: guest satisfaction, performance, behaviors, and longevity. This is not a bad model for projects as well.

Guest Services

While traditional views on quality service (and, I might add, project management) are on *meeting* needs, the Disney approach is to *exceed* expectations. They do this with a strong focus on details. While big WOWs are expensive and hard to sustain, Disney's "little WOWs" involve minor, inexpensive details that serve to surprise and delight customers. "Bump the lamp" is a popular metaphor within Disney. Its name comes from a scene in *Roger Rabbit*, where animators painstakingly fine-tuned the shadows of a swinging lamp that actor Bob Hoskins bumped his head on. Another studio might have cut the scene, citing its difficulty or expense. At Disney it served as a lasting example of the need to insert "fine touches," even if only a few people notice.

Disney has another term they call "guestology." This is the art of understanding your guests/customers through surveys, discussion, formal interviews, or observation. The goal is to find out how they think and make decisions. Disney uses a system they called "The Disney Compass," by which NWSE serves as a model to identify the guest's:

- **N**eeds
- **W**ants
- **S**tereotypes (the traits that they ascribe to *you*)
- **E**motions (their emotional state at different times and situations)

The following Disney service principles support these themes:

- When balancing customer needs and wants with your service quality standards, remember that the customer isn't always right. However, when they're wrong, allow them to be wrong with dignity. If you must reject a need they have, offer some alternative or future service.
- Be sure to examine your three primary delivery systems: cast (employees), setting (environment), and process (structure), with regard to all customer touch points. Disney uses an Integration Matrix to also validate these three delivery systems against all four service standards: safety, courtesy, show, and efficiency.
- Don't build things for yourself. Understand your customer's needs and wants, and build it for *them*. As Peter Drucker said, "Quality in a service or product is not what you put into it. It is what the client or customer gets out of it."

Loyalty

Customer loyalty is a vital ingredient of a profitable organization. Even small repeat purchases bring huge revenues over the lifetime of a single family. But does it apply to internal projects as well? To answer this I'd ask a different question: Couldn't any internal department or project manager benefit from being regularly sought out by others in the organization as a model of consistency and excellence? And couldn't this serve as a measure of how well the team contributes to the organization as a whole? Assuming the answer is yes, customer loyalty is something every project manager can benefit from.

Disney attributes high loyalty to three factors:

- Identity (people believe in a brand and feel a sense of ownership)
- Value (promise is delivered at each contact point, and exceeds expectations)
- Relationships (a strong connection exists that exceeds the mere transaction)

To close gaps in these areas, Disney suggest that we:

- Ensure our promise is aligned with our target customer
- Identify and deliver our strengths
- Emotionally connect with our employees and customers.

As it is difficult to make meaningful emotional connections amidst the daily trials of life and work, in keeping with the "little WOWs" philosophy, Disney asks each of its people to make just one meaningful connection each day.

According to Disney research, the number one reason customers leave most companies is that they sense employee indifference. This is also a key complaint I hear from organizations about the project teams and departments that serve them. One solution Disney uses to avoid this fate is "Experience Mapping." They map the elements involved in each customer touch point, and walk through the customer experience, noting where corrections are needed, and where little WOWs can be inserted to exceed expectations.

Finally, in order to move from "meeting" to "exceeding" expectations, Disney suggests that the following criteria must be present:

- Employees must be empowered to make small improvements
- They must desire to improve or boost service (they must see the need)
- Low or no-cost improvements must be sought
- Management permission is not required

Summary

If we look at project management as a service, we must look to service-driven organizations for innovative examples. Certainly Disney is an exemplary model. This article merely touches the surface of the material covered at the Disney Institute. I highly recommend the Disney Institute's programs, which are offered at Walt Disney World, or in a more streamlined and affordable touring version. I also encourage you to read *The Disney Way*, by Bill Capodagli and Lynn Jackson, which has further examples.

Sam Walton once said, "The goal of a company is to have customer service that is not just the best, but legendary." It should also be the goal of a project manager. That's a word worth remembering… legendary.

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