**BEHIND THE MAGIC: THE CASE OF THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY**

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***ABSTRACT***

*This case aims to promote discussion on the distinct culture and various characteristics of The Walt Disney Company. Every day The Walt Disney Company works to fulfill their mission to “entertain, inform, and inspire people around the globe,” while simultaneously maintaining the values and standards that are recognized throughout the world. For many people, working for Disney is a dream come true. Providing current information on this globally recognized company’s corporate culture, organization structure, motivation strategies, and their strategies for finding the right fit based on personality, this case provides valuable insight for those studying Organizational Behavior, as The Walt Disney Company’s iconic customer service, unique company culture, and distinct company organization are key parts of what add up to make Disney the worldwide media conglomerate it is today. A brief set of discussion questions follows this case.*

**A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY**

In 1923, Walt Disney arrived in California with hopes of making films. He began working with his brother Roy on what was originally known as the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio. Shortly thereafter, at Roy’s suggestion, the company changed its name to the much more familiar Walt Disney Studio. Despite its conception in 1923, it was not until 1928 that cartoon star Mickey Mouse was born with the release of *Steamboat Willie* (D23, n.d.). From there, the Walt Disney Company grew, releasing classic films like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella,* and the popular children’s television series, *The Mickey Mouse Club*. On July 17, 1955, Disneyland opened in California, marking a beginning of something magical, as the park was intended to be a place where parents and children could go and have fun together, one that would never be completed as long as there was imagination left in the world (D23, n.d.). After Walt’s death, Walt Disney World opened on October 1, 1971 as a destination resort. From there, the company continued releasing films, opening parks, producing Broadway shows, opening retail locations, and acquiring other companies to become what it is today. The Walt Disney Company has come a long way from its humble cartoon studios beginning to where the media conglomerate it is today, consisting of Pixar, Marvel, 21st Century Fox, an ecommerce platform, a streaming service, two phone applications, and six different resorts consisting of 12 parks (D23, n.d.). The Walt Disney Company has a long-standing reputation for impeccable customer service, a unique way of referring to its employees (sorry, c*ast members*), and magic-making. Organizational behavior is defined as “a field of study that investigates the impact that individuals, groups, and structure have on behavior within organizations for the purpose of applying such knowledge toward improving an organization’s effectiveness” (Robbins & Judge, 2019). This case study affords those studying organizational behavior the opportunity to examine the Walt Disney Company’s commitment to the creation of magic through various theories discussed in personality, organizational structure, and culture topics. This case also examines various questions: How did the Walt Disney Company become so successful? How does Disney utilize personality tests in its hiring process? How does Disney ensure that leaders do not lose touch with what is happening on the front lines?

**FINDING THE RIGHT FIT**

Personality plays a key role in whether or not an employee will be successful at any company, and The Walt Disney Company is no exception. While Disney does appreciate individuality and creativity, they also place emphasis on things such as working in teams and following rules. Personalities are generally something that require assessment by an employer, as having an understanding of an employee personality allows a manager or employer to determine whether the employee will be a good fit in the company, what kind of projects they should be assigned, and what their performance will be like (Nash, Chapter 5: Personality and Values, 2016). In the case of The Walt Disney Company, they construct their interviews through various stages (application, phone, in-person interview, etc.) and they frequently have their prospective cast members take short personality tests. While they do not share the test results with the cast member, they do share them with managers so that they may have a better understanding of who is working for them (Nash, Chapter 5: Personality and Values, 2016).

Disney uses a repetitive personality test in the web-based interview portion of their hiring process, wherein the prospective cast member has approximately 50 seconds to answer each of a series of multiple-choice questions. This group of questions pertains to how the prospective cast member feels about various scenarios regarding their personality. For the next section of the personality test, prospective cast members have approximately 20 seconds to answer questions on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly disagree (The Walt Disney Company, 2019).

**ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

As it stands, The Walt Disney Company’s organizational structure is designed to facilitate and maintain interaction and cooperation between the various segments of the company. A company’s organizational structure refers to how the business is designed to function, including its arrangement, interactions among managers, and hierarchy (Williams, Walt Disney Company’s Organizational Structure for Synergistic Diversification, 2019). According to the textbook *Organizational Behavior*, organizational structure is defined as “the way in which job tasks are formally divided, grouped, or coordinated” (Robbins & Judge, 2019). In Disney’s case, they utilize an organizational structure that allows the company to capitalize on the assets of their various divisions.

The Walt Disney Company has what is called a cooperative multidivisional (M-form) organizational structure (Williams, Walt Disney Company’s Organizational Structure for Synergistic Diversification, 2019). This kind of corporate structure is common amongst diversified companies like Disney, which engages in entertainment, communications, retail, and more. The cooperative M-form allows for related constrained diversification (Williams, Walt Disney Company’s Organizational Structure for Synergistic Diversification, 2019). Meaning that, according to Alex Williams, “interdivisional benefits are a priority in diversifying the business, and in implementing The Walt Disney Company’s generic strategy for competitive advantage and intensive strategies for growth” (Williams, Walt Disney Company’s Organizational Structure for Synergistic Diversification, 2019). Further, the company has strong centralization among various functional groups at the company’s corporate headquarters. This allows for strong managerial control and diversified growth among the global mass media, entertainment, and amusement park industries in which The Walt Disney Company is involved (Williams, Walt Disney Company’s Organizational Structure for Synergistic Diversification, 2019). When further examining the organizational structure of The Walt Disney Company, we see that there are three primary attributes: business segments, functional groups for centralization, and geographical divisions (Williams, Walt Disney Company’s Organizational Structure for Synergistic Diversification, 2019).

The company’s business segments allow for focus on specific industries and business types. In the case of The Walt Disney Company, the various segments operate under a related-constrained diversification strategy, meaning that constraints are upheld via centralized corporate management, and the operations of the various divisions are related via shared competitive advantages (Williams, Walt Disney Company’s Organizational Structure for Synergistic Diversification, 2019). Among The Walt Disney Company’s business segments are the following: media networks, parks & resorts, studio entertainment, and consumer products & interactive media. As the company works to strategically diversify its business, the company has the liberty to change or create segments (Williams, Walt Disney Company’s Organizational Structure for Synergistic Diversification, 2019).

The functional groups of The Walt Disney Company are responsible for centralization of strategic management control throughout the business. By utilizing these groups, Disney’s organizational structure ensures that there is effective coordination of strategic growth between the previously discussed business segments. Further, functional groups allow for cooperation amongst divisions, and because of the centralized control the company has, Disney is able to prioritize strategies across divisions (Williams, Walt Disney Company’s Organizational Structure for Synergistic Diversification, 2019). For example, characters from a new movie such as *Raya and the Last Dragon* are used in the company’s various amusement parks around the world, and merchandise is created and sold. This engages Disney’s Studio Entertainment segment, Parks & Resorts segment, and Consumer Products & Interactive Media segment (Williams, Walt Disney Company’s Organizational Structure for Synergistic Diversification, 2019).

Disney’s geographical divisions attribute allows for variations across the local, domestic, and regional markets the company engages in across the globe. These variations influenced by geographic factors affect the mass media, entertainment, and parks & resorts industries (Williams, Walt Disney Company’s Organizational Structure for Synergistic Diversification, 2019). An example of this is seen in the movie *Inside Out*. In the film, the character Riley moves to San Francisco, and is disgusted by a restaurant that put broccoli on pizza. Because of regional sociocultural factors, green peppers were substituted for broccoli when the film was released in Japan, as green peppers are more universally despised by Japanese children (Acuna, 2015). These geographical divisions allow The Walt Disney Company to ensure the appropriateness of business strategies as they pertain to market conditions. For Disney, the company’s geographical divisions are: United States and Canada, Europe, Asia Pacific, and Latin America and Other (Williams, Walt Disney Company’s Organizational Structure for Synergistic Diversification, 2019).

After looking at The Walt Disney Company’s organizational structure, it can be concluded that mechanistic model best describes the company. A mechanistic model is defined in *Organizational Behavior* as “a structure characterized by extensive departmentalization, high formalization, a limited information network, and centralization” (Robbins & Judge, 2019). The key item that classifies Disney as using a mechanistic model is the centralization aspect. While the departments in the company work together, it is the company’s centralization that allows the cooperation between departments.

**ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

Organizational culture is defined in *Organizational Behavior* as “a system of shared meaning held by an organization’s members that distinguishes the organization from others” (Robbins & Judge, 2019). This includes the company’s values, beliefs, and the assumptions that characterize the company. The six characteristics that essentially capture the essence of the culture of an organization are: adaptability, detail orientation, results/outcome orientation, people/customer orientation, collaboration/team orientation, and integrity (Robbins & Judge, 2019). However, within The Walt Disney Company, they have their own set of characteristics that define the company’s organizational culture. These characteristics are: innovation, decency, quality, community, storytelling, and optimism (Williams, Disney’s Organizational Culture for Excellent Entertainment (Analysis), 2019).

At The Walt Disney Company, cast members, especially those in the Imagineering (Disney’s engineers that develop the parks and attractions) and storytelling departments, are encouraged to be innovative, which is a large part of the adaptability characteristic mentioned above. Within The Walt Disney Company, they place a high level of emphasis on innovation. The objective in this characteristic is to encourage imagination and face new challenges so that they can integrate new technologies and satisfy emerging trends (Williams, Disney’s Organizational Culture for Excellent Entertainment (Analysis), 2019). The company also places emphasis on quality, which pertains to both the detail orientation and results/outcome orientation characteristics mentioned in *Organizational Behavior* (Robbins & Judge, 2019). Disney places emphasis on quality in all aspects of its business, including the skills of their cast members, which works to help fulfill the company’s competitive strategy and growth strategies. This prioritizes the way that the company diversifies their products via uniqueness and quality in their various divisions and subsidiaries (Williams, Disney’s Organizational Culture for Excellent Entertainment (Analysis), 2019).

The Walt Disney Company also places emphasis on decency within their own characteristics, which relates to the people/customer orientation characteristic mentioned in *Organizational Behavior* (Robbins & Judge, 2019). As a family-oriented business, Disney stresses the importance of decency within its culture. In Disney’s case, this means keeping their products and behaviors family friendly. An example of this would be that various parts of the company, such as the human resource training and development programs and management strategies, motivate cast members to incorporate decency into their behaviors, particularly when they are interacting with customers. This standard of behavior has led to the company’s exceptional brand image and positive reputation (Williams, Disney’s Organizational Culture for Excellent Entertainment (Analysis), 2019). The company also has a community mindset, which plays into the collaboration/team orientation characteristic in *Organizational Behavior* (Robbins & Judge, 2019). In the case of The Walt Disney Company, this is exemplified by the programs that the company has in place to motivate cast members to “view themselves as members of an entertainment company that works toward excellent performance” (Williams, Disney’s Organizational Culture for Excellent Entertainment (Analysis), 2019). This aspect of the organizational culture at The Walt Disney Company has led to high morale within the company, high product quality, and high customer satisfaction. Additionally, the sense of community that the company creates has helped to address interests from stakeholders in the multinational business (Williams, Disney’s Organizational Culture for Excellent Entertainment (Analysis), 2019).

The Walt Disney Company also lists storytelling as a characteristic in its organizational culture. This characteristic is key to the business as a whole, and through this cultural attribute, Disney is able to facilitate cast member behavior which adds value to the company’s products. In the case of The Walt Disney Company, the organizational culture encourages cast members to utilize their own personal experiences in order to make the entertainment products produced by the company, such as movies, programs, and resorts, more memorable and relatable to customers (Williams, Disney’s Organizational Culture for Excellent Entertainment (Analysis), 2019). Lastly, Disney places emphasis on optimism in their company. By placing emphasis on optimism, the company is also placing significance on virtues such as hope and happiness. The happiness factor in particular links the organizational culture of the company to Walt Disney’s original goal of making people of all ages happy (Williams, Disney’s Organizational Culture for Excellent Entertainment (Analysis), 2019).

**THE CLAN AND ITS VALUES**

The Walt Disney Company is considered to adhere to the cultural framework known as “the clan.” Organizations who fall into the clan category have a culture that is based on human affiliation and are considered to be highly innovative as well as producing high-quality products and services. The values that are associated with clans are generally attachment, collaboration, trust, and support (Robbins & Judge, 2019). The dominant culture of The Walt Disney Company is expressed by the values mentioned above: innovation, decency, quality, community, storytelling, and optimism (Williams, Disney’s Organizational Culture for Excellent Entertainment (Analysis), 2019).

These core values are reflected in the company’s mission statement, which is as follows: “The mission of The Walt Disney Company is to entertain, inform and inspire people around the globe through the power of unparalleled storytelling, reflecting the iconic brands, creative minds and innovative technologies that make ours the world’s premier entertainment company” (About The Walt Disney Company, n.d.). Many of the core values are explicitly mentioned in the company’s mission statement, which helps to ensure the company’s focus on those attributes.

**MOTIVATION**

It is no secret that the cast members that work for The Walt Disney Company are known for their high level of customer service and magic making. What one may wonder, however, is how those cast members remain motivated to maintain a high level of customer service on a daily basis, despite the demands of their jobs.

Intrinsically, The Walt Disney Company focuses on the following three key concepts in order to motivate and inspire their teams: vision and values; behaviors over intentions; and purpose before task (James, 2018). In terms of vision and values, what this means is that if the values of a team leader do not correlate with the values of the organization, the leader will be unable to genuinely express a vision that will motivate their subordinates. They also encourage leaders within the company to model authentic behaviors that reflect their values and vision, as the example a leader sets can serve as motivation for the leader’s team members (James, 2018). Disney also stresses the importance of discussing the importance behind tasks that are assigned as part of a team’s project. Jeff James, Vice President and General Manager of Disney Institute points out that, “if a team understands the common purpose behind individual responsibilities, they will be more inspired to own the tasks as well as the goal” (James, 2018).

Further, Disney works to create a positive workplace to inspire their cast members, but they also emphasize the need for a common purpose from which all decisions regarding service can be drawn. In the case of The Walt Disney Company, the purpose they use is described as: “We create happiness by providing the best in entertainment for people of all ages everywhere” (Jones, 2018). What this generally translates to is the creation of what are referred to as “magic moments” by the company. Bruce Jones, Senior Director at Disney Institute, recalls an example of a cast member creating a magic moment, wherein a couple brought their two children to Disneyland, one of which has special needs. The couple promised their son who has special needs that if he behaved himself, they would buy him a purple Mickey Mouse balloon at the end of the day. When the end of the day arrived and the couple approached one of the cast members selling balloons, they were dismayed to find that the purple balloons had sold out. The cast member, seeing the family’s distress, called to another cast member, who disappeared behind a door to reappear minutes later, holding the prized balloon. Despite the demands of this cast member’s role, they were able to create a magic moment and make sure the family’s day ended on a high note, since creating happiness was their primary goal (Jones, 2018). Through these methods and means, The Walt Disney Company is able to intrinsically motivate their cast members.

Disney also heavily employs the usage of recognition, encouragement, and appreciation to motivate their cast members. Through the #castcompliment social media program, guests (Disney’s term for customers) can recognize cast members for a job well done via Twitter. These tweets are then visible for the entire world to see, and they are also added to the receiving cast member’s formal record. This allows for company leadership to see the compliment, which may help a cast member receive more opportunities later on (Clayton, 2020). Further, Lee Cockerell, a former Executive Vice President of Operations for the Walt Disney World Resort, would, if a cast member’s name was mentioned in guest correspondence, make a copy of the correspondence and send it to the cast member along with a special pin he personally designed (Clayton, 2020).

Cockerell also stresses the importance of encouraging employees. Disney works to remind cast members how important they are to the product guests see or experience when they visit a Disney theme park or resort hotel, fondly referred to at Disney as “the show.” By making it known that all cast members have important parts in the show, said cast members feel respected and valued for what they bring to the table, and therefore feel inspired and motivated (Clayton, 2020). Further, Cockerell remarks that it is important take note that every employee matters, and to ensure that employees in every organization know that they matter (Clayton, 2020).

The Walt Disney Company also works to motivate their cast members through more extrinsic methods. This comes in the familiar forms of multiple health care options in the areas of medical, behavioral health, vision, dental, prescription drug coverage, life insurance, and more; educational reimbursement; paid time off and childcare centers; and special extras, such as complimentary theme park admissions and employee discounts (Nash, Chapter 8: Motivation Concept Application, 2016). In addition to these, The Walt Disney Company offers an award recognition program called the Legacy Award, which is considered to be the most prestigious award presented by Disney. The Legacy Award is presented once a year, and is given to cast members who “consistently Dream, Create and Inspire each day by supporting the business objectives of The Walt Disney Company” (Nash, Chapter 8: Motivation Concept Application, 2016) and are nominated by their fellow cast members. Recipients of this award are given a framed certificate, and are easily identified in by their blue nametags (Clayton, 2020).

The Walt Disney Company utilizes both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation tactics to motivate its cast members. This is most closely related to the self-efficacy motivation theory, which is defined as “an individual’s belief that he or she is capable of performing a task” (Robbins & Judge, 2019). Because of the usage of encouragement, recognition, and appreciation, Disney is able to instill high self-efficacy within their cast members, which in turn increases performance.

**DISCUSSION**

* *How did The Walt Disney Company become so successful?* The Walt Disney Company became so successful because of their values and culture, as well as their diversification into multiple industries. By moving from a company that just focused on cartoons, they were able to draw in a larger audience while also increasing their stability. In Disney’s case, if one industry begins to struggle, they can refocus their energies on other industries in order to support themselves. Examples of this can be seen in how the company reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic. When the company was unable to have people in their various amusement parks and resorts, Disney refocused their efforts on their streaming service, Disney+. This capability to adapt and place emphasis on a different industry allowed the company to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.
* *How does Disney utilize personality tests in its hiring process?* The Walt Disney Company uses personality tests to screen potential employees. These tests come into play during the web-based interview and phone interview portions of the application process (Nash, Chapter 5: Personality and Values, 2016). This use of personality tests allows the company to hire only those applicants who the company feels match their values and company culture.
* *How does Disney ensure that leaders do not lose touch with what is happening on the front lines?* In order to stay in touch with what is happening on the front lines of at The Walt Disney Company, Disney institutes what are called “leader walks” as one of their best practices (Disney Institute, 2018). These leader walks are used as opportunities for leaders to remain actively involved and immersed with their team in the midst of operation while also getting to know their cast members on a personal level. Some leaders at Disney go the extra mile, and they elect to work a front-line shift with their teams in full costume from time to time. Since front line employees generally know the processes and procedures involved in creating the Disney experience better and more deeply than others within the organization. These experiences allow those in leadership and managerial positions within the company to earn a level of respect for the team and the work done by the team (Disney Institute, 2018).
* *Why did Walt Disney send Mickey Mouse to team members’ houses with cash awards when that was not something that was guaranteed when they were asked to work on a project?* When Walt’s brother, Roy, would not give him more money to fund the production of his cartoons, Walt reached out to employee Mike Vance, and asked him to help get more money out of Disneyland. Vance got to work, and assembled a team of seven people to brainstorm ways to make more money at Disneyland. This team suggested that the park, which was only open from Wednesday to Sunday, open on Monday and Tuesday as well. The team was uncertain that this approach would be successful, and so they created The Magic Kingdom Club, which was only consisted of corporate members, who were permitted to give their employees discounted Disneyland tickets for Mondays and Tuesdays. This generated so much money that Walt Disney sent Mickey Mouse to each of the team members’ homes with a check for $25,000 and a note from Walt himself, which read: “It’s fantastic. You’re fantastic. Do it again” (Wood, 2018). This shock and awe method of motivation placed emphasis on gratitude, which set the precedent which would become the appreciation characteristic of motivation that the company still uses to this day.
* *How has Disney reacted to its environment?* The Walt Disney Company has reacted to its environment in several ways. This is evident in how the company adapted its film, *Inside Out*, to Japanese culture that was mentioned previously in the Organizational Structure of this paper. Another example of this is how the company reacted and adapted its operations when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Disney has also reacted to its environment by committing to diversity and inclusion, which are becoming more and more important topics as we grow as a society (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.). Evidence of this commitment can be found in the fact that, for the 14th consecutive year, The Walt Disney Company earned a perfect score on the 2020 Corporate Equality Index, and has been named one of the best places to work for LGBTQ equality (The Walt Disney Company Earns Top Marks for LGBTQ Workplace Equality, 2020).
* *How does The Walt Disney Company combat discrimination?* The Walt Disney Company has commitments and policies in place to ensure non-discrimination and freedom from harassment within their work environment. These policies are outlined and detailed in the company’s Standards of Business Conduct (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.). Further, the company works to foster a safe and inclusive environment wherever their products are made, as outlined in the company’s Code of Conduct for Manufacturers (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.).
* *How does Disney utilize reward power?* Reward power is the type of power that is most widely within The Walt Disney Company. Since reward power is the idea that workers do what is asked of them solely because the rewards and benefits offered by the company are so great. Disney offers numerous benefits as mentioned in the Motivation section of this paper. In Disney’s case, reward power is a positive source of power used by the company’s upper management (Nash, Chapter 13: Power and Politics, 2016).

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