

Why Disneyland Thrives at 60 — Part 4 of 5— Educate



An educated workforce is an empowered workforce. Today, Doug Lipp continues his series on why Disneyland continues to grow and thrive at 60 years young.

“Marketing is the time and money you spend to get people in the door. Training is the investment you make to get guests to come back and cast members to stay; it creates loyalty. If show was affected, I never cut corners to save money. I never cancelled a training program if it helped our show.”

– Jim Cora, Retired Chairman Disneyland International, Founding Member Disney University

Over the course of this 5-part series, I have introduced to you Disney University Founder Van France. Van’s insistence on perpetuating Walt Disney’s dream of creating “The Happiest Place on Earth” set in motion an organizational development revolution that is now studied by corporations worldwide; The Disney University approach to employee engagement.

A Culture of Education and Learning: “Money might be tight, creativity is free” – Van France

In 1955, Disney University founder Van France made a commitment to Walt Disney that influenced millions of Disneyland employees ... and ultimately the experience of hundreds of millions of guests. Despite the inevitable changes he knew the company would face, Van France helped shape, and then perpetuate, a corporate culture that is both steadfast and flexible. The four corporate values Van France identified, and then brought to life through his transformative employee development initiatives, form the DNA of Disney operations worldwide; each of the eleven Disney theme parks, the resorts and cruise line reflect Walt’s and Van’s values of Innovate, Support, Educate and Entertain (Van called them circumstances). This segment examines the third circumstance, “educate.”

“Back in 1932, Walt had established his own unique school for training his animators and he could understand why we had to develop our own breed of spectacular show people.” – Van France

This circumstance reveals the roots of the Disney University; Walt’s long-standing value of providing employees a tailored, relevant training and education experience. Walt Disney helped create an art school for his animators because, in his own words, “Art schools that existed then didn’t quite have enough for what we needed, so we set up our own art school ... we went a little bit beyond what they were getting in art school.”

Stodgy art schools didn’t deter Walt Disney’s goal of providing creative education to his animators. Walt’s solution was to bring into the Disney Studio prominent educators and artists—such as Frank Lloyd Wright—to give classes and lectures to the animators. The innovative ideas and outside-the-box thinking of these visiting educators became an invaluable source of inspiration to the animators.

At Disneyland, Van had to create a different version of Walt's art school; a unique school that would create a different type of artist. Along with Dick Nunis, Van created Disneyland's first new-hire orientation program in 1955. By 1963, this vehicle for training cast members in the art of creating happiness evolved into the University of Disneyland.

Employee Education is Essential: No Excuses Allowed. Keenly aware "The word 'training' has a nauseating effect on some people," Van didn't hesitate to challenge poorly designed or outdated training programs. He was the first person to change or eliminate a training event if he felt it wasn't getting results. He also knew that training alone wasn't the answer; training couldn't solve every problem.

Van was equally ardent in challenging excuses for not conducting training. Similar to Walt Disney, Van rejected the notion that economic malaise warrants abandoning efforts to plus the show. Van firmly believed in employment development activities and didn't let a slim budget get in the way. The following quote is pure Van France:

"The budget has become the scapegoat ... it is the coward's way out of any problem."

60 years after Disneyland's grand opening, cast members at every Disney resort around the world still stream through the Disney University, before interacting with guests. And, the cast members of today are often quite different from those who attended Van's first orientation programs; generational, cultural and linguistic differences abound. Yet, these cast members continue to learn, and then exude, the happiness and empathy Walt and Van were determined to foster.

Education, offered consistently and with creativity, is an indispensable value held in high esteem in the history and culture of The Walt Disney Company.

What about your organization? Consider the following questions:

- To what extent is employee education and training valued in your organization?
- Which leaders overtly support employee development? How?
- How is training offered? Classroom, On-The-Job-Training, Mentoring? Training needn't be a big-budget extravaganza.
- Which leads to the final question ...
- How does your organization bring to life training "outside the classroom?"