

The Improvisational Moment of Leadership

The soul of your organization resides with your frontline workers

At this very moment, somewhere in just about every organization, a frontline employee is going off script.

In fact, most employees, from the frontline up through middle management to the executive suite, go off script regularly. Sometimes hourly. Sometimes daily. Sometimes weekly or monthly. It's normal. It is, however, often overlooked as part of the routine functioning of an organization and its culture.

We call this, "The Improvisational Moment."

It's the moment when the norms of routine are broken, when an employee has to make a leadership decision. It's the moment when what happens next matters more for an organization than all the efficiencies and strategies combined.

The Improvisational Moment is when an entire company's reputation is wielded in the hands of a frontline or customer-facing employee. What that employee does, the decision he makes, the leadership he shows in helping the customer will impact the future of the organization.

Every employee in every organization goes off script at some point. Improvising is part of the human experience. It brings us into the moment. It energizes us. It's also when we're capable of doing our best work.

Executives who don't know this, don't understand human behavior.

Improvisational Moments are priceless if handled correctly; irreparably harmful to the firm if handled incorrectly.

A worker's success during the Improvisational Moment depends not on knowing the answer or even knowing where to look for the answer. It depends on how much autonomy she has to solve a problem and how connected she is to the company's values.

The Happiest Place on Earth

Doug Lipp, in his book, *Disney U: How Disney University Develops the World's Most Engaged, Loyal, and Customer Centric Employees*, asks us to imagine a situation that takes place in front of "It's a small world." It demonstrates how Disney's values are embraced by its employees and how those values ultimately guide them when they go off script.

Timothy, a custodial cast member (Disney workers are called cast members, not employees), is scurrying about sweeping up trash when he hears a child crying.

...Timothy sees the problem. A small boy, melting down in tears, is focused on the ground, stomping his feet in anger. The empty popcorn box and scattered kernels tell the story. Making matters worse is the boy's father who is scolding him.

This is definitely not The Happiest Place on Earth for the boy, his father, or the scores of guests watching the scene unfold.

Within moments, Timothy appears next to the boy, kneels down and says, "I'm sorry about your popcorn." Instantaneously, two things happen: Dad stops yelling and the child, almost startled by the comment, nods his head and stops wailing.

Continuing, Timothy says, "Mickey Mouse told me he saw you drop your popcorn and knows you're really sad right now...And Mickey Mouse wants to know if you would like this big fresh box of popcorn."

Miraculously, a box of popcorn appears from behind Timothy's back.

This is an "Improvisational Moment," where all of Disney's strong corporate values are articulated through Timothy's leadership and innovative response. This wasn't an accident or a fluke. Timothy, and the other frontline workers (someone retrieved the box of popcorn while Timothy consoled the boy) had been preparing for this moment from the day they were hired and became immersed in the values, culture and routines of Disney.

“Great companies are defined by great leaders”

This statement seems obvious. The problem is we think of leaders as holding positions of authority and standing atop hierarchies. We frame it that way instead of recognizing leadership as a quality that can be expressed and attained by any individual at any level of an organization.

Leadership isn't beholden to hierarchies. Being a chief executive or senior vice president doesn't buy membership in the “great leaders” club. We errantly make that assumption. Often, you'll see people with little leadership ability at the tops of their organizations. The best executives and managers empower the people under them. A manager's job is to give his employees the tools, resources and moral support to excel. The manager's job is to serve, not to lord over a domain.

Simon Sinek and his organization are on a mission to help people find meaning and inspiration in the lives and work. One of Simon's colleagues, David Mead posted recently on LinkedIn, “Inspiring leaders aren't driven to lead people. They are driven to serve them.” I couldn't agree more. That's why great leaders can appear anywhere in the organization. Disney's Timothy wasn't trying to lead people. He was trying to serve.

Leaders can stand up at any moment, in any organization, in any situation. The best organizations find people who will lead no matter where they are, no matter what their job title is.

Leaders are the people at any level in an organization who rise to the challenge in moment. Timothy was an example of a low-level, low-paid worker who picked up trash. But he also

became a great leader in the Improvisational Moment. His company, through its culture, gave him the tools (values) and the autonomy (trust) to become a leader when it mattered most.

Too many organizations don't trust their employees in this way and they have only themselves to blame for not instilling values throughout the firm to help those employees succeed. No customer ever wants to hear, "I have to ask my supervisor." And no employee ever wants to say it. It makes them feel powerless in the moment and disengages them. It's a moment of shame and we might say it's the moment when leadership is destroyed by an organization.

Great leaders are the people who identify with a strong value and share that value with everyone around them, through their words, through their actions, through their being. This is what Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King did. This is what Timothy did in Disney's example. Leaders can appear from anywhere and rise up when they are aligned with a value and see an opportunity to make a difference. Great leaders make great companies, and the best companies are led by values-driven leaders from the foundation to the very top of the organization.

Successful Improvisational Moments turn frontline employees into great leaders in the moment.