

WE ARE ALL PART OF THE MAGIC:

Insights from Disney Leadership Experts

FLA President, Doug Crane, recently interviewed the creative leadership forces behind James Songster Emerging Leader Training, three former Disney employees who utilize their years of experience to teach leadership skills. The conversation includes tips for dynamic leadership, fostering an environment of creativity, the importance of workplace culture, and how to keep it all fun. The article was published in full on both his [blog](#) and [Public Libraries Online](#). Read on for some highlights and ideas for integrating that special magic into the field of librarianship.

James Songster is a magician and an educator who worked for Walt Disney World Resort® for 30 years. In 1997 he founded James Songster Emerging Leader Training.

Sue Schank had a career in public education as an exceptional education teacher and department chair, and then a longer career at Walt Disney World Resort®, mostly involved with the education department.

Barbara Blake started at The Walt Disney Company® in 1978 and ended up working there for 42 years. The majority of that time was in educational opportunities.

Together they operate James Songster Emerging Leader Training (<https://BetterLeadershipSkills.com>), a company devoted to unlocking the best of leadership, teamwork, creativity and organizational culture.

Doug Crane is the Director of the Palm Beach County Library System and President of the Florida Library Association. He shares his musings on productivity, libraries, and leadership at his website: www.efficientlibrarian.com

Doug: Disney is known for its amazing creativity. How do you teach others how to tap into the creative spirit?

Sue: People won't let the creativity fly if they feel unsafe. We created a safe environment where it's okay to take a flying leap. It might be fabulously successful, or it might not. Either way, we learn from it and apply that moving forward. Creating a safe space is what makes creativity possible. It is absolutely essential that people feel comfortable and safe being creative.

James: Creating a safe environment where people are willing to take risks was the biggest challenge. Most people are afraid of being seen as unsuccessful or afraid of failure. Without taking a chance you're only going to do exactly what you're doing right now. For me, that was a revelation because, as a magician and entrepreneur, my whole life is about experimenting. The work became how to create an environment where people felt safe taking chances. We created the leader mindset that acknowledged not everything that we try is going to work, but if we don't learn in the process, we're never going to get better. There's a big thick coffee table book that Cast Members love called Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life. It's written by two of Walt's favorite guys, Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas. There's one page in the book about how at any given time one of three Walt's might walk into the office. There was Walt the creative dreamer with new ideas to share. There was Walt the realist who could marshal the existing resources.

WE ARE ALL PART OF THE MAGIC

There was also Walt the critic who could look at a process and ask if this was really our best work. When I started teaching the creativity program that we now offer as Unlocking Creativity Magic, we established that creativity is a strategic approach to problem solving. The mindset is: here's the opportunity, here's the risk in taking that opportunity, and here's what we can learn if we seize that opportunity. But to be successful, we need to have that safe environment. We recognize that everybody has a place in this process: dreamer, realist, and critic. The way to get best efforts is when we value each person's role in that process and understand the thinking behind why we go through this process. We define creativity as the point where imagination collides with opportunity. You have to be willing to take the chance, but you also have to do brainstorming and skill assessment and resource gathering in order to take advantage of the opportunity.

Barbara: In our Disney programs, we were always aware that some participants didn't want to make a mistake or try something that might fail. We were asked to put on education programs in our new park in Hong Kong. We were dealing with a different education system in Asia. Over there the students want to please their professors. Everything in our programs had been written to be very experiential. As we developed those programs in Hong Kong we had to figure out how to make that safe space for the students.

Sue: The Hong Kong system is very didactic. A second grade teacher is viewed like a "professor" in the front of the classroom, and the students are "bobble heads." Students don't question, challenge, or argue. They accept and repeat it back. We had meetings in advance with local teachers from the Hong Kong area. It was a fascinating experience because there was a desire to see change in the education structure so that students were more participatory rather than just memorizing. But there were also "old school" teachers who felt that students could only learn the way they always had.

One of my favorite visuals of the difference in the systems and discovery of a new way of doing things was testing with kindergarten and first grade students. We had a small test group of a dozen students and their teachers. One of my co-workers, Michael, was doing the program. At one point they were walking down Main Street in the Park. I was in the back of the group watching and all the little ones were lined up in a straight line behind him. All the students were quiet and walking in a straight line behind Michael because he was the leader. Michael saw what was going on and he started doing a serpentine walk down the street. He went side to side around the lamp posts and trash cans, weaving and wandering around. At first the kids literally stopped and looked at him like he had sprouted a second head. Then one by one they started a kind of giggle and followed him. By the time we got to the end of Main Street they were laughing, clapping and holding hands. They came out of the constraints that their educational structure put on them. It was an eye-opening experience for their teachers. At first the teachers thought the students were being bad. Then it was a realization that they were being children and having fun learning. They saw it was possible to change the mindset. When you set the right atmosphere to support self-confidence and know it's safe to experiment, amazing things happen.

Doug: How did you end up founding your training company and start working with libraries?

James: Growing up, I was the library kid that went to all the programs. I was also a volunteer in high school in the library. Libraries were safe places that I could explore. As a magician, I wanted to be in places that I knew, so I naturally performed for summer reading programs. As my Emerging Leader Training programs were expanding, it became a natural thing for me to offer them to the same clients I was already supporting. I had existing programs, and the librarians were open to them. Eventually I was given the opportunity to facilitate our Unlocking Creativity Magic workshop for the 2022 Florida Library Association conference. That was the big kick starter of how we got started supporting libraries across the state.

WE ARE ALL PART OF THE MAGIC

Doug: Having worked with librarians, what are you hearing from library workers are the biggest leadership and cultural challenges they're facing?

James: In our workshops, we run an exercise where we ask participants specifically what their teams are struggling with. The first thing that comes up on their list every single time is communication. They believe they don't communicate with each other effectively or efficiently. Every organization we have ever worked with has this as the first answer. Another thing we hear is that they don't like working in an environment where different points of view or input are not being supported or heard.

Sue: When we do our Culture program, we talk about the idea of purposely created culture and having input over where the culture is going. It is a common theme for our participants that "no one's listening to us". They have all these ideas that don't go anywhere. The more they talk about the issues they face, the more it becomes obvious that they don't understand the culture of their organization. They don't know if it's there by choice or by chance. When asked to describe their culture, it is a difficult challenge for them to articulate it. A lack of understanding of what the culture really is and what drives it, I think is a source of great frustration for our groups.

Doug: Please share a book that had an impact on your development.

Barbara: When I started at Disney in 1978 they didn't do a lot of explanation about the philosophy of Disney beyond the Four Keys. So I read Bob Thomas's book *Walt Disney: An American Original* and reread it several times. It's an incredible biography because he knew Walt and got the interviews directly from him. It was a valuable tool for me to understand the company on a personal level.

Another book that impacted me when I was in high school was Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I was raised in South Florida so most of my friends were from the North or Northeast but both sides of my family come from the Deep South. I had no understanding of the issues that were going on until I read that book. It really affected my view of the world at that time. It was 1968 and the Civil Rights organizations were impacting the world. It was an impactful book for me.

Sue: I also have two and neither one are about leadership. One is *The Star Thrower*, by Loren Eiseley. It taught me the incredible value and richness of carefully selected language. He was a brilliant writer whose style of writing was artistic and opened my eyes to the importance of using language purposely. It's inspiring, motivating, and powerful.

The other book I've read a million times is Earl Kelly's *Education for What is Real*. It was written post World War II and explored the education system when the nation was coming out of the war and into a golden future. He looks at why people are the way they are and why they make the choices they make. He noticed that people tend to respect and be kind to others. However, we've built a competitive society where people want to win and someone has to lose. His insights into nature and what that means to the learning journey are fascinating. They anchored my decision to become an educator. When I got into training with Disney, *Education for What is Real* was a mental guideline for me in terms of the need to share knowledge and the skills for students to be successful versions of themselves. It's part of my job to help them see that journey.

James: I would say the first book that I remember having a profound effect on me was *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, by Richard Bach. The philosophy behind it is that excellence is a personal choice. Nobody can stop you from excellence if you have a mindset for it. It is a choice that you have to make for yourself. It may come at great risk and pain but you have to set your wings at the right position to do the things that you want. That was really important to me when I was young because I was going against the trends and the wishes of my college and my high school counselors. I was determined to chart my own course.



WE ARE ALL PART OF THE MAGIC

Another book that was very impactful to me was *Who Moved My Cheese?*, by Spencer Johnson. During the pandemic, the entire world shut down. As a performer, I had never imagined that every single revenue stream would suddenly stop. I had a moment of panic and looked over at my bookshelf. I picked up my copy that I had for so long the pages were yellowed. I re-read that book and it was the exact mindset I needed to go forward. If there's a thread that ties everything together, it's that you are what you put into your own brain. We have a responsibility to make sure we put values and nurturing ideas into the brains of the people that we're working to support. We're trying to guide them and that's a thread that goes through all of the workshops.

Doug: How are your workshops structured?

James: Our programs flow as a conversation that starts with "I:" Unlocking Leader Magic, all about self-reflection and awareness. That takes us to "We:" Unlocking Teamwork Magic, about methods for embracing our collective skills, and reaching our goals and becoming successful. Then we have "How:" Unlocking Creativity Magic, developing a strategic approach to problem solving. And lastly, we have "Why:" Unlocking a Purposefully Created Culture, answering the critical questions. Why does this matter to our organization? Why do we want this? It's the leadership, teamwork, creativity and culture, all working together that makes the difference. It was true at Disney and it's true in all of our individual careers. No matter your career path, you still have to answer those four things: Who am I? Who are we? How do we create the culture and the environment that will support us? And why does it matter in the first place?

Doug: James, you're known for doing your magic tricks in workshops and even teaching students a magic trick. How did this training approach come around?

James: We say they're workshops and not seminars because a seminar implies I'm just going to talk at you. A workshop says it's hands-on. The old saying is: Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand. For me a huge resource that I have in my toolbox is that I can perform magic.

So, I use magic to engage their imagination, to keep them curious and excited. I love it whenever the students are all participating and performing the magic. I don't do a magic trick in the middle of a seminar or a workshop only for a brain break. The reason we do this magic is to build the connection between the content and the fun experience of the workshop. There is a great Walt Disney quote that says: Laughter is no enemy to learning. If you're having fun you're more likely to engage. If you're engaged, the outcomes are going to be more impactful. I want us to do this together so that the students can walk out of the room knowing they can start doing it tomorrow.

Doug: To wrap up, please share a favorite Walt Disney quote that's kind of stuck with you.

James: I'm going to take as my favorite Walt quote: "I would rather have entertained them and hoped that they learned something than to have educated them and hoped that they were entertained." I've found that to be good solid advice.

Barbara: My favorite is: "It's kind of fun to do the impossible."

Sue: Mine is a little longer but I love the sequence of it. "First think, second believe, third dream and finally dare." I love that approach to tackling the world.



The entirety of this interview was published in Public Libraries Online:

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