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RICK BRIMEYER

Lessons from Walt Disney

Recently while visiting our daughter and son-in-law, we took in the Walt Disney Family Museum which is located in the Presidio of San Francisco. The Presidio is a former military base and now a beautiful park, part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

I expected the museum to contain an abundance of artwork and film clips of Disney characters, perhaps in various states of character development, and it certainly did.

What I didn't expect was a thorough history of Disney as a business, often shared via Walt's personal reflections. The result is a wonderfully visual and thought-provoking "seminar" on business success.

Here's a summary of the lessons learned or reinforced:

- Do what you love to do. Walt determined at an early age that he liked to draw, and that he was very good at it. He also learned that, despite the steadier income, he detested working in a canning factory. Walt followed his passion and never looked back.
- Don't be afraid to fail. Walt founded the Laugh-O-Gram Studio in Kansas City in 1922. It went bankrupt a year later. Undeterred, he headed to Hollywood with a suitcase and 20 dollars to start Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio,

convincing his older brother Roy to leave a "respectable" banking career in Los Angeles.

Over the years, the pair would frequently bet the company, as well as the mortgages on their homes, on a new project. Having shared a happy childhood despite very humble beginnings, they were able to keep things in perspective.

- Embrace change. Walt kept keenly abreast of advancements in the motion picture industry, incorporating sound and color into cartoons.

In situations where a clear expert already existed, Disney established a competitive advantage by collaborating with the industry leader such as an exclusive contract with Technicolor to produce color cartoons.

In other areas, such as perfecting animation and adding depth to two-dimensional scenes, Disney's innovative culture and talented workforce developed the new technology internally.

- Surround yourself with great people and rise with the company.



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Convincing talented people to join a cartoon company during and immediately following the Great Depression was a tough sell. Fortunately, Walt was a great salesman.

As the company grew, Walt realized that he had to spend less time drawing and more time managing. With still further growth, Walt understood that his real gift to the company was as its visionary leader.

Diversify intelligently. Disney's evolving portfolio of cartoon drawings, animated cartoons, feature length cartoon films, character merchandising, live action films, television programming and even theme parks stayed true to the entertainment theme that the organization knew best and leveraged existing successes into new areas.

Interestingly, according to his own narratives, often ventures into new territories occurred not primarily for the prospects for profit, but because Walt felt it represented a great learning opportunity for his team.

One other theme was consistent in these new endeavors — Disney insisted that the quality of the product be representative of what customers expected of established products. Just because something was new was no excuse for sub-standard work.

- Persevere through the expected highs

and lows. Disney's organization struggled to maintain its family atmosphere, especially after moving into a spacious, state-of-the-art studio.

Departmental silos began to emerge and at least some veteran managers lamented that complacency crept into the organization along with the move to the plush studio.

The company was targeted by an industry union for a bitter conflict in the early 1940s. Walt referred to this as "the toughest period" as he prided himself on setting high challenges for his employees, but also providing opportunities and compensation that they were not likely to obtain elsewhere.

I entered the Walt Disney Family Museum expecting a retelling of all the Disney tales that we know well. I left it with the realization that the best story was Walt's personal journey. It's another great American success story with lessons for every organization still today.

Rick Brimeyer is the President of Brimeyer LLC, an independent management consulting firm located in Ames which guides organizations to higher performance by focusing on process improvement and leadership development. Further information is available at www.brimeyerllc.com or by calling 515-450-8855.