

## THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY: HOW IS DISNEY PREPARING THEIR LEADERS ACCORDING TO THEIR COMPANY VALUES?

### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I look at Disney and how it trains its Walt Disney World Parks and Resorts leadership according to the “best in class business standards.” I conducted five 30-minute interviews with Disney employees in positions of leadership within The Walt Disney World Parks and Resorts. The purpose of these interviews was to gather information on how the leaders get trained in the different leadership positions. Disney asks that its leaders act ethically, legally, with diligence, and with integrity, and prioritize safety, courtesy, show, and efficiency. The interviewees filled out a survey where they rated their experience being trained in these different categories on a scale of 1-10.

I have concluded that Disney does a substantial job at training its employees according to the companies’ values. This conclusion is supported by the findings which show trainings in 7/8 of the above values, the legal concerns trainings being the exception, were rated above average by Cast Members. These trainings do not appear to cover all the topics leaders wish they did, however.

Cast Members mentioned that the training they receive mostly focuses on keeping business operations running smoothly. When asked “How often do you think your trainings have fallen short?” Cast Members responded that they fell short 72.5% of the time. The trainings and tools provided to Disney Cast Members scored about average ( $5/10 \pm 1$ ) in their usefulness on-the-job. Overall, the trainings Disney provides leaders did a satisfactory job of enforcing the companies’ values, however Cast Members have been left feeling like there should be more to their trainings. I recommend that Disney

expand its trainings to include techniques that would help leaders motivate and lead their fellow Cast Members.

## BACKGROUND

According to numerous publications, the Walt Disney Company is thought of as one of the most successful companies to date.<sup>1</sup> This success has led to many outside organizations looking to Disney as an example of how they should conduct business in hopes of achieving the same success. For this reason, I investigated Disney to see how well they adhere to the values they are publicly endorsing.

Ethically speaking, organizations with great influence need to be evaluated regularly to ensure they are meeting the standards that they are setting. Because other organizations are mimicking the practices The Walt Disney Company uses, an objective party should investigate the usage of these practices and their effectiveness at some regularity. This is to ensure that other organizations are not implementing ineffective practices. By regularly evaluating Disney's practices, we are also holding them accountable, and ensuring that Disney is practicing the same techniques they are encouraging others to use.

For reference throughout this paper: "Cast Members" include any person working in the parks. "Trainers" are Cast Members without any leadership authority. Most days they work in their locations handling typical day-to-day operations, but they are the ones who orient and train new Cast Members not in leadership positions. "Coordinators" are always on site at the location. They watch over the day-to-day operations to make sure

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. Peters,, and Robert H. Waterman, "In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies," 1st ed., (1982): 167-168, HathiTrust, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015009025001>.

everything is running smoothly, handle any minor issues that occur, and oversee any short-term people problems such as adjusting breaks and position assignments. “Leaders” oversee the long-term people problems, like scheduling and location emergencies.

Disney is a global organization, so I looked at a singular aspect of the organization: the way Disney trains its leadership within the Walt Disney World Parks and Resorts. I also needed to determine an objective baseline to reference when comparing the standards Disney tells the public it values when training its leaders to how Disney really trains its leadership. Documents posted by The Walt Disney Company listed eight values that I used as my reference point: Leaders should act ethically, legally, with diligence, and with integrity, and prioritize safety, courtesy, show, and efficiency.<sup>2</sup> I believe that using these values as a baseline will make it possible to gather a holistic understanding of the way Disney trains its Cast Members (i.e. employees.) In understanding the values prioritized by the company, we will be able to see what strengths and weaknesses exist in how Disney trains its leaders.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Documents published by The Walt Disney Company provided the most insight. These documents listed the standards that were endorsed publicly by the company. There were three different documents that I referenced.

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<sup>2</sup> “Code of Business Conduct and Ethics for Directors,” *The Walt Disney Company* (n.d.), <https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/app/uploads/Code-of-Business-Conduct-and-Ethics-for-Directors.pdf>; Bruce Jones, “Disney Customer Service 101: Why Courtesy Is Not Always Our First Priority,” *Disney Institute* (2019), <https://www.disneyinstitute.com/blog/disney-customer-service-101-why-courtesy-is-not-always-our-first-priority/>.

According to their *Code of Business Conduct and Ethics for Directors*:

“Every Director must: (i) represent the interests of the shareholders of The Walt Disney Company; (ii) exhibit high standards of integrity, commitment, and independence of thought and judgment; (iii) dedicate sufficient time, energy and attention to ensure the diligent performance of his or her duties; and (iv) comply with every provision of this Code.”<sup>3</sup>

In short, that text is asking executives to act ethically, legally, with diligence, and with integrity. Cast Members who work in the park are given their own tetrad of values to learn. They are called the “Four Keys:” safety, courtesy, show, and efficiency.<sup>4</sup> These two documents ask executives to prioritize the shareholders’ interests and hourly workers to prioritize first the safety and then the holistic experience of the Guests (i.e.. Customers.) It appears that Disney’s goal is to train leaders on how to keep business running smoothly so the company can continue to turn a profit.

Additionally, I referenced the *Standards of Business Conduct (2017)* which also supports the above observation.<sup>5</sup> This document lists six values:

1. Integrity: Our Standards
2. Trust: Our Commitment to Guests and Customers
3. Teamwork: Our Commitment to Each Other
4. Honesty: Our Commitment to the Company and our Shareholders
5. Play by the Rules: Our Commitment to Lawful Business Practices,

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<sup>3</sup> “Code of Business Conduct and Ethics for Directors.”

<sup>4</sup> “Bruce Jones, “Disney Customer Service 101: Why Courtesy Is Not Always Our First Priority.”

<sup>5</sup> “Standards of Business Conduct,” *The Walt Disney Company* (2017), <https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/app/uploads/2019/06/TWDC-Standards-of-Business-Conduct-1.pdf>.

## 6. Respect: Our Commitment to the Community.<sup>6</sup>

Again, it appears most of Disney's focus is on preserving the company, with minimal focus on the Cast Members themselves. It is worth noting that the organization does not appear to be entirely focused on profit. This same document says "Our Company is committed to open, free and effective channels of communication, so promote an 'open door' policy, be a good listener and work to earn the trust of your co-workers."<sup>7</sup> So, while Disney does appear to prioritize Guest services by listing it ahead of Cast Member relations, they value facilitating a healthy work environment. Upon inspection, Disney does not appear to be using the six terms listed for their dictionary definitions, rather they appear to be meant as shorthand ways of explaining the meanings that follow the colons.

Research into Disney's leadership trainings is scarce, and I was unable to find objective articles on the subject. I did, however, read two articles written by individuals who had attended the Disney Institute and been taught how to lead the "Disney way." In 2000, Judy Schueler talks about how healthcare organizations in Chicago started implementing some of the Disney Guest service values into their workplace.<sup>8</sup> The changes they made after attending the Disney Institute include adding a greeter at the door and making an effort to create "magic moments" for the patients. Schuler mentions that the organizations now try to do acts of kindness to make their patients feel special. One example would be when a greeter ran up the street to hail a taxi for a patient.

In 2014 Meaghan C. Guiney wrote an article that talked about how utilizing some of Disney's business practices in education could make the school districts more

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Judy Schueler, "Customer Service Through Leadership: The Disney Way," *Training & Development*, vol. 54, no. 10, (Oct. 2000): p. 26, Gale Academic OneFile.

productive.<sup>9</sup> In Guiney's paper, she said her seminar taught her that "the Disney approach emphasizes the importance of strong, responsive leadership and active participation from the Cast Members who interact with guests on a day-to-day basis."<sup>10</sup> Both articles talked about the leadership training they received from Disney, and Guest-services appeared to be the main focus of these classes. This further supports the earlier claim that Disney's internal leadership trainings likely focus mostly on Guest services.

## METHODS & LIMITATIONS

### *Methodology*

I received approval for this study through the University of Texas at Austin IRB. This study relied on the official Disney documents to form an objective point of reference. We conducted interviews to gather more insight on what the leadership trainings look like.

To find interviewees, I reached out to Disney Cast Members I had worked with previously, as well as Cast Members I found on LinkedIn. All Cast Members were informed the study was entirely anonymous and there would be no compensation. I interviewed and surveyed 5 Cast Members (3 males, 2 females) that had been with the company anywhere between two and seven years. Cast Members, Trainers, Coordinators, and/or Leaders.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Meaghan C. Guiney, "Lessons from the Disney Approach to Leadership," *Communique (0164775X)*, vol. 42, no. 7 (May 2014): 1–29, EBSCOhost.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> See "Backround" section for definitions.

Due to COVID-19, all interviews were conducted using Zoom, a video calling software. The interviews lasted 30 minutes and were intended to get a better understanding what the training process looked like for Cast Members in different positions of leadership. I started by asking interviewees about their backgrounds with the company. I then asked the interviewees to talk about their experiences being trained by the company. An example question is: “What kind of trainings have you undergone?” Finally, I asked the interviewees how well they believe Disney trained them according to the eight values from Disney’s documents.<sup>12</sup> An example question is: “Knowing that Disney lists ethics, efficiency, and integrity as some of the aspects they value most in their leaders, how do you think Disney has done at prioritizing that in their trainings?” After the interviews were conducted, I then transcribed them under a pseudonym to compare the information gathered.

I also asked all the interviewees to respond to the short, five-minute-long survey after their interviews. All of these questions used a 1-10 rating scale, with 1 representing negative perceptions, 5 neutral perceptions, and 10 positive perceptions. The survey asked participants to rate things like the thoroughness and usefulness of the trainings they have undergone. An example question is: “On average, how thorough would you say trainings at The Walt Disney Company tend to be?” It then asked participants how often the company has had Cast Members revisit trainings, how often they have added onto trainings and elaborated on them, and how often the trainings have fallen short for Cast Members. An example question is: “How frequently are previous trainings elaborated

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix A.

upon in new ones that help you to further develop your skills?” Finally, it asked participants how thoroughly they felt they had been trained in each of the eight values.<sup>13</sup>

### *Limitations*

Two limitations were encountered in the study. The first limitation was finding participants who were in different leadership positions throughout the parks. Most of the Disney Cast Members I could find on LinkedIn were on the corporate side of the business.

Another complication I had to keep in mind was the age of the memory being recalled. Ideally, I would have been able to interview a couple of dozen Cast Members so I could compare their experiences and get the most accurate recollection of what their training was like exactly. Because of the above issue, gathering a large pool of participants would have been difficult. For that reason, I kept the pool small and distributed the survey so I would have some quantitative data to back up the responses I received. I hoped that the quantitative data would be able to identify any significant variation between responses.

## RESULTS

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix B.



### *The Trainings According to the Eight Values*

The results from the interviews produced some notable data points. When asked what values the interviewees thought Disney prioritized, all of them said safety was #1. Additionally, the results from the surveys showed that all Cast Members, when asked to list four values in response to “Thinking about the trainings you have received. In your opinion, what would you say The Walt Disney Company values the most in their leaders?” listed safety and efficiency. The other two values varied by the participant.

Cast Members rated safety and efficiency as the two values they felt the most thoroughly trained to uphold, both scoring a 9/10. Diligence (8/10), acting ethically (7.25/10), and courtesy (7.25/10) were the values they listed as being prioritized next. Finally, acting with integrity (7/10) and show (6.75/10) were the two values that Cast Members felt they received the least training. Training in legal concerns received the lowest score with a 1.5/10.

### *The Usefulness of the Trainings*

I found that the higher the position, the longer the individuals had to be trained for those positions. The Cast Member and Trainer positions had trainings that lasted 1-2 weeks, Coordinator trainings lasted 1-2 months, and Leader trainings lasted at 2-4 months. Notably, there was not a large increase in the amount of time an individual spent on the computer completing modules. Most training happened through shadowing different individuals. The Cast Members received little-to-no training on how to help other Cast Members, especially not before reaching a Leader position. The training focused mainly on how to conduct operations and keep the business running smoothly. It

should be noted that the Leader who had studied Sociology was the only person interviewed who thought their college education had helped them lead better at Disney.

Another notable discovery was that the trainings Cast Members go through are not repeated very often. Most of the training is done once and never revisited unless there is a situation that calls for all Cast Members to get reoriented with the material they have already seen. One Cast Member who has worked for the company for two years has yet to have to repeat any of their training modules. This information was further confirmed when the survey showed that the Cast Members ranked the frequency that they revisit old training modules a 1.5/10. This information means that the training modules in place are not considered valuable enough by the company for them to want Cast Members to spend time revisiting the concepts on occasion.

Finally, when asked if the Cast Members felt like they were sufficiently trained for their positions, 2/5 said they think it would be difficult to be trained more extensively since changes are happening almost constantly in the park. It was mentioned by one Cast Member that they believed training was not more extensive because it is difficult to train an individual to handle the situations they face when you never know exactly what might happen. Other Cast Members seemed to wish for more extensive trainings before being sent out to shadow. “Disney gives you your soft boundaries. They get you about 40% of the way there, and then you have to learn along the way what the other 60% is. I am a hands-on learner, but I also think that Disney could create a more thorough training guide.”

The survey responses show Cast Members feel that their trainings fall short about 72.5% of the time. All the Cast Members conceded that they would have liked to have received more training on how to be a good leader. There were no leadership classes that

taught them skills, “I know that I can boost morale by giving people Cast Compliments in the computer system, but I learned that from my own experience, not from a class Disney gave me. I would love for Disney to give me other tools to keep in my back pocket to pull out to make people feel appreciated and understood.” The Cast Members I interviewed confirmed that their training was very Guest-oriented, and very little of their training was meant to teach them how to make the workplace a more enjoyable place for Cast Members.

## CONCLUSION

After reading the literature and conducting the interviews, I have concluded that the trainings Disney provides leaders do a satisfactory job of enforcing the companies’ values, but Cast Members are left feeling like there should be more to their trainings. This conclusion is supported by the fact 7/8 of the above values, apart from the scoring of the legal concerns trainings, were rated above average by Cast Members. Training in legal concerns received the lowest score with a 1.5/10. but considering how high the scores were in the other categories, I believe that this is an outlier caused by an oversight on my part. I failed to define what Disney means by “legal concerns,” and some of the responses I received in the interviews lead me to believe that Cast Members were thinking of legal concerns that surpass what they would be expected to handle when setting this rating.

The information I have gathered leads me to believe that the leadership training they put their Cast Members through seems to teach them how to excel at Guest satisfaction before anything else. Any skills beyond the Guest satisfaction techniques taught seem to be treated as learned skills that Cast Members are expected to gain on the

job. Cast Members are left feeling like they are underprepared for their positions as leaders, so I would recommend that Disney invest in expanding their leadership trainings to include techniques that would help leaders motivate and lead their fellow Cast Members. I believe that giving the leaders tools that can help them facilitate a healthy and nurturing work environment could increase Cast morale. Leaders would feel more confident and Cast Members would appreciate having leadership they can rely on for more than just business-related problems (i.e. putting out a grease fire.) Investing in their Cast Member's happiness could be a key element to seeing Disney's profits continue to grow.

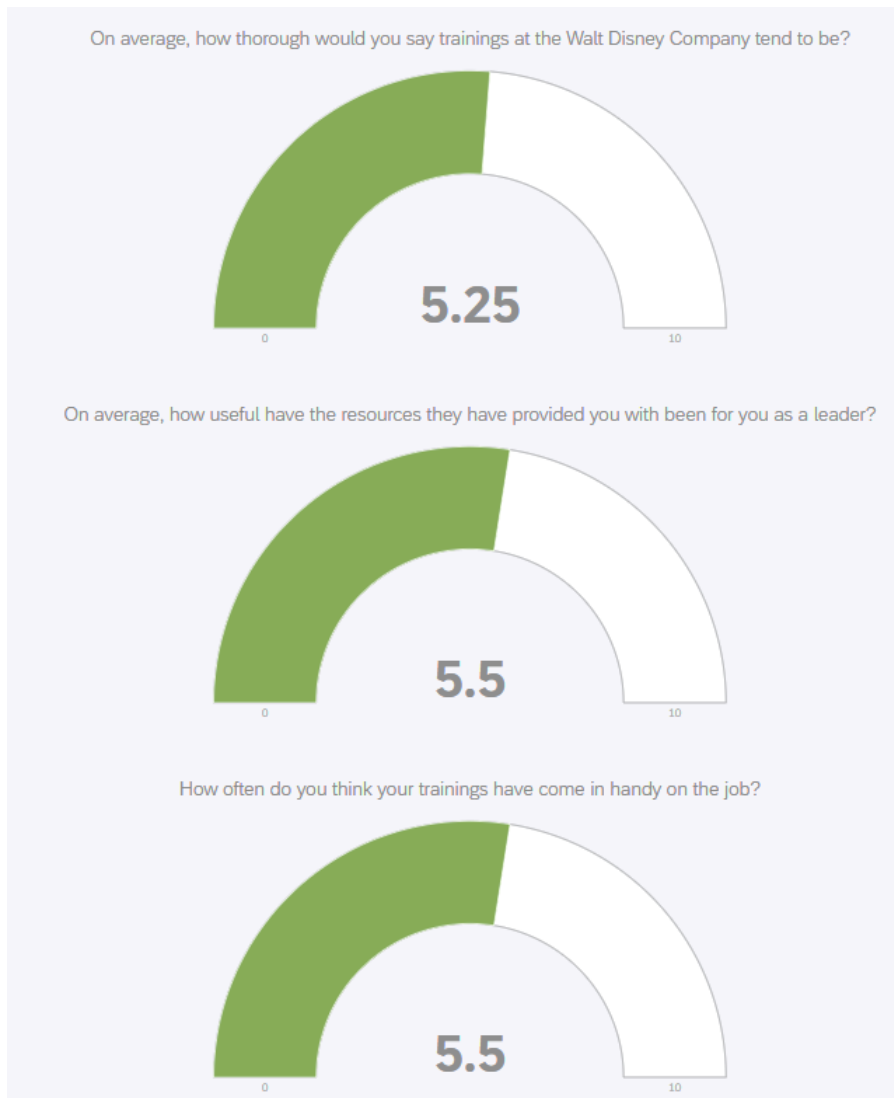
## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

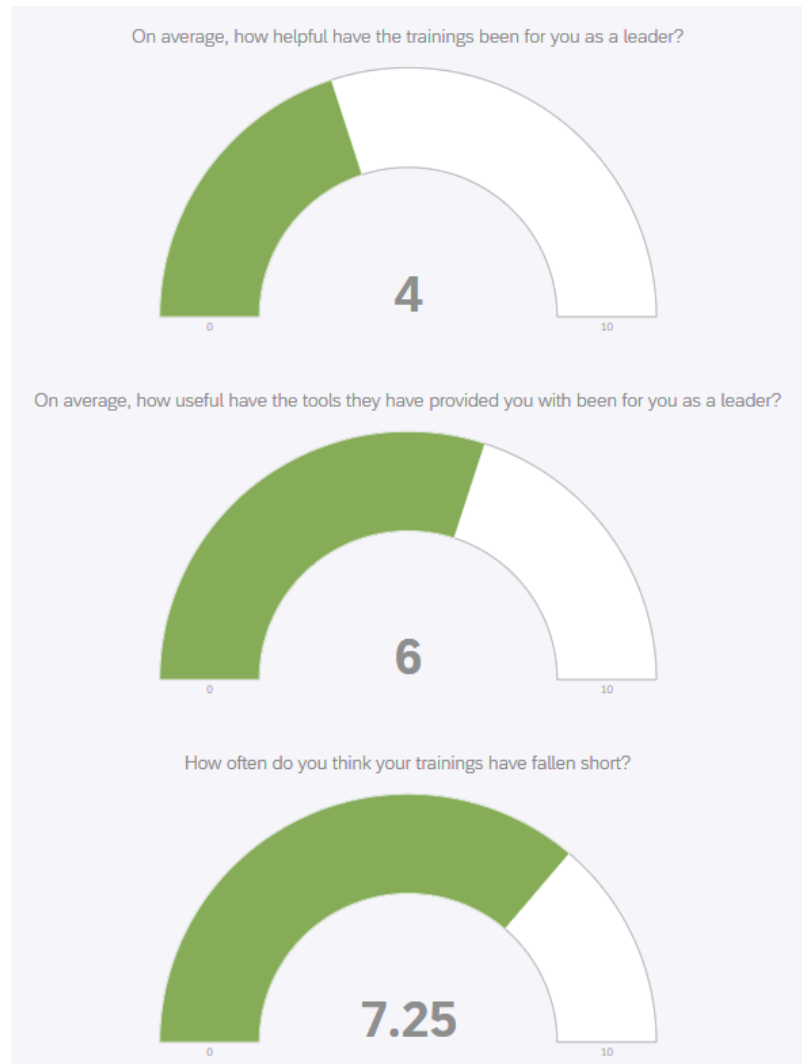
1. Tell me about your background with The Walt Disney Company
    - a. How long have you worked for Disney?
    - b. What positions have you held?
  2. What has your experience been like as a Disney employee?
    - a. How has that experience changed as you have taken on new roles?
  3. What was the position you were initially trained for?
    - a. How do you think this training impacted the experiences that followed?
    - b. What key lessons did you take away from this training that you still think about today?
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1. What kind of trainings have you undergone?
    - a. How often were these trainings?
    - b. How often did Disney follow up on these trainings?
    - c. What topics were covered in these trainings?
    - d. Did the trainings cover different things or reinforce the same things?
    - e. What training had the most lasting impact for you?
    - f. What were things that you learned on the job that you wish had been covered better or more thoroughly?
  2. What kinds of workshops and tools has Disney provided you as a leader?
    - a. What were the most useful tools?
    - b. What tools has the least impact on you?
    - c. What tools, if any, had the potential to be good, but they missed the mark? And how would you suggest they be improved?
    - d. What tools do you have outside knowledge of that you would love to see get implemented by The Walt Disney Company?
  3. What position do you think you were most thoroughly trained in?
    - a. How has that training differed from other positions?
    - b. Why do you think this training was so much more impactful?
    - c. What key lessons did you take away from this training?
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1. What is your education outside of working for The Walt Disney Company?
    - a. How do you think this education has influenced your abilities as a leader?
    - b. In what ways has your outside experience given you tools that have been useful as a Disney leader?
  2. What would you guess Disney lists as the key values they look to enhance in their leaders?
    - a. Why do you think this?
  3. Disney's Code of Conduct says it trains its employees to act ethically, legally, and with integrity; how well do you think your trainings have covered these topics?
    - a. Why?

- b. How could the trainings be improved to help leaders learn how to hone these values?
- 4. Disney's Code of Conduct also mentions that they expect their employees to "dedicate sufficient time, energy and attention to ensure the diligent performance of his or her duties." How well do you think Disney has prepared you to do this?
  - a. What could be done to help you better juggle your responsibilities?
- 5. Knowing that Disney lists ethics, efficiency, and integrity as some of the aspects they value most in their leaders, how do you think Disney has done at prioritizing that in their trainings?
  - a. What have they done to highlight these values?

## APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS AND RESULTS

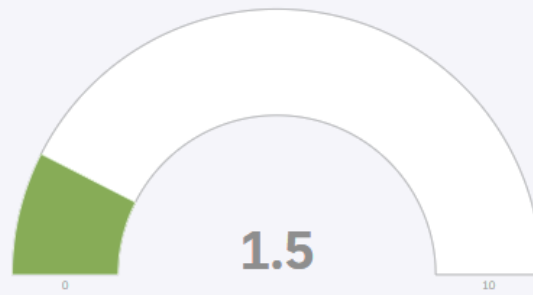
Q1. Think back on your experiences being trained by The Walt Disney Company. Keeping those trainings in mind, please answer the questions below truthfully, your responses are entirely anonymous.



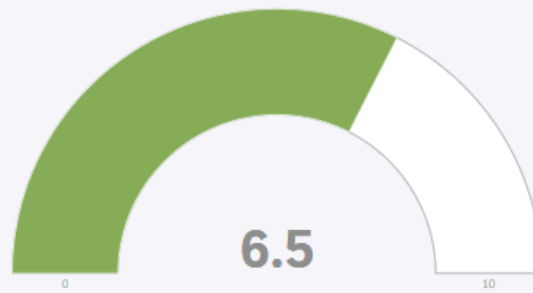




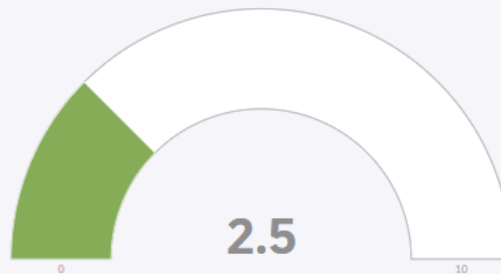
How frequently does the Walt Disney Company revisit topics that you have already been trained in?



How often do you walk away from a training feeling like you didn't learn anything?



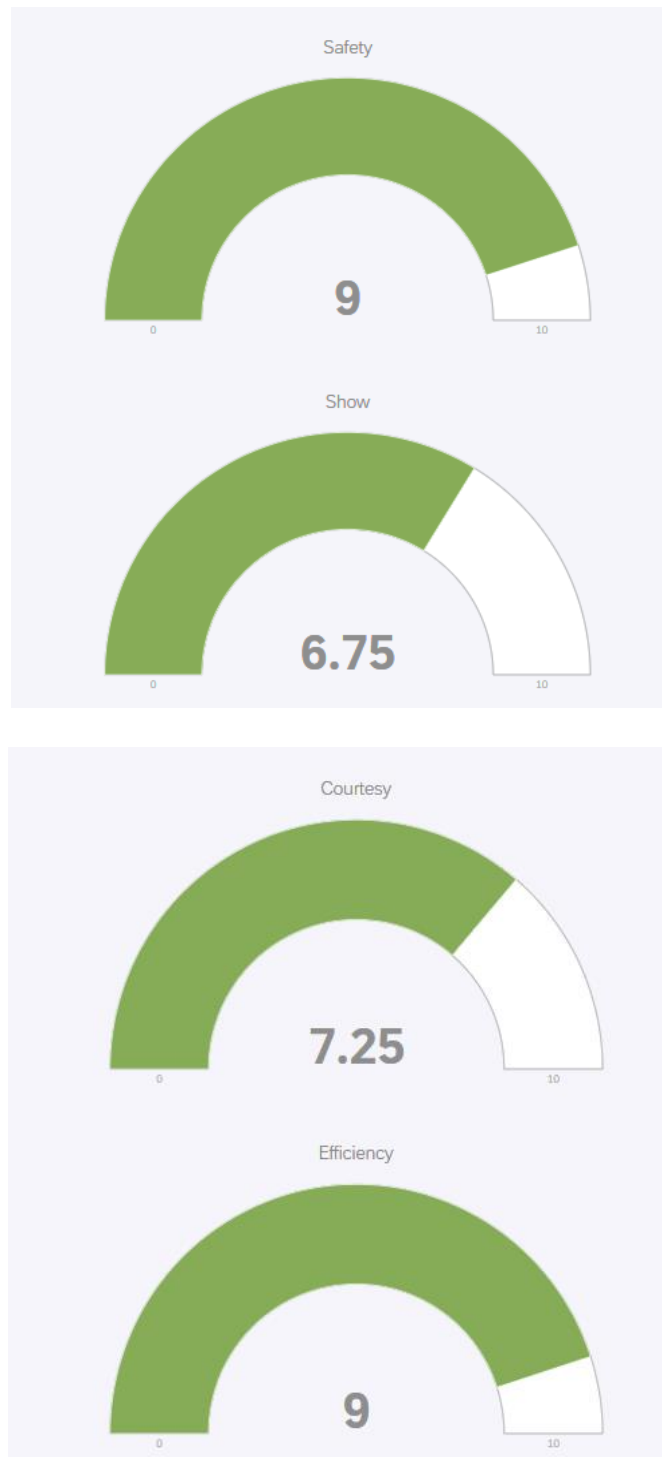
How frequently are previous trainings elaborated upon in new ones that help you to further develop your skills?



Q2. Disney's Code of Conduct and Ethics says that they train their employees to act ethically, legally, with diligence, and with integrity. How thoroughly do you feel you have been trained in those categories?



Q3. Knowing that the Four Keys are safety, courtesy, show, and efficiency, how thoroughly do you feel you have been trained in those categories?



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