

Disney University and “Mary Poppins”

A guest post by Doug Lipp, author of *Disney U* and the former head of Disney’s corporate headquarters’s training team.

“That’s what storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again.” Tom Hanks, in his portrayal of Walt Disney, uttered these words in one of the most poignant scenes in the just-released Disney film, “Saving Mr. Banks.”

This comedic drama sheds light on the challenges Walt Disney faced convincing novelist P.L. Travers to sell him the rights for a film adaptation of her book “Mary Poppins.”

Whether or not Walt Disney actually used this phrase with Mrs. Travers is irrelevant. Indisputable is that Walt Disney was a masterful storyteller. His ability to create vivid images, through words, drawings and film, transformed countless ideas into reality. Absent Walt’s talent for storytelling, his dreams of creating the Oscar Award winning “Mary Poppins,” or a theme park called Disneyland, wouldn’t have come true.

Equally important is Walt’s brilliance as a leader; he surrounded himself with staff similarly adept at igniting passion through stories. Throughout “Saving Mr. Banks” are engaging scenes depicting how Walt relied upon the songwriting prowess of composers Richard M. and Robert B. Sherman to transform Mary Poppins from words in Travers’ book, to a vibrant character on film.

Van France, founder of the Disney University, was an equally talented storyteller. Walt hired Van in 1955 to transform a group of young Californians, with no business experience, into producers of the Disneyland Dream. Van’s storytelling prowess evolved into the timeless training programs and educational materials of the Disney University, capturing the hearts and minds of millions. Van’s audience was initially Disneyland employees; the many thousands of cast members who have helped create The Happiest Place on Earth for nearly 60 years.

One of Van’s storytelling strategies involved creating a whole new language at Disneyland; a language that painted a very clear picture of how employees would evolve into actors. Disneyland is a huge stage, a show in and of itself, and Van leveraged this by introducing show-business terms. He reasoned that a new vocabulary, coupled with strong organizational values, could help bring pride and energy to very demanding jobs. Plus, it wasn’t limited to employees of the park; Van also changed the words used for customers. Thus, employees became “hosts,” “hostesses,” and “cast members.” Customers became “guests,” and crowd-control became “guest control.” This combination of a unique vocabulary and memorable training programs, supported by Walt’s unwavering focus on quality, set the stage for decades of unparalleled success. Van France’s lessons now form the basis of the renowned Disney-style of service at every Disney theme park and resort in the world.

Telling the story of Van France was a two year journey for me, culminating in my recent book, *Disney U: How Disney University Develops the World’s Most Loyal, Engaged and Customer-Centric Employees*. While writing *Disney U*, I would occasionally struggle with word choice and writing style: How to best share the creative brilliance of Van and the founding members of the Disney University? How could I capture readers’ hearts and minds? During those moments, I simply remembered a fundamental skill Van taught me ... tell a story.

Setting the tone for each of the 13 chapters in *Disney U* are never-before-told stories from numerous Disney legends. These pioneers share behind-the-scenes success stories of how they helped bring Walt Disney’s and Van France’s dreams to life.

Storytellers ignite passion, foster creativity and help us explore possibilities. How are you using the power of storytelling with your employees, colleagues or customers?

A Note about “Mary Poppins” and the Contributor of *Disney U* Foreword: Jim Cora, the retired chairman of Disneyland International, worked directly for Walt and started the Disney University with Van France. While preparing for a presentation we recently gave at The Walt Disney Family Museum, Jim recounted a fun story. Early in his 43-year career with Disney, Jim had the opportunity to work a plum assignment; he oversaw parking operations for the 1964 Hollywood premier of one of the most famous of all Disney movies ... *Mary Poppins*.

