

“You Can Create Disney Magic Too”

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August 23, 2018

Former Disney Executive Lee Cockerell on how medical groups can also create a world-class consumer experience

By Tobi Elkin

*As medical practices and the healthcare industry at large focus on strategies for improving the patient experience, they are finding insights and ideas from experts outside of healthcare. One such expert is Lee Cockerell, former Executive Vice President of Operations at Walt Disney World®Resort. An expert on leading organizations to deliver superior customer service, Cockerell is the author of *Creating Magic...10 Common Sense Leadership Strategies from a Life at Disney*. In an interview with CareCloud's Continuum, Cockerell shared his perspective on how healthcare organizations and medical practices can generate Disney magic too.*

What's the secret to creating a world-class consumer experience? From his 16-year career at Disney — and his time serving in executive positions at Hilton and Marriott — Lee Cockerell says it all comes down to three things: hiring, training and culture. By paying attention to consistency, maintaining high quality and standards in employee recruitment and engagement, and paying attention to every detail, Cockerell explains how medical practices can create their own brand of magic.

Recruit Carefully

First, as Cockerell sees it, nothing is more important than employee recruitment and how practice managers select people to join their organization: “There's nothing more important than your people. Your people are your brand. There are nurses, doctors, medical assistants, receptionists, billers – they all matter,” he said. It's critical how quickly a patient's phone call is answered, is the receptionist happy to hear from you, and how long do patients need to wait for news on test results?

“When you're hiring, it's easy to find average people. It's really hard to find great people and you've got to work harder at it. You've got to have better systems, you've got to have better interviewing skills, you've got to have better training and commitment,” Cockerell explained. “Loyalty means people come to work every day. Commitment means they'll do extraordinary work when they have to, and go beyond the call of duty.” That's a lesson to live by.

Train, Test, Reinforce

Secondly, training is critical. Imparting lessons from Disney, Cockerell described training newly hired employees, testing them, and enforcing their training while on the job. “A lot of people train new employees, but don’t test them to see if the training ‘took’. You need to enforce the training,” he said. There are various levels of training – formal training, role modeling (demonstrating how doctors behave with patients, and staffers behave in front of patients, etc.)

Bottom line: It matters how patients are treated, how you behave in front of the patient, and how staff members interact with one another in front patients and physicians. “Everyone has a role,” Cockerell said. At Disney, Cockerell was involved in every aspect of employee training and the enforcement of that training: “I spent my time making sure I was involved in all the training, making sure everybody was getting the right training. As we say, we don’t practice on our guests; we make sure our people know what they’re doing before they go out there, especially in the healthcare business, that’s critical,” he said.

Create A Culture Where People Know They Matter

Thirdly, creating and sustaining a culture and an environment where everyone matters and they know they matter is imperative. “If a patient doesn’t think they matter, it’s bad. Even the ones who are a total pain the butt,” Cockerell said. While people were always happy to be at Disney, they’re not always happy and are often stressed to be at the doctor’s office, “so we have to treat patients even better. We have to make the experience smooth and have enough empathy so we can make people feel better,” he observed.

So how can medical practice professionals deliver a superior patient experience?

Tap Into Your Inner Magic

Lately, Cockerell has been speaking all over the world about lessons that can be applied from Disney’s business to healthcare and other sectors. Perhaps his strongest area of advice is how creating a magical consumer experience must start from within.

“I try to teach their people to pay attention not only to the patient, but whoever the person is in the family that happens to be there. Or, if nurses are going to your home, to make sure they’re paying attention to the children and the caregivers, because serious illnesses affect everybody in the family whether you think they will or not,” he noted. “I talk about the competencies that we think everybody needs to be really great, not just average. I talk about technical competency and how each person owns that. You’ve got to make sure that you’re keeping up whatever your job is.”

Cockerell acknowledges that “healthcare is a highly stressful business and patients are really looking for a lot of attention and immediacy to their concerns.” He shares his ideas about technological and leadership competence in the healthcare arena. Technology improvements, he said, will help healthcare professionals deliver results faster to patients and should facilitate better communication.

Focus on how you can do your job better and improve overall operations. “What are the patients complaining about and what are the employees complaining about? Some of the best consulting is just getting your team together to discuss, ‘What do we need to do better around here and what are the patients complaining about? How can we make this a better experience?’ We have to listen to patients and employees. Don’t punish them for telling you the truth!” Cockerell said.

And, stick with the basics – friendliness, cleanliness, answering the phone more quickly, checking people in more efficiently. Technology can help with that. “I would say to the doctors, ‘You don’t have to understand this whole thing, but you’d better have somebody who’s advising you and is on your staff that does understand it, and they’re telling you the truth every day.’”

“It’s never too late to improve your relationships with your patients and to get better tech, to get better procedures, to answer the phones more efficiently, and get the restrooms cleaner. Everything matters! Everything sends a message,” Cockerell noted. “I tell doctors quit thinking about being the boss and be a teacher – teach and mentor the right people.”

The Top 5 Ways Medical Practices Can Apply Customer Service Excellence Principles

1. Establish high, clear expectations about performance: your own and those of the people around you. Key insight: “Most people want to do a good job but the leadership isn’t always clear about what it wants. Think about: How would you like your mother to be treated like by the receptionist?”
2. Identify what’s working and not working, and create clear strategies on how you will address what’s not working.
3. Make your business the ‘happiest place on earth” a la Disney, or “nothing.”
4. Attract and retain the right people, and be sure their training is tested and enforced. Key insight: “When people rave about a company, brand or how they were treated at your medical practice, it’s not about the CEO, it’s about how they were treated by the 10 or so people they came directly into contact with during their visit.”
5. Get the culture and leadership right. Key insight: “Spend your time trying to be a good role model and setting the right examples for being a good leader to show what it looks like. At the end of the day, people stay in cultures where they feel respected, treated well, involved, and listened to, and where they know their opinion counts.”