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Walt Disney, *Pinocchio*, And Lessons For Leaders

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One of the attributes that made Walt Disney unique amongst movie studio heads in Hollywood was that he was both a businessman and an artist. Walt worked everyday with the sensitivity of an artist and the hardheadedness of an entrepreneurial business owner, leading and directing his artistic and technical staff to create high-quality entertainment that would bring joy, happiness and inspiration to ordinary people.

Long-time Disney animator and director Wilfred Jackson (1906-1988) provides insight into how Walt worked on his earliest feature-length films in a series of retrospective correspondence letters with author and musician Ross Care from the mid-1970s through the early-1980s that are newly published in the book *Disney Legend Wilfred Jackson: A Life in Animation* (Theme Park Press, 2016).

Amongst Jackson's recollections of his career, he provides his perspective on what it was like at the studio around the time Walt first ventured into full-length animated feature films in the mid-1930s.

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By this time, Walt and his studio team had gained considerable experience creating seven-minute animated Mickey Mouse and Silly Symphony films before pioneering feature-length animation with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Walt followed up with *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Fantasia* (1940), setting out to apply and extend the possibilities of animated film production.

Leading with Vision, Purpose and Values

For the most part the vision for *Pinocchio*, as with *Snow White* before it, came from the mind of Walt Disney, and staff was tasked with and encouraged to contribute their own ideas and creativity to the further development and artistic expression and execution of Walt's vision within their given professional disciplines.

Storymen wrote the script; musicians wrote the score and songs; background painters illustrated the scenes; animators created the action; etc. Jackson's job as a sequence director was to make sure it all fit together properly and that the many contributions accorded to Walt's overall artistic vision, or at least his and the artists own estimate of Walt's vision at any given time, as it continuously evolved over the process. Reflecting back on those times, Jackson noted:

Up until *Pinocchio*, absolutely nothing happened without his [Walt] being in on it. All the color models he saw before they got okayed. All the rough animation. We ran it for him before anything moved into cleanup, and ink and paint. Nothing happened without his having his finger on it.

The director, to a limited extent, could check his own thing into it, but under Walt's very careful eye. Just as a storyman, just as the animators themselves. Animation was probably the one end of it where Walt had to depend more on the animators themselves, than he did on the other functions.

Walt was a better storyman than any of the storymen he could hire, he was a better director than any of the directors he could hire, but he wasn't a better animator than any of the animators he could hire. At that point (*Snow White* and *Pinocchio*) the direction was very largely a matter of trying hard to get on the screen what you understood Walt to want on the screen. (Care, *Disney Legend* Wilfred Jackson, 77-78)

What was always clear to everybody on payroll was that Walt Disney himself was the guiding and directing intelligence at the highest level of the artistic and production process. The decision to make these movies and assume the capital risk was Walt's. It was Walt's vision, aspiration, passion, courage and leadership that made the creation of Disney feature-length cartoons possible and fuelled the passion and creative expression shown towards these films by artists like Jackson and his studio colleagues.

For most of these artists, working on these path-breaking feature-length animated films with Walt Disney became the high point of their careers and a life-changing experience.

Improving and Winning Through Applied Technology

As Walt developed his vision for marquee headlining feature-length animated films, he knew that he had to ensure the artistic capability of his artist to produce engaging and believable cartoons that would hold the interest of audiences for an extended period of time. At the time, cartoons were seen as frivolous entertainment, and the idea that anybody would want to watch 80 minutes of a single cartoon was nothing less than radical.

Knowing that his survival in the cartoon business would require an improvement in the quality of the product he offered to the public, Walt instituted mandatory drawing classes at the studio starting in 1932 to improve the skill and technique of his animators and artists.

Walt's vision extended beyond just drawing. A second aspect of cartoon movie magic was the technology to compose and film the scenes so they could be presented to audiences in their final form and in a manner that would deliver and achieve the movie-going experience audiences expected.

One important technology development for cartoon makers in the mid-1930s was the creation and innovative use of a large camera apparatus known as the multiplane camera.

The development and use of the multiplane camera was important because it allowed animation to mimic the style of live-action filmmaking that moviegoers were already used to, thereby enhancing the viewer experience.

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We are lucky enough to have film footage of Walt himself explaining the visual problems posed by animation in producing a realistic looking scene and the solution provided by the multiplane camera in [this excerpt](#) from a 1957 *Walt Disney's A Wonderful World of Color* television show.

“You see,” Walt tells the viewing audience, “we decided for features, the camera needed improvement too.” These choices and commitments to experiment with and embrace new technological innovations and improvements had profound implications that reverberated throughout the various interconnected processes that made up the studio’s movie production chain.

The Reputed Champion of Multiplane Scenes

Many film historians consider the greatest and most artistic multiplane camera scene ever constructed to be Sequence 2 in *Pinocchio*, “Going to School,” beginning with a descending pan from the town bell tower and leading up to Pinocchio leaving Geppetto’s house to attend school for the first time.

This scene helps to reinforce the beautiful setting in the Italian countryside where the action takes place, but as Ross Care observes, “is pure atmosphere and scene setting, and is hardly essential to the plot” (78). Care describes the detail:

Aside from the fluid and continuous forward movement of the shot (which never breaks, at least not obviously) the details of the animation of the small village characters are amazing. When the first group of children (with the dog) are seen one falls and sprawls on the pavement. When a boy is seen leaving his house on the lower street his mother blows his nose, he kisses her and scampers off. To emphasize the sunlit morning atmosphere each character has a moving shadow, even the crowds of children that pass Geppetto’s towards the end of the shot. (Care, *Disney Legend Wilfred Jackson*, 79)

The scene itself lasts just 45 seconds, but had to be intricately planned, created, and filmed, all with the dynamic action of the capabilities and limitations of the multiplane camera in mind.

According to Disney film historian J.B. Kaufman, because of the extended and constantly shifting angle of the camera, the creation of this scene posed a new technical problem to be solved, which meant innovation and applied original

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thinking rather than merely adapting the construction of the scene to an existing and proven process, which would have saved considerable time, effort, and money.

Kaufman writes in *Pinocchio: The Making of the Disney Epic*, that the solution to filming the imagined sequence required that the multiplane camera be altered from its vertical design with the camera on top filming down into layers of background, to instead film horizontally: “The levels were painted in oil on glass, like standard multiplane elements, but here the glass planes were much larger, and special wooden frames were built to hold them in place.” (Kaufman, *Pinocchio*, 147; also quoted in Care, *Disney Legend Wilfred Jackson*, 80). Further adaptations had to be made to hold the animation cels securely while filming the character animation in this sequence.

With regards to just this one 45-second scene, Kaufman writes:

To test this ambitious undertaking, the crew filmed a “dry run” in black and white in April 1939, using pencil drawings. Having verified that the illusion would be successfully sustained, they proceeded with full color production. Altogether, the planning, testing, and completion of this one scene took months; the final version was filmed in Technicolor in late October-early November 1939. The resulting scene on the screen accomplishes its goal: it pulls us into the rich, imaginative visual world of *Pinocchio*. (Kaufman, *Pinocchio*, 148-150.)

This one scene is estimated to have cost the studio over \$100,000 circa 1939, about the cost of making a Mickey Mouse short, which was a considerable capital investment for a single “non-essential” scene by a struggling independent animation studio.

The scene itself is beautiful and memorable, and when watching the film, it passes by all too quickly. Walt wanted it included in the movie because it was something new, unique, and innovative, that audiences would find thrilling and memorable, and that would allow the studio staff to apply themselves to the full level of their capabilities while pushing the boundaries of creative and technical animation. The artists found this challenging work immensely satisfying and pride-inducing.

Shortly after the release of *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia*, Walt summarized the experience of he and his staff in pioneering the making feature-length animated films:

It has been a lot of fun and a lot of headache. The suspense has been continuous and sometimes awful. ... But after all, it is stress and challenge and necessity that make an artist grow and outdo himself. (Walt Disney, "Growing Pains," *The Journal of the Society of Motion Pictures*, Jan. 1941, quoted in Jim Korkis, *Walt's Words: Quotations of Walt Disney with Sources*, 58)

Innovation Requires an Integration of Mind and Action

It is important to step back and understand that this famous scene from *Pinocchio*, like every other aesthetically astounding and amazing element that came out of the Disney studio, didn't just happen. Each scene required an incredible amount of development, study, analysis, artistic effort, teamwork and collective consternation.

As with anything created in a production process, it all had to be envisioned, planned, created, invented, tested, adapted, refined, etc., in multiple iterations, by people with active minds engaged and working on the process. And no matter how good those artists and technicians were, their work was made possible by the vision, desire and action of Walt Disney. He saw the "Going to School" scene in *Pinocchio* and the work, time, and cost involved not as a \$100,000 additional expense and unnecessary luxury – as other studio heads, bankers and investors would have looked upon it – but as a creative and artistic element inherently necessary to the integrity of communicating the story to audiences, placing a stake in the ground, and further establishing his own visionary course for the future potential of animated films.

As an entrepreneur, Walt Disney saw the creation of such scenes both as an element of artistic integrity and an opportunity to improve his product and win customers. He thought about the total picture from a higher plane and placed value creation ahead of cost.

For Walt, as CEO of the studio and producer of *Pinocchio*, the beauty and artistic integrity of the film was of the utmost importance and value, not the

additional expense and capital required to add such a complicated scene. If Walt Disney operated on the premise that the minimization of cost and effort were the measures of achievement on the presumption that this was the way to increase financial returns, he would have created very little in his career that was of lasting aesthetic and monetary value, as has proven to be the case with most of his contemporary competitors.

Walt looked upon money as the means to finance new ideas, thereby giving him the freedom to create and do the things he wanted to do. Otherwise, as he often said, money served him no purpose. “I made up my mind,” Walt said in 1941,

that if this business was to ever get anywhere, if this business was ever to have a chance to grow, it could never do it by having to answer...to someone with only one thought or interest – namely profits.” (Walt Disney speech to employees, Feb. 10, 1941. Quoted in Korkis, *Walt's Words*, 56)

Create Options to Optimize Choice

While at times Walt Disney could be extremely detailed about specific scenes and their overall audience impact through the combination of story, design, music, pace, etc., he never lost sight of the purpose and importance of each film and scene element against the background of the entire picture. When Walt was unsure how to proceed, he would create more than what was minimally needed to give himself choices and options for the weighing of alternatives. Jackson notes in a letter,

For every one of Walt's cartoons I worked on there was enough good material prepared and proposed and considered and discarded in favor of other ideas to make footage enough for another full film. Walt was not easily satisfied with the story ideas or music ideas, or whatever for his cartoons and had to feel right about the total material for a picture before going ahead with it. This was especially true of his films in the late Thirties and early Forties. (Care, *Disney Legend Wilfred Jackson*, 85-86)

Noting Jackson's comment that Walt was not easily satisfied, one should not misinterpret Walt's demands that his staff achieve the highest levels of perfection in

the craft of animated cartoons as coming from a overbearing egotistical, imperious, and authoritarian boss (even though he was sometimes perceived this way because he focused more on intellect and professionalism and disliked dealing with people's feelings).

There is no question that at times Walt was a difficult task-master who behaved more harshly with people he valued than both he and they thought warranted, and that he likely could have achieved the same, and perhaps better results, with less conflict and tension. Walt was passionate about his work, and often leveraged his own emotions and those of others to drive passion and positive engagement. His high standards were a driving force behind the studio's abilities and reputation as industry leaders.

Working for Walt Disney – a visionary entrepreneurial leader – was never easy and friction-free. The best workers quickly realized and accepted that they could never fully participate in and comprehend the world as Walt did, precisely because they could never function effectively at the conceptual level exhibited by Walt, and attend to the range and complexity of problems, challenges, and stresses he had to contend with on a perpetual basis.

The Challenge of Working with Walt

Walt Disney not only had vested authority over the studio because he was the boss, he also was held in high esteem by staff that interacted and worked with him directly, providing a high degree of earned authority.

One of the admirable qualities of Walt Disney as a leader was his passion for lifelong learning, self-improvement, and growth in complexity. After the extremely tight control Walt held throughout every aspect of *Snow White*, Jackson observes that on each film thereafter, Walt gradually delegated more of the decision-making control to others to expand their capabilities, although he always remained the final authority:

[A]fter *Pinocchio* – there was a gradual withdrawal on Walt's part of the intimate, close working on all details with every department, and he began to leave more and more to the judgment of the animators, to the judgment of the directors, and of course the story department. He controlled things along a broader base. But the whole general concept was still definitely subject to his

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approval. When the characters were developed to his satisfaction, then it was all right to go ahead with it, but in later years we were much more on our own....

[*Pinocchio*] was a little different than on *Snow White*, in that Walt didn't work quite as closely with each detail, and there were more decisions left up to me, more initiative had to be taken on my part. (Care, *Disney Legend Wilfred Jackson*, 87)

It wasn't just to the directors that Walt was looking for more initiative, notes Jackson. He observed that after *Pinocchio*,

...he backed off and began throwing more responsibility to the rest of us [all of his creative team]. He figured we should know our business well enough to help him make pictures instead of being extra fingers on his hand. (Care, *Disney Legend Wilfred Jackson*, p. 89)

Not everybody liked this change towards greater delegation and personal responsibility. While Walt was cordial, he was also focused and purposeful, and too busy to hold everybody's hand and explain exactly what he wanted. For the studio to expand its capabilities and pursue new challenges, Walt recognized that he needed to surround himself with skilled and confident artists who were also problem solvers and thinkers.

To the chagrin of many, when Walt engaged himself and others in his creative process, he didn't always know what he wanted or the details of what he was seeking. As Walt began to delegate more, those who were less self-assured feared being held to account by Walt for thinking independently. Those who lacked confidence in their own judgment began to resent his demands and expectations for high quality work.

As a means to test the mettle of his more senior staff and create the highest-performing workplace culture in the industry, Walt didn't go out of his way to make his working relationships with his senior talent too friendly and personal.

Those who found themselves incapable of fitting in and delivering at the level of skill and ability required to meet Walt's high expectations, or found working directly with Walt too stressful, often took it upon themselves to pursue other employment options. Walt took an interest in his staff, and often if they were capable but honestly struggling and seemed to be mismatched with their current

role, would seek new roles and challenges for them. Senior talent who refused to think independently or resisted learning new skills suggested by Walt to help their careers, were usually encouraged to seek more appropriate employment elsewhere.

The Benefits of Creative Tension

Walt was aware that because of his celebrity status, people held him in awe and were fearful of him, and as a result, many were predisposed to just go along with whatever he said or intimated he wanted. Walt also knew that this was not good for business, which he believed benefited considerably from creative tension and the clash of alternative ideas.

As a result, Walt had little regard for people “seeking to polish the apple” by only telling Walt what they thought he wanted to hear, or for creative talents who would seek to only follow instructions from Walt directly, or who found it too stressful to receive constructive criticism of their work in an attempt to improve it, or who couldn’t cope with Walt’s sometimes brash and unsympathetic response to their best efforts, or who lacked confidence in their own talents, took little pride in their work, or presumed or attempted to tell Walt what he should think of something or what he could or should do or not do.

As is usually the case, when the top performers can truly and enthusiastically align themselves with the vision, mission, values, and purpose of a fully competent and engaged chief executive, they are most likely to succeed. From the mid-1930s to the Disney studio strike in 1941 and the onset of the Second World War was such a time of high achievement and success, and is now dubbed the Golden Age of Disney animation.

Together, under the guidance of Walt Disney’s directing intelligence, the studio’s outstanding artists and technicians were able to apply their creative intelligence to produce the Disney movies, parks, and attractions that we continue to cherish and which have brought joy, imagination, hope, and the positive spirit of humanity to every corner of the world.

When Jackson resigned from Walt Disney Productions towards the end of his career, no longer able to find a home in animation with the studio by this time engaging in very little animation, he recalled, “The day I left, I left with no pension, no severance pay; I just cross-resolved out. I have no feelings of anything

but that I still owe Walt; he doesn't owe me." (Care: *Disney Legend Wilfred Jackson*, 106).

Lessons for Leaders

Business leaders have learned a lot about how best to manage people in the more than 50 years that have elapsed since Walt Disney's passing in 1966, and about how to create more effective organizations through the alignment of mission, purpose, and values. Nonetheless, there is a lot that can be learned from Walt Disney's achievements and shortcomings in this regard.

If executives want to bring some of Walt Disney's wisdom and success to their own organizations, they must begin to take seriously their responsibility for creating mission-driven workplaces in which all people are challenged and fully engaged in the release of creativity, capability, and cooperation in a trust-inducing environment. By doing so, organizations can achieve the most good for employees and their families, customers, and the myriad of individuals who are connected and touched by the network and web of benevolence that is created by effective and conscientious leadership.

Walt Disney was a self-educated artist and studio boss who tried to do his humble best in a career that was immensely complex and challenging. The loyalty, respect, and love he earned from his closest associates – men like Wilfred Jackson who spent their entire career working for Walt Disney – and from his legion of fans, suggests that he succeeded, and that there is much today's leaders can learn from his example.

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