

## A Note from the Author

*Van France, “a strange combination of Jiminy Cricket,  
Mary Poppins, and Donald Duck”*

It was an evening I’ll always remember. We peppered Van with an unending stream of questions:

“What was it like working with Walt?”

“How different would Disneyland be today if Walt were still with us?”

“What would Walt do?”

“What would Walt say?”

“What kind of a leader was Walt?”

We asked Van these and many more questions about the old days, when he worked directly with Walt Disney. It was a rare opportunity for us to interact with one of the true living legends of the company, and we were bound and determined to make the most of it. Van was patient—even gracious at first—as he responded to the kinds of questions he had undoubtedly answered thousands of times before. I don’t remember which question actually set him off—perhaps it was the one asking him to lay out his vision for the company’s future—but in an instant, he went from a polite elderly

statesman to a whirling ball of profane energy. In his inimitable style, he began a rapid-fire pattern of alternately sharing his favorite quotes from Walt and then challenging us. “How the hell would I know? You’re supposed to be the future leaders of this place! What do *you* think?” We had just witnessed the infamous passion and temper of Van France, the founder of the Disney University.

We were gathered in the main theater of the Disney University at Disneyland, the very institution Van helped create. I was one of 20 leadership interns in that audience, each representing one of the various operating divisions of the company. We had been chosen to participate in a rigorous six-month leadership training camp known as the Disney Management Intern Program. Most of us were in our middle to late twenties and thrilled to be participating in a program designed to groom the future leaders of the company. In his role as featured guest speaker, Van kicked off the program, and he did an admirable job of setting the tone. He gave us a personal account of what it meant to work directly for Walt Disney and what he learned from such an amazingly creative, always demanding, laser-focused, and charismatic leader. For most of us in the room, that evening marked the beginning of a most intense and rewarding leadership journey. As the current and future leaders of the company, how would we keep alive the dreams, the passions, and the focus of Walt Disney?

Fortunately for me, this wasn’t the only time I met Van. Among the 20 interns, I was one of the two assigned to the human resources division. Since the Disney University is part of the HR division, I had plenty of additional chances to interact with Van. My career goal was to be in management at the Disney University, and so I spent a lot of my time as an intern learning as much as possible from the trainers and managers of the university, including Van.

What is the connection to Jiminy Cricket, Mary Poppins, and Donald Duck?<sup>1</sup> This spot-on description of Van is shared by many who worked with him, in particular Dick Nunis, the former chairman of Walt Disney Parks and Resorts and board member of The

Walt Disney Company. Dick would know; he was the first person Van hired at Disneyland. Van brought Dick on board to help him design the very first Disney employee orientation and training program. Walt needed employees who would “create happiness,” and it was up to Van and his new employee, Dick, to lead the charge.

Jiminy Cricket is well known for tirelessly offering positive encouragement to Pinocchio, directing him onto a more honest path—even after Pinocchio repeatedly ignores his advice. Mary Poppins, as the nanny of two spirited children, is famous for coaxing them to do the right thing by singing, “A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.” Similarly to these two characters, Van was a moral compass for the company. But his style couldn’t have been more different from those of the patient Jiminy Cricket and the genteel Mary Poppins. Van’s style was similar to that of Donald Duck, the beloved character well known for his bursts of temper. Like the irascible Donald, Van was quick to give an earful of criticism to anyone who was not perpetuating Walt’s dream.<sup>2</sup>

Van, at about five feet eight inches tall and perhaps 135 pounds—dripping wet—was larger than life. He believed passionately in Walt’s dream and demanded the same passion from those around him. In fact, Van was actually a lot like Walt himself. Walt’s dream of creating a place offering a most unique family entertainment experience—Disneyland—was mirrored by Van’s dream of creating a place offering a most unique employee education experience—the Disney University.

During his 30-plus years with the company, Van experienced the many ups and downs that come with corporate life. He saw firsthand some of the spectacular successes—and failures—of the Walt Disney Company. He learned from those experiences and, always the trainer, was quick to share his opinions.

Armed with a clear vision and leadership support and surrounded by an immensely talented team, Van France created an institution that continues to define excellence and unparalleled success. The Disney University plays a major role in turning out

employees who are second to none when it comes to friendliness, knowledge, attentiveness, passion, and guest service. Disney theme parks and resorts around the world are the main attraction; the Disney University trains the supporting cast that helps create the world-famous Disney Magic.

Van France, professor emeritus Disney Universities, was a creative dynamo. The leadership lessons he shared with so many generations of Disney employees are more important now than ever before. Van, a strange combination of three of Disney's most famous characters—Jiminy Cricket, Mary Poppins, and Donald Duck—exuded qualities and values every leader should strive to attain: crystal-clear direction plus an unwavering commitment and passion.

Van France died in 1999. His leadership lessons are alive and well.

—Doug Lipp  
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