

To Infinity and Beyond – Leadership Lessons drawn from President of Disneyland Resort, Ken Potrock in conversation with Monika Ciesielska, Managing Partner of IMSA Search Global Partners

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This year the Walt Disney Company marks its 100TH anniversary and their largest global celebration took place at Disneyland in Anaheim, California – the place where it all began.

Ken Potrock, President of Disneyland Resort, and a 28-year veteran of magical adventure, reveals leadership lessons in a conversation with Monika Ciesielska, Managing Partner of IMSA Search Global Partners Poland and President of Carpenter Consulting.

Hard Work at the Core of the Magical Formula

“We often use words like magical (to describe a wide range of products, services, and experiences at Disney) but, that

camouflages the fact that it's also hard work. Everyone at Disney, and especially our employees who we refer to as cast members, is driven to deliver an incredible experience for each customer,” states Potrock. “We are focused on quality and when there are challenges, we keep going, recognizing that they make us stronger. During the pandemic, the hardest thing we had to do was lay off or furlough 33,000 people – it was heartbreaking. When we started to see the pandemic subsiding, we worked tirelessly to reopen, supporting our cast and our community.”

The 3-Legged Stool – The Guest, The Staff and Wall Street

With a public company, there are three critically important audiences: the customers, the employees and Wall Street.

1. Focus on creating amazing experiences for your customers. At Disney, “We think about new rides, new attractions, new experiences, the service we provide, everything from a great new Spider Man attraction all the way down to a lemon chiffon cake and everything in between. No detail is too big or too small when it comes to taking care of the guest.”
2. Take care of your employees. At Disney, it is an ongoing priority to motivate and inspire the cast members. “How do we make sure they love coming to work and they love continuing to deliver a magical experience to every guest?”
3. As a public company, you need to make money. “Price correctly, understand your supply and demand, optimize your capacity.”

Care For Your Employees

There have been many societal and economical challenges in the past few years. To support your employees, make sure you have the proper systems in place. “In our parks, we have Care Centers with people trained to help employees with family disruptions and everyday life challenges navigate to resources.”

To make your company a place people want to work, regularly assess your compensation structure, your benefit portfolio, and your career development programs. “Another Disney difference is the option to continue educational careers, through professional colleges or through the trades. We created the Aspire program which provides free college for any fulltime cast member. ... And because we are such a large company with so much flow between jobs, there are many opportunities to shift into different roles,” says Potrock. “We also deliver the fun so employees get first peek with new launches.”

Celebrate Your Multigenerational Team

A multigenerational team can create challenges for some organizations but recognizing that each generation of employees will bring a different perspective leads to success. At Disney, there are four generations of employees. “We have service awards to honor people with 25, 30, 40 years of service. Younger people hear from the more experienced people who talk about what they have seen and what they have done, and why it's important, with authenticity and honesty.” Newer employees are inspired to hear what senior associates have experienced. Likewise, senior associates often can learn from newer associates including generational references and technology to stay current.

Support Your Community

Demonstrate responsibility to your community. “You can't just be a business and sit in the middle of the community and not be engaged. So we created a development program for high school students, called the Anaheim Family YMCA's Advanced Program that helps high school students understand and prepare for career opportunities so they can see their career path beyond the entry level.”

Value Kindness and Respect for Others

The Disney approach is to: “Ask and listen, value kindness and community service, and respect others.” Potrock explained, “When I first got the job here at Disney, they assigned an operations person to show me the Disney way. ... As we were walking through the park there was a piece of trash on the ground. I picked it up and the operations person commented that I had learned the Disney way. I learned this from my mom and dad, who would never have walked by a piece of trash, and would never have walked by a customer without greeting them, and would never walk by an employee and not ask how their day was. It's the Disney Way. And it's also the Potrock family way.”

Take Risks, Make Changes, Communicate

Listen to your customers, welcome critiques, create solutions. Be upfront, be engaged, be willing to make the investment. “There is a new challenge every day but how we handle the challenges is the exciting part of the job,” says Potrock. To stay vibrant and relevant requires change. And change has consequences. So explain the change and its benefits. “At Disney, we are creating a culture that says if you are not failing sometimes, you're not trying hard enough.”

Share Your Vision and Optimism

To motivate others create a vision for what your business can be and share the vision with others. According to Potrock, “From a leadership style, you could put it on a memo, and they may or may not follow. But, if you are out front, if you've rolled up your sleeves, if you are willing to dig in and get dirty alongside the team, then they will be motivated. Like Walt Disney, I am an optimist. Buzz Lightyear is my favorite character, exemplifying to Infinity and Beyond, there is nothing we can't do.”

Listen to the entire Top Leaders Club podcast with Ken Potrock https://monikaciesielska.com/en/podcast_tlc/ken-potrock/

Check out Monika's Top Leaders Club podcast as she engages in behind-the-scenes conversation with high-level global leaders and invites them to share their leadership inspiration along with their professional successes and failures.

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