Disney U: How Disney University Develops the World’s Most Engaged, Loyal, and Customer-Centric Employees


Former Disney insider Doug Lipp documents the training secrets of Van France, who helped Walt Disney create “The Happiest Place on Earth.” A key member of the team that helped launch Disneyland in 1955, France went on to found Disney University, Disney’s in-house training program.

Over the decades, Disney University has proved to be an important component of Disney success through times both bad and good. While its materials and methods have changed often through the years, Disney University’s mission has not: Innovate, Support, Educate, Entertain.

Every Disney hire attends Disney University training, from the ticket takers to Michael Eisner, whose enthusiastic blurb appears on the back cover of Disney U. There they are indoctrinated into such Disney management concepts as onstage/backstage and good show/bad show and drilled in the importance of safety, cleanliness, and friendliness in creating happy “guests.” As France wrote in one of his training guides: “Budgets, schedules, reports...and the endless things [that] take up your time are of no value unless they end up producing A HAPPY GUEST.”

The standout chapter in Disney U is “Communicate Globally,” a discussion of the cultural, linguistic, and generational issues that can undermine effective communication. The chapter summarizes the lessons learned in the launch of Tokyo Disneyland, of which the author was a part. Linguistic difficulties were expected, and many competent translators were on hand. What the planners failed to anticipate was the cultural dimension. The night before Tokyo Disneyland’s high-profile unveiling to the press, the Japanese custodial staff was instructed to clean every building in the park until it gleamed. And they did. In fact, they did their work so thoroughly that they removed any trace of the rubber-cement cobwebs and other special effects in the Haunted Mansion that had taken a team of American artists more than three weeks to create. No one had explained to them that the building had been intentionally made “dirty.”

An alumnus of the Disney University training team, Lipp currently does consulting work for companies appearing on the list drawn up by the magazine FORTUNE of the 100 American firms with the highest gross revenues.

Leadership Conversations: Challenging High-Potential Managers to Become Great Leaders

By Alan S. Berson and Richard G. Stieglitz. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013; 301 pages; $27.95

Chances are good that at some point early in your career you had uncharitable feelings about a supervisor or manager or two (or more) that boiled down to the idea that they seemed to do a lot more talking than working.

Certainly there are those who talk when they should be working, but if you have progressed far enough up the ladder, you have probably learned that, for managers and leaders, the talking is in fact a large part of the doing. Like anything else, however, some are much better than others at the conversations that define a leader. The good news, according to Leadership Conversations, is that just about anyone can get better at it.

Authors Alan Berson and Richard Stieglitz, both of whom are highly accomplished business consultants and corporate executives, are true to their book’s title and focus relentlessly on the conversations that managers and leaders must have all the time. They break these leadership conversations down into four types, which largely define the book’s structure.

“Conversations to Build Relationships” focuses on the day-to-day conversations with colleagues of all stripes that determine whether you build strong relationships that will help you succeed. “Conversations to Develop Others” homes in on the way you communicate with those who report to you. Such conversations come into play in, for example, hiring or retaining employees with high potential, mentoring and coaching, and recognizing accomplishments.

“Conversations to Make Decisions” covers the process of arriving at the decisions, large and small, that leaders are expected to make all the time. In addition to developing “the judgment gene,” leaders must have a thorough understanding of their organizations, be curious, and ask the right questions. Finally, “Conversations to Take Action” discusses the transition from talking and decisions to actual action, strategic change, and motivation and inspiration. A closing section examines the way in which the types of conversation change as one moves up through the ranks.

Leadership Conversations is replete with real-world examples drawn from the authors’ consulting experiences, making the concepts even
more concrete and compelling. It is also refreshingly free of “clever” neologisms and rah-rah buzzword-laden clichés. This is solid, focused advice. It is clearly explained and entertainingly presented, and you can begin putting it into practice immediately.

**A Grand Complication: The Race to Build the World’s Most Legendary Watch**

*By Stacy Perman. New York City: Atria Books, 2013; 343 pages; $26*

IN THE quaint vernacular of horology, any feature of a watch beyond the simple tracking of hours, minutes, and seconds is a “complication.” The pocket watch in question here—the Graves Supercomplication, the Hope diamond of the watch world—had 24 complications, ranging from a stunning celestial chart representing the night sky over New York City to a Westminster carillon played out on five gongs. But just as intriguing as the engineering of the timepiece is the Jazz Age drama that led to its commissioning.

The New York socialite Henry Graves and the midwestern engineer James Ward Packard, who played a major role in the country’s automotive history, could not have been more different. But they shared one thing: a passion for horology. In their relentless pursuit of the world’s most complicated timepiece, both men turned to the Swiss watchmaker Patek Philippe, who delivered watch after watch, each more opulent and complex than the last.

Although Packard led the race in his lifetime, a few years after his death the final victory became Graves’s. Eight years in the making, the Supercomplication was delivered to Henry Graves in 1933, the finest watch the world had ever known but already something of an anachronism.

The legendary watch remained largely unseen for decades, resurfacing only in 1999 when Sotheby’s auctioned it for more than $11 million to an anonymous bidder. Last November it was revealed that the winner of that auction was the Qatari sheikh Saud Bin Mohammed Bin Ali Al Thani, whose extensive unpaid debts may yet put the Graves Supercomplication back on the block.

Author Stacy Perman is meticulous enough in her research to satisfy the most exacting horologist, and her attention to detail evokes Jack Finney as she carefully reconstructs daily life in fin de siècle America and the Roaring Twenties. But it is her obvious passion for the subject that gives life to *A Grand Complication* and keeps the pages turning.

**The Slow Fix: Solve Problems, Work Smarter, and Live Better in a World Addicted to Speed**

*By Carl Honoré. New York City: HarperOne, 2013; 262 pages; $25.99*

THE QUICK-FIX mentality is everywhere. We see it in crash diets and miracle pills, in rash investments or purchases, or in any tendency to work around a nagging problem rather than fix it for good.

*The Slow Fix* is about taking the time to solve problems correctly, which in large part means approaching them with more deliberation and thoroughness than is our custom. The book begins, wisely, with a simple neuroscientific explanation of why humans have a bias toward the quick fix. Our brains have two “systems” for problem solving—one fast and intuitive and the other more deliberate.

Journalist Carl Honoré explains that the first was especially useful for our very distant ancestors, who had more need to make snap decisions, decisions often involving life or death. While the slow and deliberate system should be dominant after so many millennia of civilization and the resultant rewards for long-term planning and careful thinking, it is not. The first system is still there, and more to the point it is easier and confers instant gratification in the form of dopamine and other brain chemicals. We are, in a sense, addicts.

The implications of this tendency are broad. They affect us as individuals and are also reflected in corporate decision making, politics, social policy, academic research, and a host of other areas. The author tours many of these, offering them as cases in point, but spends equal time exploring success stories and describing strategies for countering the first system, among them a firm commit-