

Service - The Servant-Leader

From Fantastic Customer Service Inside & Out, © Frank Polkowski, et. al.

You know me, I'm a nice person. When I get bad service, I don't complain, fret, or criticize. I wouldn't dream of making a scene. I just happen to be one of those nice customers. But I'll tell you what else I am. I'm the customer who doesn't come back. Oh, I'll take whatever you give me, because I know I'm not coming back. I might even argue with you and feel somewhat better by causing you grief, but in the long run, it's just better to leave and leave quietly. You see, a nice customer like me, multiplied by others like me, can bring a business, yes, even your business, to its knees. There are many of us. When we have received enough bad service, we go to one of your competitors.

As you may have heard, we are now in a period when companies that perform service rather than produce goods are increasing in profitability, size, and number. With this shift, customers, more than ever, focus on service quality almost as much as they do price. For the first time, in 2002, a service company, Wal Mart, has been ranked as No. 1 in the Fortune 500. Improving service is the reason you chose this book. This chapter explores how you can make service a leadership behavior in all your people and help your leaders serve others.

Leader-Servant Posture Before we talk about the Leader-Servant posture, think of your own organization. More specifically, step back and think of this and other organizations you are involved with, maybe as a volunteer or board member. Non-profits have many of the same issues we have, but we don't always think of non-profits as businesses. What attracts their new customers? Are there any similarities between your current organization and theirs? How do you make the customer "yours"? What brings your customer back? What brings any customer back?

Close your eyes and relax for a moment -- Picture your people, those who are involved with direct customer service. Do they deliver the customer service you want? Do they know demonstratively what that level of customer service is? How do they know what a Fantastic Customer Service attitude might be? Are your customers standing up and cheering for you and your service attitude? What about those who are not directly, but organizationally, involved; do they know what that attitude is? Is that attitude demonstrated to the world?

Those of us in management and leadership positions need to be Servant-Leaders. We need to be "Cultural Advisers." As cultural advisers we promote the culture of our organization, which, among other things, includes our customer service attitude. Therefore, we must be examples to our peers, upper management, and customers alike. Not only must we be examples, we must be approachable. Leaders who serve, by design, are approachable individuals. How else can we develop leadership skills in our people if our leaders don't share them? It is a well-known fact that the more attention you pay to a behavior, the more it will be repeated. A Leader acting as a Servant must be our ambition.

Some Leader--Servant Examples I recently experienced an example of a solid leader-servant attitude at the opening of a new Perkins restaurant in our area. One full week before the restaurant was to open, the entire, newly hired staff reported to work. It didn't matter what the level of previous experience was. Everyone was in attendance. In that week, they learned

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about the Perkins culture, the serving style, the cleanup process and even tasted the food that they were to serve to customers when the restaurant opened. Oh yes, they learned the operational rules they were to work under, but service was key. The startup crew included what the Perkins people call "NSO" or New Store Openers. These were experienced people from other stores who had a penchant for customer service, knew the processes, knew the Perkins culture and could act as leaders serving others. To say the process was successful is an understatement. On opening day, the restaurant was full of previous Perkins customers and the usual curious crowd. I was one of those customers from a previous Perkins city. By the end of their first week of operation, I had returned two more times for meals. Why? Because from my first experience, the restaurant delivered service as if I had been a customer at that restaurant for years. I was not alone. I saw many repeat customers from earlier visits that week. Isn't that the wish of any new business endeavor? A solid, running, revenue start! All because of positive customer service and, of course, a good product.

So where does Leader--Servant come in? The NSO, or New Store Opening personnel displayed a high level of exuberance and a positive, infectious attitude. Besides teaching the "rules of the road," their service activity was hands-on. They helped serve meals and clean up side-by-side with the new staff. More importantly, they mentored the new employees. I observed many times that the NSO people were smiling, courteous, and helpful to the "rookies." Do as I say, not as I do, isn't evident here. This is a true leader--servant posture.

In a similar observation with RSA, Remarketing Services of America, in Williamsville, NY, a Buffalo, NY suburb, I found the culture to be similar to Perkins but the product, customer base, and customer-contact mechanism were totally different. RSA works with banks and other financial institutions to renegotiate automobile leases, generally at the end of the consumer's contract period. Their client base includes a number of major banks in the United States and many, many leases. RSA supervisors and managers act as Leader--Servant. They are, more specifically, cultural advisers promoting the RSA culture. To quote one staffer, "I am a cultural adviser." The "I" here is everyone in the chain. Employees are called associates. The organization uses a service-profit chain. They believe supervisors must be motivated to be able to deliver service to and for employees or, in this case, associates. When you deal with improving customer loyalty, not only can you maintain, but you can increase the revenue stream. You can do that only when your people believe in the organization. Management has to do more than just focus on daily operations. They must deal with people management, people development, and the meeting of employee needs. When you have all these support pieces, you can develop a cadre of people who will move mountains without question. RSA people are educated in dealing with internal customer service first. If they take care of their associates, their associates will take care of customers, and, of course, customers will pay the bills and take care of the organization. This attitude reduces staff turnover, allows predictive indexing, and allows a better coaching base. Consequently, the organization can develop and promote from within with more predictable results.

Creating the Leader-Servant Climate Now that we have seen several examples of Leader-Servant climates, let's take a look at what you can do for your own organization. As you have no doubt experienced, as employee attitudes deteriorate, so do loyalty, performance, and commitment. This negative attitude is transferred to your customer and eventually leads to the

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loss of customers. Employee expectations are one of the key drivers of employee attitude. If expectations are established in a positive, assistance--friendly atmosphere, it is easier to reinforce the positive culture you are trying to establish or maintain.

Organizational leadership must be defined as including all levels of management, floor leaders, and senior staff. Floor leaders are those people who do not necessarily have the authority to make management decisions but are looked upon by others as the people who have the right answers and are generally more readily available. Floor leaders are just as important in developing a positive customer service attitude as any other leader in your organization. Unappreciated, they can make it more difficult to establish a positive customer support structure and can have a negative effect on employee morale. Support must come from the top, and it must be visible and demonstrative.

Support also must include senior staff who are not in management positions. For any organization to reinforce a positive, servant--friendly atmosphere, positive commitment from all levels must be evident and nurtured continually. Customer service and the Leader-Servant posture must come first. As an example, a factory in Canada was having problems with safety at all levels in one of their plants. We were asked to initiate a different approach. It was recommended that a "safety first" attitude was to be the rule. Therefore, safety must always be first in everything they did. This meant that on the front page of the employee newsletter there would always be an article about safety. All other printed material had an item about safety on the front cover. All doors and gates to their facilities had safety notices on them so they would be the first thing an employee would see upon entering the location. All meetings, conferences, and retreats included a safety skit or announcement. Safety truly was first. The number of safety incidents was reduced significantly within the first few months. Likewise, if Fantastic Customer Service is your goal, your leadership must be servants to the mission and all the people who support your organization.

Leader--Servant Shopping List Just as you should never go to the supermarket without a shopping list, you should never establish a program or seek to create a climate without knowing what resources you have and what resources you need. To develop Leader--Servants, you need people who will share thoughts and processes; guide, but not dictate; ask "why" questions, and perform what Tom Peters, leading business author and founder of the Tom Peters Group, calls "naive listening." Naive listening allows the speaker to talk and make the point before you, the listener, answers. Many times we answer before the speaker is finished. Consequently, the same questions will be asked over and over again as we have stolen the opportunity to learn from the one asking the question. What, then, do you need to do to improve your customer service, utilizing leaders as servants? First, make a list of proficiencies you need. Gather active input from all levels of management, senior staff, floor leaders, and entry-level people. You now have involvement and ownership from all levels. Second, take inventory of the skills that you have, and identify the key players who can impart those skills to others.

Using the lists of "need" and "have," develop a training plan that:

1. Reviews the mission and goals of your organization
2. Promotes your service posture
3. Highlights the benefits of a solid service attitude to your attendees

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4. Places attendees in energetic role-play situations
5. Allows for discussion of past service-related issues without reliving blame
6. Celebrates the positive impact of Fantastic Customer Service

Don't wait for everyone to be trained. Make your intentions known to all as you would any major announcement, but begin changing the atmosphere to a Leader--Servant climate with the first group.

Evaluating the Process Now we must ask the question: are we experiencing leadership examples in areas we haven't seen before? If we are, we need to celebrate those positive changes and the people involved. Carrots have always worked better than sticks. If we see something that is good, we need to foster more of that activity -- it's contagious. Is there a higher level of employee morale in the organization? If so, celebrate. If not, find out what's wrong. You have embarked on a mission to change attitudes and increase customer service levels. Are your leaders serving others? It is important at this stage of the game to analyze the changes in your organization and react. You need to demonstrate to your employees that you are involved, active, and caring. Otherwise, it may become a "flavor of the month" program and not become a constant behavior.

What if it doesn't work? How do you recover? As with any project, there will be successes and failures. The important issue at this time is to not give up. You still have the business to run and customers to serve; it is important that you make any adjustments so that they are transparent to the customer. If the customer becomes involved, apologize if necessary, but explain what you are doing. Very possibly, some customers could assist you in your project. You can learn from each other, and the interaction could be a very positive reinforcement to that customer's loyalty. Customers talk to other customers. Likewise, if your changes create some very distinct and positive customer relations, ask those customers for their opinion. They may be glad to help. Customer support and customer involvement with successes also breed customer loyalty. Again, customers talk to other customers.

Leadership isn't for everyone Yes, it would be wonderful if all of your employees embraced your customer service strategy and your use of leaders as servants, but that doesn't always happen in today's world. Don't dismay. Rome wasn't built in a day. This change has become your policy. As with the restaurant noted earlier in this chapter, positive attitudes and exuberance breed positive attitudes and exuberance! What is important now is that management does not become transparent. Management transparency occurs when subordinates point toward top leadership as the reason *why* things change instead of endorsing the change and supporting it at their level. With continual nurturing, a positive attitude and a broadening of leadership at all levels will occur.