

# THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

**EPISODE FIFTY-THREE  
MAKING MAGICAL EXPERIENCES**

**HOST: SHAWN NASON  
GUEST: LEE COCKERELL**

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**Shawn:** Welcome to the fifth season of *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast, where bold leaders combine with big ideas to make life better for all of us. I'm your host, Shawn Nason, CEO and founder of MOFI. In these episodes, we'll be exploring the power, influence, and importance of Experience Ecosystems™. To do that, we're bringing together the most unique and influential experience experts in the world for honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, leading with heart, and getting real about heartsets and mindsets. In case you're wondering, an Experience Ecosystem is the web of people, touchpoints, and interactions that combine to create all of the positive and negative experiences we have in the world. When an organization wants to improve customer experience, they're wasting their time if they're not willing to engage and humanize their entire Experience Ecosystem. It's time to blow up some silos and ignite an experience revolution by putting people first.

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**Shawn:** On today's episode, we are honored to have Lee Cockerell, who is the former executive vice president of operations for the Walt Disney World Resort. He is a sought-after author, speaker, and consultant, specializing in leadership and management training, with an emphasis on how to create world-class customer service through great leadership. He is currently the chief learning officer of Cockerell Academy, offering self-paced leadership, management, culture and customer service courses online. And he's the host of his very own podcast, *Creating Disney Magic*, available wherever you get your podcasts. And we are really honored and blessed to have him here. Welcome, Lee.

**Lee:** Thank you, sir. And thanks for having me on. I appreciate it.

**Shawn:** Well, Lee, you are a hero of mine. Obviously, being a Walt Disney Imagineer and working for the company, all the stories I heard about you and your leadership. But what's kind of funny to me is, you're a pretty busy man for someone who's supposed to be retired. So, you have a storied career. So how does a kid from Oklahoma get to be VP status of Hilton and Marriott and then end up at Disney ultimately running operations for Walt Disney World?

**Lee:** Well, that's a good question. I think all the kids I went to high school with are still trying to figure that out. And I know my teachers there are all dead, but they would die if they found out I was actually running operations at Disney World because I was not a great student. I tell people I've written four books. But I don't know where the commas go. So I have to hire people to put those in.

I think it's probably a combination. I grew up in Oklahoma on a farm. And when you live on a farm, they don't call it work. You just got things got to get done, and your parents assign them to you. And so my brother and I had a lot of chores to do every day. I had to milk a cow every morning by hand. That was part of my program, even though we had electric milkers. But we were busy all the time. In my whole life, we never went on vacation one time because when you have a farm, you just can't go away. And my mother was married five times. She was kind of busy. And I've been adopted twice. And I look at my wife and I say, "And I'm totally normal." And so she says, "No, you're not." But I got to go to college because number four had money. She started marrying these guys that were doctors and things like that. And I went to Oklahoma State for two years, flunked out because I forgot to go to class. And then I went in the Army. And I got in the Army. After I got out of the Army. I met a guy there. We went to Washington DC. I got a job as a waiter at the Washington Hilton up on Connecticut Avenue where John Hinckley shot President Reagan.

I worked there. I got in a management training program because I had two things going for me and I recommend this to everybody. Have a good attitude, especially if you don't have a degree. And second, you know, just working hard and being reliable and credible. I had a good attitude and I'm really organized. If you give me something to do, I'll get it done for you. And bosses seemed to like those two things. So I got the management training. And I got promoted to Chicago to the Conrad Hilton. Then I got promoted to the Waldorf Astoria in New York, and then to another little town, Tarrytown, New York by the Tappan Zee Bridge in New York, and then to Los Angeles. I was the director of food and beverage. There I left because my boss and I didn't get along. I didn't like him. He didn't like me. I had a 2-year-old, a wife, and barely paid the rent.

So I went over to Marriott and worked for Marriott 17 years, became the vice president of food and beverage and mainly because I had focused on the food and beverage business my whole career. So I had become an expert at it. And I tell everybody, "Become an expert in something. You could always go get a job." And I went along doing that. And I started going to seminars, studying, paying attention to leadership issues, trying to be a better manager, really focused on the customer. And the next thing I knew...I stayed at Marriott and went all around. Also, I went to Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington, then up to the Springfield, Massachusetts area.

And then I got recruited by Disney in 1990 to go to France and open Disneyland Paris, the food and beverage operations. I did that for three years and then I got asked to come to Orlando where I'd never worked before and become senior vice president of hotel operations. After two years of that, I became the executive vice president of all

operations at Walt Disney World. And when I was 62, I thought, "Oop that's enough. I'm going retire before I die at my desk." And I did and that's 15 years ago. And I started a company to keep busy basically. Wrote four books, I got the podcast, I have a new Cockerell Academy for courses. I do speeches all over the world. It's been a lot of fun.

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**Shawn:** And not only that Lee, but your son followed after you too. Dan was an amazing leader as well at Disney.

**Lee:** Yeah, he told me he would never do what I did for a living when he was younger. And he ended up doing exactly what I did. So don't say never.

**Shawn:** That's right. Again, my time at Disney, you are known for your leadership, and your passion around the cast members. And a lot of other organizations call them employee experience. And you said your biggest accomplishment at Disney was focusing on leadership, and not customers or guests. Why is that your biggest accomplishment?

**Lee:** Well, it became obvious to me that great parents produce great kids. And great leaders really take care of people who work for them and make sure that they're going to be successful. And that's not done a lot in business, you know. And I think I had a different perspective. I've done every job. I was a cook in the Army. I was a waiter. I cleaned rooms. I didn't have a college degree. I could relate to all the cast members at Disney pretty well, the ups and downs of life. And literally, I'll tell you one thing I was successful was because I wrote one of my books, When you become a big deal, don't. Don't go around being a big deal. I told somebody the other day, "Don't even become famous because those people have all kinds of problems."

And so I just enjoy, it. I enjoy helping people. I converted myself from the boss to being a teacher. And I really think that's the key in business and parenting and your job is to teach. It's not to bully people, or intimidate them, or push them around, I don't even know why people think they have the right to do that. Life's short enough already. So I just pay attention to helping people get ahead. And they got committed and they liked me. I'm a good example of anybody can do it because, literally, I'm not a good student. My wife is so much smarter than I am. I read every day now because I've gotten a lot smarter since I dropped out of college. I got excited about learning. Eventually, one day I woke up and I was like, "This is kind of fun."

And then Google came along. Now I get really smart every day. I look up things. And it's a curiosity. It's fun. It's at our fingertips, and anybody that doesn't know something, it's their own fault because you've got it right in your pocket. And so I just thought, let's be a teacher. And if we had more people thinking about teaching instead of bullying, and thinking they're hot stuff, we would have a better situation. And I thought my job was to make the environment and culture a place where everybody mattered and they knew they mattered. Everybody wants to matter and get ahead in life. And paying attention and being available for them, and training them, and to have opened them, and having those hard conversations with them like mothers do with their kids, it comes out the other end in a very productive way.

And it's highly satisfactory too. I give speeches now and people say, "Why do you do it, Lee?" And I said, "Well, the main reason I do it is because people clap and I'm insecure and I love applause." When I play golf, nobody claps. So I quit doing that.

**Shawn:** This is a key for our listeners to understand about creating the environment. Rather than calling yourself a VP, you refer to yourself as a chief environmentalist. What does that mean?

**Lee:** Yeah. I mean, I wasn't thinking about air quality. I was thinking about the quality and the environment people have to come into every day to work. And the atmosphere is, I don't want it to be toxic. I don't want hurricanes every day because managers are misbehaving. I want it to be a place where you wake up in the morning and want to come to work because you're included and involved and listened to. Your opinion, counts. You're treated respectfully. That's the environment people want to come to. And by the way, most people in our business, and many other businesses, have had a horrible personal life at home. And I want them to wake up and want to come in because that's where they're respected and taken care of, and looked after, and helped if they need help. People don't leave that kind of environment and culture.

I mean, people don't leave the culture. They leave their manager, you know. They leave the manager that's a jerk. And it's that simple. Even at Disney, Disney too. I would say, out of all the managers at Disney World I'd say, 85% are great, 15% are struggling. And that's...every time somebody quits or leaves we find out it's because of their manager who wasn't on top of things, who wasn't paying attention to them, wasn't available for them, wasn't getting them trained and developed. And so it's a pretty easy recipe, you know. I say, "Train them, right. Treat them right. And hire them right." Hire them right, train them right, and treat them right. That's a simple recipe for success.

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**Shawn:** Brilliant. It rings to my heart because I was there for almost six, seven years. And those principles are throughout the whole organization because you lived it, and you breathed it, and you taught it. So in your book, *Creating Magic*, which is a phenomenal book, if you've never read it, you say that there are two key principles for making a great place to work. Make your people your brand, and give people a purpose, not just a job. And you also say that it's not the magic that makes it work. It's the way we work that makes it magic. Can you help our audience understand this philosophy and what you mean around all of this?

**Lee:** Well, I think of any company I do business with. When I think of my dry cleaner, I think of the people who work there. They are the ones that greet me, and take care of me, and look after things, or the grocery store. You can buy groceries anywhere, but the people are on top of things. You're looking for something. They walk you down the aisle and find it for you. Your people are your brand.

The people who come to my door I know the FedEx and UPS guy better than anybody. I don't know anything else about their company. I don't care who the CEO is. I don't care how many trucks they have or airplanes. All I know is he brings it and brings it on time, and he's nice. And that's it. That's my impression of FedEx. And a lot of us have negative impressions in life because of their people don't answer the phone. They don't call you back. They're unreliable. They're not credible. And I don't care how big their brand is. If they don't produce, there's a certain company and all people talk about how great Chick-Fil-A is.

I mean they are and it's the people it's not the chicken. I told Chick-Fil-A once I said, "It's not the chicken. It's the people." You can get chicken anywhere. There's a lot of chickens in this country. And the reliability. It's clean and the people are nice. They pay attention to you. It's consistent. No matter what exit you get off on on the expressway anywhere in the United States, it'll be the same. It's reliable. And that's what a brand is. And the reliability only comes through people. You got to have great people to be reliable.

**Shawn:** Yeah. Let's put this in business now because this is really around service standards and service principles. And you teach that great service doesn't cost any more money than average or poor service. And you simplified service to meeting four guests' expectations. And those expectations are make us feel special, treat me as an individual, show me respect, and have knowledgeable people working for you. How

does this framework actually help with employee experience and what we call Lee, the Experience Ecosystem? How does that framework encompass that whole ecosystem?

**Lee:** Well, I think all of us want the same thing. You know, if I'm doing business with you make me feel special. I go into a restaurant and they know me. I go there all the time and they know which table I like. They make me feel special. If they know my name, "Hey, Mr. Cockerell, welcome back. It's good to see ya, Mrs. Cockerell, I'm glad you guys came in again."

The second thing is this, treat me as an individual. If I got a problem, take care of my problem. I get there and I have six people instead of four and work it out. Figure it out. Don't give me some rule about, "You didn't tell us." You know, treat me as an individual. Make it work. And we get those requests at Disney every day, a million of them, that the cast members have the authority to make the right decision to make the customer want to come back because I tell people, "The last word you should ever use is, 'No.' Figure it out. Find something. You can do it if you wanna do it. It's a state of mind, excellence."

The third thing is respect. And that's a big one we don't have in this world. The world is screwed up right now. It always has been, by the way, because of the bigotry and the racism and treating people badly. I left Oklahoma when I was 20 years old. And the people say, "How did you get out of this idea that you lived in this place, which was bigoted and racism and back in the '50s and '60s." I said, "I left." First, I went in the Army and, second, I moved to Washington DC, and if you don't like people from other places, don't move to Washington DC because...or New York, or LA, or anywhere, or don't get in the hotel and restaurant and the entertainment business because everybody's from somewhere else.

You know, at Disney World, we employ people from over 100 countries and guests are from 140 countries. It changes you. And I tell kids today, "When you get out of college, get out of your village. Move to the big city and live five years and become a whole person. Don't stay in the village because nothing's going to change in the village." Nothing's going change. It's going be like it always has been. And get out. Even, you know, in New York, there's villages. Some people live in their own little neighborhood and they don't even know other parts of New York. It's unbelievable.

And you become a different person. And once you become a different person, you think differently. You do differently. You treat people better. And it's where we all ought to be, but that bigotry and racism and not treating people respectfully, I swear, it's your great-grandparent's fault. And then it's your grandparent's fault. And then it's



your parent's fault. So you're gonna have to cut it off yourself and get out of there. And that's how I think about life is I know people all over the world and they all have children, and they love them. And I've been to Russia, China, India, Cambodia, Vietnam. I've been everywhere, even Beirut. I mean, I went to Beirut during the war and did some work for the Army. And I stayed in one of Saddam's palaces actually, it wasn't that great. It was a little dry.

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**Shawn:** I've always said, if it ain't broke, you don't need to fix it. Right? And MOFI, our boutique firm, we have three experience principals: know me, surprise me, and make it easy for me. And those three principles were built off of what your framework is because it's that powerful. And I think that simple. For our listeners, because I think this is a powerful thing that people also have to understand, in a culture and in an environment that you helped build and mold at Walt Disney World. You make people a priority and say the only way to excellence is with training, education, and enforcement.

How does that apply to vendors and contractors? So how do you manage those vendors and temporary staff that directly interact with your guests?

**Lee:** Well, I think the way you manage everybody that touches your business, or your life is with being clear about expectations before you're able to join us, or work on us, or get a contract. Clarity of expectations is probably the most important thing leaders can do. And they don't do it because being clear is hard work. And being clear means you got to have hard conversations when they don't do it. And people don't like to do hard things and that's the problem in life. If you don't do the hard things, life gets harder.

And so when you write a contract, you look them in the eye, I always said, "Look them in the eye, like your mother used to you and say, 'Did you understand what I just told you?' Don't play with me." Because mothers have empathy, and they have discipline. And if you apply those two things in the workplace, empathy and discipline, you will be extremely successful. And by the way, you should treat everybody respectfully, vendors, guests, competitors. We've done... You can't go around choosing to be different with different people. You're either a solid, good person, or you're not.

When you're not doing that, you're just playing the game and manipulating people. And that's how I think about it.



You know, somebody told me the other day he said, "You know, Lee, you'll be the same person you were today five years from now, except for the people you meet and the books you read." And boy, there's a lot of truth to that. If you don't get out of the village, you'll be the same person. You'll believe the same things. And about half of them are not true. About half the stuff your parents taught you is not true. You got to think for yourself, and you got to get out there and know, meet people, know people.

**Shawn:** I just had the honor this past year to co-author a book with two incredible colleagues, Michael Harper and Robin Glasgo. And the name of the book is called *Kiss Your Dragons*. And the premise of it really is around radical relationships, and this whole concept that your vibe attracts your tribe. So if you stay within your village, you stay within your tribe, you surround yourself with people that think like you, look like you, act like you, and really support you. And the whole premise of *Kiss Your Dragons* is dragons travel in swarms. And they travel with dragons that look different, act different, are different sizes, different colors. And that's what you're getting at. What I found powerful in what you just said, and really I hope our listeners hear it, is mothers have empathy and discipline. And as leaders, if we lead with empathy, but still have discipline, that's when you can build that environment that you are talking about, Lee.

So with all of your experience that you've shared with us, I'd love to get your opinion about some new challenges that leaders are confronted with today and even more relevant since 2020. One of those topics is the shift to remote work. How do we support an employee culture in a future where people won't be always on-site, but will have hybrid remote work jobs? What's your recommendation and advice to those leaders?

[00:20:15]

**Lee:** Yeah, well, remote is, you know, there's a lot of trust that you have to have when everybody goes remote. I would say it's the same theory in a way. You got to have the right people in place that you got to trust. If you don't trust people you've hired, you've hired the wrong person, or you have a serious problem. You should go see a psychiatrist because when you hire these people, you've got to trust them. You got to be clear about their expectations, what you need them to do and not do. You've got to train them the same way. You've got to get them trained one way or the other, right, whether it's online or in person, and you got to treat them right. You got to stay in touch with them.

You know, I don't text that much back and forth, some, or email back and forth. If somebody's got a problem, they'll send me a text, and half the time the text doesn't

have their phone number. So I say to somebody, "Give me your phone number," and I call them and we talk about it on the phone. And I keep in touch with people and call them and they're surprised. Most people don't get a call anymore and it's still hearing that voice, somebody caring about you. And by the way, being on Zoom where we can look at each other, that's still better than nothing. And you do get the feeling that you've had an appropriate interaction, and I can tell, you can talk about different things.

So I would say today, you got to treat them the same. It may be more work for you if you're the boss, but you've got to figure it out. And you've got to stay in touch, and the same old stuff. You got to have great people. Be clear what their work is. Give them the right resources, trust them, and then treat them right and make sure they know you haven't forgot them. I heard it from a lot of people in this that were laid off over the year. They had...6, 7, 8, 9, 10 weeks had gone by and they hadn't even heard from their boss. And they were on furlough. I mean, come on. People were struggling out there mentally. You know, anxiety and depression, right now. It's probably at the highest level it's ever been in the world.

And you got to help people. Be in touch. Tell them, "I appreciate you. How's it going? Do you need anything? How's the computer working? You know, you're going to be fine. We appreciate the good job you do." That call, I mean, it's part of your job. How many times you call your daughter when she goes off to college one day. You'll probably call her every day. She probably won't take your call. But yeah because parents, again, there's only two things parents worry about, two: safety and education. And that's all you're gonna worry about with your daughter, safety and education. And if we did that at work, safety and education, which means mental safety too, you keep in touch with those people. You encourage them.

You make sure they know they matter, how important they are. And then they can sleep at night and get up and do a good job for you. If you ignore people, they dream up what the problem is. That's the problem. If you don't hear from me, you'll start to make up the reason you haven't heard from me and it won't even be right, that you just won't know that I'm just not organized and haven't called you and I'm not paying attention. You'll think I don't care, or I'm about to fire you, or who knows. We dream up everything. There's no untold stories at the end of every day about how we feel about each other.

**Shawn:** Something that's really coming into the workplace today and into the corporate is the concept of heart. How does leading with the heart help a leader?

**Lee:** Well, I can tell you my theory is you cannot get into the brain till you go through the heart. You've got to connect with the person emotionally. They got to know you care, you respect them. They will then listen, and they will trust you. And then it'll send that little message up to the brain to do whatever you need them to do. And that's the way it works. I mean, let me tell you, you just got to think about that every day. You know, even if you have your daughter one day is having trouble in school or about something, the best way to reach her will be for you to sit down, talk to her quietly, have lunch with her, talk about it frequently so she trusts you, and not overdo it and not overreact and not make her scared because we can overdo it.

So you got to do it with finesse, and you gotta do it with empathy. And you've got to understand that people want to be cared for and loved. My wife told me once she said, "Lee, if you love me, tell me. Don't keep it to yourself." And I think I tell my wife today, I didn't. When I was busy running around, I wasn't doing that. And we've had a long talk about it, and she needs that. And I tell her every day I love her. And we've been married 52 years. And I will tell you, our relationship got better over the next few months after I started paying better attention to her and seeing how to reach her and help her and notice, and all the things we don't do sometimes. And, the same at work. Every day, you and everybody, this is opportunities to show appreciation, recognition, and encouragement to people.

That's the fuel that drives human performance every day. It could be a person on the street. It could be a homeless person. It could be your next-door neighbor, your mother. I tell everybody now, call your mother tonight and tell her how much you appreciate everything she's done for you. She'll start crying and your dad will say, "What happened? Did you get fired? Are you moving back home? Why are you calling here?" Because we don't do it often enough.

People got to know you're not manipulating them. And you got to walk the talk. And if you say, "I'm going to be there for you," you got to be there for them. If you just want to go home at 5:00 and something happens, you got to stay till 10:00, you know that, you got to stay and make it happen. You got to have total trust, and reliability, and credibility, and keep your promises. That's the name of the game in life. And we all know those people that we wouldn't trust in a minute to follow up. They say yes, they don't do it, and then we know the person in our life who you can always count on. And I want people to count on me that they know, Lee said he would be there. And he's there. He did it.

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**Shawn:** Well, as I've listened to you I had no idea the impact that the culture of working at Disney had made on my life and our company and the way I lead. And hearing you talk about this, I'm like, holy cow, that culture that you just created in Florida resonated throughout the company. And I want to thank you for that. And I want to thank you for actually pouring into me as a leader without me ever having to know you because you did lead this way. This is the legacy you're leaving to the world, so thank you for that.

**Lee:** Well, the only thing you can take with you and leave behind is your legacy, by the way.

**Shawn:** Yeah. Well, we've come to that point in the podcast that we call the Combustion Questions, three random questions that you don't even know what I'm going to ask you, Lee. And I just want you to have fun with it and give us your answer. So combustion question number one, Lee, if you could teach a course for undergraduates at any university in the world, what would you teach?

**Lee:** Well, I am doing that now. I got a course on my Cockerell Academy. It's the 30 things you need to know before you get in the workforce and the things you and I talked about today about people say, "I hope I'm going to be successful." And I say, "You go in there. You be better than everybody else. You have a better attitude. You do the work. You're reliable. You're credible. You do what you're supposed to do. And they won't even care if you have a degree." And so that's it. Be your best every day and then forgive yourself and then wake up tomorrow morning. Do your best every day and forgive yourself. And don't underestimate what you can achieve in your life. That's the biggest problem. Insecurity and lack of self-confidence keeps too many people down because they grew up poor, or they weren't a good student. They didn't have whatever else. They underestimated. They do themselves in. Don't do that. It's never too late to get better.

**Shawn:** Great advice. Combustion question number two, what's your favorite song to dance to?

**Lee:** "Blue Suede Shoes." And by the way, in 1960, I had a pair of blue suede shoes and the brush to brush them and I was pretty cool. I was wanting a pair of white bucks, but my mother wouldn't get them for me.

**Shawn:** Wow. I think the blue suede shoes fits you much better, Lee.

**Lee:** They are very cool.

**Shawn:** Yes. All right. Combustion question number three. What do you think about roller skates?

**Lee:** Well, when I was living on the farm, the big outing was we would get in the car in the backseat, my brother and I, my mom and dad. She would sit over by him because in those days you could sit anywhere you wanted in the front seat. She'd sit over with him and they were madly in love, I guess. And we would go roller skating. And that was, like, unbelievable excitement to go down about 12, 15 miles into the town and go to the roller-skating rink. The only bad thing was all the smoke in the air and secondhand smoke and everything and drinking beer and cussing. But yeah, we were little. And I mean, I'm talking little, fifth, sixth, seventh grade. That was the most exciting thing. I can't tell you. I still think about it, the music and some cute little girls running around and...

**Shawn:** Thank you so much for being with us on this episode. And I want to make sure to give you 30 seconds or so. Where can people connect with you, website, any social media, any of that? Where can our listeners get in touch with you?

**Lee:** Well, I'm on all the social media sites. That's how I promote my business even on TikTok. And you can get ahold of me at leecockerell.com. It's got everything on there that I've talked about today. I keep it all in one place.

**Shawn:** Thank you and be blessed.

**Lee:** Thank you, sir. It was fun and 98% of what I told you is true.

**Shawn:** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*. Let's keep the conversation going by connecting on LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. To learn more about the world of Experience Ecosystems, go to MOFI.co where you'll discover ideas and resources to help you ignite your own experience revolution.

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