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## In the Study of Leadership and Change Management of Walt Disney: Linking Theory to Application

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### Abstract:

*This article will introduce the issues and key theories in the leadership and management of change for Walt Disney and help readers to develop key change management skills. The focus in this article will be on understanding the way organization operate in its social environments, economic, and the change agent and activities manager undertake within organisations in pursuit of organizational goals and long term sustainability of the Walt Disney Company. The article begins in evaluating the influence and nature of Walt Disney's leadership towards management of change. By using the theories personality and leadership, the leadership model is determined by giving examples of behaviour as evidence. Supported by evidence-based journals, the possible challenges and outcomes are evaluated. To conclude, suggestion on his leadership management in achieving greater organisational effectiveness are proposed.*

**Keywords:** Walt Disney, change management, leadership, organizational goal

### 1. Introduction

In 1923, the co-founder Walter Elias Disney and his brother had established Walt Disney Company (D23.com, 2020). According to Walt Disney Company (2020), the company provides entertainment in classical 2D cartoons as a main vision. Along the journey, the enterprise consists of Disney movies, TV channels, toys, clothing lines as well as story books. By 1954, Disney land was launched in California where fairy-tales of storytelling boarded amusement park taken from Walt's works. Disney had become the most successful world wide's entertainment company with realising of total \$193.98 billion market capital in 2019 (Duffin, 2020).

Under Walt's leadership, Disney's empire continues to grow with tremendous success and in the near future will expected to rise and shine. Walt's leadership skills explain his victory in the industry. His business was successful because of his innovating vision. Begin with the iconic character of Mickey Mouse until more animation; one of the attributes to success is to dream big (biography.com, 2020). Walt's vision sets the direction of development for a desired business future and focuses on becoming a top player of entertainment's provider in the global market as mission.

According to Kotter (2011), a leader plays a role during the company's attempt to embrace change. During the period in-between, Walt Disney Company is in an unstable situation where often characterized by loss of direction. Hence, it is essential that leader embody the reality of change in the firm's attempt for achieving success. By doing this, Walt should focus more on the confusion of employees' feelings and develop a new style of altered workplace.

Throughout his leadership journey, the implementing management of change has led to great success for Walt Disney. The first step occurred in the organizational development is requiring new techniques (Thornberry, 2003). To improve work quality, he pursued his story writers and artists to attend art institutes or learn animation on his expenses. This shows that Walter recognized employees by developing talents through training. Walt started to invest more money in education where classes were hold at his own studio. In order for the film to be more realism, animal movement and human anatomy were being studied by Disney's employees (Greco, 1999).

### 2. Leadership Model Adopted by Walt Disney

According to Ken Blanchard (2010), the author defined when an individual that is attempting to influence another person or group's behaviour in any situation consider as leadership. One of the approaches to understand leadership is to identify the traits possessed by a leader. The implicit idea of leadership trait theory is that leaders are born rather than made (Derue, et.al, 2011). Firstly, creativity is one of the personality traits that associated with Walt's leadership. His never-ending creative thoughts have made him master storytelling skills. Thereby, the famous Mickey Mouse character voice came from himself with great high-pitched and enthusiastic tones (Murphy, 2013). Secondly, self-confidence was found in Walt's decision-making. In 1928, Walt faced difficulty when looking financial help for his early film 'Mickey Mouse in Steamboat Willie'. His key to success comes back with self-confidence that enables him to persevere long. Yet, he still made it out proven that his confidence leads to competence (Rottenberg, 2014).

Next, leadership behaviours theory conclude that leader's personality traits behave can be acquired rather than born (Derue, et.al, 2011). Based on the Michigan Studies and Ohio State Studies (2007), those researches strongly representative of the ideas of leaders engage more with subordinates by two leadership dimensions. Walt always shows concern on employees' job satisfaction and also their personal lives. As evidenced, Walt used people-oriented leadership

blended with some aspects of task-oriented leadership in his organization. In 1936, Walt went around the country looking for skilled artistic to produce best work. He shows sense of caring by providing a family-like working environment and also demands excellence. In return, he will take his workers for gathering or Sunday barbeque at his house (Jones, 2018).

The contingency theory of leadership attempts on specific situation does affect the effectiveness of a leader (Peters, Hartke and Pohlmann, 1985). According to Hersey-Blanchard Model (2015), situational leadership theory focuses on followers when selecting the right leadership style. Follow by example, Walt use coaching style management in his studio. He shows high supportive behaviour where he values his employees' suggestion and work done by them. At the same time, he also shows high directive approach where he directs employees to focus his vision.

Part Goal theory also applied to Walt's leadership where his role is to clear the pathway for his employees to achieve goals. Walt as a leader encountered with participative leadership and took it to great heights on a global level. The leadership style does allow followers to have some level of influence over the top management's final decision (House, 1996). Walt demanded creativity and gave his workers an opportunity to present new ideas. This shows that he permits employees to become part of the community that is so important to Disney's culture. Hence, Walt used his organizational culture to its advantage and took a step to create a niche for itself in the cartoon industry.

Besides, Walt also follow leader participation model which resembled aspects of authoritarian style in decision-making. According to Venom and Yetton (1973) studies, the model relates leader behaviour and participation in decision-making. In this case, Walt obtained acceptance from employees who are counting on management to do their diligence (Vroom and Jago, 1995). The situation is good in the sense of people come to have faith in leader and allowing them to focus on tasks. At the same time, communication through all level is meant to be one. The respect for the organization as a whole has caused the organizational structure to known as strict and became a very successful part of Walt Disney.

Nevertheless, Walt also practiced transformational leadership style. This neo-charismatic leadership theory focuses on transforming the organization and emphasis followers' engagement by sending a great deal of building trust (Jung, Chow and Wu, 2003). Example can be seen when Walt prided himself on being 'one of the guys' by telling his employees to call him 'Walt' rather than 'Mr. Disney' (Greco, 1999). The calling by first name offered a sense of warmth and allows employees building confidence in Disney's vision. Earning trust and respect from followers prove Walt showed evidence of idealised influence. Ultimately, another component that was achieved by Walt is inspiration motivation where this provides achievement's inspiration for employees to dedicate themselves into Disney's vision (Hoover, 2020). Walt's employees were willing to work long hours as they believe what they are doing. Walt also showed intellectual stimulation where he stimulated his employees to be innovative and go beyond expectations. In 1936, those dedicated Disney's workers help to share Walt's vision to release the first ever movie 'Snow White' (D23.com, 2020).

Lastly, the incarnations of charismatic aspect can be seen in Walt's leadership when he faced financial pressure in the early 1940s. A charisma leader takes responsibility for their actions (Awamleh and Gardner, 1999). To support with evidence, Walt as a charismatic leader took high personal risk for the sake of organization. At the time, Walt faced staggering budget because the 'Snow White and Seven Dwarfs' feature-length film cause almost \$1.5 million dollars. Instead being persuade to stop the project film, he is willing incur high costs and believes there is an opportunity ahead. In three years' time, the company almost faced bankruptcy as all the money is poured into the production (Loftus, 2014). Later on, a further ray of hope came when Walt had a great deal of convincing from the Bank of America to lend money for the production. In the end, Walt excitement over Snow White film inspired everyone and became the most successful movie earning \$8 million dollars (Lambie, 2019).

### **3. Challenges and Outcomes of Leadership Style in Influencing Psychology of Team or Individual in Managing Change**

According to Bennis (2007), challenges are arising from internal sources which are the nature of its leadership role. One of the challenges faced by Walt is the domineering of leadership style may stifle the company's responsiveness. Walt as an authoritarian leader had the tendency toward negative motivation to achieve results (Khan, et. al, 2015). This situation became even complex and create a culture of crisis in the company. Supporting related case when Walt's managements change coincided with the advent of World War II. Walt began haemorrhaging for money and diversify his interests into creating real life war-time documentaries. To meet the demand for war films, his employees worked six days straight at the studio. Therefore, morally suffered issue appeared and low wages paid throughout the managing change (Miller, 2019). Walt abuse an autocratic leadership style is viewed as controlling. He acknowledged and reverted to a strict hierarchy structure where employees were reminded of working for Disney instead working with Disney. It can be a particularly problematic where his employees end up feeling they have no input in how things are done. Ultimately, the leadership change could hurt the group performances.

Another challenges faced by Walt is failure to learn when leader is too fall foul into own charms. Walt as charismatic leaders fails in some manners which potentially suffer the wellbeing of his dependent followers (Fogarty, 2010). This situation viewed as a fail case and organizational goals are even harder to meet. The evidence case could be supported when Walt received many Oscar's nominations. He took all his animator' credit and did not intent to acknowledge their contributions when accepting the awards. His charismatic leadership viewed as negative due to his self-centred and domineering. Conversely, his employees were offended and were suggested to host another Oscar ceremony to recognize employees privately. However, Walt had rejected the idea and this cause rising of resentment among his animator (Medelros, 2018). The group effectiveness is negatively impacted due his egotistical and inability to demonstrate responsibility to his followers.

Leadership challenges are the biggest obstacles to route for success. Walt's approach solution to employee satisfaction can be based on Frederick Herzberg's theory. The theory could boost motivation factors to create job

satisfaction (Herzberg, 2008). After the success of Snow White, issues appeared that Walt didn't treat his employees as it used to be and high turnover rate happen. By utilizing this motivation theory, Walt should provide his employees with the opportunity for achievement recognition. Fair labor wage should be practiced where Disney's story men, animators, inkers, technicians and painters were being awarded with good salaries. Walt also should recognize employee's hard works such as rewarding them high bonuses.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is essential for a leader to improve his or her leadership skills which brings greatly impact the success of an organization, a team or group performance and also ownself. In order to achieve organizational effectiveness, Walt must understand own weakness and strength as well as motivations. Firstly, executive coaching can have a profound effect on Walt and his employees. This one-to-one coaching helps Walt Disney gain more emotional intelligence and enable him to have greater empathy and self-awareness (Palmer, et. al, 2001). By participating in coaching, he will become more aware of his impact on others and learn to self-identify problems. Walt can understand more on his workers' emotions and brings opportunities to build deeper relationships with them. The leader training process focused on helping leader achieve goals which will also enhance organization's productivity and also personal job satisfaction (Wasylyshyn, 2003).

Secondly, 360-degree feedback can be a perfect tool for improving leadership management. The feedback tool is specifically focused to improve leader's performance and skills (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998). By practising this instrument, Walt could gather survey from whole Disney organization and extremely valuable to know his employees thinking. Hence, the evaluation could impact the leadership development by identifying Walt's blind spots such as unnoticed behaviours and competency gaps (Yukl, 1999). In the end, variety perspectives enable Walt to improve his working relationships and optimize his leadership.

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