

Opening the "Taj":



Culture of Fantasy

In putting together his grandest venture to date, Donald Trump used the principles of corporate culture to make his version of the Taj Mahal a reality. Here's how you can apply the basics of company culture

record net win of \$34.2 million during its first month of operation. Bus loads of giggling guests fill out their chance to win a Rolls Royce before they tackle row after row of gleaming slot machines. If ever an

organization's culture was evident, if ever fantasy was played out before a crowd, it happens at the Trump Taj Mahal. In this article, I will examine the culture of this land of make believe. Although you may not want to build an opulent palace or create a rustic jungle environment for

your main restaurant, you can gain valuable ideas for building your company's culture by looking at how the Trump Organization developed the Taj culture. There is no question that strong service cultures promote guest satisfaction and employee commitment.

Judi Brownell, Ph.D., is an associate professor of communications at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration. She acknowledges the assistance of Edward Tracy, Steve Sless, Mark Mutkoski, and Alice McGlynn.

The Culture of Fantasy

In putting together his grandest venture to date, Donald Trump used the principles of corporate culture to make his version of the Taj Mahal a reality. Here's how you can apply the basics of company culture

by **Judi Brownell**

WRITERS refer to it as an adult Disneyland on the Atlantic or the "work of a candy maker gone mad."¹ It is the world's most opulent casino and most expensive building. It is the 51-story Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort, New Jersey's tallest structure. The "Taj" fantasy has encouraged thousands of guests to play its games, helping the casino to a

¹N. Gibbs, "A Candymaker Went Mad," *Time*, April 9, 1990, pp. 75-76.



Impressions of the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort
 Candy-chrome colors...
 Exotic shapes...
 Dazzling designs...
 Everything to promote the fantasy that Donald Trump has created for his guests and for his employees.

a symbolic action that creates and maintains your culture.³ To give an example, you might correct employees' table service or explain to them how to enter guest information into the computer. Beyond the simple instruction is the meaning that this activity has for them. This meaning is based on the way you and other organizational members behave toward that activity. Perhaps the placement of silverware is so important because your company values attention to detail. Perhaps your company is on the cutting edge, and the proper application of computer software is

good service might have meant getting the guests cranked through as quickly and smoothly as possible. Moving to the five-star resort, however, good service has entirely different meanings, and speed might not be one of them.

As employees share their experiences with each other, they develop a common history and assign similar meanings to the actions and events in the work place. People working in the same company create commonly held understandings and assumptions, and they begin to interpret events in a similar manner. As a result, you can

Organizational Culture

By now, you're probably familiar with the idea of organizational culture.² In fact, you may already have decided that it's something you can live without. When a job needs to be done, you might think, what matters is clear statements of fact, not abstract, philosophical ideas regarding your company's mission and values.

To some extent, you're right. Managers clearly spend a good share of their time giving directions, explaining procedures and policies, and making specific requests. As Peters and Austin note, however, more is happening when managers communicate than simply getting the job done. The way your managers communicate is

²Robert A. Woods, "More Alike than Different: The Culture of the Restaurant Industry," *The Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 30, No. 2 (August 1989), pp. 82-97.

also a symbolic action that creates and maintains your culture.³

To give an example, you might correct employees' table service or explain to them how to enter guest information into the computer. Beyond the simple instruction is the meaning that this activity has for them. This meaning is based on the way you and other organizational members behave toward that activity. Perhaps the placement of silverware is so important because your company values attention to detail. Perhaps your company is on the cutting edge, and the proper application of computer software is essential to success.

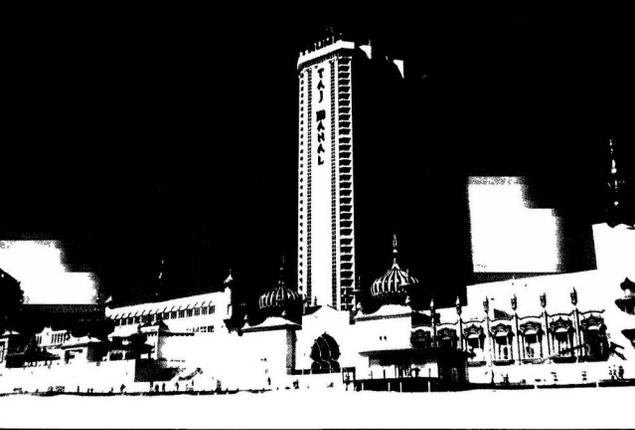
Meanings are social products that vary from one organization to the next. When you ran a three-star conference hotel, for instance,

³Thomas Peters and Nancy Austin, *A Passion for Excellence: The Leadership Difference* (New York: Random House, 1985).

good service might have meant getting the guests cranked through as quickly and smoothly as possible. Moving to the five-star resort, however, good service has entirely different meanings, and speed might not be one of them.

As employees share their experiences with each other, they develop a common history and assign similar meanings to the actions and events in the work place. People working in the same company create commonly held understandings and assumptions, and they begin to interpret events in a similar manner. As a result, you can make fairly accurate predictions about what your co-workers will do and think in a given situation.

Culture is a learned product of a particular group's experiences. Your daily routines, the stories you tell new employees about your company, and the reward systems you



Creating Culture: "Taj" Performers

When employees come on board at the Trump Taj Majal Casino Resort, one of the first things they do is to participate in an image-creation program. Unlike seminars in other training programs, this one places them on center stage. They learn how to wear costumes, fix their hair, and project their character to guests. Once they put on their costume, they are no longer simply employees. Instead, they are Taj performers, taking part in the greatest production on earth. Each employee helps to create the Taj image as he or she interacts with guests and participates as a member of an impressive cast.

Wandering through the long, chandelier-lit lobby, one can't help but notice the be-turbaned bell staff—who, busy as they are, always seem to have time to stop and pose for a photo with guests. Elsewhere, a man on stilts, a magician, and a belly dancer chat with the crowd, after giving what seems to be impromptu performances. Later, they wave to guests in

Creating Culture: "Taj" Performers

When employees come on board at the Trump Taj Majal Casino Resort, one of the first things they do is to participate in an image-creation program. Unlike seminars in other training programs, this one places them on center stage. They learn how to wear costumes, fix their hair, and project their character to guests. Once they put on their costume, they are no longer simply employees. Instead, they are Taj performers, taking part in the greatest production on earth. Each employee helps to create the Taj image as he or she interacts with guests and participates as a member of an impressive cast.

Wandering through the long, chandelier-lit lobby, one can't help but notice the be-turbaned bell staff—who, busy as they are, always seem to have time to stop and pose for a photo with guests. Elsewhere, a man on stilts, a magician, and a belly dancer chat with the crowd, after giving what seems to be impromptu performances. Later, they wave to guests in the hall to let the guests know that the show isn't over.

The Trump Organization put extensive effort into preparing these employees for opening night. Guest-relations training included instruction in body language and eye contact. These

two elements are important in communicating to guests the idea that while the costumes are exotic the characters are highly approachable. The Taj instills in its employees a sense of responsibility to the guests. To give the employees a perspective on their jobs, Taj trainers ask them to imagine a performer like Bill Cosby suddenly looking at his audience and saying, "Sorry, I'm finished for the night. I don't feel like doing this any more."

Selected for their up-beat manner and positive attitude as much as for their previous job experience, new employees are constantly reminded: "Smile—you're on stage." As they emerge into the spotlight of guest attention, performers can check their appearance using one of dozens of mirrors on the doors throughout the back of the house. Talk with the employees, and they will tell you that working at the Taj is fun.

The Trump image has inspired many of these performers. I asked employees, "Why do you think guests choose to come to the Taj?" Most quickly responded, "The glamour, the glitz, the Trump name." But does the magic last? For Taj performers, brief memos from the training department coupled with coaching from individual department heads keeps the cast in character. In the employee cafeteria, the performers are often joined by top-level managers. Even Donald could stop by. If

two elements are important in communicating to guests the idea that while the costumes are exotic the characters are highly approachable. The Taj instills in its employees a sense of responsibility to the guests. To give the employees a perspective on their jobs, Taj trainers ask them to imagine a performer like Bill Cosby suddenly looking at his audience and saying, "Sorry, I'm finished for the night. I don't feel like doing this any more."

Selected for their up-beat manner and positive attitude as much as for their previous job experience, new employees are constantly reminded: "Smile—you're on stage." As they emerge into the spotlight of guest attention, performers can check their appearance using one of dozens of mirrors on the doors throughout the back of the house. Talk with the employees, and they will tell you that working at the Taj is fun.

The Trump image has inspired many of these performers. I asked employees, "Why do you think guests choose to come to the Taj?" Most quickly responded, "The glamour, the glitz, the Trump name." But does the magic last? For Taj performers, brief memos from the training department coupled with coaching from individual department heads keeps the cast in character. In the employee cafeteria, the performers are often joined by top-level managers. Even Donald could stop by. If he does, you can be sure he's checked the mirror on the back of the door just before he makes his entrance.—J.B.

use are all symbolic. They all suggest your company's unique values and beliefs. Weekly meetings, accessible lounge areas, employee-of-the-month programs, and prominent bulletin boards are all symbols that contribute to a sense of openness and employee participation.

Culture is strongest when a group is well defined and has a significant history. Think of the properties and companies you know that have a strong culture. As soon as you hear their names, you think of certain expectations—from the length of time it takes a guest to check in to how amenities are displayed on the vanity.

Uses of fantasy. One particularly useful approach to developing a strong culture incorporates the idea of fantasy. As you know, fantasies have the potential to excite, fascinate, involve, and motivate

workers (and guests) to a much greater extent than ordinary visions of effective service or high standards of quality. Fantasy themes carry their own set of symbols and images that can be used to define and sustain the culture over time. Although most organizations create a culture by sharing their symbols and stories with their employees, fantasies are rich in detail and dramatization. In a fantasy, employees are, in effect, giving performances and playing out scripts.⁴ Disney was the first and is still the most effective in using the power of fantasy to create a strong, shared culture among its employees.

Although cultures can evolve without management intervention, strong cultures are usually the product of a leader who has a sense

⁴M.E. Pacanowsky and N. O'Donnell-Trujillo, "Organizational Communication as Cultural Performance," *Communication Monographs*, 50, No. 2, pp. 477-481.

of purpose and who manipulates symbols and images to create a vivid and shared vision of what the organization should be like. Donald Trump's packaging of the Taj Mahal provides an excellent example of how a leader can influence organizational culture.

Trump as Cultural Leader

In their popular text on the subject, Deal and Kennedy distinguished cultural leaders or "heroes" from managers as follows:

[H]eroes are...intuitive; they have a vision. Managers are disciplined; heroes are playful and appreciate the value of hoopla—ceremonies and rewards to honor top performers.... Managers will spend hours refining their numbers, while heroes will plant a garden so that it will look just right.⁵

⁵T. Deal and A. Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982), p. 37.

Culture leaders shape employees' experience in a variety of ways. I'll explain three ways that Trump does so: the use of a fantasy theme, hyperbole, and participative management.

Fantasy

The Taj employee pocket guide begins: "As a Trump Taj performer, you should visit and become familiar with each scene (location) outlined in this book.... As a Taj performer, you will be our star on stage." At the Taj, everything is done to ensure that the performers are also having fun. This attitude echoes Peters and Austin's contention that "when people aren't having any fun, they don't produce."⁶ Potential employees, Miller observed, want to be part of the fantasy or magic that surrounds the Taj Mahal.⁷

The facilities themselves promote a sense of wonder and excitement. Dumont, one of the Taj's architects, explained in a recent interview that his goal was to create a fantasy world where visitors would feel transported to another time. The maharaja's landmark seemed to be a perfect icon that could provide a wide range of related images, ranging from Alhambra to the South Sea islands. Vaulted ceilings, chandeliers, crystal, marble—all create images of the Taj experience.

Trump believes that the Taj fantasy, a world where everything is larger than life, will capture the imaginations of both employees and guests. His ability to inspire others through the use of symbols and images is well known.

Hyperbole

At the Taj's pre-opening rally, hundreds of employees congregate in the 63,000-square-foot Mark G.

Etess Arena. After a magnificent light show, Donald Trump walks on stage to the sounds of "Eye of the Tiger" thundering through the hall. To Trump, all business is show business. All management is show business. Trump takes show business seriously. In his book, *The Art of the Deal*, Trump discussed the importance of hyperbole. "People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular," he wrote. Such truthful exaggeration is one of Trump's trademarks. The story related by Engel of Trump's dealings with Holiday Corporation shows how this strategy works.

In an effort to convince Holiday's board of directors to sign a partnership agreement for an Atlantic City casino hotel, Trump told his construction supervisors to "transform my two acres of nearly vacant property into the most active construction site in the history of the world. What the bulldozers and trucks did wasn't important, I said, so long as they did a lot of it.... One week later, I accompanied top Holiday Inn executives...to the Boardwalk. It looked as if we were in the midst of building the Grand Coulee Dam."⁸

As a culture leader, Trump has inspired his employees because he himself seems inspired. As he touts the greatness of the Taj and the Trump organization, he illustrates once again the principles of symbolic management. Trump symbolizes his concern for grandeur by paying obsessive attention to it. He stresses the importance of providing maximum space, maximum equipment, and maximum service. He seems able to repeat, continuously, his virtuoso performances for press, planners, and employees alike (and, apparently, for bankers). For Trump, every media con-

ference, every visit to the Taj, is symbolic behavior.

While he is optimistic, Trump also recognizes the importance of employee commitment. He believes that employees want to become part of the Taj fantasy and live up to its exacting standards. He realized that while a guest may forgive an inoperative slot machine, he or she won't forget poor service.

Participative Management

Managers who use symbols place a high degree of trust in their employees. If employees are happy in their work, their attitude will be communicated to their guests. Trump realized this fact of human nature and incorporated it into many of his management strategies. Employee pre-opening orientation included a "fun night" when employees could try out all of the Taj's wonders for themselves.

Edward Tracy, president and CEO of the Trump Hotel Corporation, described the typical Taj employee as friendly, enthusiastic, and happy. In helping to create and maintain the Taj fantasy, each employee must know his or her role well. Weekly department meetings, regular management-employee discussions, a strong emphasis on communication, and regular visits by Trump provide employees with a sense of importance and involvement. As Trump put it:

I don't hire a lot of number crunchers, and I don't trust fancy marketing surveys. I'm a great believer in asking everyone for an opinion before I make a decision. It's a natural reflex.⁹

Before his untimely death in a helicopter crash last year, Mark Etess, the first president of the Taj Mahal Casino Resort, was among the strongest advocates of employee participation. Etess was also instrumental in laying the founda-

⁶ Peters and Austin, op. cit.
⁷G. Miller, "The Taj Mahal à la Trump," *Hotel and Resort Industry*, May 1989, p. 30.

⁸P.G. Engel, "Trump: The Man and the Myth," *Lodging Hospitality*, February 1988, pp. 72-73.

⁹S. Crystal, "Donald Trump to the Max," *Meetings and Conventions*, April 1989, pp. 93-95.

tion of the Taj's culture. He said, "We have a strong commitment to the Taj culture.... If employees are happy in their work, this will come across to the customer."

For Taj employees who never met him, Etess's contribution is most vividly manifest in a document that he created called the "Taj Promise," which symbolizes the Taj's culture. The promise is from management to its employees, with the understanding that employees will, in turn, promise the same to one another. Accordingly, the Taj Promise is part of the employee handbook:

We Promise

<i>Time</i>	To take the time to listen to one another even at our busiest moments;
<i>Awareness</i>	To be aware of each other's needs and concerns;
<i>Journey</i>	To make success a journey and not a destination;
<i>Pride</i>	To have pride in ourselves and the organization we have built;
<i>Respect</i>	To respect one another and treat each other with dignity;
<i>Optimism</i>	To be always optimistic in the face of discouragement;
<i>Motivation</i>	To be motivated to do the best job we can;
<i>Interest</i>	To stay interested in our plans and achievements;
<i>Service</i>	To remember that, above all, we provide a service to our guests; and
<i>Excellence</i>	To strive always for excellence in all we do.

The Taj promise is one most of us would like made at every property we manage or visit. The principles of effective service and

the value of customer satisfaction are a part of all excellent hospitality cultures.

Applying Culture Leadership

Even if you are not creating a fantasy theme for your property, you can apply the essential principles of culture leadership. These principles are as follows, stated in the form of questions:

- (1) Do I sincerely believe in my product? Do I demonstrate my enthusiasm and model the principles I advocate?
- (2) Do I have a strong, clear vision of what my guest's experience should be like? Have I communicated that vision clearly to my employees?
- (3) Are my employees having a good time at work?
- (4) Do I do things on a daily basis that support the kind of culture I want to create? Are there routines and rituals that reinforce my concern for employees' ideas and contributions?
- (5) Do I visibly reinforce behavior and reward employees who do a good job?
- (6) Do I talk with my employees on a regular basis? Do I listen carefully to what they say?
- (7) Do I deliberately strengthen my organization's culture by creating opportunities for employees to share common experiences? Are there celebrations and hoopla?
- (8) Do I pass on stories of excellent employee performance—incidents that can serve as examples of my high standards?
- (9) Are tangible symbols of my organization's culture readily apparent?
- (10) Do I believe in myself and thoroughly enjoy my job?

If you can answer yes to most of these questions and you can demonstrate your commitment to providing high quality service each

day, you don't need a magic formula—you're already building a strong, healthy organizational culture.

Sense of Wonder

Peters and Austin said that culture leaders must have a strong vision of where they're taking their company and also must dramatize that vision.¹⁰ As a culture leader, your role is to make your vision for the company come to life. Through the use of a fantasy theme, hyperbole, and an emphasis on employee involvement, Trump has been able to instill a sense of wonder and excitement in Taj employees and guests alike. Fantasy makes us feel special and makes us believe in the magic that renews our spirit and restores our belief in ourselves.

In his warm portrait of Walt Disney, Selden speaks to this sense of wonder:

What was it that made Walt Disney different from...other business people? Perhaps it was that Walt Disney was like a great magician. His work was like a mirror that gave all people, young and old alike, the chance to see the fantasy and enchantment in their own lives.¹¹

No industry is better suited to fantasy themes than the hospitality business. The Hyatt fantasy resorts developed by Christopher Hemmeter demonstrate this point conclusively. The images of fantasy are images of what could be possible in anyone's life—images that excite and fascinate, images that take guests from their daily routines into a world full of promise. By the same token, the use of fantasy as explained here can greatly strengthen your employee culture. Strong service cultures create experiences that will linger in guests' minds and imaginations for a lifetime. □

¹⁰Peters and Austin, op. cit.

¹¹B. Selden, *The Story of Walt Disney, Maker of Magical Worlds* (New York: Dell, 1989), p. 87.