

## Service Excellence: The Leadership Factor - By Dennis Snow

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We all know that customer service initiatives come and go, usually beginning with a lot of fanfare and ending with a quiet departure. With each occurrence of this pattern, an organization's employees become more and more skeptical about subsequent service initiatives.

When employees don't see intense leadership commitment beyond the program's rollout, they quickly understand that the initiative is another program of the month. The general feeling becomes; "wait it out, this too shall pass."

*"The corporation can never be something we are not" Max Dupree, Leadership is An Art*

There is no shortage of vision statements, service strategy formation, and service program rollouts. It is in the execution of these initiatives that organizations often come up short. The virtues of customer service have been preached for years, but the results have been less than impressive. Why? The main reason is that most organizations want a "smile pill" that can be taken with little or no disruption to the current routine. In order to truly generate lasting service improvement, a top down commitment to changing processes, behaviors, measurements, etc. is needed. To execute a vision or strategy effectively, leaders must be committed in the long-term. Employees at all levels are watching to see how committed their leaders are. Clues to commitment to execution include; what does my manager spend most of her/his time talking about? What do our meetings focus on? What does my manager hold me accountable for? What gets rewarded and recognized? And probably most important of all, how well does my manager walk the talk when it comes to providing excellent service?

There are three key leadership behaviors that will demonstrate commitment to executing a service improvement strategy:

### **Walk the talk**

Before employees take personal responsibility for creating an environment that demonstrates a commitment to excellence, they must see that their leadership team is committed. If, for example, you expect employees to acknowledge customers promptly, it is vital that you do the same. If you expect employees to pay attention to detail, then picking up a piece of trash off the floor as soon as you see it will speak volumes beyond anything you can put in a policy manual.

A recent article in the Orlando Sentinel highlighted Erin Wallace, Vice President of the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World. Part of the story emphasized that whenever Erin walks the park she carries and uses a "nabbie grabber" which is a device Custodians use to pick up cigarette butts off the ground. Imagine the impact this has on Disney cast members. Cast members are reminded that it is everyone's job to keep the park clean. It also reinforces one of Disney World's key values - attention to detail. If, however, Erin were to simply walk by a piece of trash on the ground and not pick it up, cast members would quickly get the idea that "attention to detail" is simply a catch phrase, not a true value.

A clear example of walking the service talk is the willingness to put service support systems in place. Support systems demonstrate that you are prepared to back up the talk with resources. Southwest Airlines, for example, is noted as a service leader. They constantly preach the value of excellent service. They don't just talk about it, however. Southwest is the industry standard when it comes to flight turnaround time; twenty-minutes. They are currently working on a new jetway system, however, that will improve the turnaround time to fifteen minutes. If you watch the Southwest ground crew in action when a plane arrives, you'll see that it is similar to a racecar pit crew. Everything is ready to go into motion as soon as the plane stops. The new jetway system will allow employees to unload and load the plane from the front and rear doors simultaneously, dramatically improving the efficiency of the process. It is clear that the leadership team doesn't simply tell the staff to be friendly. They put systems in place that enhance the ability of their personnel to provide outstanding service. The message is a powerful one. Is it any wonder that Southwest Airlines has the lowest employee turnover in the industry?

### **Keep the vision in front of the team**

It is not enough to state the message of service excellence a single time and expect that behaviors will magically change. Research shows that repetition is the key to behavior change. Use all of the communication vehicles available to you to stress the importance of customer service. For example, make it your policy to start every meeting with a customer service item, either a story, a problem/challenge facing the team, or a discussion of service measurement data. Employees will soon get the idea that these discussions are part of the normal course of business and will, over time, begin participating in the discussions.

Use your internal newsletter to communicate your service commitment. More importantly, use the newsletter to tell stories of excellent service. Share specific stories of employee actions that result in excellent service. Send articles about customer service to the team with a note from you highlighting how the information pertains to your business. Ensure that all areas are displaying service measurement information in behind-the-scenes areas and that the information is kept up to date. Nothing screams "program of the month" louder than data that hasn't been changed for months.

Most importantly, be creative about the communication mechanisms used for keeping the vision in front of the team. I recently consulted with a hospital that has variety of mechanisms to remind staff members of the true meaning of their jobs. My favorite example is this: Whenever a baby is born in the hospital, the first 10-seconds of Brahms lullaby plays softly throughout the entire hospital's sound system. This simple mechanism reminds staff members, in very difficult jobs, of the miracles happening in their workplace. They have found that patients often ask why the music is playing. When the staff member explains that a baby has just been born, there is an emotional connection that takes place for the patient and the staff

member.

### **Hold employees accountable for service excellence**

Leaders must ensure that accountability processes are built into any service improvement initiative. Look at your performance appraisal system. Do appraisals, for both management and frontline employees, emphasize specific customer service behaviors? How much is customer service emphasized in the appraisal? Is it a single rating point amongst thirty items, or is it clear that service is a priority?

It is vital that you become a customer service coach. Whenever you see opportunities for improvement for any employee, take the time to coach. If you do this consistently, word will spread faster than you can imagine. If, for example, you notice an employee displaying negative physical posture or using a bored tone of voice on the telephone, taking a moment to correct the behavior and stressing why it is important to present a welcoming image is more effective in changing behavior than any training program. The immediacy of the feedback is the key. Often leaders do not do this because they are concerned about offending the employee, or there is simply a reluctance to confront negative behavior. But holding employees (at all levels) accountable for service excellence is vital if you are serious about service improvement. When I was a relatively new supervisor at Walt Disney World, I received a call to meet then Walt Disney World Vice President Bob Matheison at a specific location on Main Street USA. As I walked up to Bob, I saw that he was staring at one of the merchandise shops. I knew from his expression this was not going to be a pat on the back for a job well done. "What do you see?" he asked. I saw that a small pane of glass had been replaced, and that the installer had neglected to take the protective paper backing off of the glass. Although I did not install the glass, it was my job as supervisor to make sure that Main Street USA was "show ready" by the time the guests arrived. I missed this particular item. Bob's simple act of holding me accountable for a small detail had a huge impact on the future of my attention to detail.

Of course, the other side of the accountability coin is also important. The Gallup organization has conducted significant research regarding the reasons for employee "defection." Gallup found that one of the main reasons for defection is a lack of recognition for good work. Whenever you observe an employee providing excellent service, take the time to reinforce the behavior through immediate recognition. Recognition can simply take the form of a positive comment, or something greater if appropriate. Again, immediacy is the key. Taking the time to immediately reinforce the behavior greatly increases the likelihood of the behavior being repeated.

As a leader, you are looked upon as a role model of the organization's commitment to customer service. Employees take their cue directly from you. They watch how you treat customers, listen to how you talk about customers, and observe what you demonstrate as important through how you spend your time. By walking the talk, keeping the vision constantly in front of employees, and holding everyone accountable for performance, service excellence will soon become part of the organization's culture, creating a culture of service excellence.

### **Watch the magic happen**

A favorite example of "inculturating" service excellence involves a housekeeper at Walt Disney World's Contemporary Resort. A family was at dinner and the housekeeper was conducting the room turndown service. As she prepared the beds and did the general cleanup, she noticed that the children had several stuffed Disney characters around the room. Taking an extra few seconds, she arranged the characters on the children's pillows, tucked them in, and left a note saying, "I know you had a busy day! The characters were tired so I tucked them in for you." She then signed her name, Helen. Imagine the impact on this family when they returned to the room. Leadership seized upon this story of doing small things that make a big difference and told this story in so many meetings that it became legendary at Disney World. Other housekeepers have come up with creative ideas such as lining up the stuffed characters in front of the TV and turning it on. Some housekeepers will arrange the characters on a table with playing cards in their hands, or with milk and cookies. Guests consistently write complimentary notes regarding this activity. Imagine the loss if leadership did not recognize this behavior, communicate it, and reinforce it. Most people want to do their best. They just need encouragement and reinforcement. Watch the magic happen!

### **About the Author:**

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