

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Creating Magic

Lee Cockerell

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About the Book

“IT’S NOT THE MAGIC THAT MAKES IT WORK; IT’S THE WAY WE WORK THAT MAKES IT MAGIC.”

Lee Cockerell, the man who ran *Walt Disney World* Resort operations for over a decade, shares the ten practical, common sense leadership principles that guided his own journey from a poor farm boy in Oklahoma to the head of operations for a multibillion dollar enterprise. He demonstrates that we can all become leaders capable of outstanding leadership: the kind that inspires employees, delights customers and achieves extraordinary business results.

Combining surprising business wisdom with insightful and entertaining stories from Lee’s four decades on the front lines of some of the world’s best-run companies, *Creating Magic* shows all of us - from small business owners to managers at every level - how to infuse quality, character, courage, enthusiasm, and integrity into our workplaces and into our lives.

Creating Magic

10 Common Sense Leadership Strategies
from a Life at Disney

Lee Cockerell



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You are the leaders of tomorrow.

You continually inspire me
to be a better leader and role model.

I love you—Papi

FOREWORD

CREATING MAGIC, LEE Cockerell's new book, does just that! As the Executive Vice President of Operations for the *Walt Disney World*® Resort, for ten years Lee led a team of 40,000 cast members whose daily challenge was to create magic for the millions of people who visited the parks and resorts. With this book, Lee takes us on a leadership adventure—not just in theory, but an actual real-life journey along which you will learn how to build a passionate team whose members believe: “It’s not the magic that makes it work; it’s the way we work that makes it magic.” *Creating Magic* is not about the theory of magic, but the live, on-the-ground experience of an icon in the magic business—Lee Cockerell.

This remarkable story of a leadership journey is filled with common sense lessons about making magic that we can translate into our own careers, business cultures, or visions of the desired future. Lee shows how, at Disney, leadership starts with respect for all people—Guests and Cast Members (not “employees”) alike. Lee’s approach helps us remember Peter Drucker and his philosophy: “They are not your employees, they are your people.” Lee has distilled his lessons learned into short, powerful messages that connect, illuminate, and motivate.

The Disney Great Leader Strategies that Lee developed are the basis for this handbook for leaders of the future. As Lee’s story shows, fostering participation, engagement, and a sense of ownership at every level across the Disney world brought high morale, high productivity, and real results. Lee’s story is about moving from the old hierarchy to an

inclusive, flexible, fluid, inclusive structure—from “telling” to “asking.” These missions, values, and strategies have made Disney a great learning organization, and at the Disney Institute, they have helped bring people from all over the world together to learn to be better leaders.

Lee Cockerell’s journey began on a dusty Oklahoma farm, and the lessons he learned along the way—from the farm, to college, to the United States Army, and in the hospitality and entertainment industries—provided the lessons indispensable to the future leader he would become.

He learned the power of inclusion that later became “RAVE”: respect, appreciate, and value everyone. His thirteen steps to creating a culture of inclusion give clear and powerful direction. All the way through the book, you will learn the value of people—and how to redefine the future by infusing quality, character, truth, communication, learning, courage, and integrity in all you do.

Even in his acknowledgments, Lee thanks all the Cast Members at Disney World “for all you’ve taught me over the years. You are the magic.” Lee’s leadership is never about him, but always about the people. Leading into an uncertain future, there is a call for principled, ethical, effective leaders—not repeating the strategies and philosophies of the past, but redefining the future—the opportunities, the challenges, the ambiguities. Lee Cockerell’s lessons from his own life provide a road map, a handbook, for us all on our journey to leadership. The leaders of tomorrow, called to lead in uncertain times, will translate *Creating Magic* into their own guidebook for the future.

The lessons in this book apply to leaders at every level in every type of organization and in every country on this earth. Lee’s common sense leadership strategies can help all people understand that leadership is not a title or a position, it is a personal responsibility.

I guarantee you that this book will help you create magic in your business life, your community life, and your personal

life.

Today, Lee travels, speaks, writes, engages, and shares as generously in person as he does in this great book.

*Frances Hesselbein
Chairman and Founding President
Leader to Leader Institute*

Frances Hesselbein is the Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Leader to Leader Institute (formerly the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management) and served as its Founding President. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States of America's highest civilian honor, in 1998. The award recognized her leadership as Chief Executive Officer of Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. from 1976 to 1990, and her role as the founding President of the Drucker Foundation. President Clinton, in his opening citation, said, "Mrs. Hesselbein is a pioneer for women, diversity, and inclusion." Her contributions were also recognized by former president George H. W. Bush, who appointed her to two Presidential Commissions on National and Community Service.

CHAPTER ONE

MAKING MAGIC

“IT’S NOT THE magic that makes it work; it’s the way we work that makes it magic.” Everyone who works at *Walt Disney World*® Resort learns that principle, and the result has been magic for the Guests and for the bottom line. Now you can create magic too—for your organization, your family, and your community—by following the leadership strategies in this book.

During my sixteen years as a senior Disney executive, I repeated that phrase about making magic hundreds of times. But its full magnitude hit me with hurricane force—literally—in the summer of 2004. That’s when Disney World was hammered by three major hurricanes in a little more than a month. Normally, tropical storms do not cause heavy damage in Orlando, as it is about fifty miles from both coasts. In fact, the city had not suffered a direct hit in forty-four years. Then came 2004 and the one-two punch of Charley and Frances.

In August, Hurricane Charley swept through Orlando on Friday the thirteenth with gusts of up to 105 miles per hour, ripping down trees and power lines and tearing the roofs off buildings. The area had not yet fully recovered when Frances came roaring in two weeks later—on Labor Day weekend, no less, when Disney World was host to seventy-five thousand guests. We were forced to close the theme parks on both occasions, something we had done only twice

before, once on 9/11 and once in 1999 for Hurricane Floyd, which fortunately veered away at the last minute. But this time we had to batten down the hatches, and when your hatches are spread over forty-seven square miles, it's a monumental task.

What I remember most about the ordeal is not the terrifying winds or the sleepless nights in the emergency operation center (EOC), where my team and I had gathered to make plans to ensure the safety of our Guests and fellow Cast Members.¹ Instead, I remember the dedication of our staff, the precision of our communications, and the smooth way everyone did what he or she was supposed to do even though it'd never been done before. I remember teams of dedicated people tying down chandeliers, stacking tables and chairs and roping them together, and strapping vending carts to the ground. I remember Mickey and Minnie and Cinderella and Goofy cheering up frightened children in the hotel lobbies. Mostly, I remember the five-thousand-plus Cast Members who spent the stormy nights on the property so they could help at any hour and in any way they could, and the countless others who showed up with their sleeves rolled up the minute it was safe to leave their homes.

I also remember this: When Charley finally subsided, around midnight, exhausted Cast Members worked through the night, clearing debris, getting supplies to where they were needed, and hauling away thousands of damaged trees. It was a monumental effort, with everyone acting as one to get the parks ready for our Guests, some of whom had been stuck in their rooms for eighteen hours. The next morning, we opened on time. And the families who poured in were astonished to find the sunlit theme parks looking spotless and the operations running as if nothing had happened. What they could not see was the massive teamwork behind the scenes that made it all possible or the stress and fatigue behind the smiling faces that greeted them. While many other attractions and businesses in

central Florida remained closed and local municipalities were struggling to restore power and clear the roads, Disney was making magic.

As the executive vice president in charge of operations at Disney World, I could not have been more proud. All the work that my colleagues and I had done to instill strong leadership values throughout the company had clearly paid off. We already knew that our basic principles worked, but it's easy to think you're doing well when times are good. The real test comes when a crisis hits, and our response to this one validated everything I had learned and tried diligently to teach others. Thanks to the solid structures and processes we had in place, everyone knew exactly where to go and what to do. More important, each Cast Member was prepared, mentally and emotionally, to let the vision of Disney World govern everything he or she did: treat the Guests as cherished friends, exceed their expectations, and give them the best vacation experience of their lives. Everyone from top executives to rookies pursued this vision with remarkable dedication.

Soon I would be even more proud. Our company immediately set out to help Cast Members and area residents who had suffered major losses because of the hurricanes. Cast Members at every level of pay came through, either with direct donations or by converting their accrued vacation time into cash. With those funds and the millions more contributed directly by the Walt Disney Company, we were able to provide substantial financial aid, along with supplies, lodging, child care, and other services, to those in need.

All in all, what we saw in that tumultuous period is the kind of strong commitment and exceptional performance that any organization can enjoy as long as its leaders treat people with respect and unite them all behind one common purpose. When things returned to normal and I read the hundreds of letters we'd received from grateful Guests, I

made a personal decision: The minute I retired, I would write a book about Disney's leadership strategies, so that people in every industry and every walk of life could learn how to create the same kind of magic in their organizations and in their lives. This is that book, and I'm certain that no matter what position you now hold—whether you've just started your very first job or you're the CEO of a multinational corporation—you will be a better leader if you follow the ten common sense strategies that follow.

THE WORLD OF DISNEY WORLD

The enchanted realm called Walt Disney World is about the size of San Francisco, or *twice* the size of Manhattan. As the largest tourist destination and one of the biggest convention sites in the world, its 25,000 acres include 32 hotels with more than 31,000 rooms, hundreds of dining and retail locations, four major theme parks, a sports and recreation complex, a shopping and entertainment village, and 167 miles of roadway. With its 59,000 Cast Members, it is the largest single-site employer in the world. And my job was to know exactly what was going on in every nook and cranny of that vast domain.

For ten years I was responsible for making sure everything from the removal of trash to the operation of rides and attractions ran as smoothly and impeccably as a Swiss watch. In order to do my job, I had to know what our Guests felt about their time with us, and so I read their letters over the years, thousands of them, and I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that it's not just the great weather, fabulous shows, and thrilling attractions that bring millions of people a year to Disney World. Those all are extremely important, of course, but what *really* drives the magic is the extraordinary service. How does Disney maintain that high-quality service? Each of the fifty-nine thousand Cast

Members is trained to treat each and every Guest with the utmost care and respect. And they do this consistently because they are treated exactly the same way by the Disney leadership: with the utmost care and respect.

If that sounds like a commercial for a fluffy feel-good Disney movie, let me assure you it's not. It's a rational, muscular, no-nonsense business strategy. And its results are reflected in Disney's robust bottom line, not to mention its astonishing 70 percent return rate among visitors and the lowest employee turnover rate of any major company in the hospitality industry. The formula is simple: Committed, responsible, inspiring leaders create a culture of care, which leads to quality service, which leads to Guest satisfaction, which leads to measurable business results and a strong competitive advantage.

Products and services can easily be replicated. So if your company's competitive advantage is based on products and services alone, you are at risk. But if it's based upon products, services, and *quality service*, then you'll have a competitive advantage that's very difficult to match. And you can get quality service only by creating a caring, respectful, people-centered culture within your company. Take care of your people, and they will take care of your business, not just because they *have* to but because they *want* to.

KEEPING UP WITH CHANGE

Walt Disney himself created the template for quality service when he first envisioned theme parks more than half a century ago. Later, in 1982, the company's reputation got a powerful boost when Tom Peters praised it in his mega-selling book *In Search of Excellence*. Because Peters singled out the Disney training procedures, managers and

executives from other companies started asking how they could emulate those methods.

Throughout the 1980s, Disney World continued to thrive financially. But by the early 1990s, the times were a-changin'. Competitors were starting to catch up, and certain aspects of the company's management style began to seem outdated. The autocratic, top-down leadership approach of the past was less and less welcome in the changing social landscape; management experts predicted that the coming generation of workers and managers would thrive better in a more democratic, participatory environment. One visionary leader who saw the writing on the wall was Judson Green, who was then the president of Disney's Theme Parks and Resorts division. If Walt Disney World was going to adapt to an evolving society and maintain its industry dominance, he realized, the corporate culture had to change.

Intuitively, Judson knew that the key to continued financial success was to provide Guests with a wonderful experience so they'd come back again and again and recommend the place to their families and friends. He reasoned that the Guests' satisfaction depended on the quality of service they received. After all, studies in a variety of industries have shown that it's not just the product that makes for satisfied customers; it's the way they are treated. Judson also knew what I too had learned over the course of my career: If you want your employees to deliver excellent service, you'd better provide them with excellent leadership. A few years later we tested this theory analytically, by conducting a research study. The results showed clearly that Guests were far more likely to return if they were satisfied with their previous visit, and their satisfaction level was highest when they had positive interactions with Cast Members. What was the key to producing that? Effective leadership. The study found that business units with the highest scores in Guest satisfaction were the same ones whose leaders received

high ratings from their direct reports in qualities such as listening, coaching, recognizing people's efforts, and giving people decision-making authority. In short, great leadership leads to employee excellence, which leads to customer satisfaction and strong business results. In other words, the customer doesn't come first; *leadership* comes first.

THE DISNEY FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

.....
Leadership ⇄ Cast (Employee) Excellence ⇄ Guest (Customer)
Satisfaction ⇄ Business Results

So Judson Green and Al Weiss, the new executive vice president, set out to implement that formula by revamping the management style at Walt Disney World. That's where I came in.

In May 1993, I was vice president of resort operations at Euro Disney (now Disneyland Paris). My wife, Priscilla, and I were living in France, preparing for our son Daniel's wedding to our wonderful daughter-in-law, Valerie, when I was offered the post of senior vice president of resort operations at Walt Disney World, reporting directly to Al Weiss. I'm sure there were many reasons for that promotion, and one of them was surely my passion for leadership excellence. Judson, with whom I'd worked in Paris, knew that I had been studying the subject for many years and had implemented key leadership principles during my time with the company, as well as earlier, when I had worked for Marriott.

So Priscilla and I picked up and moved to Florida. Pretty soon I was playing a key role in transforming the corporate culture at the world's most successful resort. The mandate was clear: In an era of rapid change, our management style had to be as creative as the movies produced by Disney's animators and as innovative as the attractions dreamed up

by Disney's Imagineers (creative designers). We needed leaders who could both manage the business and inspire our Cast Members to adapt to twenty-first-century demands.

A TIME OF TRANSITION

Disney was already renowned for its excellent training procedures at the time, but that training did not include leadership. This was about to change. Now we would make it our policy to promote leadership excellence among our Cast and follow through with clear expectations and ongoing education. And that meant *everyone*. The idea was to achieve leadership excellence by spreading responsibility and authority throughout the organization. We understood that anyone at any level—from the landscape and cleaning crews right on up to the CEO of the whole organization—can exert leadership and make a positive difference. We let it be known that managers and executives would be evaluated not only on their bottom line results but on *how* those results were obtained. Everyone was now expected to live up to specific values and ideals. “My way or the highway” would be replaced by “What do you think?” as leaders were expected to encourage ongoing input and to show Cast Members that their ideas were valued and their needs were taken seriously.

The road to performance excellence was bumpy at first; change always meets with resistance, and this was no exception. Some of the old guard were set in their ways and were unwilling or unable to get on board. We heard many variations of “It ain't broke, so why fix it?” and we lost some competent managers along the way; some of our leaders left the company in the first eighteen months. But eventually the new direction paid off big-time.

Most leaders saw merit in what we were doing and learned to adapt, even though it wasn't easy at times. One

prime example was Tom Nabbe. Tom had started working for Disneyland in Anaheim when he was in junior high, just after the park opened. Red-haired and freckled, he was the very first “Tom Sawyer” on Tom Sawyer’s Island. He later moved into supervisory roles and relocated to Orlando in 1971. Eventually he became the manager of distribution services for warehousing. After more than thirty years at Disney, Tom was used to the old management style, in which the people in charge handed down directions and the staff were expected to execute them exactly as they were told. Now, like all the other managers, Tom was asked to step back, loosen the reins, and inspire his team to develop its own procedures and discover its own solutions. “It was a time of introspection for me,” he recalls. “I was a little skeptical at first, but the philosophy behind the Performance Excellence campaign started to make sense. I learned how to develop real teamwork, where everything we did supported what we called the three-legged stool: the Guests, the Cast Members, and the business metrics. I became a better leader, and everything got done better, faster, and cheaper.”

Tom, who retired in 2003 after forty-seven years with the company, remembers the time that the process of handling materials was brought up-to-date with new technology. Under the old management style, automating a major operation would have been met with strong resistance from disgruntled workers. Instead, the frontline staff met the challenge head-on. Because they were involved from conception to execution, not only did they feel a sense of ownership in the new system, but their ideas proved to be invaluable. As a result, products got from the warehouse to the end users a lot faster, and Tom’s team received accolades from trade magazines and industry experts.

Once the changes were firmly in place, we quickly saw concrete evidence of the results, which convinced Tom and other managers that we were headed in the right direction.

The average score on our annual leadership survey went up, and the average continued to rise annually at a rate that business analysts called incredible.

THE GREAT LEADER STRATEGIES

Two years later, in 1995, I realized that the new leadership philosophy was not being implemented as quickly and as universally as we had hoped it would. So I decided to make the basic concepts more concrete. Drawing on everything I had learned over thirty-five years in the hospitality industry, and with the help of a friend and management consultant named Jamie Conglose, I wrote them out in a clear, simple, and easy-to-follow form. The result was what came to be called the Disney Great Leader Strategies, which soon became the bedrock principles by which the company's seven thousand leaders operate. And it's these same strategies that now provide the foundation for this book.

Once the strategies took hold, bottom line results quickly followed: The percentage of returning Guests steadily increased; scores on leadership evaluations improved dramatically each year; employee turnover dropped to its present level, the lowest in the hospitality industry and a third of the industry average. The rollout of the strategies took only eight weeks. I began by going over each strategy and tactic with my direct reports. Then they spent two weeks reviewing them in detail with their own direct reports. This chain continued until the strategies had been reviewed by every single manager. We then made copies available to all the Cast Members so they would know what leadership behaviors to expect from their managers. Because the strategies were taught to all Cast Members (they were even recorded on CDs, which Cast Members could borrow or buy), everyone, from stage hands to supervisors to upper management, became fully committed to one common

purpose: making sure that every Guest had the most fantastic time of his or her life.

Without these strong values and the solid leadership training to implement them, Walt Disney World might not have made it through the tumultuous nineties with the remarkable reputation and competitive edge it still enjoys today.

I assure you the strategies don't apply just to theme parks and resorts, and they don't work just for world-famous brands like Disney. They are effective at every level of every industry, in any location, whether a corner shop or a retail conglomerate; a hospital or a bowling alley; Wall Street or Silicon Valley; a London bank or a German automobile plant; a Japanese electronics firm or a Bangalore call center. And they work not only in the corporate world but also in the nonprofit sector, in everything from schools to religious organizations, as well as in community life, the military, and even parenting! After all, Disney is just like every business, including yours, whatever it may be: It has to make a profit, it has to deal with serious business issues, it faces intense competition, and its strongest competitor is its own reputation.

Over the course of many years and hundreds of seminars and lectures, I've taught the same principles to leaders from every continent and a vast array of cultures, and I've never found anyone anywhere who does not recognize their validity. In short, the strategies in this book can benefit anyone who wants to make a difference and leave a legacy of positive leadership.

My former colleague Trish Hunt is a good example of someone who used the Great Leader Strategies (GLS) as a road map to success in a number of different arenas. She first learned the principles you're about to learn when she worked in human resources at Walt Disney World. She later applied them in executive positions at Cooperstown Dreams Park as well as two large financial institutions. "If I didn't

have the Great Leader Strategies to reference, I wouldn't have had the success I did," she told me. "Applying what I learned about leadership, following the different steps, and sharing ideas from the strategies opened doors for me with other executives and with my staff. It translated to high performance and productivity. In the three years I was at one bank, none of my direct reports was terminated or resigned, customer satisfaction increased steadily, and I reduced my budget several million dollars by applying specific tools from the GLS." Throughout the book you'll hear from other leaders who have successfully applied the strategies in their organizations.

THE DISNEY INSTITUTE

When you do something really well, the word tends to get out. Soon more and more businesses were asking to learn about Disney's training methods, so a full-fledged professional development institute was established. Today the Disney Institute (DI) attracts more than a hundred thousand people a year to its open enrollment courses and specially tailored programs. People from all kinds of companies around the globe come to improve their leadership skills, business practices, work environment, and customer service.

The DI draws clients from a wide range of industries—from health care to financial services to manufacturing—and from virtually every country with a modern economy. At a recent seminar, for example, there were people from a South African mining company, a large Canadian restaurant chain, a park district in the California desert, a small Pennsylvania college, an international investment banking firm, a foster care agency, a small auto dealership in Mississippi, a large health maintenance organization, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, Hewlett-Packard, and the National

Security Agency. In fact, as I was editing this book, the *Washington Post* reported that 2,000 employees of Walter Reed Army Medical Center would be required to take a Disney Institute training program. The hospital is implementing a command-wide culture change to ensure that everyone who enters its doors leaves having had a positive experience. The quality of medical care provided for patients was never in question. But inadequate housing facilities and frustrating bureaucratic processes for disability evaluation led to well-publicized complaints from patients and family members. The hospital turned to Disney for help in changing its culture. Colonel Patricia D. Horoho, commander of Walter Reed's health-care system, explained why: "When you enter the hospital, we want it to be the best experience possible."

Seeing how effective the Great Leader Strategies were in practice, the DI began to incorporate them into its training programs. The strategies now form the basis of the institute's core curriculum, providing the foundation for courses such as Leadership Excellence, Quality Service, and Organizational Creativity. In essence, the Disney Institute uses both classroom instruction and real-life demonstrations in the actual Disney operation to teach companies of all types how to make the Disney approach work in their business or industry. Their courses take people from the principle to the practice so quickly and seamlessly that once the training is over, attendees can immediately begin to implement them to become better leaders in their own organizations. ([See Appendix](#) for more information about the institute.)

The point is that every person in these training programs leaves better equipped to lead his or her organization to better results. Why? Because all business problems boil down to leadership problems. Everything you wish to accomplish is driven by great leadership, and the strategies for achieving that are the same regardless of the industry

you're in, the continent you're on, the products or services you provide, or the number of workers you employ.

The ideas in the coming chapters are as simple as they are profound. They sound like good old-fashioned common sense, and they *are* common sense. But unfortunately they are *not* common practice. I've known a lot of powerful, highly competent executives in my time. Most of them can describe their business strategies in great detail yet have very little to say about their leadership strategies. And many of those who can talk the talk don't necessarily walk it. They train people to manage just fine, but they fail to appreciate the critical difference between managing and leading. I learned the hard way that managerial skills are absolutely essential for getting results, but they are not enough to drive *excellence*. Excellence requires common sense leadership.

One of the great misconceptions about leadership is that it's an innate gift that can't be taught. People assume that leaders are born, not made. Another misconception is that leadership is synonymous with titles, job descriptions, and salary grades. It's not. Leadership is more than a role; it's a responsibility. A big one. Being a leader means doing what has to be done, when it has to be done, in the way it *should* be done, whether you like it or not, and whether *they* like it or not. It means making the right things happen by bringing out the best in others. I like to say that good leaders are environmentalists. Their responsibility is to create a sustainable business environment—calm, clear, crisp, and clean, with no pollution, no toxins, no waste—in which everyone flourishes.

Everyone can exert that kind of leadership. The top-to-bottom principles in this book can be taught to people at every level of any enterprise, and the results are predictable: increased trust, motivation, and teamwork, plus an emotional connection that resonates throughout the

organization, spreading from one employee to another and then outward to the hearts and minds of customers.

That's what makes the difference between ordinary performance and magic. I have repeatedly seen the strategies in this book transform managers into leaders, poor leaders into good leaders, and good leaders into great leaders who create the kind of environment that everyone dreams of working in and that customers return to again and again.

The purpose of this book is to offer leaders and potential leaders the same powerful strategies that have worked magic at Disney World and for the clients of the Disney Institute. Two of the ten strategies emphasize the nuts and bolts of organizational structure and business procedures. The others focus on dealing with people. That 80:20 ratio reflects the vital importance of inspiring, motivating, teaching, and other so-called soft skills. As I tell every audience I address, the soft stuff is actually the hard stuff, but if you get it right, everything else tends to fall into place and turns out to be not so hard after all.

I've often wished that someone had taught me these leadership truths early in my career. (Actually my mother and grandmother did teach them to me, but I forgot them when I got into the corporate world.) Had I remembered them, I would have been spared a great many costly mistakes. Then again, I learned from those mistakes, and I take great pleasure in knowing that this book will help other leaders avoid the same pitfalls. But before we get into the leadership strategies themselves, let me fill you in on how my own life and career led me to them.

¹ Walt Disney World capitalizes words such as "Cast Member" (the term used for employees) and "Guest" as a reminder to everyone how critically important they are. I will follow that convention in this book.

CHAPTER TWO

THE JOURNEY FROM THE FARM TO A MAGIC KINGDOM

IF MY HIGH school classmates and teachers knew about my career, they'd most likely be shaking their heads in surprise. They probably figured I'd end up running a local supply shop, not a multibillion-dollar enterprise with fifty-nine thousand employees. Frankly, I'm astonished myself. I never had a career plan. I had no five-year goals. I just did the best work I could. I worked hard and tried to be responsible, patient, disciplined, and positive. And as I plugged along, opportunities showed up just when I was prepared to take them on.

But of all the factors that carried me from a dusty Oklahoma farm to the higher reaches of the corporate ladder, the main ingredient was this: Throughout my career I made an effort to learn everything I could about leadership. I'm not an academic. I did not go to business school or study organizational psychology or management in classrooms. I learned in the trenches, by watching good leaders excel and bad leaders mess up and by observing the effects their behavior had on businesses.

The farm I grew up on in the late 1940s and early 1950s had no indoor plumbing. Everyone in the family worked long hours, seven days a week, trying to scrape together a living. Starting when I was eight, I milked a cow every morning before going to class in a one-room schoolhouse. I hauled

that milk to our neighbors across the road, Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, who gave me fifty cents, plus some peaches when they were in season—an early lesson in the rewards of good work habits. In the summers, my brother Jerry and I helped out by riding on the back of a hay baler, making sure the bales were tied properly while our grandfather drove the tractor. We considered this fun. Some of our other tasks, like cleaning up the barn after the cows had been milked, we did *not* think of as fun; they were hard work. In fact, I didn't even know about the concept of a vacation until I was in my twenties, when I served meals to vacationers in hotel dining rooms.

Meanwhile, my home life was as unstable as my family's income. By the time I finished high school, my mother had been married four times (she later married once again). But despite that, my mother was rock solid. I didn't realize it at the time, but she was one of the greatest leaders I've ever known: tough and resolute, yet kind and sensitive. She not only was crystal clear about what she expected of my brother and me but also explained *why* she held those standards and made sure we understood the consequences of not living up to them. This is just what a business leader ought to do; that is why I give speeches titled "Manage Like a Mother." The true work of a business leader, like that of a mother, is to help others to be the best they can be. Rather than expect their teams to serve them, good business leaders serve their teams the way mothers serve their children. In turn their people serve their customers better, and excellent business results follow just as surely as solid families follow from solid parenting.

I wish I'd absorbed those leadership lessons better at the time.

I worked part-time throughout my teenage years, doing everything from unloading cement, Sheetrock, and lumber from train cars to delivering prescriptions for the local drugstore. Because the last of my stepfathers was a

physician who could afford to send me to college, I was able to enroll at Oklahoma State. I was not the greatest student. I'm more of a hands-on learner, so I learned a lot more through my series of part-time and summer jobs than I ever did in a classroom. As a kitchen steward in my fraternity house I learned about serving people and even more about working with a team.

Realizing that college wasn't for me, I dropped out after two years and joined the army, where I was assigned to cook school. Among the many lessons I learned there was to always have respect for process and procedure—another one of Disney's Great Leader Strategies. One day, while making the dough for three hundred hamburger buns, I did not pay attention to when and how to add the yeast. The result was not pretty. I was demoted to dishwashing and potato-peeling duty for a few days. But this also was a learning opportunity; it taught me how to deal with setbacks and learn from mistakes. Luckily, the electric potato peelers were broken, and I seized the opportunity to get my cook's job back quickly by peeling potatoes better and faster than anyone ever had and by maintaining a positive attitude the whole time.

ENTERING THE HOSPITALITY BUSINESS

I graduated from cook school second in my class. The number one guy was a professional cook from England, my friend Terrence Biggs. I learned a lot from Terrence, including the importance of spending time around people with something to teach. When our military service drew to a close, Terrence said he'd lined up a job at the new Hilton hotel in Washington, D.C., and could get me one too. Twenty years old with nothing better to do, I seized the opportunity. I'll never forget that first night upon arriving in Washington, when we stayed in an eight-dollar room in a tiny motor hotel

called Twin Bridges Marriott. Back then, if anyone had suggested that I'd one day help Marriott grow into a major force in the industry, I'd have called him crazy.

Hilton's personnel manager asked me what kind of job I wanted. I had no idea. I had never set foot in a hotel before. I had never even seen linen napkins, let alone a place setting with more than one fork (in my house you licked off the dinner fork before using it to eat your pie). When the manager offered to make me a banquet waiter, I said "sure," not having any idea what the job was. The closest thing to a banquet I'd ever been to was my high school prom, and that was at the YWCA.

When I saw the grand ballroom, I was so overwhelmed I almost had a heart attack. It seated three thousand people! But my farmer's work ethic and my soldier's discipline got me over the initial hurdles and endeared me to one of the banquet captains, who took me under his wing. He not only taught me how to fold napkins, skirt tablecloths, and pour the right wine into the right glass but also showed me how important it is to train and develop your people, the key leadership principle you'll read about in Chapter Six. He taught me as well the importance of looking and acting like a professional even when I was so exhausted I thought I'd fall asleep on my feet.

Because the guests and my coworkers were from all over the world, my time at the Hilton also taught me about diversity long before social scientists thought up diversity training. The job also taught me a lot about how to treat others. I served presidents, senators, foreign dignitaries, celebrities, and other powerful people. Some of them treated small fry like me like dirt. Others treated us with dignity, and I saw that they were the leaders everyone respected.

It took many years and many mistakes before these invaluable lessons sank in. But my memories of life on the