

Customer Service: Training for Excellence - By Dennis Snow

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George Miliotes was the General Manager of the California Grill restaurant from 1995-2001. The California Grill is an upscale restaurant located on the top floor of the Contemporary Resort at Walt Disney World. George is a big believer in training and education. Disney World, of course, is known for training its cast members in the nuances of customer service.

George recognized, however, that it is his responsibility to support and supplement the education his cast members received from formal programs such as the Disney University. He spent 15-minutes every day educating all California Grill cast members (front of house and back of house). If he was not there, the Assistant Manager did the training. Three topics were covered in these short sessions; wine, food, and service. Although George has left the California Grill, his influence is still felt. He has trained servers from all walks of life to be wine experts. Every cast member on every shift knows how to describe all menu items in ways that highlight why they are special (menu items vary depending on season). They can describe the freshness of the tomatoes used in a way that literally makes your mouth water. George also focused on customer service issues, which included recognizing performance, providing showmanship tips (how to describe the wine list is truly an art), or anything else he felt deserved attention. The impact of these daily educational moments:

Beverage sales average 10-15% of total sales in similar restaurants. Wine revenue represents 30%+ of total sales revenue at the California Grill.

In 1999, The USA Today food critic wrote that the single best meal he had that year in the United States was at the California Grill.

65% of the original staff was still there when George left six years later. This is in an industry that averages nearly 200% turnover per year.

George has since become the General Manager of a new restaurant in Orlando and that restaurant is now considered to be THE place to eat, and is known for outstanding service. George has successfully continued his approach to training.

Education, in all its forms, pays off when it is focused, sincere, and ongoing. Most world-class organizations quickly indicate training and education as keys to their success. However, it isn't simply a matter of sending employees to classes and checking training off your to-do list. It is about using educational opportunities to strategically deepen the culture of the organization. The information in this article is applicable to all training efforts including orientation, on-the-job training, and ongoing training efforts.

Effective education/training in an organization should accomplish three objectives:

Objective 1: Build pride in the organization

When employees are proud of what they do and the organization they work for, they will usually go the extra mile when opportunities present themselves. This is because they feel a sense of duty to uphold the image the organization has built. In most companies, employees don't truly feel a connection to the company's heritage and traditions; therefore they have no anchor for an emotional connection.

As leaders, we should use every opportunity to educate our people on the values, heritage, and traditions of the company. We need to provide a foundation for pride. Employees will always gripe internally about certain organizational issues. It is simply human nature. The true measure of pride is how they talk about the company externally. If someone badmouths the company, do employees defend the company's honor? Or do they join in with the badmouthing?

Storytelling is at the core of organizational pride building. Where did the company come from? What makes it special? What are some of the legends that define the company's culture? Disney makes a special point to highlight the challenges and struggles of the early years and how the challenges were overcome through courage and creativity. This helps new cast members appreciate the legacy they are now responsible for upholding. I know of a hospital whose orientation program highlights their ongoing community involvement and the special place they occupy in the hearts of community residents. Employees get the message that they are now ambassadors of this reputation. This message is stressed in every one of the hospital's training activities.

As mentioned above, storytelling is a key tool in the pride-building component of training. Anthropologists tell us that throughout history humans have used storytelling to perpetuate their cultures. Stories create a picture of the culture in action and help create an emotional connection. A good place to start is with long-term employees, especially those who were with the company from the beginning. Get them to tell you stories of those early years and how the company endured through good and bad times. Why did the company succeed? Who were some of the key people involved? You clearly won't be able to use every example, or even most of the examples. But a few gems will present themselves that truly define the company's origins. Also, talk to your outstanding employees one-on-one. Why are they proud to work with the organization? What stories do they share that provide the rationale for their pride? Again, you won't be able to use everything you hear. But certain themes will arise that will help new employees connect emotionally with the culture. Make these stories key components of your organization's training activities.

Objective 2: Communicate the "true product"

In order to get the highest level of performance, associates need to understand the value of what they do beyond the mechanics of the job. Most people want to know their work is meaningful to others. This is why Walt Disney World's true product is not rides; it is "happiness." Select Medical Corporation's true product is not medicine; it is "miracles." BMW Canada's true product is not a car; it is the "ultimate driving experience." These companies use their training programs to communicate the true product.

Imagine, for instance, being hired as a mechanic with a BMW Canada auto dealership. It is one thing to be told, "you fix cars." It is something else to understand that you are part of creating the "ultimate driving experience." In the latter, you are encouraged to help customers get the most from these very special cars. Clearly, you can't simply communicate the true product and leave it at that. There must be systems and processes that support the philosophy. But, communicating the true product is an important part of the process. Most employees want to be part of something larger than the basics of their jobs. Walt Disney World custodial hosts and hostesses, for example, not only keep the parks clean, they answer questions, take photographs for guests, and "sweep with showmanship." They are creating happiness.

Once again, one of the best ways to communicate the true product is through storytelling. To say, "We create happiness," is nice, but not very effective. To provide ongoing examples of how it is done, and celebrating those who do, provides a model for associates to emulate. This is why storytelling is at the core of Disney's approach to training.

What is your company's true product? It is the benefit your customers get by using your product or service.

Objective 3: Communicate expectations

One of the top reasons for employee defection is a lack of clarity regarding expectations. When people don't know what it takes to be successful, they do their best to simply stay out of trouble and off the radar screen. Clear expectations provide a template for success. Consistent, non-negotiable service standards sound limiting at first glance. In reality, consistent standards are liberating in that they allow employees to focus their creativity in appropriate ways.

Most organizations today have stated values. The problem lies in the fact that these stated values are often vague, they are similar to the values of every other organization, and/or there are too many for an individual to keep top of mind. It is vital to zero in on 4-5 organizational values that are "core-core". Violation of any of these values, even once, diminishes the very identity of your organization. Many organizations will argue that, "all 25 of our values are important." While this may be true, I would challenge anyone to recite those 25 values, and I would question the "coreness" of all of them.

Training should communicate these core values as behaviors. What do the values look like, sound like, and feel like in action? The more information you provide, the greater the likelihood you will get the performance you are looking for. For example, Respect for the Individual is a core value of the hospital I mentioned earlier. Behaviorally, all hospital employees are expected to knock and ask permission before entering any patient's room. They are expected to pull the privacy curtain any time they are with a patient. All hospital employees are expected to explain any procedure they are doing, demonstrating respect for the patient's dignity. These behaviors are non-negotiable. The behaviors are introduced during orientation, reinforced during on-the-job training, and employees are thereafter held accountable for them.

Concluding Comments

If you want to build a service culture, service training will play an important role. Of course, technical training is, and will continue to be an important part of any training program. Most companies, however, focus strictly on the technical skills and ignore the service culture skills, thinking that employees will simply catch on. The poor state of customer service in most companies demonstrates that most employees don't catch on. World class companies ensure that employees:

1. Are proud of the organization
2. Understand the true product
3. Understand what is expected

Manager 1 - "What if I put all of this effort into training my associates and they leave?"

Manager 2 - "What if you don't put any effort into training your associates and they stay?"

About the Author:

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