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Leadership Skills

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Walt Disney: Leading into Breaking History**Introduction**

Throughout the millions of years of the planet's rich history, several leaders have risen to the top, standing against the test of time. Leaders like Constantine, Alexander the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, Queen Elizabeth I, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. are still learned about and praised for their leadership long after their deaths. The history of their leadership leads on, and it leads on for a reason. While leaders can be those of high positions and high performance, many define great leaders as those who have the power to influence a group and are capable of doing such in an impactful way (Staff, 2018). One of these great leaders is Walter Elias Disney. He may not have been a war hero, a leader of national pride, or even an advocate for equality, but his leadership is worthy of being regarded as one of the greats and is worth studying long after his death. His impact on the film and entertainment industry is monumental and his leadership ability to lead a team to break such incredible records is inspiring. Leaders are not born, they are shaped through years of experience, intentionality, grit, and hard work. At various points and times in Disney's life, many around him would not be led to consider him a great and noteworthy leader, but through his years of experience and work in building up an empire within the film industry, Walt was formed and crafted into a remarkable leader and icon. Naturally, Walt Disney is not a man free of flaws, which can be seen as well in the leading style of his team at Walt Disney Studios, however, the legacy he left many years after his passing speaks for itself his ability to raise new leaders and lead a team, and lead a successful one at that.

Biography of Walt Disney

Walter Elias Disney was born on December 5, 1901, in the city of Chicago, although he spent the most memorable years of his childhood in the rural farmlands of Marceline, Missouri. (Thomas, et.al., 2023, chapter 1). To help support the family, both Walt and his older brother Roy were charged with the responsibility of delivering newspapers before and after school every day for six years (Thomas, et. al., 2023, chapter 3). The rigorous conditions of the Kansas winters made this job especially difficult and led to Walt developing skills in perseverance, determination, and grit (Hancock, 2013). Throughout his schooling, Walt had a passion and knack for doodling during class, creating the now iconic character of Mickey Mouse in one of these school doodles. In 1917 Walt began attending classes at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, however, his choice to join the war as an ambulance driver kept him from pursuing his passion for drawing for a time (Tieck, 2010, pg. 8). After spending a few years after the war at a cartoon company in Kansas City, Disney packed up and moved to Los Angeles where he expected to be offered a job rather quickly having been qualified for a position, but he learned Hollywood was not so simple (Tieck, 2010, pg.10; Quinn, C., & Vertilachini, 2019).

Beginning his career as the world knows it today, Walt teamed up with his older brother, Roy, and together the two created the Disney Brothers Company. The brothers were denied loans from the bank to begin their film company, but Roy had a skillful art in persuasion and being a former bank employee understood the financial side of the business and was able to convince their uncle Robert to loan them the money to kick start the business (Quinn, C., & Vertilachini, 2019). By 1926 the company had grown from just the two brothers to a whole staff of animators and the brothers recognized it was time to move to a new space, and with the new space and staff began going by Walt Disney Company (WDC) (Quinn, C., & Vertilachini, 2019). In 1927 the

WDC debuted Walt's long-ago doodle, Mickey Mouse in a cartoon short film, a character which today is considered to be one of the most iconic and recognizable cartoon characters (Tieck, 2010, pg. 14). From there the company continued to grow and Walt continued to push the limit and boundary on, first, the cartoon industry, then the film industry in general, and even to the entertainment industry of amusement parks. Walt Disney and The WDC found themselves hurdling various hurdles in their early days like the Great Depression and World War II. During the second world war, the WDC created shorts and cartoons used to boost the morale of the American soldiers and the public surrounding the war (Mollen, C. & Vertilachini, B., 2021). Simultaneously, the studio itself was used as a place to house soldiers after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the film team worked to make soldier training videos as well (Giltin, 2010, pg. 62-64). Over the years, Walt Disney earned several cinema awards for his and his team's work, and he is often thought of today as the man behind the Happiest Place on Earth.

Building an Empire

Walt Disney was a visionary, more so than anything else. His ability to take his vision, share it with his team, and bring it to life is in large part what sets him apart as an incredible and noteworthy leader. What is most remarkable about Walt Disney and Walt Disney Studios is their story of building an empire. They revolutionized the film industry, specifically the cartoon industry, and still to this day even, the Walt Disney Studios tests the limits of cinematography and animation. The authors of *Entrepreneurship the Disney Way* believe so strongly in Disney's contribution to revolutionizing the film industry, and arguably even American culture surrounding entertainment, that they said "It seem[s] that where goes Walt Disney, so goes American history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (Goldsby & Matthews, 2019, pg. 2). How does one company go from two employees producing short cartoons to becoming one of

the most recognizable companies and largest entertainment producers in the world? According to Walt Disney himself, it would seem like testing the limits and trying new things. Walt Disney remarked there is no secret to the Disney way, but that they just “[kept] moving forward, opening up new doors, and doing new things because [they were] curious and curiosity [kept] leading [them] down new paths.” (Gleim, 2021).

In light of Walt Disney’s drive to be curious and test out his curiosity comes the first major breakthrough for the Walt Disney Company, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. This project came as a solution to the Great Depression and its effect on American movie theaters. By 1934, the WDC had produced several short films, beginning with *Steamboat Willie* in 1928 which featured the iconic Mickey Mouse, and they had established themselves well within American movie theaters. With the rise of the Great Depression, most American families could not afford to continue to go out to the movies, and additionally, theaters could not afford to pay film producers for short films. Disney came up with the idea to try something never done before... producing a full-length animated feature (Giltin, 2010). The three-year project had many of Disney’s employees skeptical of its success, in fact, some in the team even went so far as to call it “Disney’s Folly”, anticipating that a full-length cartoon film could not hold an audience’s attention (Giltin, 2010, pg. 56). Quite to the contrary when the film released in 1937 it was an absolute hit and “earned more than \$8 million, twice as much as any previous film in history”, and it set it a new tone for the world of animation (Giltin, 2010, pg. 57). The following year Disney even won an Oscar for the film, an Oscar specially designed with one man and seven little dwarf trophies (Giltin, 2010). With the first major hurdle for the WDC came their first major triumph and it set the trajectory of a long and successful empire within the film industry.

The second most remarkable thing of Walt Disney's career and impact is the building of Disneyland, in fact the concept alone was completely new. Never before had anyone ever created a whole theme park centered around a film company and their films. In fact, never before had a theme park in itself ever been made (Chytry, 2010). Disney first began breaking ground and the expectation of possibilities in the film industry, and now he was moving on to the entertainment business, venturing to do something totally new. The desire and hope for the theme park was to truly transport guests inside the world of Disney films, giving them a sense of escape and a sense of magic (Hobbs, 2010). On opening day millions of Americans and their families flooded the gates of Disneyland, although, Walt has remarked Disneyland was not fully ready that day and several rides did not properly function, as well as there being a real issue with incredibly long lines. However, after some time of fixing up and bringing Disneyland to its meant to be state, the public and critics raved and doted on the new experience and form of getaway. Today, the Disney parks are referred to as the Happiest Place on Earth or the Most Magical Place on Earth. Today, there are over 400 amusement parks in the United States alone, and both Disneyland and Disney World theme parks find themselves at the top of the list (*Amusement Parks*, 2023). Walt Disney's legacy has far surpassed his own life, though he died in 1966, his team continued plans for the second amusement park of Disney World, which held its grand opening in October 1971. Millions of visitors travel to the Disney parks every year and experience a taste of the Disney Magic.

Recognizable Leadership Skills at Work

There is so much evidence of concrete leadership skills in Walt Disney's approach to leading his Imagineers, as his employees have come to be referred to. In the Leadership Skills course, there are various identifiable leadership qualities Walt Disney possesses, qualities such as

surrounding one's self with complimentary co-workers, Not asking anything of his employees he wasn't willing to do himself, and many others.

Walt's ability to ally himself in his work with those who complement his weaknesses has been an ability of his from the start of the Walt Disney Studios company, dating back to when it was just becoming the Disney Brothers Company. As earlier mentioned in the paper, Walt's brother Roy was the more financially aware of the two of them, exemplified in his ability to persuade their uncle Robert into providing a loan, one which the Brothers were able to pay off within three months (Quinn, C., & Vertilachini, 2019). This compliment between the two brothers remained throughout their whole time working together as Walt headed the animation and art side while Roy took care of the business side. Walt did not do this for himself and his brother alone. He actually had a real talent and ability to see the strengths in his employees and strategically place them on projects to fit their strengths (Peri, 2008; Quinn, C., & Vertilachini, 2019). He was great at recognizing where another possessed a strength that he himself was lacking, and he used this as a tool to create a very successful and creative team that could achieve his envisioned goals and dreams. In the Leadership Skills course, this ability was highly emphasized, it not only creates a team that is operating to its best strengths, but it creates a team that finds satisfaction as each member can operate in their own skill sets as well as in their own place they are passionate about. This particular component of Walt Disney's leadership can be the source of the strong team and its unprecedented success in the film industry.

During *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the filming process was a little hectic and chaotic in the WDC production studio. The company worked day and night... literally... to accomplish the project by Disney's expected release date. Much like Brenae Brown's team had to point out to her, it would appear that Disney had a bit of an issue with unrealistic expectations

and deadlines of his team. While this is most considerably a weak spot in Disney's leadership, there is an element to admirable in it. Walt Disney expected a lot out of his team, but nothing he was not willing to do. He was in the office every time he expected his team to be in the office, and he took no breaks from this way of leading, even to the extent that he continued to show up day in and day out immediately following adopting a second daughter (Gilton, 2010). Though this way of working is arguably unsustainable, unhealthy, and unbalanced, you can't say he wasn't dedicated and determined to be right there in the thick of it with his team. It's important for a leader to be willing and ready to do any and everything they would ask their team to do, it shows equality that is both respectable and highly personal. Additionally, a leader who gets right in there with their team is able to better boost morale and support their team members as they are more aware of the realities of the situation at the company and the overall well-being of their employees.

Analysis of Walt's leadership is useful to understand his way of leadership, however, another critical element of understanding his style of leadership and impact in that role comes from hearing the stories, accounts, and character witnesses of some of Walt Disney's colleagues. Researching through interviews with WDC employees sheds light on more personal components of Disney's leadership. He was one of those leaders, according to an employee named Ben Sharpsteen who had a natural confidence about him and was always sure of himself, his ideas, and his abilities, something which Ben strongly admired especially given that Walt was much younger than himself (Peri, 2008). Walt allowed for this same confidence to encourage and build up his team, compelling them to share in confidence and to strive for the best quality standard of work. Ben additionally remarked on Walt's high standard for the WDC's quality of work, saying "In Walt's estimation, everything that was done had to be executed with a great deal of thought

toward finesse in order to make it better.”, implying a hint of perfectionism to Walt’s style of leadership (Peri, 2008, pg. 5). There is a fine line between perfectionism being a desirable quality in a leader and being problematic. For Disney, it seemed that in most ways this was positive as he used this drive for perfection to inspire and rally his employees around his ideas and their work. Another employee, Ken Anderson, reminiscing on the beginning of the *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* project, recounted that Walt’s vision casting for the film “lit such a fire under those of [them] who were there” that they immediately desired to create such an incredible thing and they were ready to work hard to see it to fruition (Peri, 2008, pg. 135). He had an incredible ability to draw his team into his vision and empower them to make this vision a reality. This is a vital skill for great effort leaders to possess.

Of course, with all great leaders come some not-so-great moments in their leadership or some flawed approaches they’ve implemented before. While Walt Disney is an incredible leader, visionary, entrepreneur, and artist, he certainly has his moments of questionable leadership. One thing that Ben Sharpsteen notes about Walt Disney is he was not much of a giver of positive feedback. The leadership course emphasized the importance of positive reinforcement and encouragement to a leader’s employees. Providing affirmations often boosts not only the employee’s morale but their feelings regarding their relationship with their work and with the leader over them. In Disney’s mind, the completed product was an affirmation of hard work in itself, but that real joy could be found in moving on to the next thing. Another aspect of his leadership that is not so admirable is his extremely high expectations and tendencies toward perfectionism. As earlier mentioned, during the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* Disney pushed his team to work extremely hard, which eventually led to the workers forming a union and 1500 employees going on Strike against the WDC in 1941, demanding higher pay and

working fewer hours (Gitlin, 2010). Pushing one's team to excellence as a leader can be beneficial to the team as they feel more empowered, but pushing the boundaries and expectations to the point where workers feel they must demand more pay and fewer hours is a sign of a blindspot in a leader's awareness. Walt let this affect him in many ways as he above all else values loyalty and honesty, and he didn't have the same kind of trusting relationship with his employees again after this occurrence (Gitlin, 2010 & Peri, 2008). As mentioned early, Brené Brown outlines the harm in unrealistic goals and expectations being put over employees, and this is a prime example of the harm manifesting itself.

This last idea behind his leadership contains equal good elements to not-so-good elements. Disney was remarked on as being an incredible team builder. He could rally his company around his ideas, but also around one another, creating a true sense of team comradery. Where the rubber meets the road with this form of leadership is that Disney did not raise leaders who had this same knack or ability. This ability could come from a natural sense of charm and charisma that Disney possessed and would have been unsure of how to train up in others or perhaps it seemed less important to Disney to teach this leadership than it was to just live in it. Either way, Ken Anderson noted that after Disney died in 1966 the "core" employees who had prior had such a strong bond, lost some of that closeness to never be regained (Peri, 2008). A great leader will raise up the next great leaders and in their absence, the ideal would be that the business could go on without them as before because the leader set them up for success. Perhaps Walt did do this, but his friendship among his co-workers was so strong that they found it hard to ever feel fully whole as a group again. Either way, leaders who can truly create a sense of belonging and unity within their organization are truly strong leaders through and through.

Application to My Personal Leadership

There is a lot that can be learned from Walt Disney, both as a person and as a leader. One thing that I found particularly impressive and insightful about his leadership was his ability and intentionality to take notice of where his employees excelled best. He paid attention to the skill sets of those he led over and he strategically placed them so that they could operate in their strengths for their own personal benefit but also for the benefit of the team as a whole. As a leader, I want to follow in his footsteps, taking notice of where those I lead really excel and where they are passionate about and making sure to really emphasize those areas for them. Unlike Disney, I think I personally would desire to be more vocal and affirmative about the areas in which I really saw someone excelling. Another incredible thing about his person as a leader was his ability to get everyone in on his vision and make it as if it was all of their vision and together it could come to full fruition. He was more than simply a vision caster, giving clear guidance of the objectives and directives to achieve such. Rather, he was a visionary who had a way of making one feel their special place within his idea. I love this, I think it's one of the best ways to make those on your team feel truly seen and appreciated and it's the most honorable way to advocate for your ideas and visions to be realized. It's not a forceful or manipulative tactic, but rather a tactic that invites and includes the group to come together, under one unifying idea and goal and gives the group greater purpose in their roles. As a specific instance of where I want to implement this is being an R.A. next year. My hall is welcoming up to eighteen new freshmen, and for the vision of hospitality and community I have to play out and be realized, I need to rally up the current students in the hall and make them feel they are a part of realizing this vision with me. Without them, I alone can not make a hall feel like a family, but with each of them feeling the sense of need for their presence, we can work together to create this wonderful environment. I'll need to look strategically at what each of them brings to the table and I'll need to draw them

in by affirming their passions and talents and inviting them to use those things uniquely to help our hall create this atmosphere.

Conclusion

Walt Disney, an entrepreneur, a visionary, a leader, and a history maker, will be remembered forever as an incredible leader. From the ground up, he along with his brother, had created a film and entertainment empire that has no end in sight even still to this day. His leadership abilities to create strong and alluring visions, carefully delegate roles, create a sense of unity and purpose, and display determination and perseverance have earned him a rightful place on the list of leaders to be respected and analyzed. His ability to test the waters all in the namesake of curiosity and wonder is not only inspiring to the leaders in the world but to the everyday person. His movements and growth in leadership and his craft led to a small two-person film company becoming an empire of the film industry that includes entire theme parks based on their films. Working for Walt Disney meant creating with high integrity and quality, it all led up to and continues to point to the feeling of the most magical place on earth for those who get to experience the work and legacy of Walter Elias Disney. For his timeless mark on the world and impact on Hollywood, he should forever be remembered as one of the greats in leadership.

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