

Why Disneyland Thrives at 60 – Part 2 – Innovate



Doug Lipp continues his look at Disneyland at 60.

“It took more than a good idea to bring the Disney University into existence. This new baby in the corporate family might have died in the delivery room had it not been for certain circumstances.”

– Van France, founder of the Disney University”

Yesterday, I introduced to you Disney University Founder Van France. A human dynamo, Van helped set the stage for Disneyland’s 60 years of success. His insistence on challenging the status quo to foster innovation was rivaled only by Walt Disney.



July 17, 2015 marks the 60th Anniversary of Disneyland's grand opening. Despite constant bombardment by the dual challenges of competitors and cultural shifts, Disneyland remains an icon of success.

How do the employees and leaders at Disneyland continue bringing to life Walt's dream of being "The Happiest Place on Earth?" The answer lies in a rock-solid set of values and a crystal clear, yet adaptable, corporate culture. 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 Van's values (Van called them circumstances).

Innovate

Support

Educate

Entertain

Let's explore the first of the Four Circumstances Van identified: Innovation.

Circumstance #1: Innovation

This circumstance reveals the essential trait associated with those who break new ground; the pioneers who are brutally honest and not afraid to take risks. Van's focus on being innovative created an ever-evolving culture of learning and adapting. He learned from a great mentor, Walt Disney, who constantly challenged the status quo.

Van's zeal for challenging entrenched behavioral patterns and beliefs is evident in a passage he created for an early 1980's Disneyland management training program:

"Budgets, schedules, reports, more reports, union negotiations, training programs, meetings ... more meetings, handbooks, cover-your-ass memos and the endless things which take up your time are of no value unless they end up producing A HAPPY GUEST."

Not content to merely challenge fellow managers, Van also held top management's feet to the flames. Consider this excerpt from a memo Van penned in 1962, in which he proposed a new approach to employee training ... the Disney University. The recipients? Walt Disney and the executives in charge of Disneyland. The creative word choice is pure Van:

"Disneyland will never be completed. We've certainly lived up to that promise. But what about the people who operate it? Are we growing with the show, or just getting older? The trouble with people is that we get hardening of the mental arteries, cirrhosis of the enthusiasm and arthritis of the imagination."

Van didn't hesitate to stir the pot to promote innovation. Jack Lindquist, the former president of Disneyland and a leader who spent his share of time with Walt Disney and Van France says this of Van, "Van was a maverick. He didn't fit into any box ... he was his own box."

This is just a glimpse into the magic formula which made and continues to make Disneyland special. In the coming days, we'll explore even more of the recipe for Disneyland success.

We encourage you to let us know how the principle above applies to your work and home life. Are there lessons here for you?