Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Walt Disney

Managing Tourism Event & Leisure Operations

Leisure, Events, Tourism & International Travel & Tourism Management

(BMTP4018)

Lecturer's Name

Scott James

Student Name: Jasmine Robinson

Student ID: 2404492

Word Count

2000 words

Contents

Walt Disney 1
Contents 2
Executive Summary 2
Introduction 2
Leadership and Change Management 3
Leadership Style, Culture and People 4
Stategic Recommendations for Leadership 6
Conclusion 7
References 7

Executive Summary

This report focuses on Walt Disney, how he dealt with change at his time at Disney, his transformational leadership style and his decisions and how they impacted his employees and Disney's. This purpose of this report is to inform its readers about Walt Disney's impact on Disney as a leader. This report was researched using many different sources such as books, websites, blogs and articles and then the researcher put this into the report. This report proves that Walt Disney was an excellent leader who thrived in challenging situations, cared about his company and had a strong sense of company culture and values. Some recommendations for improving the Disney that Walt could have implemented are employee development, increased diversity and improving employee wellbeing. This report and its recommendations are extremely important as a lot of people know about Disney as a company but not about the mind behind it.

Introduction

Walt Disney is the founder of Disney, voice actor of early days Mickey Mouse and Jiminy Cricket, producer of movies such as Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella and envisioned and initiated the plans for Walt Disney World (Levitt, 2023) (Disney Parks, 2023) (The Telegraph, 2017). Disney is a mass media and entertainment company which has 12 theme parks across six resort destinations worldwide, a cruise line and 25 resorts and villas (Disneyworld, n.d.) (Disney Experiences, n.d.). Walt Disney struggled with many challenges during his career such as financial setbacks, creative struggles and a labour dispute. Before he started Disney, Walt and his brother Roy launched a cartoon

business called Laugh-O-Gram studios in 1920 which went bankrupt, he had a nervous breakdown after creating Mickey Mouse, during World War two his animators went on strike and Disneyworld's opening day got the name 'Black Sunday' (Pak, 2020). This report will focus on how Walt Disney's approach to leadership helped manage change, how Walt's actions impacted Disney's culture and how his decisions helped boost Disney's performance especially during difficult times.

Leadership and Change Management

Despite Walt Disney's struggles he never lost sight of his goal to create joy filled entertainment. After Walt went bankrupt due to Laugh-O-Gram studios he failed at acting however after that he noticed there weren't any animation studios in California which is where him and his brother moved to, and he created the character Oswald the Lucky Rabbit who was a star in one reel animation. This shows determination as he chose to persevere and rebuild his career rather than give up (Pak, 2020).

However, when he travelled to New York to renegotiate his contract he discovered his producer took his animators and Walt no longer had legal rights to Oswald. Disney decided to start again and, on his train, back to California he created Mickey Mouse which shows adaptability as he didn't dwell on setback instead and persevered (Davis, 2024).

Bankers rejected Mickey Mouse 300 times before one said yes however even with the success of Mickey Mouse Walt Disney still struggled to keep Disney afloat as he was overworked and had tensions with his employer who stole his animators from him, all this led to a mental breakdown. After taking some time off he came back to work with Snow White and the Seven Drawfs which was a big hit. This shows focus and determination as even when he was struggling, he remained focused on his goals (Mohammed, 2018).

Walt's animators going on strike contributed to his debt of $4,000,000, to stop this Walt turned into television to make shows such as Mickey Mouse Clubhouse and Davy Crockett which was a big success. This shows innovation as he pushed the boundaries of animation and television by commercialising his success even more and was quick to recognize the potential of television and adapt his storytelling approach to the new medium (Alonso, 2023) (Beattie, 2022).

On the opening day of Disneyland forged tickets brought more visitors than expected, it was so hot it was melting women's heels and some of the rides were malfunctioning which caused the name Black Sunday. However, Walt persevered until he turned

Disneyworld into a big part of his brand and cleared his debts, he said “all the troubles and obstacles, have strengthened me” (Pak, 2020).

Walt Disney showed leadership skills by emphasizing quality and detail. Disney was known for his meticulous attention to detail and his insistence on high-quality standards, ensuring that every aspect of Disneyland contributed to the overall magical experience (Beaver, 2023).

Walt Disney was known for closely observing staff by wondering around Disneyland to see them working, casually talking to them and actively seeking their ideas and input (Snow, 2018). Walt also focused on visual communication through storyboards, models and concept drawings and made sure everyone was on the same page (Dixon, 2014). Walt Disney built trust with his stakeholders through personal engagement, storytelling and a focus on creating a positive and inclusive environment (Disney Institute, 2019).

Walt Disney's legacy of innovation, storytelling, and a relentless pursuit of excellence, instilled in the company, allows Disney to adapt and succeed during change by fostering a culture of creativity, embracing new technologies, and constantly innovating to maintain relevance and appeal.

Disney's ability to craft compelling narratives and create memorable characters has resonated with audiences for generations. This focus on storytelling is crucial for Disney's ability to connect with people and build strong brands, even as the entertainment landscape evolves (Beaver, 2023).

Leadership Style, Culture and People

Walt Disney was a transformational leader, this means that he inspired and motivated his team by encouraging personal growth and innovation and with a clear vision for the future. He encouraged new ideas by thinking outside the box and made sure that his team trust and respect him (Liotopoulos, 2023) (Northouse, 2022).

Walt prioritized his employees, providing them with good pay, specialized training, and a positive work environment, fostering a feeling of belonging and family within the company (Liotopoulos, 2023) He encouraged his team to embrace creativity and innovation, pushing the boundaries of what was possible in animation and entertainment (Yie, 2021).

Disney's relentless pursuit of excellence and his commitment to innovation created a culture that embraced change as an opportunity for improvement. This focus on quality

and pushing boundaries allowed the company to adapt to evolving consumer tastes and market trends (Yie, 2021).

Walt's innovation inspired Disney to diversify into live-action films, television and other media platforms required adapting to new technologies and market trends. This innovation allowed Disney to successfully navigate these changes and maintain its brand identity (Liotopoulos, 2023).

Staff that work at Disney get trained at the Disney institute which is the professional development and external training arm of the company. It offers professional development courses, private learning events and advisory services (Disney Institute, 2019).

Disney's leadership style was communal and collaborative, encouraging team members to contribute their ideas and insights (Millbower, 2020). Disneyland Paris offer various team-building activities and workshops which are esigned to enhance collaboration, communication, and problem-solving skills, all while incorporating Disney's unique approach to teamwork (Disneyland Paris Business Solutions, 2025).

Deal and Kenedy define organizational culture as 'the way people in an organization think and act' (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). Charles Handy created an organisational culture model to explain the four main types of culture. Person culture values individuals and the organisation exists to support the workers. Power culture is where a small group of people or one leader has the most control and makes key decisions. In a role culture there are clear job roles and responsibilities, so everyone knows what they need to do. Task culture focuses on getting specific tasks or projects done by teams (Handy, 1993).

The key company culture pillars Walt has implemented are creativity and innovation, optimism and inspiration, family-friendly and inclusive, focus on quality and excellence, employee engagement and development and decency and wholesomeness (Disney, 2023).

Disney's leadership style allowed his staff to have some influence over the company's final decision. He gave his employees opportunities to present their ideas as he wanted creativity within the workplace. (Yie, 2021).

Expedia a travel technology company has demonstrated its ability to innovate by integrating ChatGPT into its app for personalized trip planning and by expanding its offerings to include a wider range of travel experiences (Nguyen, 2024). Disney could use AI to create fully immersive attractions at the Disney parks.

Walt Disney's leadership developed over time. At the beginning of his career, he motivated his employees with his passion and enthusiasm for his work and was a hands-on leader who was deeply involved in the creative process often micromanaging projects

(Liotopoulos, 2023). However, he was also known for his temper and lack of patience which caused difficulties for his team (Jim Korkis, 2019).

As Disney grew older, he focused more on communicating his vision and inspiring his team rather than micromanaging. He valued his team and often attributed his success to them (Disney Institute, 2019).

As Walt was near the end of his career, he evolved into a kind, impish, and wise man, freed from the daily grind and becoming a visionary everyone loved . He became a TV star thanks to his Disneyland TV show, which further solidified his image as a visionary leader (Millbower, 2020).

Stategic Recommendations for Leadership

Walt Disney was a visionary leader however there are some areas where he could've improved. He could've fostered a more diverse and inclusive work environment. He could have recruited people from diverse backgrounds or put diversity and inclusion training in place for his staff (EW Group, n.d.) (Watson and Lam, 2022). Modern leadership emphasizes the importance of creating a workplace where everyone feels valued and respected, regardless of background or identity. Disney could have actively sought out and incorporated diverse voices and perspectives into his leadership decisions, fostering a more inclusive and collaborative environment (Hindie, 2024). However, this is something that Disney are now implementing with a black Ariel and the movie Soul whose main character is black (IMDB, 2023) (IMDb, 2020)

Walt could've strengthened employee wellbeing by implementing an employee wellness program initiative and included resources like fitness programs, stress management, and financial wellness support (Hibob, n.d.). Employee wellness programs have also been shown to positively impact employee engagement and reduce healthcare costs. A study found a correlation between maintaining a balanced diet and increased productivity, suggesting that wellness initiatives that promote healthy eating can be beneficial. However, it is essential for organizations to tailor their wellness programs based on employee feedback to ensure effectiveness and acceptance (Kumar, McCalla and Lybeck, 2009).

Walt could've enhanced employee communication through regular team meetings. Team meetings play a crucial role in enhancing communication and collaboration within organisations, which are fundamental for achieving productivity and efficiency. Regular team meetings are associated with improved employee engagement and overall performance. These meetings facilitate open dialogue, allowing employees to

share information, address concerns, and foster a culture of trust and feedback (Philomena, 2024).

Walt could've increased employee engagement through focusing on employee development. Providing opportunities for skill development, mentoring, and performance-based rewards can significantly improve employee morale and engagement. When employees perceive that their growth is supported, they are more likely to engage fully with their work (Jan and Sisodia, 2024).

He could've embraced modern technological advancements by using data analytics to gain a better understanding of audiences which would aid him in coming up with successful ideas for movies (Ahmed, 2021).

Walt could have made it easier for people to advance in their career which would be a big incentive for his team to do their job to the best of their ability and fostered a more cohesive team. (Stahl et al., 2009). He could do this by implementing employee training programs such as leadership or upskilling or reskilling programs (Gupta, 2023).

Conclusion

Overall, Walt Disney was an excellent leader who never gave up, made the best of bad situations, had firm morals and stuck to them such as innovation, creativity and optimism, listened to and encouraged his employees and had a relentless pursuit of excellence.

Walt's legacy of innovation follows through to the next generation of employees as he encouraged his team to personally be creative and innovative so they can embrace new ideas and technology and also embrace change as an opportunity for improvement. He made sure his team respect and trust him by creating a sense of family within the organisation which is crucial to a positive work environment.

However, there are some things that Walt could have done to improve. He could have enhanced employee satisfaction by implementing wellness programmes and employee development.

References

Ahmed, T. (2021). Digital Transformation of Walt Disney. [online] Medium. Available at: https://tambirbau.medium.com/digital-transformation-of-walt-disney-50892cafb813.

Alonso, T. (2023). Strategy study: How disney became the world's entertainment leader. [online] www.cascade.app. Available at: https://www.cascade.app/studies/disney-strategy-study.

Beattie, A. (2022). Walt Disney: How Entertainment Became an Empire. [online] Investopedia. Available at: https://www.investopedia.com/articles/financial-theory/11/walt-disney-entertainment-to-empire.asp.

Beaver, C. (2023). Uncovering the secrets to walt disney's success. [online] advisorycloud.com. Available at: https://advisorycloud.com/blog/uncovering-the-secrets-to-walt-disneys-success.

Disney Parks (2023). Disney History: The Timeless Magic of Disney Parks. [online] Disney Experiences. Available at: https://disneyconnect.com/disney-history/.

Dixon, J. (2014). Walt Disney & 3 Lessons on Leadership. [online] Dixon on Disney. Available at: https://dixonondisney.com/2014/06/07/walt-disney-3-lessons-on-leadership/#:~:text=He%20was%20able%20to%20figure%20out%20ways,and%20inspired%20them%20to%20keep%20at%20it. [Accessed 22 Mar. 2025].

Disney Institute (2019). Disney Institute. [online] Disneyinstitute.com. Available at: https://www.disneyinstitute.com/blog/leadership-lessons-from-walt-disney-communicating-a-vision/.

Disney Experiences. (n.d.). Parks. [online] Available at: https://disneyconnect.com/parks/.

Davis, D. (2024). What Walt Disney Can Teach Us About Perseverance. [online] Available at: https://darrylspeaks.com/what-walt-disney-can-teach-us-about-perseverance/#:~:text=Adaptability%20and%20creativity:%20Disney's%20ability,hearts%20of%20millions:%20Mickey%20Mouse. [Accessed 4 Apr. 2025].

Disneyworld (n.d.). List of current Disney Resort Hotels | Walt Disney World Resort. [online] Available at: https://www.disneyworld.co.uk/faq/resorts/resort-hotel-list/.

Disney Institute (2019). Disney Institute. [online] Disneyinstitute.com. Available at: https://www.disneyinstitute.com/.

Disneyland Paris Business Solutions. (2025). Private evenings and team building at Disneyland Paris. [online] Available at: https://business.disneylandparis.com/en/our-team-buildings-and-private-evenings/ [Accessed 28 Mar. 2025].

Disney (2023). Culture and Values – Life at Disney. [online] sites.disney.com. Available at: https://sites.disney.com/lifeatdisney/culture-and-values/.

Deal, T.E. and Kennedy, A.A. (1982). Corporate cultures : the rites and rituals of corporate life. Reading (Mass.): Addison-Wesley.

EW Group. (n.d.). The Walt Disney Company. [online] Available at: https://theewgroup.com/case-studies/the-walt-disney-company/.

Gupta, D. (2023). 14 Types of Employee Training Programs (+Benefits, Examples). [online] The Whatfix Blog | Drive Digital Adoption. Available at: https://whatfix.com/blog/types-employee-training-programs/.

Handy, C. (1993). Understanding Organizations. 4th ed. London: Penguin.

Hindie, N. (2024). Thinking Differently in Business Leadership - Lessons from Walt Disney. [online] Linkedin. Available at: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/thinking-differently-business-leadership-lessons-from-hindie-bjkdf/ [Accessed 29 Mar. 2025].

Hogan, V. (2024). How To Build A Positive Workplace Culture. [online] Forbes. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/ginnyhogan/2024/02/05/how-to-build-a-positive-workplace-culture/.

Hibob. (n.d.). What is an employee wellness program? [online] Available at: https://www.hibob.com/hr-glossary/employee-wellness-program/.

Indeed Editorial Team (2023). How to Create a Positive Culture in the Workplace. [online] Indeed Career Guide. Available at: https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/positive-culture.

IMDB (2023). The Little Mermaid. [online] IMDb. Available at: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5971474/.

IMDb (2020). Soul. [online] IMDb. Available at: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2948372/.

Jan, S. and Sisodia, S. (2024). Leveraging Employee Engagement: A Proposed Model and Strategies. International Journal of Business Performance Management, 1(1). doi:https://doi.org/10.1504/ijbpm.2024.10057786.

Jim Korkis (2013). Walt Disney's Leadership. [online] Available at: https://mouseplanet.com/walt-disneys-leadership/4228/.

Kumar, S., McCalla, M. and Lybeck, E. (2009). Operational impact of employee wellness programs: a business case study. International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management, 58(6), pp.581–597. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/17410400910977109.

Levitt, B. (2023). Every Walt Disney Animated Movie, Ranked. [online] Rolling Stone. Available at: https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-lists/walt-disney-animated-movie-ranking-1234892890/.

Liotopoulos, A. (2023). The Story Behind the Mouse: Transformational Leadership at the Walt Disney Company. Journal of Global Awareness, [online] 4(1), pp.1–17. doi:https://doi.org/10.24073/jga/4/01/08.

Millbower, L. (2020). Learn Walt Disney's Leadership Style In Three Easy Steps. [online] HRDQ-U. Available at: https://hrdqu.com/coaching-skills/the-three-leadership-stages-of-walt-disney/.

Martins, J. (2024). 12 tips for effective communication in the workplace. [online] Asana. Available at: https://asana.com/resources/effective-communication-workplace.

Mohammed, S. (2018). The Success Story Of Walt Disney- The Man Who Pursued 'Unhappiness'. [online] Medium. Available at: https://shahmm.medium.com/walt-disney-the-man-who-pursued-unhappiness-46d0f7009564.

Northouse, P (2022). Leadership: theory and practice. 9th Ed. London: SAGE

Nguyen, T. (2024). Best Travel Marketing Examples From 12 Leading Brands. [online] Idomoo Personalized Video. Available at: https://www.idomoo.com/blog/best-travel-marketing-examples/ [Accessed 29 Mar. 2025].

Philomena Ify, I. (2024) 'Communication Strategies And Employee Productivity', Global journal of social sciences, 23(1), pp. 97–102. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4314/gjss.v23i1.8.

Pak, E. (2020). Walt Disney's Rocky Road to Success. [online] Biography. Available at: https://www.biography.com/movies-tv/walt-disney-failures.

Radley, B. (2021). 10 Straightforward Ways to Improve Workplace Communication. [online] Workday Blog. Available at: https://blog.workday.com/en-us/10-straightforward-ways-improve-workplace-communication.html.

Snow, D. (2018). Lessons I Learned From Walt Disney. [online] Snow & Associates Inc. Available at: https://snowassociates.com/blog/lessons-i-learned-from-walt-disney#:~:text=Spend%20LOTS%20of%20time%20with,call%20center%2C%20listening%20and%20learning. [Accessed 22 Mar. 2025].

Stahl, G.K., Chua, C.H., Caligiuri, P., Cerdin, J.-L. and Taniguchi, M. (2009). Predictors of turnover intentions in learning-driven and demand-driven international assignments: The role of repatriation concerns, satisfaction with company support, and perceived career advancement opportunities. Human Resource Management, 48(1), pp.89–109. doi:https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.20268.

The Telegraph. (2017). The voices behind Disney's best characters through history. [online] Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/actors/the-voices-behind-disneys-best-characters-through-history/ [Accessed 15 Mar. 2025].

University of Massachusetts Global (2020). How Setting Effective Goals Can Improve Organizational Performance. [online] www.brandman.edu. Available at:

https://www.umassglobal.edu/news-and-events/blog/how-to-measure-organizational-performance.

Williams, P. (2019). Learning Leadership From Walt Disney, Master of Soft Skills. [online] Training Industry. Available at: https://trainingindustry.com/articles/leadership/learning-leadership-from-walt-disney-master-of-soft-skills/.

Watson, L. and Lam, B. (2022). The Walt Disney Company Reinforces Its Commitment to Use Its Broad Global Reach and Unique Platforms to Promote Social Responsibility. [online] The Walt Disney Company. Available at: https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/the-walt-disney-company-reinforces-its-commitment-to-use-its-broad-global-reach-and-unique-platforms-to-promote-social-responsibility/.

Yie, C.E. (2021). In the Study of Leadership and Change Management of Walt Disney: Linking Theory to Application. The International Journal of Business & Management, [online] 9(8). doi:https://doi.org/10.24940/theijbm/2021/v9/i8/bm2108-031.