“It’s not the magic that makes it work; it’s the way we work that makes it magic.”

The secret for creating “magic” in our careers, our organizations, and our lives is simple: outstanding leadership—the kind that inspires employees, delights customers, and achieves extraordinary business results.

No one knows more about this kind of leadership than Lee Cockerell, the man who ran Walt Disney World® Resort operations for over a decade. And in Creating Magic, he shares the leadership principles that not only guided his own journey from a poor farm boy in Oklahoma to the head of operations for a multibillion dollar enterprise, but that also soon came to form the cultural bedrock of the world’s number one vacation destination. But as Lee demonstrates, great leadership isn’t about mastering impossibly complex management theories. We can all become outstanding leaders by following the ten practical, common sense strategies outlined in this remarkable book.
What people are saying about the book:

“Shows the magic in leadership – and the leadership in magic! Read this book!” ....Marshall Goldsmith


“In Creating Magic, Lee Cockerell delivers his ideas about leadership in a common sense way that can really reach people and help them improve their effectiveness at work, at home, and in their communities. His valuable leadership strategies and remarkable Disney stories will ring true for everyone who reads this book” ............Ken Blanchard

Ken Blanchard is Co-author of *The One Minute Manager®* and *Leading at a Higher Level*

"A highly worthwhile volume, Creating Magic transcends the leadership business-speak so prevalent in modern day motivational tomes and offers a real approach to sensible and practical strategies culled from the experience of a lifetime spent in pursuit of leadership excellence.” .....Ted Kleisner

Ted Kleisner is President and CEO of Hershey Entertainment and Resorts Company

“Lee Cockerell’s common sense principles and down to earth storytelling is refreshing. His book will help leaders and managers at all levels become better in all parts of their lives” ....Lee Huebner

Lee Huebner is currently the Director of School Media and Public Affairs at the George Washington University. He is former Director of the School of Media and Public Affairs at Georgetown University. He also held positions as Publisher of the International Herald Tribune in Paris and President of the American University of Paris.
Creating Magic, Lee Cockerell’s new book, does just that! As the Executive Vice President of Operations for the Walt Disney World® Resort, for ten years Lee led a team of 40,000 cast members whose daily challenge was to create magic for the millions of people who visited the parks and resorts. With this book, Lee takes us on a leadership adventure—not just in theory, but an actual real-life journey along which you will learn how to build a passionate team whose members believe: “It’s not the magic that makes it work; it’s the way we work that makes it magic.” Creating Magic is not about the theory of magic, but the live, on-the-ground experience of an icon in the magic business—Lee Cockerell. This remarkable story of a leadership journey is filled with common sense lessons about making magic that we can translate into our own careers, business cultures, or visions of the desired future. Lee shows how, at Disney, leadership starts with respect for all people—Guests and Cast Members (not “employees”) alike. Lee’s approach helps us remember Peter Drucker and his philosophy: “They are not your employees, they are your people.” Lee has distilled his lessons learned into short, powerful messages that connect, illuminate, and motivate.
The Disney Great Leader Strategies that Lee developed are the basis for this handbook for leaders of the future. As Lee’s story shows, fostering participation, engagement, and a sense of ownership at every level across the Disney world brought high morale, high productivity, and real results. Lee’s story is about moving from the old hierarchy to an inclusive, flexible, fluid, inclusive structure—from “telling” to “asking.” These missions, values, and strategies have made Disney a great learning organization, and at the Disney Institute, they have helped bring people from all over the world together to learn to be better leaders.

Lee Cockerell’s journey began on a dusty Oklahoma farm, and the lessons he learned along the way—from the farm, to college, to the United States Army, and in the hospitality and entertainment industries—provided the lessons indispensable to the future leader he would become.

He learned the power of inclusion that later became “RAVE”: respect, appreciate, and value everyone. His thirteen steps to creating a culture of inclusion give clear and powerful direction. All the way through the book, you will learn the value of people—and how to redefine the future by infusing quality, character, truth, communication, learning, courage, and integrity in all you do.

Even in his acknowledgments, Lee thanks all the Cast Members at Disney World “for all you’ve taught me over the years. You are the magic.” Lee’s leadership is never about him, but always about the people. Leading into an uncertain future, there is a call for principled, ethical, effective leaders—not repeating the strategies and philosophies of the past, but redefining the future—the opportunities, the challenges, the ambiguities. Lee Cockerell’s lessons from his own life provide a road map, a handbook, for us all on our journey to leadership. The leaders of tomorrow, called to lead in uncertain times, will translate Creating Magic into their own guidebook for the future.

The lessons in this book apply to leaders at every level in every type of organization and in every country on this earth. Lee’s common sense leadership strategies can help all people understand that leadership is not a title or a position, it is a personal responsibility.

I guarantee you that this book will help you create magic in your business life, your community life, and your personal life.

Today, Lee travels, speaks, writes, engages, and shares as generously in person as he does in this great book.
Frances Hesselbein is the Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Leader to Leader Institute (formerly the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management) and served as its founding President. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States of America's highest civilian honor, in 1998. The award recognized her leadership as Chief Executive Officer of Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. from 1976 to 1990, and her role as the founding President of the Drucker Foundation. President Clinton, in his opening citation, said, “Mrs. Hesselbein is a pioneer for women, diversity, and inclusion.” Her contributions were also recognized by former president George H. W. Bush, who appointed her to two Presidential Commissions on National and Community Service.

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CHAPTER THREE

STRATEGY # 1

REMEMBER, EVERYONE IS IMPORTANT

At Walt Disney World® Resort, what is usually known as the laundry is called Textile Services. It consists of three huge separate facilities: one for the more than two million costumes worn by Cast Members; one for the linens used at the 255 food and beverage locations; and the housekeeping plant, which handles the sheets, pillowcases, towels, and washcloths for all the resorts. Cast Members wash, dry, press, and fold 240,000 pounds of linen a day. That’s about a million washcloths a week. While many hotels in the business contract their laundry operations to outside companies, Disney has found that doing it all in-house works out to be less expensive and more efficient, thanks mainly to leadership strategies that motivate and empower every single Cast Member to perform to the best of his or her ability.

In the mid-nineties the Textile Services management team attended a three-day seminar about how to include Cast Members at all levels in the decision-making process. Afterward, when the managers announced that the Cast would now be empowered to find ways to enhance teamwork, productivity, and the quality of the final product, the response was not what they had expected. The Cast Members said, basically, “No way!” They thought that if they were put in charge, they’d be blamed and punished when anything went wrong. The message was clear: They didn’t trust management.

The managers immediately recognized their mistake: Ironically, in formulating the plan to include more people, they had neglected to consult the very people they sought to empower. So when they regrouped for brainstorming sessions, they made sure to invite a number of Cast Members. The result was an action plan that the Cast happily signed on to and eventually won the approval of skeptical union representatives. Under the new plan, Cast Members would be taught the mission and values of Walt Disney World, learn about the impact of Textile Services on Guest satisfaction measures, be involved in
planning for the plant, and participate in a cross-utilization program in which they exchanged jobs with Cast Members in other areas of Walt Disney World. Every aspect of the plan was designed to increase their participation and involvement.

About a year after the new policy was introduced, things were going so well that the Cast was given the freedom and flexibility to set its own productivity targets. The managers reasoned that the Cast would make smarter decisions if it knew exactly how its work affected the budget process and the company’s bottom line. At the time, allowing frontline Cast Members to set their own productivity numbers was unheard of, because management assumed they would set the bar way too low. But most departments actually set their numbers very high, even when we said they would be held accountable for meeting their goals. The result? They blew us away! Their productivity far exceeded management’s expectations.

It took hard work and a good deal of retraining, but the reinvention of Textile Services quickly yielded measurable results, not only in productivity but also in innovation and employee satisfaction. Cast Members continued to come up with fresh ways to improve their work, finding creative solutions to problems that management alone could never have dreamed of.

You’ll read about some of those later in the book. Over time the turnover rate at Textile Services dropped steadily; today the operation loses only 5 to 7 percent of its full-time staff a year, remarkably low for any organization and especially low among employees doing physically demanding work. The Textile Services section is now one of the crown jewels of the company, showcased at the Disney Institute as a shining example of the impact a great leadership strategy can have.

TRUE INCLUSION
The transformation of Textile Services is a prime example of the first and most important leadership principle, inclusion. “Inclusion” is a major buzzword in business today. It’s usually thought of in terms of ethnic, racial, religious, and gender diversity and filling the workplace with representatives of every demographic category.

This is an important and worthy endeavor, and I’m proud that during my tenure at Walt Disney World we created an environment that welcomed Cast Members of every culture, religion, gender, race, ethnicity, physical condition, and sexual orientation. But inclusion is not just a matter of hiring policy or
of respecting the differences among people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. It’s about engaging and involving your employees and showing them that each one of them is important.

On the surface, a workplace can look as diverse as the United Nations, but if the employees are not truly respected, not truly valued, not truly involved, and not truly treated with dignity, what you have is a great photo opportunity, not real inclusion.

The reason inclusion is so important is simple: When everyone matters and everyone knows he or she matters, employees are happy to come to work, and they’re eager to give you their energy, creativity, and loyalty. The result is predictable: more productivity and satisfaction; less absenteeism and turnover. On the other hand, when people don’t feel included, they become apathetic and perform at less than their full capacity. To put it simply, all people want exactly what you want. You want to be included, listened to, respected, and involved, don’t you? You want to be asked your opinion and have it taken seriously. You want to feel valued. And you want to be known as an individual and treated as such. Well, so does everyone else. That’s why great leaders make sure that everyone in the workplace—no matter the rank or position—feels included and no one feels left out.

At Disney we defined our approach to inclusion with the acronym RAVE: respect, appreciate, and value everyone. If you respect, appreciate, and value your employees, the word will get out. As a result, people will line up to work for you, and current employees will not want to leave. That’s exactly what happened at Walt Disney World when we began to implement the Great Leader Strategies; Cast Members convinced their friends and family to move to Orlando and apply for jobs. It’s also why the company has the lowest turnover rate of any major company in the hospitality industry.

I’m proud that during my tenure at Disney I earned a reputation as an inclusive leader. Dieter Hannig, whom I promoted to senior vice president of food and beverage, once told a magazine:

“Lee can relate to all people at all levels, no matter what their background is, from the pot washer from Santo Domingo to the maid from Haiti. He has the ability to touch them and reach them. It’s a gift. ”

I mention this not to blow my own horn but because Dieter was
wrong. The ability he described is not a gift. It’s a learned behavior. As I pointed out earlier, relating well to people was not always part of my skill set. I learned through painful lessons how to treat everyone with respect and dignity. I worked hard at it and eventually mastered it. Then I helped teach it to other leaders.

You too can create a culture of inclusion in your organization or group by applying the following strategies. They will show you how to foster an environment in which your employees are engaged, motivated, and fully committed to the goals of your organization, just as we did at Disney.

1. Make sure everyone matters . . . and that everyone knows it. Business leadership is a lot like parenting: Your job is not just to make your employees happy but to create an environment that enables them to excel at what they do. Just as great parents pay attention to everyone in their family, so great leaders pay attention to everyone in their organizations, bolstering his or her self-esteem and self-confidence at every step. If everyone feels recognized, appreciated, and listened to, everyone will want to take every opportunity to learn and grow. In my years at Disney I constantly trumpeted this basic idea: Every single Cast Member is important to our company. I didn’t just do it as a motivational device or a way to gain popularity. It was a no-nonsense business practice with an immediate payoff. When people feel valued for the talents and skills they bring to the team, their level of commitment soars. And committed people feel a strong personal connection to, and responsibility for, the work that they do and the teams they’re a part of. As a result, you’ll be able to recruit and retain the best and most dedicated employees, keeping turnover, disciplinary problems, and absenteeism low. Common sense? Yes. Common practice? No.

The principle that everyone matters also has another clear advantage: It’s true! If any job were unimportant, why would you bother to hire someone to do it? As you can imagine, the quality of french fries at Walt Disney World is an important element in Guest satisfaction. Who do you think is more important, the person who calculates how many potatoes to order, the person who places the order with the supplier, the person who unloads the cartons, the one who fries the potatoes, or the one who serves the cooked french fries? The answer I always gave the Cast Members was: They’re all equally important. If any one of them doesn’t do his or her job, the Guest won’t have a satisfying experience, and business will suffer. I learned that lesson early in my career, when I worked
as the grease man in Harvey’s Hotel and Casino at Lake Tahoe, Nevada. I spent my time pushing a little cart around the kitchens, emptying grease from the griddles, and I was treated with disdain. But I realized that without me the grills would shut down, as the holders overflowed with hot grease. No grease man, no hamburgers; no hamburgers, no customers; no customers, no restaurant.

My point is this: The people who clean the bathrooms, sweep the floors, and empty the garbage are just as important as the executives, managers, directors, and supervisors. Maybe even more important. Ditto the ticket takers, the parking lot attendants, and the people who answer the phones. Imagine how many of the Guests at Disney World might vacation someplace else if the bathrooms and floors were dirty or if the people responsible for creating a Guest’s first impressions were rude or unhelpful. Everyone is important. And this is not just true of theme parks and resorts; it is true of every organization everywhere, including yours.

2. Know your team. If you have children—or godchildren or nieces and nephews—you know how important it is to treat each one in a way that makes him or her feel special. You probably also know that the way to make one child feel special may not be the way to make another feel special. As a parent, you find it easy to treat each child as an individual because you’ve discovered over time what makes each of them unique and how to appreciate him or her for who he or she is. Why not do the same with your employees and team members?

Every worker has different motivations, priorities, preferences, and dreams. Workers hail from different backgrounds and different neighborhoods. To make them feel special, you have to get to know every person. How do you do that? Learn about your employees’ past work experiences, their aspirations, their skills and talents, their short- and long-term goals. Get to know about their personal interests and their families as well. They’ll light up when you remember some seemingly minor fact about their lives. Now, take it one step further: Use that information to find ways to maximize their abilities and help them realize their goals and ambitions.

When I worked at Walt Disney World and had to meet with one of the managers who reported to me, I’d often go to his or her office. Some might expect that since I was the boss, the proper procedure would have been for him or her to come to me. But reversing the protocol gave me the opportunity to get to know each one better and to become familiar with his or her
coworkers. You can learn an awful lot about employees from the photos on their desks, the artworks on their walls, and the way they interact with the people around them. Getting to know each person as an individual isn’t easy, and it doesn’t happen overnight. But believe me, it pays off big time. (We’ll revisit this important subject in another context, in Chapter Eight.)

3. Let your team get to know you. Remember, your inclusive workplace includes you. Too many leaders keep their distance from employees, both physically and emotionally. Believing that they can’t manage well unless they project an image of impervious strength, they hide their humanity, especially their flaws and weaknesses. I promise you, you’ll get a lot more respect if you let people know who you really are.

That doesn’t mean you should broadcast your deepest, darkest secrets. But make sure the people around you know what moves you, what excites you, what you care deeply about, and even what you struggle with. This holds especially for owning up to your mistakes and admitting what you don’t know. These are some of the hardest things for leaders to do; many are afraid it will undermine their authority or cause people to lose confidence in them and their abilities. But I’ve found that the opposite is true: The more authentic you are, the more your employees and peers will respect you and the more they will trust your judgment. Believe me, they already know you’re a human being, and they already know you make mistakes, so no amount of posturing is going to convince them otherwise. They’ll respect you more if they sense that you are being candid and genuine.

Whether you’re looking up or down the corporate ladder, make sure you treat everyone you interact with the same way, with respect. If you don’t, people will see you as a phony, and you’ll lose credibility. I’m sure you’ve seen leaders who act totally differently when their bosses are around from when they’re in front of their direct reports. Didn’t some red flags go up as soon as you saw the difference? If you ever find yourself behaving differently around different people, stop yourself. That’s another lesson I learned the hard way.

Early in my career I found it difficult to juggle my behavior when my bosses and my direct reports were all in the same room. But life as a leader got a whole lot easier when I started being myself twenty-four hours a day, for better or for worse. If you learn to do this and have the confidence to do it
consistently, people will say good things about you—to your face and behind your back—and your effectiveness as a manager and an employee will soar. Most workplaces are way too full of people who take themselves too seriously. Take your responsibility, not yourself, seriously.

4. Greet people sincerely. Many tough-minded leaders sneer at this advice because it sounds like something a mother would say when she sends her child to school. Some leaders get so wrapped up in their work and in projecting a commanding image that they walk right past people without acknowledging them or, worse yet, acknowledging only some of them—usually the same ones day in and day out. I assure you, if you walk past people as if they were invisible, everyone will notice, and it will send a demoralizing message about how little you value them. Never underestimate the power of a simple gesture like saying hello or stopping to chat for a minute or two. And make sure you mean it; if you’re just going through the motions like a glad-handing politician looking for votes, they’ll see right through you. As the old saying goes, “People will not remember what you said, but they will remember how you made them feel.”

On my frequent strolls around Walt Disney World, I always stopped to say hello to as many Cast Members as I could. I’ll never forget the looks on their faces when I asked how their husbands or wives were or when I remembered where they had been born or that a child had recently gone off to college. I also remember the wounded expression of an employee who told me that her manager of ten years did not know whether she had a son or a daughter. It would have made a tremendous difference to that woman’s work performance if her boss had shown a genuine interest in her family.

5. Reach out to everyone on your team. Everyone wants to be heard and respected. It’s one of our most basic human needs. But hearing all voices is not just vital for building morale and self-confidence; it’s a crucial source of information for you as a leader. Great leaders know they don’t know everything. They learn as they go, and they’re confident enough to listen to people at every level of their organizations. As a result, they make better choices and fewer mistakes. They also inspire greater commitment to and more support for their decisions. By reaching out to everyone on your team, you gain the benefit of a variety of perspectives. Make it clear that you want to hear from everyone, whatever his or her title or position, and that you want everyone to speak his or her mind. Ask for people’s opinions and ideas even if they don’t volunteer them.
Never underestimate the wisdom and resourcefulness of your frontline staff. After all, they’re the ones in the trenches day after day, seeing things you don’t see and picking up information you can’t possibly have. Ask them direct questions, such as “Is this the best way to get this done?” and “Is there anything else I should know before I make this decision?” Let them know you appreciate their advice, even when it is the opposite of what you were thinking or something you disagree with or might not want to hear. Remember, they’re probably intimidated by your position, so put them at ease, and thank them for being honest with you. How many times have you heard leaders say, after a crisis has erupted, “Why didn’t anyone tell me?” Probably they were afraid to. They’ll tell you the truth only if they trust you 100 percent.

Over the years I’ve seen countless examples of how involving people at all levels leads to continual improvement in productivity, innovation, and problem solving, and I’ll share many of them throughout the book. Once, for example, in an attempt to reduce the cost of room amenities in one of Disney World’s resort hotels, management decided to eliminate the free sewing kits we placed in each room. It reasoned that no one really used or needed them and that the Guests probably wouldn’t even notice they were missing. Well, the Guests did notice, and you wouldn’t believe the firestorm that resulted. You see, those kits came in tin boxes decorated with beautiful Victorian images. The Guests didn’t want them for sewing; they liked taking them home as souvenirs. The problem was, the managers had not bothered to ask the opinion of the housekeepers, the ones who really knew what room amenities Guests wanted. The housekeepers set us straight, and the sewing kits were quickly returned to the rooms. If we had asked the experts in the first place, we would never have made that mistake. The next time you go to a Walt Disney World Resort, pay attention to the service you receive and the way you and your family are treated. Chances are you’ll notice something special, something you might not see at other hotels, restaurants, or theme parks. And chances are the original idea came from a person or a team that was fairly low on the totem pole. For example, at Disney World you’ll see a different family get selected to open the park each morning. You’ll see bus drivers break out in song as they ferry you back to your resort late at night when everyone is exhausted. You’ll see security hosts and hostesses singling out children to be deputy security hosts, complete with a ceremony in which they raise their right hands and take an oath to have a good time. All those ideas came from Cast Members.
Chances are you’ll make a point of eating at the Whispering Canyon Café in the Wilderness Lodge. Be warned, it’s a noisy place. The servers are loud; they shout out funny things and sometimes make teasing remarks to the Guests. Then, when you least expect it, one of them will round up all the kids and lead them on a make-believe horseback ride around the restaurant. Songs can break out at any moment. It’s all part of the show, and children love it. Where did the concept come from? Not from upper management, I can assure you. It came from the Cast Members when the lodge first opened. It was a strange idea at the time, but the leaders were smart enough to listen. Whispering Canyon has since become one of the most popular restaurants at Disney World, and the Wilderness Lodge has since been rated the top family-friendly hotel in the country.

6. Make yourself available. Do everything in your power to be there for people when they need you. Like good parents, great leaders are always available. At Disney, I let all the Cast Members know that I was available to anyone who wanted to see me about anything, and I made good on that promise by making time for everyone who requested a meeting, regardless of his or her position in the organization. Some executives fear that a policy like that will take up too much of their time. I found that it saved time, because it helped create a happier, more productive environment and because it prevented a lot of problems that would have completely devoured my time. In fact, far fewer people than you might expect actually made appointments to see me, but just knowing that they could had a powerful effect. And when they did come to see me, the impact was usually profound.

Because they knew I would give them a fair hearing and follow through on my commitments, frontline Cast Members and managers came to me directly with their concerns and complaints. Some, for example, thought that they were not being given an opportunity to get into management. Others came because they were having difficulty with managers and wanted advice on what to do. By helping them resolve these concerns before they festered into resentment and antagonism, we made the workplace more harmonious and we kept many competent people who might otherwise have left. And sometimes my open-door policy unearthed vital information, like the time a Cast Member felt safe enough to tell me that a coworker was taking food from the company and reselling it. “I know you’ll take care of it,” she said, and I did, quickly and quietly. On some occasions I’d be told about personal concerns that were not work-related at all. A Cast Member from one of
our resort pastry shops came to me once and said that her mother had fallen and needed a walker. She could not afford to buy one because she had spent all her money installing ramps in her house and repairing the damage from a recent hurricane. Because I’d said that anyone could come to me if he or she ever needed anything, she asked for help. I contacted the United Way, and a few days later there was a walker on that Cast Member’s porch. It had taken me less than half an hour to get her that walker, and the payoff in loyalty and motivation was incalculable. Many leaders think it’s a waste of time to listen to the problems of low-level employees. I don’t. I learned over the course of my career that if you take care of all the little issues, big problems are less likely to occur. Because I was available, I could resolve delicate issues quickly, before they escalated, and the company was spared some protracted grievances and legal entanglements. And because I worked hard at being available, other Disney leaders followed my example, and the practice became commonplace at every level of the operation.

So let your team know you’re there for them when they need you. That means twenty-four hours a day, so give them the appropriate phone numbers and let them know it’s really OK to use them. Yes, it’s a pain to get calls at home, and it’s awful to be awakened in the middle of the night. But it comes with the territory, and it won’t kill you. In my experience, people rarely abuse the privilege, so the calls you do get are likely to be of great importance. Moreover, merely making the gesture sends a strong signal that you really do want to hear from everyone, at any time. Your employees may never use your home number, but just knowing they have it will make them far more willing to come to your office or send you an e-mail with information you need to know.

When something of concern to one of your people comes up, try to see him or her as soon as you can. That’s the reason I include this essential tip in my time management seminars: Always leave blank spaces in your calendar to accommodate the unexpected, because the unexpected is often more important than the expected.

7. Listen to understand. Making yourself available is an empty gesture unless you genuinely listen. As Stephen Covey puts it in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” Too many leaders fail to stay focused on the person they’re speaking with because they’re thinking about something else or rehearsing what they’re going to say next. Their body language practically screams, “Shut up!” Good leaders, on the other hand, take the
time to let people express their thoughts completely. Yes, this requires patience. Yes, people often ramble on and on out of nervousness and take forever to get to the point. Yes, they often tell you what you already know. But it’s vital to hang in there, because you never know when a glimmer of an idea might shine through. The sentence you tuned out on might hold a crucial fact or reveal an important problem you need to know about. And even if you learn nothing newsworthy, listening to people speak their minds tells them that you care about what they have to say.

There is another reason to give the speaker your full attention: Most often what people are saying and what they are trying to say are two different things. There is much to be learned from body language and from what is being left out. But in order to read between the lines, you have to stay focused, so allow no distractions or interruptions from phone calls, paperwork, or text messaging. As you’re listening, you might want to take notes to refer to later; even the best leaders can’t always remember everything. And when the person is finished speaking, it’s a good idea to reiterate what he or she has said, to make sure you’ve understood. Say, “I think you are saying . . .” or “I understand from what you said that what you want me to do is . . .” or “Is there anything else that you think I should know?” Showing that you are trying hard to grasp what they are saying will put people at ease, and that will encourage them to speak openly and candidly. As a result, you will dramatically improve your odds of learning the whole truth.

Speaking of putting people at ease, here’s a tip that worked really well for me. When Cast Members came to see me in my office, I went out and greeted them myself rather than had my assistant bring them to me. I sat beside them in the same kind of chairs they were in, not in the big comfortable chair behind my desk. In fact, the only times I ever sat behind my desk were when I was alone. When the meeting ended, I always escorted my visitors out of my office and thanked them for coming over. In other words, I didn’t just make the time to see them; I made an effort to show them I was really there.

By the way, I always held the door open for my visitors, and I held it until they got all the way through—just as my mother had taught me when I was a boy. It was a basic lesson in courtesy that I always remembered, and as a leader I practiced it both literally and metaphorically by using my authority to open doors for people so they could reach their highest potentials.

8. Communicate clearly, directly, and honestly. Good
communication is clear communication. Use ordinary language, and say exactly what you mean. If you don’t, people will leave more confused than they were before, and you’ll pay the price in inefficiency and loss of trust. Beating around the bush increases confusion, not clarity. If you “spin” your message, people will see right through it, and their trust in you will be undermined, perhaps forever. If you communicate clearly, directly, and honestly all the time, people will understand what you want them to know and what you want them to do. And you will earn a reputation as a trustworthy individual. People may not always like what you say, but at least they will trust that you mean it. Nothing is more important if you want to be a great leader.

Make an effort to communicate one-on-one in person whenever you can. Nothing makes people feel more valued than a face-to-face meeting. Second best is a one-on-one phone conversation; if that isn’t possible, try gathering people in small groups. If you must resort to e-mail or written notes, find a way to personalize those messages, and try to make them enjoyable and interesting. Yes, this takes time and effort—no one said good communication was easy—but the payoff is enormous.

9. Stand up for the excluded. Be on the lookout for people who feel left out for one reason or another, such as a new employee eating lunch alone in the cafeteria. If someone is being excluded socially, it usually has nothing to do with his or her skills, but the isolation will affect his or her performance. Maybe the person is shy and finds it difficult to speak up. Maybe he or she looks or sounds different from everyone else and has been made to feel insecure in the group. Maybe he or she grew up in an unfamiliar culture and coworkers are uneasy about how to relate to him or her. There are a million reasons a person can feel excluded in the workplace, but whatever the underlying cause may be, the instant it comes to your attention, take steps to rectify the situation. Make sure your team understands how important it is that everyone on the team—regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or physical appearance—feels included, and always set a good example yourself.

Make no mistake, anyone who feels left out is left out. I learned that lesson in my very first job. There I was, fresh out of the army, a country boy from Oklahoma working at a fancy hotel in the nation’s capital. All the other waiters were professionals who had been trained at the best facilities in Europe. Not only had I not been formally trained anywhere, but I also hadn’t even finished college. I felt so totally left out that I was tempted to
get on the first bus back to Oklahoma. It was a huge blow to my self-esteem and self-confidence, and it affected my ability to do my job.

Luckily, my supervisor, Kurt, made me feel as if I belonged. Not only that, but he took me under his wing and helped transform me from a timid kid who had no idea why a table setting needs more than one fork and thought that Sterno (the fuel used for heating up chafing dishes) was an appetizer into a confident young man who couldn’t wait to learn the next new thing. Kurt was tough. He insisted that everything be done perfectly. But despite my frequent mistakes, he never made me feel dumb, and he never embarrassed me in front of others. He just quietly told me the right way to do things. I never forgot Kurt’s example.

10. Forget about the chain of command. The days of the vertical chain of command as a way of doing business are over. Leaders who continue to manage this way are doomed to failure, because a rigid top-down command structure can slow communication significantly and deliver less than reliable information. This is especially true of emotionally charged issues, because feelings are never translated or passed on properly in a command chain. This doesn’t mean that people should not talk first to their immediate supervisors when problems arise; it means that good leaders are willing to listen to anyone in their organizations, whether or not that person reports to them directly. I think it is fine for leaders to make it clear to their reports exactly what they want to be informed of and how they expect information to be presented. But there should never be a hint of intimidation. There is no room for such comments as “Why did you talk to him before talking with me?” At Walt Disney World, Al Weiss and I learned to work with a flexible chain of command over the years. My direct reports talked directly to Al or to whomever else they thought appropriate whenever they needed to, and they would leave me a voice mail summarizing the discussion or else update me later on. I attribute much of our success to that style of leadership, because the message it sent was: “We trust you to do the right thing, and we are confident you’ll make the right choices.”

Needless to say, this kind of flexibility requires an enormous amount of trust, but once that trust has been established, and fear has been removed from the equation, you’ll find that information is far more likely to flow where it’s needed when it’s needed.
11. Don’t micromanage. If you want to lose great people quickly, look over their shoulders all the time and make all their decisions for them. On the other hand, if you want to be a great leader, learn to let go. Hire great people, be perfectly clear about their responsibility, authority, and accountability, and let them do their thing. You may earn more money than they do, and you may have a fancier title, but none of that makes you smarter than your direct reports. Whenever I needed to remind someone of that, I would tell them about the button I once saw on the shirt of Ken Blanchard, the leadership and management expert. It read, “None of us is as smart as all of us.”

Yes, there are times of crisis when a leader needs to take command. But it’s the height of arrogance to assume that every difficult situation needs you to take over and make every decision. In fact, the opposite may be true. In Chapter Four, you’ll read about what we went through at Walt Disney World on September 11, 2001, and in the immediate aftermath. In the midst of that terrible crisis, everyone came through with flying colors precisely because we shared the leadership role as the situation required.

12. Design your culture. The Disney Institute defines a corporate culture as “the system of values and beliefs an organization holds that drives actions and behaviors and influences relationships.” Whether you recognize it or not, your organization has one. So the question isn’t whether you have a corporate culture but what kind of culture you have. Does it work for you or against you? Successful cultures are established by design, not by chance, and they’re clear, well defined, and purposeful. One of those purposes should be to create and foster an inclusive environment. It has never been more crucial for leaders to promote, in word and deed, inclusiveness at every level of their operation.

There is no downside to designing a culture of inclusiveness; it is 100 percent upside for every part of your business and frankly for our country and the whole world. I’ve seen its impact in organizations of every size and shape, from corporate giants like Disney to mom-and-pop operations. For instance, Laurie Kotas, founder and CEO of Wishland, a small nonprofit in Southern California that works with wish-granting organizations to provide assistance and cherished moments to seriously ill children and their families, says that after taking a Disney Institute seminar, she realized “the importance of defining and creating a culture that can be in place as the organization grows, and where everyone feels they’re an important part of our magic and success.” Once she started
communicating her refined vision of an inclusive, mission-driven organization, she got an immediate buy-in from her staff of three, her board, and her corps of volunteers. The result was a boost of enthusiasm, commitment, and creative ideas, as well as an increase in volunteers and donations.

On the other end of the spectrum is the international auto giant Volvo. Kevin Meeks, the network and business development director at Volvo’s British operation (Volvo Car UK Limited), says that “one of the most important learnings from our time with Disney was a deeper appreciation of the role that every individual in the company plays in delivering an outstanding service to our customers.” This realization inspired the company to revise its employee training program. The result is what it calls Volvo PRIDE, an acronym for passion, respect, integrity, drive, and energy. Highlighting Volvo’s culture, heritage, and reputation for safety, quality, and environmental care, the program is rated as “very good” or “outstanding” by 95 percent of its attendees. “It creates a passion for the brand and demonstrates how individuals can personally contribute to the success of the business,” says Meeks. “We know that Volvo PRIDE is helping to strengthen our brand and customer experience.”

However you measure success, designing an inclusive culture will surely yield results in your organization. But this doesn’t mean it’s easy. In fact, it’s a journey that never ends, and it’s a prime example of something I said earlier: The soft stuff is actually the hard stuff. Managers often say they have no time for the soft stuff because they’re busy with the “important” things: making money, increasing productivity, cutting costs, enforcing rules, keeping labor in line, and the rest of the measurable tasks that running a business requires. But the fact is, if you don’t do the soft stuff well, you will never achieve the payoff you’re aiming for with the hard stuff. That’s why it pays to take care of your people before you take care of your paperwork.

13. Treat your people as you would want your customers to be treated. The bottom line of this chapter is that there is a direct correlation between how you treat your employees and how those employees treat your customers. Cast Members at Walt Disney World are trained to deliver on these Four Guest Expectations:
Make me feel special.
Treat me as an individual.
Respect me and my children.
Be knowledgeable.
That’s basically what customers of any business want, over and above a high-quality product. Disney leadership trains Cast Members to fulfill these expectations by treating them the same way. You might call it Disney’s version of the Golden Rule: Leaders do unto Cast Members the way they want Cast Members to do unto Guests.

It works because the Four Cast Expectations are essentially the same. Make me feel special. Treat me as an individual. Respect me. Make me knowledgeable.

Your employees have the same four expectations; if you fulfill them, their self-esteem and confidence will soar, and they’ll behave in a professional and caring way. And you know what follows from that: bottom line business results. I can’t emphasize this enough. In studying the Guest satisfaction surveys at Walt Disney World, I’ve seen a clear trend: People who say they had a memorable interaction with a Cast Member invariably give an excellent rating, and they are also far more likely to return on their next vacation.

By the way, the same reasoning applies to employees who do not have direct contact with customers. Treat them properly, and those “backstage” workers will treat suppliers, direct reports, supervisors, and one another properly. It’s simple human nature: If you want people to behave a certain way, model it by treating them that same way. At Walt Disney World, I and other leaders did our best to make every last member of the Cast feel trusted and respected, while the Cast Members did all they could to make kids feel important and parents feel valued. Without that, Walt Disney World might not have remained the most popular tourist destination in the world. The same formula can help you and your business achieve similar success.

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