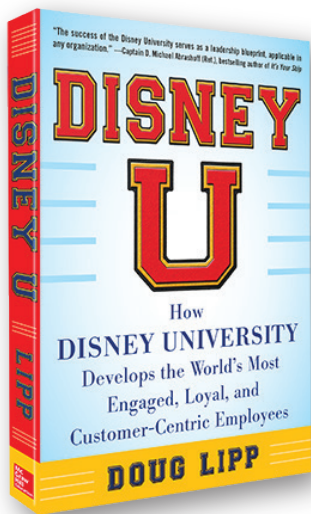


Disney University: The Power of Free Popcorn



Are the people who pay for goods and services "Customers," "Patients," "Students," "Residents," or "Guests?"

Are the people working in an organization "Associates," "Team Members," "Partners," "Employees" or "Cast Members"?

The debate about how to best address customers and employees consumes valuable time, energy and money in many organizations. Yet, merely changing nouns or verbs won't ensure a culture dedicated to world class customer service or create a motivated and engaged workforce.

Equally preposterous is the notion that simply slapping a fresh coat of paint on a dilapidated, run-down house will bring it up to code. Just as paint won't improve the structural integrity of a building, expertly designed training interventions and clever words for customers and employees have no value without leadership support. These organizations face more onerous issues.

Assessing and clarifying organizational values is a precursor to future improvement. Let's start with the fundamental value of trust.

Picture the following scenario in front of "it's a small world" at Disneyland:

Timothy, a custodial cast member, is scurrying about sweeping up trash when he hears the child crying. Making his way through the guests converging on source of this commotion, Timothy sees the problem. A small boy, melting down in tears, is focused on the ground, stomping his feet in anger. The empty popcorn box and scattered kernels tell the story. Making matters worse is the boy's father, scolding the boy for his carelessness. This is definitely not "The Happiest Place on Earth" for the boy, his father, nor for the scores of guests watching the scene unfold.

Within moments, Timothy appears next to the boy, kneels down and says, "I'm sorry about your popcorn." Instantaneously, two things happen: dad stops yelling and the child, almost startled by the question, nods his head and stops wailing. Continuing, Timothy says, "Mickey Mouse told me he saw you drop your popcorn and knows you're really sad right now." Pausing for a moment to let this message sink in, Timothy continues, "And Mickey Mouse wants to know if you would like this big, fresh box of popcorn."

Miraculously, a box of popcorn appears from behind Timothy's back.

"Profound" doesn't come close to describing the impact of this interaction on the child, his father, and the many guests who've gathered. Timothy is equally buoyed by the interaction. Unfortunately, some organizations seem determined to undermine employee trust, morale, creativity and effectiveness—up and down the hierarchical chain of command—with restrictive policies. Far too many organizations spend more time worrying about "the cost of the popcorn" than creating a culture promoting staff unity and morale.

Handing out free stuff is certainly not the answer to every problem. The organization that constantly rectifies problems by doling out free goods and services ("comping") is likely plagued by more fundamental issues. Yet, companies with the best products and tightest service standards must prepare for eventual customer complaints and requests. Too few are well prepared. "I'll have to ask my supervisor," reflects the sad state of organizational health for legions of employees and their disgruntled customers:

- Potential problems are not discussed.
- Resolution strategies are not considered.
- Employees aren't trusted.

Those managing the Disney University and their counterparts running Operations at theme parks and resorts relentlessly consider potential problems and their resolution. "What do we do when operations don't go 'according to the script'?" Managers and cast members constantly assess, and even role-play, guest problems and resolution strategies.

The cost to Disney of a box of popcorn is mere pennies, yet the message conveyed to guests and cast members is worth the weight of the popcorn, in gold:

- Actions speak louder than words. "We care about your happiness."
- Trust. Empowered cast members solve most commonly occurring problems.

Popcorn empowerment embodies an organizational culture crafted carefully and methodically. Timothy's problem-solving strategy is but one example of creating a culture dedicated to a culture of trust and service excellence ... not focused on "slapping a coat of paint" on problems.