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LESSONS IN CREATIVE LEADERSHIP
FROM THE CEO OF THE
WALT *Disney* COMPANY



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To Willow: This ride would not have been possible without you.

*Kate, Amanda, Max, and Will: Thank you for your love and
understanding and for all the joy you have given me.*

*To the thousands of Disney cast members and employees past
and present: My pride in you and appreciation of you is boundless.*

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PROLOGUE

IN JUNE 2016 I made my fortieth trip to China in eighteen years, my eleventh in the past six months. I was there to oversee the final preparations before the opening of Shanghai Disneyland. I'd been CEO of the Walt Disney Company for eleven years at that point, and my plan was to open Shanghai and then retire. It had been a thrilling run, and the creation of this park was the biggest accomplishment of my career. It felt like the right time to move on, but life doesn't always go the way you expect it will. Things happen that you can't possibly anticipate. The fact that I'm still running the company as I write this is a testament to that. Much more profoundly, so are the events of that week in Shanghai.

We were opening the park on Thursday, June 16. That Monday, the first wave of VIPs was scheduled to arrive: Disney board members and key executives and their families, creative partners, investors and Wall Street analysts. There was a huge international media contingent already there and more coming in. I'd been in Shanghai for two weeks and was running on adrenaline. Since my first location-scouting trip to China in 1998, I was the only person who

had been involved in the project from day one, and I couldn't wait to show it to the world.

In the sixty-one years since Walt Disney built Disneyland in Anaheim, California, we'd opened parks in Orlando and Paris and Tokyo and Hong Kong. Disney World in Orlando remains our largest, but Shanghai was of a different order than all the others. It was one of the biggest investments in the history of the company. Numbers don't really do the park justice, but here are a few to give some sense of its scope. Shanghai Disneyland cost about \$6 billion to build. It is 963 acres, about eleven times the size of Disneyland. At various stages of its construction, as many as fourteen thousand workers lived on the property. We held casting calls in six cities in China to discover the thousand singers, dancers, and actors who perform in our stage and street shows. Over the eighteen years it took to complete the park, I met with three presidents of China, five mayors of Shanghai, and more party secretaries than I can remember (one of whom was arrested for corruption and banished to northern China in the middle of our negotiations, setting the project back nearly two years).

We had endless negotiations over land deals and partnership splits and management roles, and considered things as significant as the safety and comfort of Chinese workers and as tiny as whether we could cut a ribbon on opening day. The creation of the park was an education in geopolitics, and a constant balancing act between the possibilities of global expansion and the perils of cultural imperialism. The overwhelming challenge, which I repeated to our team so often it became a mantra for everyone working on the project, was to create an experience that was "authentically Disney and distinctly Chinese."

In the early evening on Sunday, June 12, I and the rest of my team in Shanghai received news of a mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, fifteen miles from Disney World. We have more than seventy thousand employees in Orlando, and we waited in horror for confirmation that some of them were at the club that

night. Our head of security, Ron Iden, was with us in Shanghai, and he immediately began calling his network of security contacts in the States. It was twelve hours earlier—just before dawn—in Orlando when we first heard the news. Ron told me he'd have more information when I got up in the morning.

My first event the next day was a presentation to investors over breakfast. Then I had to record a long interview with Robin Roberts of *Good Morning America*, which included touring the park and riding attractions with Robin and her crew. Then there was a meeting with Chinese officials about protocol for the opening ceremonies, a dinner with members of our board and senior executives, and finally a rehearsal for the opening-night concert that I was hosting. Ron periodically gave me updates as I moved through the day.

We knew that more than fifty people had been killed and nearly as many injured, and that the shooter was a man named Omar Mateen. Ron's security team ran Mateen's name through our database and found that he'd visited the Magic Kingdom a couple of months before the shooting, then again the weekend before. There was closed-circuit television footage of him on that last visit, pacing outside a park entrance near the House of Blues, in Downtown Disney.

What we learned next shook me in a way few things have over the course of my career. It wouldn't be made public until nearly two years later, during the trial of Mateen's wife as an accomplice to the murders (she was later acquitted), but federal investigators informed Ron that they believed Disney World had been Mateen's primary target. They'd found his phone at the scene of the shooting, and determined that it had been pinging off one of our cell towers earlier that night. They studied the CCTV footage and saw him, again, walking back and forth in front of the entrance near the House of Blues. There was a heavy metal concert there that night, which meant extra security—five armed police officers—and after a few minutes of casing the area, Mateen could be seen walking back to his car.

Security cameras picked up two weapons in Mateen's possession, a semiautomatic rifle and a semiautomatic pistol, hidden inside a child's stroller, along with a baby blanket that hadn't yet been taken out of its packaging. Investigators suspected that his plan was to cover his weapons with the blanket and wheel them up to the entrance before pulling them out.

Our head of Parks and Resorts, Bob Chapek, was also in Shanghai, and he and I consulted throughout the day as Ron passed on more news. We were still anxiously waiting to hear if any of our people had been at the nightclub, and now we were concerned that the news of our being a target would soon be leaked. It would be a big story and would take a difficult emotional toll on the community there. The bond you form in high-stress moments like this, when you're sharing information that you can't discuss with anyone else, is a powerful one. In every emergency I've encountered as CEO, I've been grateful for the competence and cool heads and humanity of the team around me. Bob's first move was to send the head of Walt Disney World, George Kalogridis, back to Orlando from Shanghai, to give his people on the ground more executive support.

The data on Mateen's phone showed that once he got back to his car, he typed in a search for nightclubs in Orlando. He drove to the first club that came up, but there was construction going on in front of the entrance, and traffic was backed up. The second result was Pulse, where he ultimately committed his massacre. As the details of the investigation trickled in, I felt horror and grief for the victims of the shooting, and at the same time a sickening "there but for the grace of God" relief that he'd been deterred by the security we had in place.

I'm often asked what aspect of the job most keeps me up at night. The honest answer is that I don't agonize over the work very much. I don't know if it's a quirk of brain chemistry, or a defense mechanism I developed in reaction to some family chaos in my youth, or the result of years of discipline—some combination of all

of those things, I suppose—but I tend not to feel much anxiety when things go awry. And I tend to approach bad news as a problem that can be worked through and solved, something I have control over rather than something happening to me. But I’m also all too aware of the symbolic power of Disney as a target, and the one thing that weighs heavily on me is the knowledge that no matter how vigilant we are, we can’t prepare for everything.

When the unexpected does happen, a kind of instinctive triage kicks in. You have to rely on your own internal “threat scale.” There are drop-everything events, and there are others when you say to yourself, *This is serious, I need to be engaged right now, but I also need to extricate myself and focus on other things and return to this later.* Sometimes, even though you’re “in charge,” you need to be aware that in the moment you might have nothing to add, and so you don’t wade in. You trust your people to do their jobs and focus your energies on some other pressing issue.

That’s what I was telling myself in Shanghai, half a world away from Orlando. This was the most momentous thing the company had embarked on since Disney World opened in 1971. We had never invested so much in something, with so much potential—for success or failure—in our nearly hundred-year history. I had no choice but to compartmentalize, to focus on the last-minute details of the opening ceremonies, and trust in my team in Orlando and in the protocols we had in place.

We have a system that tracks employees whenever a disaster occurs. If there’s a plane crash or a hurricane or a wildfire, I get reports on who’s unaccounted for, who’s had to evacuate their homes, who lost a friend or relative or pet, whose property was damaged. We have well over two hundred thousand employees around the world, so if something catastrophic happens, the odds aren’t insignificant that one of our people has been touched by it. After the 2015 terror attacks in Paris, I learned within hours that vendors from an ad agency we work with were killed. In the aftermath of the Las Vegas shooting in the fall of 2017, I got reports right away

that more than sixty of our employees were at the outdoor concert that night. Fifty of them knew someone who was either killed or injured. Three had been shot themselves. And one, an employee at Disneyland, had been killed.

By Tuesday morning in Shanghai, we'd learned that two of our part-time employees were among those killed in the nightclub shooting. Several other employees were friends or relatives of victims. Our trauma and grief counselors went to work, contacting those affected and arranging mental health services.

MY ITINERARY FOR those days leading up to the park's opening was scheduled down to the minute: leading park tours and giving interviews and attending rehearsals to give final notes on the opening-ceremony performances; hosting lunches and dinners and meetings with shareholders and vendors and members of our board; meeting with Chinese dignitaries to pay proper respects; dedicating a wing of the Shanghai Children's Hospital; practicing a brief speech, part of which was in Mandarin, that I'd be giving at the opening ceremony. There were even small intervals during which I was scheduled to get makeup, change my clothes, or sneak a quick snack. On Wednesday morning, I was leading a VIP tour of about a hundred guests. Jerry Bruckheimer was there, and George Lucas. Some of my direct reports were there with their families. My wife, Willow, and our kids were there. Everyone wore headsets, and I spoke into a microphone as I led them through the park.

I remember exactly where we were—between Adventure Island and Pirate Cove—when Bob Chapek approached me and pulled me aside. I assumed he had more news from the shooting investigation, and I leaned in so that he could privately give me an update. “There was an alligator attack in Orlando,” Bob whispered. “An alligator attacked a young child. A little boy.”

We were surrounded by people, and I had my rising sense of horror as Bob told me what he knew so far. The attack had occurred

at our Grand Floridian Hotel resort at about 8:30 in the evening. It was now around 10:30 A.M. in Shanghai, so, two hours ago. “We don’t know the status of the child,” Bob said.

I instinctively started praying that somehow the boy was not killed. And then I started scrolling through the history in my mind. Had this ever happened before? In the forty-five years the park had been open, as far as I knew, a guest had never been attacked. I started to visualize the property. Bob told me it happened on the beach at the resort. I’ve stayed in the Grand Floridian many times and know that beach well. There’s a lagoon there, but I’ve never seen anyone swimming in it. Wait, that wasn’t true. The image of a man swimming out to retrieve a balloon that his child had lost came to mind. It was about five years earlier. I remembered taking a picture of him as he swam back to shore, balloon in hand, laughing to myself at the things parents are willing to do for their kids.

I finished the tour and waited for more news. There’s a protocol for what rises to me and what gets handled by someone else, and my team will regularly wait to tell me something until they’re sure it’s accurate. (To their frustration, I sometimes chide them that they don’t report bad news to me fast enough.) This time the news came to me immediately, but I felt desperate for more.

George Kalogridis, whom we’d sent back in the aftermath of the nightclub shooting, landed right around the time of the attack and began to deal with it instantly, passing information on to us as it became available. I soon learned the boy was missing. Rescue teams hadn’t found the body. His name was Lane Graves. He was two years old. The Graves family was staying at the Grand Floridian and had gone down to the beach for a scheduled movie night. The movie was canceled because of lightning, but they and some other families decided to stay and let their kids play. Lane took a bucket to fill at the water’s edge. It was dusk, and an alligator that had come up to the surface to feed was right there in the shallow water. It grabbed the boy and took him under. The Graves family had come to Disney World from Nebraska, George told me. A

crisis team was with them. I knew a couple of members of that team. They were exceptional at their jobs, and I was grateful they were there, but this would test them in the extreme.

That night was our opening concert in Shanghai, to be performed by a five-hundred-piece orchestra and featuring the world-famous pianist Lang Lang, along with a lineup of the most revered composers and singers and musicians in China. Prior to the concert, I was hosting a dinner for a group of Chinese officials and visiting dignitaries. I did everything I could to focus on my responsibilities, but my mind returned constantly to the Graves family in Orlando. The thought that they had come to Disney World, of all places, and suffered such an unimaginable loss, loomed over everything.

Thursday morning, June 16, was opening day. I woke at 4:00 A.M. and worked out, to try to clear my head, then wandered to a lounge on our floor and met with Zenia Mucha, our chief communications officer. Zenia and I have worked together for more than a dozen years. She's been with me through it all, good and bad. She's tough, she'll tell me straight to my face when she thinks I'm making a mistake, and she always has the best interests of the company at heart.

The story was being reported widely now, and I wanted our response to come from me. I've seen other companies deal with crises by letting a "company spokesperson" be their official voice, and that strategy has always struck me as cold and a bit cowardly. Corporate systems often work to insulate and protect CEOs, sometimes to a fault, and I was determined not to do that now. I told Zenia I had to issue a statement, and she immediately agreed that it was the right thing to do.

There is so little you can say to make sense of something like this, but we sat there in the lounge and I dictated my feelings to Zenia as honestly as I could. I talked about being a father and a grandfather, and how that gave me the slightest window into the parents' unimaginable pain. Fifteen minutes after our conversa-

tion, the statement went out. I returned to my room to start to get ready for the opening. Willow was up and out, and my boys were asleep. I couldn't seem to do what I needed to do next, though, and after several minutes I called Zenia again. When she answered her phone, I said, "I have to speak with the family."

This time I expected pushback from her and from our general counsel, Alan Braverman. This could become a complicated legal situation, and lawyers want to restrict the possibility of saying anything that might exacerbate liability. In this case, though, they both knew this was something I needed to do, and neither of them offered resistance. "I'll get you a number," Zenia said, and within minutes I had the phone number of Jay Ferguson, a friend of Matt and Melissa Graves, the boy's parents, who'd flown to Orlando immediately to be with them.

I sat on the edge of the bed and dialed. I didn't know what I was going to say, but when Jay answered, I explained who I was and that I was in Shanghai. "I don't know if they'll want to talk with me," I said, "but if they do, I would like to express my sympathies. If they don't, I'll express them to you and ask you to pass them on."

"Give me a minute," Jay said. I could hear talking in the background, and then suddenly Matt was there on speaker. I just started talking. I reiterated what I'd said in the statement, that I was a parent and a grandparent, that I couldn't fathom what they must be going through. I told him that I wanted him to know from me, the person at the top of this company, that we would do anything we could possibly do to get them through this. I gave him my direct number and told him to call it if he needed anything, and then asked if there was anything I could do for them now.

"Promise me that my son's life won't be in vain," he said. He was speaking through heaving sobs, and I could hear Melissa also sobbing in the background. "Promise me you'll do whatever you can to prevent this from ever happening to another child."

I gave him my promise. I knew from a lawyer's perspective that I should be careful about what I was saying, that I should consider

whether that was somehow an admission of negligence. When you work in a corporate structure for so long, you become trained to give legalistic, corporate responses, but I didn't care about any of that in this moment. I reiterated to Jay that he should call me if there was anything they needed, and then we hung up, and I sat there shaking on the edge of my bed. I'd been crying so hard that both of my contact lenses had come out, and I was vaguely searching for them when Willow walked into the room.

"I just talked with the parents," I said. I was at a loss for how to explain what I felt. She came to me and wrapped her arms around me. She asked what she could do. "I just have to keep going," I said. But I didn't have anything left. The adrenaline that had been powering me for the last two weeks, all that this project meant to me and the thrill I'd felt at sharing it, had drained away. In thirty minutes, I was scheduled to meet the vice premier of China, the U.S. ambassador to China, the Chinese ambassador to the United States, the party secretary of Shanghai, and the mayor of Shanghai, and lead them on a tour of the park. I felt like I couldn't move.

Eventually I called my team and said to meet me in the hotel lounge. I knew if I described the conversation to them, I would start crying again, so I kept it short and told Bob Chapek what I'd promised Matt Graves. "We're on it," Bob said, and sent word back to his team in Orlando right away. (What they did there was remarkable. There are hundreds of lagoons and canals on the property, and thousands of alligators. Within twenty-four hours, they had ropes and fences and signs up throughout the park, which is twice the size of Manhattan.)

I went off to meet the dignitaries. We rode rides and posed for pictures. I struggled to smile and go on with the show. It was a stark example of the truth that what people see on the outside so often doesn't reflect what's happening on the inside. When the tour was over, I was scheduled to give a speech to the thousands of people gathered there in the park, and millions more in China watching on TV, then cut a ribbon and officially open Shanghai

Disneyland to the world. Disney coming to mainland China was a major event. There were members of the press there from all over the globe. Both President Xi and President Obama had written letters that we were planning to read at the opening. I was well aware of the weight of it all, but I also couldn't stop thinking of the anguish of Matt Graves's voice on the phone.

As I walked away from the vice premier, the president of Shanghai Shendi Group, the Chinese company we'd partnered with, caught up to me and took me by the arm. "You're not going to talk about Orlando, are you?" he said. "It's a happy day. This is a happy day." I assured him I wouldn't say anything to dampen the mood.

Less than half an hour later, I found myself sitting alone on a banquette in the Disney castle, waiting for a stage manager to give me the cue that it was time for my speech. I'd memorized the lines in Mandarin that I was planning to deliver, and now I was struggling to recall them. It was true, it was a happy day, and I needed to try to focus on that and recognize what it meant for all the people who had worked so hard, for so long, to make this day happen; and for the people of China, who would have this place to dream about in the same way that I and so many American kids dreamed of going to Disneyland. It was a happy day. It was also the saddest of my career.

I'VE WORKED FOR the same company for forty-five years: twenty-two of them at ABC, another twenty-three at Disney, after Disney acquired ABC in 1995. For the past fourteen years, I've had the enviable task of being the sixth CEO to run the company since Walt founded it in 1923.

There have been difficult, even tragic, days. But for me this has also been, to steal from a phrase, the happiest job on earth. We make movies and television shows and Broadway musicals, games and costumes and toys and books. We build theme parks and rides, hotels and cruise ships. We stage parades and street shows and

concerts every day in our fourteen parks across the world. We manufacture fun. Even after all of these years, I still sometimes find myself thinking, *How did this happen? How did I get so lucky?* We used to call our biggest, most exciting theme-park attractions “E-Tickets.” That’s what comes to mind when I think about the job, that it’s been a fourteen-year ride on a giant E-Ticket attraction known as the Walt Disney Company.

But Disney also exists in the world of quarterly earnings reports and shareholder expectations and countless other obligations that come with running a company that operates in nearly every country in the world. On the least eventful days, this job requires an ability to constantly adapt and re-adapt. You go from plotting growth strategy with investors, to looking at the design of a giant new theme-park attraction with Imagineers, to giving notes on the rough cut of a film, to discussing security measures and board governance and ticket pricing and pay scale. The days are challenging and dynamic, but they’re also a never-ending exercise in compartmentalization. You address one thing—What are the attributes of a Disney princess in today’s world and how should they manifest in our products?—then you put it away and shift your focus to the next: What will our slate of Marvel films be for the next eight years? And those are the rare days when things actually unfold according to schedule. As the week described above makes all too clear, there are also, always, crises and failures for which you can never be fully prepared. Few will be as tragic as the events of that week, but something will always come up.

This is true not just of the Walt Disney Company but of any company or institution. Something will always come up. At its simplest, this book is about being guided by a set of principles that help nurture the good and manage the bad. I was reluctant to write it for a long time. Until fairly recently, I even avoided talking publicly about my “rules for leadership” or any such ideas, because I felt I hadn’t fully “walked the walk.” After forty-five years, though—

and especially after the past fourteen—I've come to believe that I have insights that could be useful beyond my own experience.

If you run a business or manage a team or collaborate with others in pursuit of a common goal, this book might be helpful to you. My experiences from day one have all been in the media and entertainment world, but these strike me as universal ideas: about fostering risk taking and creativity; about building a culture of trust; about fueling a deep and abiding curiosity in oneself and inspiring that in the people around you; about embracing change rather than living in denial of it; and about operating, always, with integrity and honesty in the world, even when that means facing things that are difficult to face. These are abstractions, but my hope is that the stories and examples that are significant to me as I look back at the long arc of my career will help them feel more concrete and relatable, not just to the aspiring CEOs of the world but to anyone wanting to be less fearful, more confidently themselves, as they navigate their professional and even personal lives.

For the most part, the book is organized chronologically. Since my first day at ABC, I've had twenty jobs and fourteen bosses. I've been the lowliest crew member working on a daytime soap opera and run a network that produced some of the most innovative television (and one of the most infamous flops) of all time. I've twice been on the side of the company being taken over, and I've acquired and assimilated several others, among them Pixar, Marvel, Lucasfilm, and, most recently, 21st Century Fox. I've schemed about the future of entertainment with Steve Jobs and become the keeper of George Lucas's Star Wars mythology. I've thought every day about how technology is redefining the way we create, deliver, and experience media, and what it means to be both relevant to a modern audience and faithful to a nearly hundred-year-old brand. And I've worked hard and thoughtfully to make a connection between that brand and billions of people around the globe.

As I near the end of all of that and think back on what I've

learned, these are the ten principles that strike me as necessary to true leadership. I hope they'll serve you as well as they've served me.

Optimism. One of the most important qualities of a good leader is optimism, a pragmatic enthusiasm for what can be achieved. Even in the face of difficult choices and less than ideal outcomes, an optimistic leader does not yield to pessimism. Simply put, people are not motivated or energized by pessimists.

Courage. The foundation of risk-taking is courage, and in ever-changing, disrupted businesses, risk-taking is essential, innovation is vital, and true innovation occurs only when people have courage. This is true of acquisitions, investments, and capital allocations, and it particularly applies to creative decisions. Fear of failure destroys creativity.

Focus. Allocating time, energy, and resources to the strategies, problems, and projects that are of highest importance and value is extremely important, and it's imperative to communicate your priorities clearly and often.

Decisiveness. All decisions, no matter how difficult, can and should be made in a timely way. Leaders must encourage a diversity of opinion balanced with the need to make and implement decisions. Chronic indecision is not only inefficient and counterproductive, but it is deeply corrosive to morale.

Curiosity. A deep and abiding curiosity enables the discovery of new people, places, and ideas, as well as an awareness and an understanding of the marketplace and its changing dynamics. The path to innovation begins with curiosity.

Fairness. Strong leadership embodies the fair and decent treatment of people. Empathy is essential, as is accessibility. People committing honest mistakes deserve second chances, and judging people too harshly generates fear and anxiety, which discourage communication and innovation. Nothing is worse to an organization than a culture of fear.

Thoughtfulness. Thoughtfulness is one of the most underrated

elements of good leadership. It is the process of gaining knowledge, so an opinion rendered or decision made is more credible and more likely to be correct. It's simply about taking the time to develop informed opinions.

Authenticity. Be genuine. Be honest. Don't fake anything. Truth and authenticity breed respect and trust.

The Relentless Pursuit of Perfection. This doesn't mean perfectionism at all costs, but it does mean a refusal to accept mediocrity or make excuses for something being "good enough." If you believe that something can be made better, put in the effort to do it. If you're in the business of making things, be in the business of making things great.

Integrity. Nothing is more important than the quality and integrity of an organization's people and its product. A company's success depends on setting high ethical standards for all things, big and small. Another way of saying this is: The way you do anything is the way you do everything.

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PART ONE

LEARNING

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