

## **Multinational temporary employment agency cascades organization-wide leadership initiative**

Start Holding, the second largest temporary agency in the Netherlands, has more than 5,100 employees in 650 storefront offices located primarily in Holland, Spain, and Germany. Start's Netherlands hub alone represents some 60,000 temporary employees and a caseload of 15,000 workers in Start's "full service process" (people currently taking part in an outplacement, recruitment, or reintegration process).

In the Netherlands, it is commonplace for professionals to seek temporary employment as a career path. Take a walk down any major urban thoroughfare and one will see storefront after storefront offering temporary employment opportunities – with as many as 25 competitors on a given street. Unless an agency has an exclusive assignment, practically every agency is working on the same business – making competition frenetic.

Start needed to differentiate itself from the hundreds of "me too" agencies throughout Holland and beyond. For some time, the company's leadership had viewed *Walt Disney World*® Resort as an example of exemplary quality service. If Start could absorb some crucial Disney best practices and philosophies and cascade them throughout its operation – thus, reinvent the culture – it could race away from the pack. It could also standardize quality service practices across multiple countries and further sharpen competitive advantage. Start's management turned to *Disney Institute* for assistance.

### **Taking it from the top**

It was the flexibility and willingness of the *Disney Institute* team to listen, look, and learn that sold Start's leadership on their ability to deliver on their promises. An extensive discovery process was employed to capture insights about the organization's structure, needs, challenges, opportunities, morale, and other elements from multiple organization level perspectives.

From this, *Disney Institute* partnered with Start's leadership to create a five-tier implementation plan for the training

that would ultimately be cascaded to all international operations. Training was conducted for one group at a time: 1) Start's Netherlands Board of Directors plus the heads of international operations; 2) middle management; 3) Branch Managers; 4) front-line employees; and 5) flex workers. Training for the first three groups was conducted by *Disney Institute* and Start; the Branch Managers were charged with training employees.

Beginning in Fall 1999, a customized program focusing on people management, leadership, and service quality was cascaded to Start's top leadership. It's important to note that the intervention was positioned internally as a leadership program – not a service quality program – because it was believed that lasting cultural change had to be driven from the top, in ways that were visible and meaningful to every employee.

During this time, Start's leaders worked tirelessly to craft a company vision and mission statement, core values, leadership characteristics, service standards, human resources statements, and financial statements.

Start adopted a corporate vision, We create careers. Four service standards were developed: accessibility, reliability, service provision, and efficiency. The Disney model "Chain of Excellence" was employed to guide the company through its change effort, with elements including leadership excellence, employee excellence, candidate satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and financial results/customer value. All of this was designed to build further loyalty among Start's flex workers and clients.

### **Moving the line**

In early 2000, the multinational group of middle managers were brought to *Disney Institute's* campus in Lake Buena Vista, Florida for a whirlwind training session on the same elements of leadership, people management, and quality service training. Because this group would have ultimate responsibility for cascading and integrating the concepts into the organization, the training

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was geared to their role as drivers of the business. To ensure buy-in to the process, these participants worked as a team to further refine the vision, mission, and service standards. Several months later, a *Disney Institute* facilitator returned to Holland to meet with this diverse group and examine together their progress in implementing the concepts.

In May-June 2000, the branch manager group – charged with implementing the principles into daily work life – was reached. The training was designed to emphasize their pivotal role as a leader in the organization. In a unique partnership with Disneyland Paris, each came to the park for a three-day program (one day of field experiences and two days of training) focusing primarily on people management and service quality elements.

This was the first *Disney Institute* program ever conducted at Disneyland Paris using its venues as behind-the-scenes benchmarking opportunities. In another “first”, operational manager speakers from Disneyland Paris shared best practices from their own operation as well as from *Walt Disney World*® Resort.

The Dutch Branch Manager training was designed to have the two groups converge on one day – the first group, coming from across Holland, was scheduled for a Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. The second, multinational group, came that Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. This allowed everyone to be present on one day for extensive team-building and information-sharing. Per up-front agreement, the entire program was conducted in English.

Next, Start began cascading the process to the front line. The company needed to develop and communicate the performance behaviors that would help its widespread team of branch employees to deliver its brand of quality service. Start’s answer was to develop a system called the “Service Box.”

The Service Box includes a series of training and motivational videotapes, issued to leaders every two months, that explain and explore another aspect of Start’s four Service Standards.

Each office schedules a staff meeting coinciding with the tape’s arrival. The videos are about 15 minutes long, and are designed to be a launching point for further learning about the topic. The remainder of the session is devoted to brainstorming on how to put concepts from the video to work on a daily basis. All of the ideas that are generated from each staff and operational area are collected and communicated through what Start calls “Service Platforms” – a communications tool designed to leverage the creative effort of employees, by sharing solutions to common issues from each office across the company.

In another novel approach, Start negotiated a cross-training arrangement with the Casting team at *Walt Disney World*®

Resort to enable front-line Start employees work for a summer in various parks and resorts – a win/win opportunity for both organizations. The company plans to make this an ongoing annual program. To date, more than 30 have participated in this

effort. During this time, they also attend *Disney Institute* public programs in quality service and people management. This builds insights and new attitudes that can be shared with peers when they return home.

Start’s top management relies heavily on its Branch Managers to handle the majority of training responsibilities for their front-line employees. The program has now reached the level where employees can apply tangible actions to different elements of the Service Standards – both technical performance issues as well as attitudes.

### Honoring Cultural Norms

Several unique challenges germane to training a multinational audience emerged. First, because management structures throughout Europe are typically more hierarchical in nature, the learners required speaking with more senior-level Disney Cast Members than is normal practice in certain field experiences in American-based *Disney Institute* programs. Second, in both field experiences and classroom sessions, the facilitators needed to continually make the connection for learners in how the principles tied back to their own operations. Throughout the implementation process,

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The power of the sessions was driven home by one speaker, a native German Disneyland Paris Cast Member, who told the groups, “You’ve now been here one-and-one-half days, and you are thinking, ‘This sounds great for Disney, but it won’t work at Start.’ I’m here to tell you that it will.” This generated great credibility with the learners.

Cultural stereotypes continued to break down. Participants were excited to experience friendly and helpful treatment by the Disneyland Paris Cast Members – although the demeanor was more tempered than the usual Disney cultural norm of “aggressive friendliness” toward Guests – that would have come on too strong in this venue.

Other norms unique to European tastes needed to be considered. For example, Disneyland Paris is the only Disney park where alcohol is served outside of restaurants. Also, since it is more customary locally for Guests to wait 15 minutes or more for initial service after being seated in restaurants, that custom needed to be honored in this European venue.

### Lessons Learned

The Start leadership team gained many insights through its efforts to transform its culture into a more service-driven operation.

1) **Leadership must begin at the top, and must stay the course, throughout the intervention and beyond.**

Part of that entails communicating, both up-front and on an ongoing basis, that slight revisions to the process will probably occur as new insights are gleaned. That does not mean, however, that the overall effort is flawed; rather, that it is a living, breathing effort that is continually being sharpened and polished. It must be communicated that it will take many years to achieve the transformation – it will not happen overnight. Again, that is why Start chose to position the program as a leadership program so that it would not

be viewed as a “flavor of the month.” Communication was deemed such an important element of the process that Start appointed a corporate communications position dedicated exclusively to internal communication about the initiative.

2) **Set the measurement process up-front.** Start is now partnering with Erasmus University of Holland to develop a customized standard of internal/external measurements. The good news and “bad news” about Disney is everyone thinks Disney is all about fun. And it is, but there are many proven business practices at work behind the operational success of the company. Behind-the-scenes field experiences were instrumental in helping make the connections for learning, both at *Walt Disney World Resort*® and Disneyland Paris.

3) **Be careful of promises.** Every promise brings new challenges, and people have to meet them. Employees at all levels are watching to see the leaders’ true commitment, versus lip-service. If a leader says materials will arrive on

a certain date, they must be there by that date, case closed. The greatest hurdle for Start

was each time another employee group was transitioned into the program. People became increasingly aware of the improvement effort and wanted more information, but management wasn’t always able to provide substantive information at that time – plans weren’t finalized on certain issues. If no information is communicated to the front-line levels, it potentially sets up a “we/they” gap. But when too much information is shared, it sets expectations, and when plans get changed in mid-stream, it can foster cynicism that leaders aren’t doing what they promised. As such, it is important to communicate continually that certain ideas are “works in progress.”

4) **Understand your own culture, and how the program works in your culture, before cascading it to other countries.**

Leaders must then understand what is uniquely important to each culture, what ‘service’ means in each culture, and what expectations each culture has. In essence, *Disney Institute* had to manage two filters: translating Disney culture to Start culture, then translating Start culture to all the other multinational cultures. It is important to not lose

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key concepts or intent in printed and verbal translations. Different countries may need to move through the transition at different paces. No benchmark is available to smooth the process – a company must learn and adapt as it goes.

5) **Employ a methodical, top-down strategy in implementing the program.** Make sure the highest echelon of the organization “gets it” and is supportive before cascading the implementation to the next level, and so on. In Start’s experience, “moving the line” of training down the organization was the most challenging part of the process, because there was extreme sensitivity when the higher level had already been exposed to key concepts and had greater insights than the next group. Speed in implementation is important, but everyone couldn’t be trained at the same time. To allow time for the concepts to “sink in,” Start spaced its sessions four to six weeks apart. In addition, the company held two management meetings when it transitioned to the next group. The first of the two meetings featured a *Disney Institute* person, and the second meeting a Start representative.

6) **Don’t just conduct the training and expect changes to be operationalized.** Change takes a long time to take hold. If “everything speaks” – a key Disney principle about the importance of setting – then getting everyone to “speak” the same way requires constant nurturing. Every company must find ways unique to its culture to refresh the training, reward positive modeling about the culture change, and provide networking opportunities. Start still utilizes its tool kit, and has created 14 functional Service Platforms to further drive home the concepts. Each Director has a service platform comprised of both staff and operations. All employee improvement ideas are communicated through the Service Platform, then sent to the Director, and then communicated to the organization wherever feasible. A reward and recognition program is being created to further encourage innovation and spur positive peer pressure. Communication about the leadership program is mailed to everyone’s home in the same manner. All of this is gradually building pride and ownership in the process.

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### Results to date

Now that Start’s leadership has fully communicated the program to employees across the organization, preliminary results indicate that the initiative is a winner.

- In the few months where the Service Platforms have been operational, 129 useful ideas have been offered by employees.
- The most recent employee satisfaction research indicates that almost 75% of respondents say that Start’s vision statement and mission are clear.
- During the first implementation year, employee understanding of the leadership initiative have improved by 10%.
- Employee knowledge about the future corporate direction has increased 22% in the period from 1998 to 2001.
- Start managers have a greater receptivity to employee ideas (81%) compared to managers in other Netherlands companies (74%).

With enhanced measurement systems, Start will be continually quantifying bottom-line improvements from the organization-wide leadership program.

Studies have shown that a top-down implementation approach is the most effective way for companies to effect lasting cultural change. Positioning the intervention as a leadership effort – when much of the program centers around quality service improvement – was an important way for Start to signal to everyone that this would be the permanent new way of doing business. The Start executive team is committed to forging a service-driven culture, and is in the process of driving the initiative across its many international operations. Start and *Disney Institute* continue to work toward achieving mutually beneficial goals as the program cascades through the organization.