

What To Do If There's Nobody at Home - By Steven Ferry

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We all know what are right attitude and good service, but how does one bring them about in others? The answer to that question should be worth your attention, if not \$64,000.

The basic philosophy behind the answer is that presence precedes action both in terms of sequence and importance. Without the ability to be, one cannot do-an understanding that could have put Hamlet's mind firmly to rest. It could likewise save many megawatts of energy on the part of trainers the world over, trying to inculcate¹ into their hopeful charges various mantras and set patterns of behavior in dealing with guests.

The point being missed is that the simple ability 'to be there, in the moment' is the starting point for three vital skills, all of which add up to ability, and without which, actions invariably end up being inappropriate:

- 1) Can you perceive what is there in front of you (as opposed to what you think is there)?
- 2) Can you compute rationally?
- 3) Can you act appropriately?

In order to perceive what is in front of you (such as a guest), you have to be in front of the person in front of you. No argument with such a truism², perhaps, until we ask for a definition of 'You.' Who are you? We are back to philosophy. A question that is easy to answer, in this case, if we imagine your body standing in front of an irate guest who has various things to say, while you are daydreaming about the night before; or perhaps thinking furiously about your employees who messed up in so disagreeable a fashion; or zoning out in any number of ways. The guest finally finishes talking and you do a quick replay of what you thought he said, and your response results in another ten minutes of invective. 'You' in this case, does not refer to your body. While some people might guess it refers to your mind, the thing you are busy computing with-'Your mind was on something else'-this is not correct, either. 'You' are the person who is aware of being aware, who is aware of the thoughts about your juniors, or the pictures of the night before, and busy looking at them instead of the guest.

Now, the last paragraph has probably lost half the readership, so if you are still with me, congratulations; you may now proceed to the article in this week's HBR and see if it opens any doors for you.

1 Instill (an attitude, idea, or habit) by persistent instruction

2 A statement that is obviously true while providing nothing new or interesting

What To Do If There Is Nobody At Home

By Steven Ferry, Chairman, the International Institute of Modern Butlers

If being in the moment is so important, why can't or don't more of us do it more often? How come our minds keep wandering, we become impatient or angry with the person in front of us, or bored, or any other attitude? These are all a departure from being there comfortably in front of another person and really tracking with what he or she is saying, doing, and needing.

Well, 20th Century pill-pushers have most of us convinced that these modern potions and elixirs will fix our wandering attention. Yet every single person I have seen on these legalized drugs or trying to shake their addiction is a mass of random thoughts and introversion that make it very difficult indeed to be in the moment, observing calmly, computing and acting rationally. With 80% of the US population on these drugs and the rest of us beginning to enjoy them in our water supply, I'd say we had one reason people's attention is not always in the moment. Obviously, street drugs, some of which are as powerful as their psychiatric cousins, have the same effect, but we tend to try discourage street-drug-popping employees from remaining employed. So this may not be a factor, except in the case of employees who have indulged a bit too much in the past-drug residues remain locked in various parts of their anatomy and occasionally go into circulation and thus effect.

Another element that makes it hard to be in the moment is thinking we understand something while not actually doing so; or not understanding something at all. If this guest with a big issue uses words we do not understand, or mumbles something so we cannot hear it, or uses a word for which we understand the wrong definition, or has a limited ability to express himself, there is a subtle disconnect on our part from the guest, and if enough of these non-comprehensions occur, we start to feel frustrated or worse at the guest, compounding the problem that we are not understanding their problem and so are not going to be able to deal with it to their satisfaction.

Or maybe we have had an argument with a significant other. That's an upset and a problem and maybe, if we have something we did to him or her that we haven't come clean on, also a source of anger toward them (paradoxically): the end result is attention anywhere but on the guest.

Many more factors compel a person out of the moment, but rather than belaboring the point, suffice to say that trying to beat in SOPs over these distractions does not resolve them and so success remains ephemeral. ³ When employees walk around with an unfortunate attitude or serve salami in the soup instead of croutons, then one has to cut back and fix the 'ability to be in the moment' before one can make any progress with 'Well, this is what really goes in soup,' and 'This is the kind of

attitude guests tend to appreciate when servicing them.' The ability to be in the moment no matter what is going on in one's own head (such as dislikes of certain types of guests), one's private life (such as financial problems), or one's body (such as pains, or drugs numbing or speeding up life), is the desired end goal. Handling the different elements that drive one out of the moment is of course the best long-term fix. But this lies outside the scope of a hotel executive's purview.⁴

By definition and requirement, British butlers are a phlegmatic⁵ group tasked with observing what is in front of them so as to anticipate and provide invisible service. That was my starting point as a butler, so meeting with shortfalls in those under my charge in terms of superior service, I realized the basic issue was this question of inability to be there in the moment and thence observe what is right in front of one's face. Under-butler standing behind a guest who has just lit a cigar: does the under-butler observe that the room has no ashtray, thereby predicting an imminent need and so acting swiftly and discreetly?⁶ No, he is off in the stratosphere about goodness knows what, reason unknown. So the inevitable happens: the guest has to ask for an ashtray, about which the under-butler may or may not have an attitude, and then the guest has to focus on calibrating the required angle of his cigar to accommodate a one-inch length of sagging ash while the cigar slowly extinguishes itself and the under-butler tracks down an ashtray in a flurry of coattails and perspiration.

The search for a solution to this malaise led to a most unlikely place: A series of drills created almost six decades ago by the researcher, Mr. Hubbard, who was the first to recognize this issue of people not being in the moment and the various reasons they are not. He created drills that would enable the counselors he was training to be in the moment during counseling sessions that would sometimes last hours on end. The requirement being interested observation and concern that was completely invisible and natural to the other person. Nothing introduced by the counselor that could distract the other person, continual observation of the other person's world, computing and anticipating futures, and taking appropriate action. It would be nice to think Hubbard was inspired by observing his Rhodesian butler in action a few years earlier, but that would not be the actual case.

Suffice to say, the drills work very well when done properly, because they give employees the ability to be present in the moment, and therefore observe, anticipate, and act. It does not matter how wild a situation or person may become, the employee has the ability to calmly and appropriately face the situation, weigh it up, and act to improve it. Where everybody has this skill, more often than not, situations do not spiral so far out of control that they need to be salvaged with great decibel- and fraught⁶ emotional-levels.

If a person can be himself, accurate observation, intelligent computation, and effective action can then take place. Beyond this, however, is one other element that is singularly critical to anyone interested in serving another, whether a writer, actor, butler, or President: the ability to be that other person, to see life as he or she sees it.

What do my constituents really want that will make them vote for me again? What do my customers really want to buy? What does my guest like and want? Yes, we research, ask questions, build databases if we are smart. But beyond that, when all is said and done, are we sitting in our own space thinking, thinking, thinking? Or can we go out and look at another person and just see them for who and what they are? Can we assume their point of view, geographically speaking, literally look at the world through their eyes and listening through their ears and hearing their thoughts?

When we can, then we won't have any trouble anticipating their next need and desire. When a butler long in experience, including with the British Royal family, told the author that mastering the art of butling is a life-long ambition, he was right on track, because this kind of skill is some of the magic that goes into being the quintessential butler, and therefore, the quintessential service professional.

And it all starts with being.

3 Lasting a very short time

4 The extent of the concerns or influence of someone or something

5 Having a dependable and calm disposition

6 Intentionally unobtrusive

7 Causing or affected by great anxiety or stress

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