

Op-Ed

Lessons in Leadership: Lee Cockerell Creates Disney Magic at Torah Academy



Rabbi Feinberg, Dean of TABR

It seems surreal, but natural at the same time, that I had the privilege of welcoming former Executive Vice President of Operations for Walt Disney World Resorts Lee Cockerell to speak at Torah Academy of Boca Raton just a few short weeks ago. When I was planning his day of workshops to staff and parents, I steeled myself for the inevitable questions: “Why would a preeminent businessman who was responsible for 40,000 cast members, 20 resort hotels, 4 theme parks, and massive shopping and sports complexes come to a Jewish private school to speak, and what message could he impart, considering the infinite differences between Disney World and a yeshiva?”

Good question... one that I would have asked myself before I learned of Lee’s writings, podcasts, and speeches. His message bridges the gap between large and small businesses, sprawling and tiny cities, privileged and impoverished backgrounds, and even secular and religious concerns; perhaps that is what so strongly captured my interest on a day several years ago in a shop at Downtown Disney, where my wife showed me one of Lee’s books.

Profoundly affected by his personal story as well as his prescriptions for how any organization can learn to achieve more, I somehow mustered up the gumption to ask to meet him. Knowing him now as a friend, it is no longer surprising that he agreed to our first meeting, and reg-

ular contact after that.

We met for coffee in Starbucks, and I still remember him pointing to one of the overstuffed chairs. “I spend an hour each morning in that chair, thinking of what I want to accomplish that day, thinking of yesterday’s pursuits, and planning how to use my time to its fullest,” he explained, and I was reminded of the classical exhortation of Jewish Sages to perform daily accounts that question ourselves about how we are using the talents, resources, and time we are given in this world. Lee was talking about a concept akin to *cheshbon hanefesh!* We were an odd pair – the CEO from Ardmore, Oklahoma and the rabbi from New York; yet it was no wonder his aura had an air of familiarity to me.

Eventually, I knew I would have to find a way to bring Lee to Torah Academy. Lee’s overarching message, of building one’s business to the pinnacle of success, through building oneself to full potential, was one commensurate with the values our yeshiva promotes every day; and Torah Academy’s success is not only desirable but crucial, as our business is ensuring Jewish continuity through education of the next generation.

Lee’s presentations to administrators, office staff, teachers, and parents were simultaneously focused on magic and reality. With certainty borne of the experience of managing thousands of employees, vendors, and customers, Lee told all our audiences that attitude is everything. Demon-

strating a positive attitude, a willingness to create healthy, pleasant relationships, and motivation to exceed expectations will catapult anyone to success, Lee firmly maintains. Like Mickey Mouse, who smiles at everyone, is happy around everyone, is welcoming and accommodating and eager to give, the employees that see success are those who develop those character traits. What an apropos message for Torah Academy, where one of the pillars of our educational experience is character refinement!

I think the appeal of Lee’s approach is that, beneath the fanfare, shimmering costumes, theme rides, intricate floats and larger-than-life stories that he brought to life for millions of Disney visitors, he encourages people to simply do the basics of good living. Listen more, communicate openly, create clear expectations, seek to understand and respect and connect and smile – it may sound like a plebeian formula, but it brings magical dividends, and

turns us all into refined royalty.

At Torah Academy, our business is to teach learning and ethics at a deep and meaningful level. In order to achieve the excellence we seek, our team has to share that vision, love to come to work each day, and feel a part of the collective achievements we experience. No matter our position in the organizational hierarchy, we have a responsibility to make ourselves and others feel indispensable to our shared mission.

Lee’s core conviction that success is always within reach – that it is never a fantastical idea, but always attainable – inspires his listeners to keep giving the performance of their lives, no matter what or where their personal stage may be. Ironically, we can create magic by being real: by being positive and genuine in our relationships and focused on our larger, long-term goals, striving to create “the happiest place on earth” all around us.



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