

Report to the CEO: Color Factory
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Creative Leadership

Color Factory has the potential to be a unique place where each guest leaves feeling cheerful and lighthearted. However, due to poor management and a leadership team that is far removed from the daily realities faced by lower level employees, Color Factory is in the early stages of tribal leadership development. The talents of the experience specialists and operations team are being underutilized by a management team that is inexperienced and unwilling to admit they have faults. It is an organization that claims to have been started as a way to bring joy to people but has become more focused on profits and popularity. Beginning with a set of guiding principles, Color Factory must find its deeper cause and use that as a guide to a new, more positive and sustainable culture.

The first step in re-structuring Color Factory is to determine its guiding principles. Currently, the company values don't seem to go beyond making people happy and maintaining a clean image that's appealing for photos. One of Color Factory's goals is to give people a chance to take a moment to appreciate the joy of color, bringing attention to the colors that surround us in our daily lives, and letting go and feeling like a kid again. Staying true to the initial mission is important, but it's gotten lost in the pursuit of fame and profits. This is a place with potential for a unique set of principles because there's nowhere else exactly like it.

A good way to start would be for everyone involved with Color Factory, from the creative team to the experience specialists, to write down a few words or phrases that they would consider a description of the ideal version of what Color Factory could be. Some ideas of guiding principles that come to mind are being welcoming, inclusive, accessible, inviting, fun, lighthearted, whimsical, creative, or inventive. Building off the idea of embracing color and feeling like a child again, the new guiding principles can focus on being in the moment and forgetting one's troubles. Once everyone has written their idea of what Color Factory should stand for, the results could be studied to find patterns. When a consensus is reached, the results should be shared with all members of the staff. Attention should be paid to the vision the floor workers have just as much as the vision expressed by the creative team. With this balance, everyone is more likely to be on board with the new purpose. If anyone totally disagrees, time should be taken to find out why, and either they get on board or find somewhere else to work. Having a unified vision for the team is a strong way to begin a new era.

The management team is a major part of what's keeping Color Factory from reaching its full potential. There's a divide between managers, the operations team, and experience specialists. Each team thinks they are better than the others and feels like they have to fight to prove it. The current managers are indecisive and inconsistent in their leadership styles. Some days, they seem more concerned with having employees like them, and take it personally when experience specialists complain about the job. They need to learn that, as leaders, if they're making the right decisions for the group and people still complain, they should be able to move on and not take it personally. Being confident in decision-making and being able to be the scapegoat from time to time is part of being a manager, especially in a service industry-style job.

There's also inconsistency in the way rules are enforced. At the beginning of Color Factory, it seemed like strict rules would be in place about lateness, phone use, and job performance. However, once the place opened, the leadership team wasn't rigid about the rules- in part because they didn't want to be seen as the "bad guy." Employees got comfortable with that freedom, and the business was still successful, and guests were happy. Months later, managers decided they didn't feel like they were getting enough respect and began cracking down on the rules. A few people were fired to make a point, and employee morale dropped. Managers pick a just few people to target at a time, so one person could get away with sitting on the floor, being consistently late, or not following food safety rules while others were fired for doing the same thing. This causes experience specialists to not trust managers.

It's also clear that managers don't trust experience specialists. They're suspicious of gossip and go out of their way to be involved in private discussions. They get upset when employees on their lunch break are overheard complaining or talking about anything deemed inappropriate for the workplace- the definition of which changes each day. There needs to be more trust between the groups. Both sides think the other is badmouthing them, and they're usually right. Managers speak in a very political way and aren't honest about what they're doing or why they're doing it. They say they're approachable, but once someone speaks up about a concern, that person is targeted. People have given up and decided it's not worth the energy to try to improve things.

Improved transparency and authenticity is important to gaining trust on both ends. Managers must be able to hear complaints and understand that it's not personal. Some complaints are valid and should be addressed, but sometimes an employee just wants to express their frustration with a stressful day and they shouldn't be punished for it. Instead, leadership should look into the deeper reason behind the complaint. Sometimes it's something that can be worked on and sometimes the person just has a negative attitude- and often, that negative attitude is a result of poor organizational culture. Really listening to each other- not just saying, "We'll look into that!" is the way to gain trust and respect. Being consistent with policy and behavior instead of enforcing rules or giving people written warnings because the manager was in a bad mood is not the way to run a successful business.

Due to the inconsistent behavior of management and the disrespect shown by the creative team, experience specialists have gone from eager, involved employees who were ready to offer suggestions for improvements to beaten down, lifeless cogs in the machine. Having a more present creative team would be a good start to changing the attitude of experience specialists. Instead, the team comes through once every couple of months, barely acknowledges experience specialists, then goes back to their main jobs, sometimes in places across the country. After they leave, employees are told the new regulations for the appearance of the exhibit as designated by the creative team. Quite often, these new rules make the experience specialists' jobs more difficult, giving them more details to keep up with and maintain while trying to provide top-notch customer service. It's frustrating that people who have never worked in the space or really seen it in action are making decisions without consulting the people who are affected by them.

Currently, most experience specialists are apathetic at best. They show up, do the bare minimum, and leave as quickly as they can. They spend most of the time avoiding work and trying to stay out of sight of the managers because it's better to be under the radar. They even have tricks to hide from managers: going to areas where security cameras don't reach, carrying around a broom or paper towels to look busy, or staying on the move so they are harder to find. When it comes to the point where employees are trying to look busy so they don't get in trouble, it's time for a change.

Having a more open environment where experience specialists feel heard and seen is key to improving the culture at Color Factory. The people at higher levels need to spend more time on the floor so they can appreciate and understand the effort it takes to keep the place running smoothly. Listening when experience specialists voice their concerns or explain why a new policy doesn't work would save time and money. There have been so many times when management or the creative team made a decision that the lower level employees knew would be a failure but didn't listen when they spoke up. All the time and effort that goes into fixing things that aren't problems could be better spent fixing the parts that don't work, but the leadership doesn't listen to those ideas.

When people feel like their input matters, they take more pride in their job. Appreciating experience specialists for their effort and ideas would go a long way in improving the overall energy of Color Factory. Guests can tell when workers don't want to be there, and they have a better time when experience specialists are having fun. When experience specialists are truly valued for their unique talents and perspectives, they are more likely to put out a positive attitude and work as a team to further the mission of the company.

By establishing guiding principles, Color Factory will be able to find its deeper purpose. Instead of competing with other tourist attractions or pop-up Instagram museums, its competition will be all the negative things that happen in a person's day, or the monotony of a dull life. The drive to be the bright spot in someone's day, to potentially change their perspective and improve their outlook will be the intent of the place and of those who work there. One way to make the space more enjoyable for guests and workers would be to cut down on ticket sales. When Color Factory is at capacity, visitors have to wait in long lines and the rooms are crowded, loud, and messy. Experience specialists are stressed and unhappy, guests feel that they aren't getting their money's worth and are upset that they have to spend so much time waiting in lines. It takes the free-flowing aspect away and makes the experience less easygoing and fun. Weekends tend to be sold out and busy, while weekdays are less crowded. Perhaps the amount of tickets sold could be cut back, and prices lowered during weekdays. It would encourage more people to come during the week, selling more tickets those days to balance out the price difference and lower ticket sales.

Instagram-focused pop-up museums have become a fad. Color Factory, while it claims to be different, is part of that fad. It caters to the Instagram crowd by having built-in photo stations be part of the appeal. Many of the rooms' installations are used as just a photo backdrop, and the artists' work is underappreciated. Even the managers tell experience specialists to arrange the rooms and stations a certain way because people will want to take pictures for Instagram, or they will want it to look like the pictures they've seen on Instagram before their visit. At the same time, they tell experience specialists to try to honor each artist's intent- which isn't possible when people are just there to take pictures. While it may be extreme, having a no phone policy would really set Color Factory apart. It would force people to be in the moment, enjoying time with their friends and family, and taking in the exhibit. If that's too strict a policy, maybe just enforcing it a few days each week- phone-free Fridays, for example- could be a way to test the public reaction to such an unconventional move. Lowering or eliminating the association with Instagram is the way to make Color factory outlast the fad and be a sustainable business.

Accessibility is another major issue that the guiding principles should address. Not only are people who are blind or people with certain physical disabilities left out of the fun, the price is prohibitive for many. Instituting certain hours that are "pay what you wish," as done by other museums in the city, could open up Color Factory to people who can't afford the \$38 ticket price without doing much damage to profits. Being more inclusive and accessible would also make the place seem more friendly- the high ticket price keeps many people away and puts a lot of pressure on Color Factory to make people feel like the money they've spent was worthwhile. Many museums in the area have student, senior, child, or NY resident discounts to make themselves more accessible. Dynamic pricing could also be used, so the price goes up at high-demand times, allowing for lower prices during the off-season or weekdays.

Once Color Factory has reached the stage of enlightenment, where they are no longer comparing themselves to other businesses, existing to serve a higher purpose, and engaging employees at all levels, its journey isn't over. It should always be growing, learning, and adapting. It is important that management keep checking on the health of the organization and don't fall back into old habits. Color factory should be treated as a living organization that is always open to improvements and new ways to solve problems. Its leadership can't do the work to reach the highest level of tribal leadership, then walk away. For the success to last, employees must stay aware of the guiding principles and greater purpose and keep from getting dragged down by the stress of customer service. Leadership must be open to the idea that employees will come and go due to the service-oriented nature of the job. It's not one that can last, especially for artists who need a day job and don't intend to work their way up through the ranks. But hiring young artists as well as people who want a long-term career with Color Factory is important. Hiring young artists is a way to provide fresh perspectives and different aspects of creativity to the overall culture at Color Factory. As long as the leadership stays true to the organization's mission and has a contagious passion for their work, some turnover won't damage the work done to raise the standards of the organization.

Timeline for instituting change:

1. Establish guiding principles: 3-4 weeks
2. Re-write business plan to align with guiding principles: 4-5 weeks
3. Re-train or hire new management who believe in the newfound purpose: 5-6 weeks
4. Re-train and reevaluate the role of experience specialists: 4-6 weeks
5. Continue re-evaluating goals and values to adapt to changing conditions, ingrain sense of purpose into company culture, allow room for growth while maintaining core purpose: ongoing

These times are flexible. The process shouldn't be rushed, but it shouldn't drag on so long that momentum is lost.