

Thinking Globally, Acting Locally - By Steve Ferry

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How does one turn individuals from no matter what culture, country, familial and social background, who follow certain moral codes or not, into the epitome of a British butler and the quintessential service provider?

Not a question most people ask, but it is one that has challenged trainers at the International Institute of Modern Butlers and which parallels the task facing trainers around the world trying to bring about some standardized level of high-quality service by employees in their hotels.

We look for those with a service heart, with service experience, with some starting point upon which to hang the service culture established by corporate. And the result is generally mixed, ranging from very good to passable, more often the latter. Perhaps nowhere is it more important to think globally and act locally than in the hospitality industry of a global economy.

Trying to enforce a global model, a same-brand identity in all corners of the world results in the kind of behavior that can rankle with guests: such as having butlers slip notes under guest-room doors at regular intervals reminding guests to use their butlers; or guests being told 'It's my pleasure' by every employee in response to the slightest of acknowledgements by the guest. Sometimes, hotel-grading standards enforce this on hotel staff, such as the requirement that the guest's name be used at least three times by each employee. This sounds natural enough when a butler is with a guest for several minutes, but what about the valet, doorman, and bellhop? They have seconds to fit in the mandatory greeting in triplicate, and the guest hears his or her name nine times within the first minute of arrival.

What is happening here is a tendency to put a rule where an individual's judgment should be; to make a rule stand in for the evident lack of ability of individuals to exhibit basic social graces and service functions. But does this not boil down to a failure to bring about an understanding of the principles of social interaction and graces, and of service, and be able to apply them when called for? In other words, as trainers, we seem to have hit a brick wall on having employees think for themselves and act responsibly.

We seem to have fallen for the line that people have to be programmed in the same way that one programs computers or robots. This seems like the only option that works, but the problem is, it does not work beyond a certain level, just like robots. Take the task of training a couple from the Far East as butlers in a private residence in three days. It was not possible, beyond training in certain set actions and phrases, which the couple would then use from then on out, whether or not they were appropriate to the occasion.

Where understanding is lacking, employees will ask earnestly for set patterns to follow. Even though they make very poor robots and have the ability to think intelligently for themselves, they want some stable datum to fall back on in order to deal with the confusion of some situation or in servicing a guest.

There are many reasons for this tendency, including the Chinese School method of learning by rote...repeatedly reading something aloud until it is memorized, but with no faintest idea of the meaning of the words being spoken, or how to apply the procedures they may describe.

We are encountering the same in Western society, as education and reading standards continue to fall over the last four decades (in the US, since the Secondary Education Act of 1965 redirected schools away from teaching the three 'R's and onto psychiatric programs and drugs). Today, according to the US Government, half the adult population in the US is either functionally illiterate (44 million or 23%) or sufficiently illiterate not to be able to be trained (worldwide, the figure is 1 billion, or 16% functionally illiterate). When most people read today, they either go blank, having no idea what they just read, or they can repeat it all back but have no idea what it means, or more pertinently, how to do it (a la Chinese School). Has this happened to you ever?

In this sort of a climate of learning, it becomes very hard to train employees to think for themselves, to act intelligently, to apply the basic social graces, to serve with finesse. And so we resort to set patterns and procedures in order to bring about at least a modicum of service.

But the problem with this approach is guests are not treated as individuals, but as items on a conveyor belt, a commodity that has to be dealt with. There is no real live communication, and often, entirely too much communication when acute observation and an understanding silence on the part of the employee would work far better.

So this is barrier #1, the solution to which is teaching people how to study effectively (the subject perhaps of another article) and so think for themselves, rather than requiring programming.

The next hurdle to top is again one that relates to creating an ability in employees that is completely new in the field. Actually, increasing the ability to do two things: a) To be present in the moment and b) to observe the obvious.

These sound simple to do and are, but present a challenge to all who first attempt them. Too often in terms of being there in the moment, an individual will actually be thinking of something else in the past while addressing a guest: some upset, some problem, something they messed up on; or of something in the future, such as their upcoming vacation or the size of the tip they will receive in two minutes; or they think about something in present time, such as the bust line of the guest or of what to say next. All of these add up to being distracted and interiorized, instead of extroverted with all attention on the guest and

servicing him or her.

In terms of observing the obvious, an individual will look at something and make all sorts of conclusions and suppositions from it and then present this package as a statement of what they see. For instance, asked to look at a guest, an employee might say, 'I can see he has experience.' This is not an observation, but an extrapolation based on what is seen. All the employee can actually see, when pushed to clarify his statement, is that the guest 'has wrinkles around his eyes,' which to that employee connotes 'experience.' This is one of the key reasons twelve witnesses to the same accident will describe twelve different accidents. In the hotel context, if employees observe to observe the obvious, in other words, what they actually see, hear, smell, and feel (touch, not opinions) about their environment and guests, then they will be able to record that data in a rapidly growing guest profile for future use, as well as deal with the situation or guest appropriately.

The kind of observation that butlers (should) engage in is unobtrusive, the kind that notes without asking what the guests preferences are in terms of areas such as the arts, sports, food, drink, dress, transport; personal, familial, and cultural celebrations and customs, morals and ethics, and generational differences within families.

Alert employees able to think for themselves, will add to such a data base and use it. No amount of rules can bring about such attention to detail because the starting point, an alert employee, is missing.

These are the underlying skills that smooth the way for interacting smoothly with diverse cultural groups with the alertness, intelligence, panache, equanimity, attention to detail, anticipation, and professionalism of the British butler.

Easier said than done? Yes, but still very much within reach.

Professor Steven Ferry trains butlers in hotels, hotel condominiums, private villas, resorts, and private estates; spa butlers in facilities with spas, and corporation employees on a variety of topics. He is Chairman of the International Institute of Modern Butlers (www.modernbutlers.com) and author of the best-selling industry texts, *Hotel Butlers*, *The Great Service Differentiators* and *Butlers and Household Managers*, 21st Century Professionals. He can be contacted at stevenferry@modernbutlers.com.

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