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TALENT MANAGEMENT ISSUE

KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

Disney VP Julie Hodges shares
House of Mouse workforce secrets,
while *Training* attends Disney Institute

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Managing the Magic

Management at Walt Disney Parks and Resorts is about more than efficient workforce performance; it's about managing employees who can make or break a child's day. BY MARGERY WEINSTEIN

You could do worse than having Mickey Mouse, Goofy, and Donald Duck as employees. They're generally cheerful and good at satisfying customers. But, like any company, managing employees at Walt Disney Parks and Resorts isn't all picture-perfect moments. Julie Hodges, vice president, organization and professional development for Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, shares with *Training* how the "Happiest Place on Earth" recruits, trains, retains, and continues to engage its workforce:

Training: What was Disney's greatest training challenge over the last year, and how was it met?

HODGES: Right now, a Disney Theme Park is open somewhere every minute of every day, and our organization is responsible for ensuring employees at all of those sites have the proper training to provide a seamless Disney experience for our guests. Our greatest training challenge has been to find the right balance of consistency and adaptability for our dynamic business needs and diverse employee base. We need to ensure that we provide useful, relevant learning solutions that are engaging, interactive, adaptable to different learning environments, and considerate of cultural norms.

Training: What new programs or initiatives were put in place, and/or what new technology was purchased?

HODGES: Our training needs are continually evolving, just like our Theme Parks and Resorts. Our business strategy has always been to match the appropriate technology and delivery methods with our target audience, whether the audience is guests or employees. In addition to implementing an enterprise-wide learning management system and learning content repository, our organization has begun offering rapid development and electronic performance support systems as a component of the learning solution. We recently developed gaming, simulation, and mobile learning experiences.

Training: What can you share about the demographics of your workforce, and how are you tailoring training to meet their respective needs?

HODGES: Disney is recognized as a people-oriented company with a strong corporate culture. We foster our relationships and are in the business of making "magical" relationships. It doesn't matter if people are "young" or "young at heart." Our workforce represents a broad demographic. In our Theme Parks, Resorts, and Cruise Ships, you will see employees from different generations, cultures, backgrounds, and lifestyles all working together. By recognizing their individual learning needs, we enable learners to develop their knowledge, uphold the Disney traditions, and feel they are actively involved in the

company's success. Simultaneously training four generations of people from diverse backgrounds who work together does pose some unique challenges. Walt Disney once said, "I'd rather entertain and hope that people learn rather than teach and hope that they're entertained," and it is as true now as it was 50 years ago. Our learners want to be engaged in dynamic learning experiences, so we constantly strive to enhance the training for their various needs and learning styles.

Training: What's the greatest change that's occurred in the way you deliver training over the last 10 years? Why was this change necessary, and how did you get your workforce on board with it?

HODGES: Our training has evolved in tandem with technological developments and changing workforce demographics. Over the last few years, we have promoted flexible learning deliveries, customized learning experiences, and collaborative development with internal partners and clients. Ten years ago, most of our learning experiences were delivered as instructor-led training. Now we promote a blended approach and leverage technology to enhance the learning solutions. This shift allows us to engage learners from diverse backgrounds and respond with greater flexibility. With creativity and innovation as two of our company's values, we will continue to develop smart solutions that deliver the right message to employees at the right time.

Training: Would you say Disney trainers have a seat at the executive table? In other words, how much do trainers participate in conversations about company strategy, and the workforce's capability to deliver on that strategy?

HODGES: Our executives recognize there is a wealth of knowledge in our workforce. They realize it is critical for our employees to receive training to further enhance their skills in order to deliver a seamless guest experience. Our business needs are continually evolving with the strategic direction. The organization is committed to developing learning solutions that support these needs. This alignment includes a variety of integration points, including a close partnership between the learning and development team and our human resources generalists, business leaders, and learners. Additionally, a rigorous needs analysis process ensures that each learning strategy effectively and efficiently supports our business strategies.

Training: From the Disney Institute program, I learned empowering employees is a big part of Disney culture. So, I was wondering about the mechanisms you have in place, such as surveys and other feedback forums, you've implemented to hear their voice, and (sometimes) act on their suggestions.

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Managing the Magic

HODGES: Walt Disney made it clear we could never rest on our laurels, so continuous improvement has been an integral part of our culture. In our organization, it's important that each employee has a voice and that people have a variety of ways to share their thoughts and opinions with us. In addition to annual employee surveys and action-planning forums, there are employee resource groups, advisory councils, and feedback mechanisms—usually supported by a leader or an executive champion—that are in place. Whether an employee submits feedback through a formal or informal process, there are methods for doing so directly or anonymously. It is then our responsibility to respond appropriately.



WALT DISNEY PARKS AND RESORTS EXEC JULIE HODGES SAYS THE COMPANY'S GREATEST TRAINING CHALLENGE HAS BEEN TO FIND THE RIGHT BALANCE OF CONSISTENCY AND ADAPTABILITY FOR DYNAMIC BUSINESS NEEDS AND A DIVERSE EMPLOYEE BASE.

Training: How do you recruit new workers?

HODGES: At Disney Parks, there are wide varieties of guest service, entertainment, internship, and professional roles. We utilize a multilayered media approach to lead prospective candidates to our Websites, including Internet advertising and postings, print advertisements, radio commercials, and displays and signs in targeted locations. However, our most successful source for new candidates is from Cast Member referrals to our sites. Our network of employment Websites provides detailed descriptions and visual displays about the employment experiences, role expectations and qualifications, and the beginning of the application and selection process. The recruitment process is completed by our recruiters, who discuss the best role that suits the individual's skills and desires, while focusing on the person's potential to provide excellent guest experiences.

Training: At Disney Institute, I learned that you have a much better-than-average employee retention rate than other hospitality/resort companies, but that you would like to further reduce turnover. What is your retention rate and what are you doing to improve it?

HODGES: Retention rates vary among the business units. We have 40 different lines of business and more than 2,000 job descriptions (for salaried leaders, hourly employees, office and technical staff, and technical specialists). The turnover of full-time employees at our Parks and Resorts is significantly below the industry average. Key retention factors include providing knowledge, resources, and a supportive work environment. Although all leaders are accountable for engaging employees, we have service managers whose primary focus is the employee experience. We talk to candidates and employees to discover what brought them to Disney and encourage employees to

enjoy our company products and services when they're not at work, not only for their knowledge about our company's products and services, but to build pride and engagement.

Training: What is the blended learning equation at Disney?

HODGES: There's no specific equation for our approach to blended learning. Our instructional systems design practices enable us to identify the appropriate delivery methodology for each individual learning experience—instructor-led, e-learning, a gaming simulation, a media object on a mobile device, or an on-the-job training session. To stay in touch with our learners, our Disney trainers and coordinators of training, who work in the operation each day, identify individual needs and learning styles so we can design training effectiveness and learner comprehension into new offerings.

Training: How do you assess the knowledge of your employees after courses? And how do you assess the course to know it's working and is a worthwhile investment?

HODGES: The Walt Disney Parks and Resorts segment has a dedicated Learning and Development Evaluation team, which partners with training professionals during the design, implementation, and evaluation of an offering to design an appropriate evaluation strategy. Employees are required to complete and pass all regulatory compliance training; other assessments and evaluations focus on the transfer of knowledge. After the evaluation team presents the data to our training professionals, we can consider whether to revise, redesign, or retire content as appropriate. Although training evaluation involves a continuous process of asking questions, gathering feedback, and evaluating training effectiveness, it is critical for the ongoing success of our employees and, ultimately, our business. ■