BIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

The Ride of a Lifetime: Lessons Learned from 15 Years as CEO of the Walt Disney Company

by Robert Iger

Disney's CEO tells how bold bets on quality, technology, and Pixar, Marvel, and Star Wars remade a giant.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Innovate or die: if you don't disrupt your own business, someone else will.**

Iger bought BAMTech and built Disney+ while licensing and ESPN money was still flowing, accepting short-term pain. Technology makes old models obsolete whether you move or not.

02 **Quality is the strategy, not a department.**

His first big bet was buying Pixar for about $7.4 billion because Disney animation - the company's heart - had lost its magic. Cost cutting cannot substitute for excellence.

03 **Optimism is a practical leadership tool, not a mood.**

People are not motivated or energized by pessimists. Iger argues pessimism leads to paranoia, which leads to defensiveness, which leads to risk aversion.

04 **Run on three clear priorities, not thirty - and repeat them constantly.**

Iger won the CEO job on three: create high-quality branded content, embrace technology to reach audiences, and become a truly global company. Clear priorities take the guesswork out of everyone's day.

05 **Decide on time; chronic indecision corrodes morale.**

All decisions, however difficult, can and should be made in a timely way. Iger welcomed diverse opinions, but treated endless delay as more damaging than a hard call.

06 **If you want innovation, grant permission to fail - and own your failures when they come.**

At ABC he backed Twin Peaks and the flop Cop Rock with the same philosophy: fear of failure destroys creativity. His appendix rule: take responsibility when you screw up.

07 **Longshots are usually not as long as they seem.**

Buying Marvel and Lucasfilm, roughly $4 billion each, looked reckless to critics. Once Iger got into the details, the seemingly impossible became a plan - courage is the foundation of risk-taking.

08 **Respect is an undervalued currency in negotiation.**

Iger buried the hatchet with Roy Disney and repaired the broken relationship with Steve Jobs by approaching both with empathy instead of ego. Most deals are personal - especially over something the other person created.

09 **Protect the creative people you acquire; don't absorb them.**

After buying Pixar, Iger kept its leaders and culture intact in Emeryville rather than folding it into Disney. The magic survives only if the magicians feel trusted.

10 **There is no price on integrity - values outrank profits.**

Iger canceled the hit Roseanne reboot over its star's racist tweet - do what is right, not what is commercially correct - and removed stars John Lasseter and ESPN chief John Skipper when their conduct crossed the line.

11 **Know what you don't know, and say so without apology.**

Made head of ABC Entertainment with no Hollywood experience, Iger asked basic questions, admitted gaps, and learned fast. Curiosity, he says, is where the path to innovation begins.

12 **Don't let ambition get ahead of opportunity.**

Iger spent years as second in line without letting it poison his work. Do the job you have well, be patient, and make yourself someone bosses have to turn to when an opening comes.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

This is part memoir, part leadership manual. Robert Iger started at the bottom of ABC television as a studio grunt in 1974, worked at Domino's and as a janitor before that, and slowly rose through sports and entertainment jobs. Along the way he learned from demanding bosses - above all ABC Sports legend Roone Arledge and Capital Cities' Tom Murphy and Dan Burke - what good leadership, and bad leadership, looks like up close.

In 2005, after a bruising selection process in which he was the only internal candidate, Iger became CEO of Disney, a company many thought was fading. He won the job with three strategic priorities: create the best branded content in the world, embrace technology instead of fearing it, and become a truly global company. Everything famous that followed hangs on those three pegs.

The biggest bets were acquisitions. He repaired a relationship with Steve Jobs that his predecessor had wrecked and bought Pixar for $7.4 billion, restoring Disney animation - minutes before the deal was announced, Jobs confided that his cancer had returned and offered Iger a way out; Iger stayed

in. Then came Marvel in 2009 and Lucasfilm in 2012, and finally most of 21st Century Fox in 2019. Late in his tenure he disrupted Disney's own model with streaming, buying BAMTech and launching Disney+ in 2019.

The book opens with his hardest week: opening Shanghai Disneyland in June 2016 while the Pulse nightclub shooting and a toddler's death by alligator at a Disney resort demanded his personal response - a lesson in the compartmentalization leadership requires. He distills his approach into ten principles: optimism, courage, focus, decisiveness, curiosity, fairness, thoughtfulness, authenticity, the relentless pursuit of perfection, and integrity.

The through-line is respect for creativity combined with clear-eyed change. Protect the people who make great stories, give them modern ways to reach the audience, hold everyone - stars included - to the same standards, and never let fear of disruption freeze you in place.

DO THIS WEEK

Write your top three priorities for the next year, one line each, and share them with your team or family. Then look at your current projects and cut or postpone one that serves none of the three. That short list is what focus actually looks like.

Robert Iger, first published 2019. A memoir and manual in one; ideal for anyone who leads creative people or runs something big that must change.