

The Uncommon Practice of Common Purpose

James H. Gilmore, coauthor of *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*, introduces a tale of learning based on an excerpt from the book *Common Purpose: How Great Leaders Get Organizations to Achieve the Extraordinary*, by Joel Kurtzman,

Over time, managers have come to know the value of providing service excellence and having the tools to analyze and improve service. Yet in many encounters consumers have with businesses, service is not extraordinary. In fact, it often stinks. Why?

One major reason is that too many executives don't tap enough uncommon sources to inspire a common purpose within their organizations. They implement best practices instead of best principles. They focus exclusively on ROI (return on investment) and instead get RODNN (return on doing nothing new, pronounced "rotten").

Consumers crave more authentic experiences. What is instructional about the story Gilmore shares from Kurtzman's book is how the staging of distinctive experiences for customers begins with the staging of unique experiences for employees. It's a lesson and a practice any true leader should readily embrace.

On a trip to Kyoto, Japan, a group of Japanese automobile executives took Kurtzman to an Italian restaurant. He was initially perplexed at the choice of cuisine given that they were in the center of old Japan, but he quickly learned the reason behind the choice. They wanted to show him something they thought was important about leadership.

The restaurant, which looked like a traditional Japanese restaurant on the outside, was very Italian on the inside, with warm pastel colors, white tablecloths, candles, and Western flatware rather than chopsticks. The food turned out to be excellent, the sauces were delicate and very much like what he had eaten in northern Italy. The pairing of Italian wines was impeccable and the selection was vast. All in all, it was a wonderful and unique dining experience. But the question still nagged him as to why an Italian restaurant?

The Japanese executives explained that once a year, the owner of the restaurant closes his doors for two weeks and takes all of his employees on a trip to Italy. They go to a different region each year. Chefs, waiters, even the dishwashers go. As they travel the country, they pay close attention to the food, the ambiance, to the way the plates are prepared, to the service, and to the way each different food is served. They go to Italy for the experience, and when they return to Japan, they recreate that experience.

While this is not an inexpensive exercise, the restaurant owner finds that everyone in town is excited about what he and his staff learned and about the new dishes they will soon be serving and business always picks up. In addition, these visits to Italy rebuild the restaurant's esprit de corps. Everyone who works there feels special — as if they are on a mission on behalf of their customers to discover what will delight them.

The restaurant's owner decided when he opened his establishment that he wanted it to be the best and most authentic Italian restaurant in Kyoto — perhaps in all of Japan. He wanted his restaurant to be authentic not just with regard to cuisine, but also with regard to the experience he provided to his guests. As a leader, the owner didn't care that his restaurant cost more to run than other restaurants that got their recipes from books. He knew that by making a regular pilgrimage to Italy, he was creating a mystique for his endeavor and that customers would pay more for the experience of tasting something novel and good.

But the real surprise for Kurtzman was learning how an executive at a global, multibillion-dollar Japanese auto company would care about a business as small as a restaurant with only one branch as an example of how people should lead.