

Walt Disney's keen eye for talent

Part of Walt Disney's genius was recognizing talented people and giving them the freedom to innovate. The more passion they brought to the job, the more Disney admired them.

Just days before Disneyland's grand opening in 1955, Walt Disney was in a meeting when a 12-year-old burst into the office. The boy, who worked in the mailroom, delivered a package to Disney. But then he made a bold request.

"I really do not want to work in the mailroom," he told a stunned Disney. He then asked if he could audition for the role of Tom Sawyer (on Tom Sawyer's Island, a Disneyland attraction).

Noticing that the youngster had red hair and freckles, Disney turned to his vice president of casting for his opinion. The VP hired the lad as Tom Sawyer.

Two days after the park opened, the VP went to Disney and suggested firing their new Tom Sawyer. Disney wanted to know what the youngster did wrong.

It turns out that their new hire was taking his role too seriously, acting like a tough kid just like Tom Sawyer did in Mark Twain's novel. He never lost character or let down his guard with guests.

Pouncing on a teachable moment, Disney told the VP, "You don't understand what we are trying to do here. That little boy is being the best Tom Sawyer he knows how to be."

In an instant, Disney was able to make an indelible impact on his team: He wanted them to create a rich fantasy world with actors who fully stepped into their roles.

Thirty years later, the then-retired VP hosted a party for the red-haired kid to celebrate his 30 years of service to Disneyland—and recalled Disney's wise words.

— Adapted from *The Disney Way*, Bill Capodagli & Lynn Jackson, McGraw-Hill.