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Doing it the Disney way

customer service



The marketplace is defined by competition – resulting in better customer service, according to training consultant Doug Lipp. Courtesy The Guild

Walt wouldn't stand for any nonsense

Company's former head of training spreads the wisdom with a Dubai seminar next month

Lianne Gutcher

N Doug Lipp is the former head of training at Disney University, the staff training and development arm of the Walt Disney Company. Since leaving Disney to become a consultant, his clients have included Mercedes-Benz, Cisco and McDonald's. He is an expert in the field of leadership and customer service. He will be holding seminar on these topics in Dubai next month.

Q Will this be your first time visiting the Middle East?

A Yes – but I have a history [here] even though I've never been. My grandfather lived in Bahrain for almost 11 years; he was there in 1936 to open the very first refinery. He was with Bapco and before that Caltex and Standard Oil.

You credit Disney with having "the world's most engaged, loyal and customer-centric employees". That's not necessarily how many service-sector employees in the Middle East would be characterised. Is it possible to improve

customer service standards here?

What will drive that is the consumer base – if consumers get upset and decide they are going to spend their money in a place that has a friendlier environment. A marketplace will change as long as there is some form of competition. There is always someone who is going to be selling the same things as you – maybe for a cheaper price. So are you selling the product and the experience? Or just the product? And if it's just the product you are always going to have somebody who can undercut you on price.

OK, but the UAE, for example, is a very transient place. People work here for a bit then move on. How can businesses win employees' loyalty?

There are transient businesses worldwide: where you have, for example, a ski resort, you have employees who come in for four months and then they are gone. If your organisational culture shows respect even to a transient workforce then you will engender that kind of loyalty so that transient workforce will come back to you the next season. If you look in any

HR handbook for any corporation [it says] we must respect our employees, we must respect our customers. Oftentimes it's just the opposite of that. What I will be addressing in my workshop is the need for honesty and the need for an organisational culture in which the words and the actions are doing and saying the same thing. All too often there is a disparity, a discrepancy there. As for as expatriates, I am a firm believer that every organisation, as soon as it possibly can, must localise its workforce.

What will people learn at your workshop?

It's about leadership and the success stories and failure stories I've seen in a variety of companies around the world; I'm including of course my own experience with the Disney organisation. It will be an opportunity for people to assess their strengths as a leader [and] opportunity for people to consider their weaknesses and [then to figure out] how you recognise and minimise those weaknesses. And I will give people plenty of chances to ask me questions.

Who is the seminar aimed at?

I've really designed it for a variety of sizes of organisations. And quite frankly the fundamentals really don't change from large to small organisations. The most important thing to realise is that the successes of Disney or any large corporation

can be applied to the smallest family-run business.

So what are those fundamentals?

It's about showing respect to each other, to employees, and then to your customers. I certainly realise that a family-run business can have a lot more emotion than a major corporation. But in either case sometimes you have to be willing — as a business owner or a business leader — to make some very difficult decisions.

Can you give me an example from your own career?

A specific example from my career at Disney is when Walt Disney would say: "There are a lot of people at the Disney studios who have retired; they just haven't yet told me". It was his tongue-in-cheek way of saying: "Produce or leave". When I was at the Disney headquarters the company was almost bought out three times in the mid-80s because it just wasn't producing quality products any more. Two new executives were brought in from the outside who brought back that sense of urgency.

✉ lgutcher@thenational.ae

Doug Lipp's seminar on "Leadership & Service Magic" is to be held at Grosvenor House on November 6 from 9am to 5pm. He will also be presenting in Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar

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