

Disneyland: The Smile Factory

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From the Californian amusement center's inception, Disneyland has consistently been a best practice business model for many amusement parks. The combination of seemingly cheerful employees and its immaculate park grounds has proven to maintain its inexhaustible business success, and doesn't seem to be slowing down anytime soon. However, perhaps its success can be attributed to something a little greater than management's stellar selection of "happy" employees? That's right. Disneyland's corporate management meticulously plans the socialisation of each employee into their role through a rigid work culture with an elaborate set of rules, combined with the careful maintenance of each employee's emotions. Sounds rather sinister doesn't it? This case will exemplify the power of culture, and how Disneyland has used organisational identification and psychological contracts to manipulate employee behaviour. We will begin this discussion with the values Disneyland instills in their new employees when they are recruited.

Disneyland, as the self-proclaimed "Happiest Place on Earth," certainly occupies an enviable position in the global amusement park business arena. It also proclaims its product is positive emotion - laughter, happiness and well-being. Disneyland executives believe that their on-the-ground employees are the facilitators of this product reaching their customers. Disneyland operates on the notion that their business is not just an operational profit-and-loss business, rather a "feelings-evoking" business, which is a value they instill in their employees during training. Van Maanen (1999) explains that employees have the power to amplify or dampen customer spirits during their Disneyland experience, and is therefore a core concern of management in this "feeling business". The happiness trade is an interactional one. It rests partly on the symbolic resources put into place by history and park design, but it also rests on the animated workforce to meet and exceed customer expectations. Rude words, careless disregard, detected insincerity, or a bored presence can all undermine the enterprise and ruin a sale. The smile factory has its rules" (Van Maanen, 1999).

In the following section, I will explain how management socialises their new employees using a particular set of formal rules, as well as instilling many tacit rules in these new employees to form Disneyland's organisational identity. I will explain how this organisational identity is implemented and controlled by management through three levels of culture - artifacts, espoused values and basic assumptions. It is important to note that the management team has the ultimate power in 'moulding' these employees through whatever they prescribe the employees to do, think and say. Of course, the management has a legitimate power over these employees, but employees are so easily manipulated in this process because of their need to impress management in getting the job. This has understandably been subject to discussions about major unethical breaches in employment however, we will cover this a little later on.

First, it is important to explore why Disneyland has set down these rules and processes in socialising their new employees. It comes from the need of organisations addressing the intangible aspects of performance. These are aspects of employee action that cannot be measured, but are still critical to the performance of the organisation. These aspects are often seen as tacit rules of the organisation, and rules that are learned about the implicit culture in an organisation. Some aspects include job satisfaction, job involvement, organisational identification, organisational commitment, psychological contracts, organisational attitudes, organizational citizenship behaviours, and

organisational norms. To highlight the most notable aspects, I will focus on Disneyland's organisational identification and the psychological contracts between employees and supervisors.

First, we will discuss Disneyland's organisational identification. Organisational identification is the individual's knowledge that they belong to a certain social group, as well as the emotional and value significance they place on being a part of that group. Organisational identification is directly correlated with organisational outcomes like turnover, satisfaction and performance, so it is especially important to organisations like Disneyland. It also satisfies the fundamental need to belong in employees, and helps them to define the purpose they have in their organisation. This organisational identification is found in the artifacts of Disneyland, namely employee's uniforms and the very employees recruited in this organisation. The cultural homogeneity of employees has been carefully crafted by management to depict the 'personification' of good health to its park-goers. This is achieved by recruiting: single, white males and females in their early twenties, without facial blemishes, of above average height and below average weight, with straight teeth, conservative grooming standards, and a chin-up, shoulder-back posture suggestive of a recent history in sports. Their uniforms are another interesting point of conversation as each level in Disneyland has their own distinctive uniform to portray the different levels of status. Most organisations have different divisions wear a distinctive uniform to other divisions so I believe this is realistically, fairly normal. However, it doesn't dismiss the fact that there may be some in-groups and out-groups formed due to this difference in status among employees, threatening the organisational's overall identity. However, in the different levels in Disneyland, I believe that uniforms and the physical characteristics of new employees are ways in which management fosters organisational identification.

Another way is through the values instilled in employees upon attending Disneyland University - a mandatory induction program designed to train and socialise all new employees into their role at Disneyland. Some of the values include maintaining a positive demeanour at all times. At Disneyland University, this is achieved by 'practicing the friendly smile, using only friendly and courteous phrases, and remaining open and personable at all times. It is also very interesting learning about certain phrases employees were permitted and not permitted to use when working in Disneyland. For example, "there are no rides at Disneyland, only 'attractions', and that there are no accidents, only 'incidents' in the Park. From day one at Disneyland University, it is management's job to convince employees that they are happy at work. And from day one at Disneyland University, employees are trapped in this facade by the inability to express their true feelings at work. Management fosters this strong organisational identification through employees sharing a common visions, experiences and attitudes when employed at Disneyland. There is a strong in-group among employees in each division, and a perceived consensus of happy employees crafted by management. According to O'Reilly & Chatman (1986) "psychological attachment at work has been predicated on organisational identification", which is what Disney has achieved through this intense socialisation process (Chatman & O'Reilly 1986).

The second aspect affected by this socialisation process are the psychological contracts employees enter into with their employers and thus, their organisational commitment dependent on this contract. Psychological contracts have been defined as the implicit expectations about employee-employer relationships that affect work behaviour and attitudes. Case in point, Disneyland strives for a relational approach with their employees, rather than a transactional approach. It is the relational approach management has taken with their employees to make feel obliged to invest more time, effort and feeling into their work which ultimately improves performance and minimises turnover. It is the relational approach that evokes loyalty, security, trust, autonomy, courtesy,

advancement and altruism in employees, and on the surface Disneyland has achieved this. However, it has been said that floor staff receive visits from supervisors who are dressed in disguise a few times a year, to ensure everything is running smoothly and according to specific procedures. Of course, during the induction of these employees, they are set to believe that they're entering into a relational agreement with management (e.g. The "feeling" business spiel). However, once these employees are socialised, they begin to feel almost claustrophobic of the scrutinous culture evident in Disneyland. It has been noted that the "feeling of being watched is a rather prevalent complaint among Disneyland people, and is one that employees must live with if they are to remain at Disneyland" (Van Maanen 1999, p. 21). It is easy to see how employees may find a breach in their psychological contract when they are subject to distrust by management. Makin et al (1987) explains that "these breaches lower trust and job satisfaction. In addition, those who have experiences such breaches are more likely to leave" (Makin 1987). "The ease with which employees glide into their kindly and smiling roles is, in large measure, a feat of social engineering" by management (Van Maanen 1999, p. 21) "Disneyland doesn't pay well; its supervision is arbitrary and skin-close; its jobs require minimal amounts of intelligence or judgment; and it asks a kind of sacrifice and loyalty of its employees that is almost fanatical. Yet, it attracts a particularly able workforce whose personal backgrounds suggest abilities far exceeding those required of a Disneyland traffic cop, people stuffer, queue manager, and button pusher. Adherence and support for the organisation is remarkable" (Van Maanen 1999, p. 21). This case certainly shows the power of culture, and how Disneyland has used organisational identification and psychological contracts to manipulate employee behaviour.