

The leadership of walt disney



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This biographical study attempts to demonstrate the ways in which Walt Disney's leadership influenced his followers through his method of leadership and the extent to which his followers influenced his leadership style. This will be demonstrated with reference to relevant leadership theories, whereby section I shall relate the leadership style of Walt Disney with reference to 'Transformational Leadership', and more specifically: 'Idealised Influence', 'Inspirational Motivation', 'Intellectual Stimulation' and 'Individualised Consideration'. Section II considers 'Path-Goal Theory' and section III 'Contingency Theory'.

Section IV deals with 'Team Leadership' with reference to 'Leader-Member Exchange Theory' and, lastly, section V regards the importance of 'Authentic Leadership' style to the effectiveness of Walt Disney's organisational culture. It does not intend to give an in depth commentary on the life of Walt Disney, nor does it anticipate to outline the modus operandi of the Disney Company today. However, it does seek to understand the leadership styles of Walt Disney with reference to theories primarily referenced in extant leadership theory and practice.

I. Transformation Leadership Walt Disney saw his subordinates as a means not an end. Working beyond traditional leadership, he notoriously took risks and motivated followers to produce a more innovative enterprise. During his leadership, team members were treated as decision makers instead of mere executors of managerial requisition (Flower 1991) and mutually aligned with individual ethos, ethics, values and standards to a long term prospectus of company goals.

Germane to the theory of Transformational leadership, one could assimilate his leadership principles through methods of Idealised Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation and Individualised Consideration (Bass & Avolio 1990 in Northouse 2010, p. 180). His method of ‘ Idealised Influence’ is evidenced in the clear principles Walt laid out from the beginning, a philosophy which enabled him and his peers to work ‘ on the same page’. In this way, when Disney strove to push barriers and take risks, his peers would follow with bidding confidence (Schein 2004, Ingelsson, Eriksson and Lilja 2012). As an ‘ Inspirational Motivator’, Walt functioned as an agent for change.

He immersed himself in the culture of Disney to co-create symbolic activity with his colleagues and facilitate successful change processes (Brownell 2008). This is evidenced in the intellection incitation for his employees. According to Northouse (2010, p. 179), ‘ Intellectual Stimulation’ includes “ leadership that stimulates followers to be creative and innovative”. And pertinent to his contemporaries, Walt’s communicative style of leadership enabled the conceptual foundation of Disney to be strengthened through others’ congruousness. Moreover, this provided others the mental stimulation to think creatively and to develop a myriad of possible solutions (Taylor and Wheatley- Lovoy 1998).

In this way, Walt yielded the possibility for people to think in a similar way yet, interpretatively, create progressive and innovative solutions (Ward 2003). His leadership vision comprised a strategic vision, of which one could relate and, consequently, assimilate. Frances and Mintzberg (1989) articulation of his visionary leadership deemed it a development of intimacy

to one's subject and implementation strategy as his 'craft'. His 'Individualised Consideration' for team members cultivated them as 'team leaders' and provided a basis for the production of Disneyland today. Furthermore, each member is referred to as 'Cast Members' whence cooperative responsibility is given for the maintenance of the Disney vision.

This constitutes, primarily, the assurance of customer satisfaction and, subsequent, consumer loyalty (Taylor and Wheatley-Lovoy 1998). Moreover, all of these constituents comprising Walt Disney's leadership style construe a transactional leadership approach. This represents the transaction of contingent rewards, by individuals, for their active participation toward the success of the Disney mission.

Overall, through 'Transformational Leadership', Walt openly communicated his vision into the infrastructure of Disney and instilled values and a sense of purpose among his employees. With a wanted trust and respect for followers, he was able to encourage and challenge traditional methods to harness better, innovative ways to solutions (Flower 1991). Ruling by consensus, his consideration for the individual needs of his followers made him an ideal teacher and coach for his enterprise (Davis 2008).

II. Path-Goal Theory Walt Disney saw change as a consequence of employee behaviour (Brownell, 2008). If a leader were to be effective, he or she must understand the needs of a member in an organisation. This also included an awareness of motives, personalities, skills, and abilities (See 'Emotional Intelligence' in Northouse 2010, p. 23; Brownell, 2008). Path-Goal Theory comprises the motivation of leaders toward subordinates in order that such

needs are met and achievement of an organisation's proposed goal is reached (Northhouse 2010).

Walt Disney sustained subordinate involvement and interest through his leadership commitment to employees, as well as his dynamism and enthusiasm (Bryman 1993). After all, "Walt Disney's greatest creation was not Fantasia, [n]or Snow White, but...his uncanny ability to make people happy" (Collins and Porras 1995). His leadership behaviour remained directive, supportive, participative and achievement oriented (see 'Major Components of Path-Goal Theory' by House and Mitchell 1974 in Northhouse 2010, p. 127), all of which he was described by peers as "expecting the best and not relenting until he got it" (Kirkpatrick and Locke 1991, p. 51). When Walt opened the gates of Disneyland he was wont to 'walk the front', that is, interact with guests and members, observe and gather firsthand information to diagnose problems and determine improvements for operational efficiency (Taylor and Wheatley-Lovoy 1998). Therefore, it seems evident that this leadership behaviour not only motivates subordinates towards goal productivity but gives them a sense of equality.

III. Contingency Theory

Although his motivation style was considerably task oriented, he was renowned for his strong relationships with others. Illustrative of this, and with reference to extant theory, 'Contingency Theory' is a method allocated by academics to differentiate whether a leader is 'task' or 'relationship' motivated (see 'Least Preferred Co-worker' (LPC) Fiedler 1967 in Northhouse 2010). Aforementioned, Walt Disney's leadership style (with a middle LPC

score) is considerably relationship motivated with a large proportion of his attention directed toward the correct execution of task management (Kirkpatrick and Locke 1991).

With this in mind, the contingency model for Disney illustrates a strong orientation to his position power, to positive agent and subordinate relationships and, an overall, high demonstration of task structure (Northouse 2010). He believed undirected creativity imposed little value for structure and that discipline would be required to convert such creativity into business value (Weiner 1988).

Because organisations are not static entities and are, indeed, in a constant process of evolution, Walt's vision sought to augment his vision by ways of which it was interpreted and understood by his listeners. In this way, Walt's leadership was instinctive and emotional as well as systematic and articulate (Watts 1995). So, with an enterprise vision emerged a synergy of leader-subordinate behaviour that provided concessive and innovative decision making for the future of Disney.

IV. Team Leadership

Walt utilised a method of team leadership in which groups were made into 'teams' (see the difference between groups and teams in Tannenbaum, Beard and Salas 1992, pp 117-153). Facilitating a sense of company ownership to his team members, he encouraged personal motivation to ensure positive and effective performance (see 'Team Leadership' in Northouse 2010). In this way, his method dovetails 'Leader-Member Exchange Theory'. Through a dyadic relationship, this focuses on the <https://assignbuster.com/the-leadership-of-walt-disney/>

interactions between leaders and subordinates as integral to the development of a goal. Walt Disney, as leader, views his employees as mutual leaders (Northouse 2010; Taylor and Wheatley-Lovoy 1998). This meant that individuals were able to express and implement their own ideas and engage in an equal opportunity organisational culture.

To demonstrate, members of Disney staff regularly met to discuss management problems and possible solutions conducted in open-door board meetings (Taylor and Wheatley-Lovoy 1998). Therefore, participation, by both leaders and followers, in organisational procedures enables individuals to witness first hand information and evaluate operational efficiencies for better organisational solutions.

V. Authentic Leadership

Walt Disney provided a utilitarian manifold to his multi-faceted leadership approach. A visionary, one can witness his desire for the imaginative and an innate sense of what people want (Gabler 2007). His authentic style leadership (see 'Authentic Leadership' in Northouse 2010, p. 205) deemed him an individual whose main purpose of leadership was to attend to the interests of others. In connection with Robert Terry's 'Authentic Leadership' approach, this demonstrates the leadership style of Walt to encompass all of the constituents comprising the 'Authentic Action Wheel' (Terry 1993).

As a guide to extract problem areas of leadership, it is also useful to determine the stronger points of Disney's leadership. These include 'Meaning' through guiding values, principles and ethics; 'Mission' in goals, objectives and desires; 'Existence' via the importance of history and

identity; ' Power' through energy, motivation, morale and control; ' Resources' be means of people, capital, information, equipment and time; and ' Structure': by way of systems, policies and procedures. These combined with relentless determination and perfectionism, led him to be a revolutionary in the animation industry (Gabler 2007).

Similarly, Bill George's ' Authentic Leadership Characteristics' model (George 2003) focuses on the characteristics of authentic leaders, of which attributes are consisting of ' Compassion', ' Passion', ' Behaviour', ' Connectedness' and ' Consistency'. Moreover, in terms of the forms of value systems Walt demonstrated in his leadership style, it is most suited to a ' Functional-Traditional' approach (Weiner 1988). This approach constitutes: ...value systems that are classified both as functional and traditional...most likely to contribute to the development of proper values and, consequently, to organizational effectiveness.

This value system also...encourages...broad organisational participation imbedded in the realities of day-to-day business conduct, rather than a ritualistic, top-down approach (Weiner 1988, p. 538). Furthermore, for Walt, an interest in culture and revitalising artistic expression and dynamism, illustrated his moral relativism and equality as the core of modern human experience: Adopting aesthetic as well as moral relativism, [he] borrowed from...cultures, adapted technological artefacts and industrial motifs around them, dipped into European and American folk culture, or tried to dismantle barriers between " high" and " low" culture (Watts 1995, p. 87).

Walt's awareness of cultural integrity and diversity (see ' Culture and Leadership' in Northouse 2010) demonstrated his modest intelligence to the diverging principles and value systems of his peers in the process of his leadership. According to ' Culture Clusters and Desired Leadership Behaviours' of Anglo cultures, ' Charismatic' or ' Value-based Leadership', along with ' Participative' and ' Human-oriented Leadership' styles are integral to the expectations of leadership for this culture. Moreover, subordinates are in want of leaders who are exceedingly motivating, visionary and considerate of others (Northouse 2010, p. 252).

Disney's affinity to these principles was, indeed, evident in his working style and, as such, communicated his inventive imagination through the medium of storytelling to inspire others. This ability to connect with people and inspire them with his own vision made him a valuable asset to the modus operandi of Disney (Flower 1991).

Conclusion

Overall, Walt was a visionary leader and Creator. He inspired others by preparing to follow his vision, whilst taking risks to see to its achievement. In this essay, methods and theories comprising his leadership style were encountered and analysed. In section I, it recognised his loyalty to his own vision, with planning and articulation through transformative methods of leadership. Section II concentrated on ' Path-Goal Theory' whereby peer motivation supplanted the productivity of Disney Company.

Section III comprised of the ' Contingency Theory' which aided to understand Walt's leadership style and pragmatism. Section IV composed the efforts to

create his vision through team leadership and with reference to ‘ Team Leadership Theory’ and ‘ Leader-Member Exchange Theory’. Lastly, section V drew parallels between his style of leadership and principles of ‘ Authentic Leadership’ in order to demonstrate the purposes for his style of leadership, concluding that this method of leadership was suitable to create a sustainable foundation for his vision of Disney. More importantly, the articulation of these theories leads one to appreciate the true visionary streak that was Walt Disney.

His display of clear principles and expectations made him such a leader so as to transform the methods of industry production and the ways in which he changed the lives of those sharing his vision. To conclude, leadership is about promoting association with your audience, and from the words to describe the purpose of cartooning for Walt, one cannot help associate these things with his leadership style. “ Caricature has a ‘ subconscious association’ within the audience as it invoked situations they had ‘ felt, or seen, or dreamt’. It involved the audience in perceiving the several layers of motivation that might lie behind movement: ‘ the personality, the attitude of the character’” (Watts 1995, 94).