

My week as a room-service waiter at the ritz – customer service that puts the rit...

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The phrase "the customer is never wrong," has been attributed to Cesar Ritz, the founder of the Ritz-Carlton empire. Needless to say, the man knew from customer service. How does this luxury hotel keep its customers content—and coming back?

Paul Hemp, a senior editor at Harvard Business Review, stepped into the shoes of a Ritz-Carlton room-service waiter to find out. One observation: Empowering your employees to provide top-notch customer service is not enough. You must also inspire them to exercise that power. by Paul Hemp Reflecting on the experience

One element of the Ritz-Carlton training is a follow-up session, known as Day 21. It typically takes place about three weeks after the initial orientation. The aim is to review the Gold Standards after new employees have had a chance to put them into practice. Though I didn't work the full twenty-one days, I sit in on the half-day session (which, amidst the frenzy of the hotel's early months, actually takes place on the 49th day after our orientation). Training director Tim Kirkpatrick starts with another mock lineup.

He discusses the new-employee job certification test that department managers should have administered. He announces a new guest recognition hotline, which employees can use to call in guest preferences. And he unveils an updated version of the company's principles, now in the form of a three-dimensional pyramid. This supplements the existing Gold Standards with an additional category of seven "key success factors." But for staff to delight customers, managers must do more than grant their employees the

freedom to do what is necessary; they must motivate employees to exercise that freedom.

— Paul Hemp Employees are asked about their experiences on the job. Erin Garrity, the new front-desk clerk from Johnson & Wales, is disappointed she has been assigned the overnight shift but looks on the bright side. " I get to see a lot of celebrities" at that time, she says. Her goal for the year is to be named one of the hotel's select five-star employees, and she intends to continue being the " friendliest person I can be. " John Rolfs reinforces his message from orientation that our sole job is to " make guests feel good so they come back.

" The hotel's 320 employees have countless interactions with guests, he says, and it takes just one interaction to make a guest feel bad. " If you're thinking about doing your job well, trying to understand and master your day-to-day routines but not thinking about how guests feel, they'll have a difficult time forgiving you. They'll probably forgive us if the air-conditioning fails. But they won't forgive us for failing to make them feel good—because that's why they selected Ritz-Carlton. " Tim's final announcement concerns the results of the first monthly Gallup survey of Ritz-Carlton guests, released to managers earlier that day.

The Ritz-Carlton/Boston Common leads the company's hotels in overall customer satisfaction. There is a stunned silence—after all, this is a new hotel still smoothing out the rough spots—followed by loud applause. As I leave the hotel and walk across the Boston Common in the gathering dusk, I reflect on what I've learned about teaching and motivating employees to

provide truly memorable service. One thing seems clear. Great customer service should be based on dynamic principles rather than a rigid formula.

You don't demand that employees say, "Certainly, my pleasure," until it feels right to them. You don't mindlessly assume every guest wants to be pampered; some people just want to eat their dinners. I also ponder Ritz-Carlton's efforts to win the hearts and minds of its employees by, for example, making them feel part of a proud heritage. A recent study of hotel workers by researchers at Cornell's School of Hotel Administration found that, while job satisfaction plays a major role in employee retention, it isn't the key factor in a hotel's ability to provide excellent customer service.

Rather, it is employees' emotional commitment—which is achieved in part through symbols and rituals that enhance employees' sense of identity with the company—that contributes most to superior performance. Ritz Carlton certainly has an unusually rich tradition to draw on in creating that feeling of identity. But every company, even a two-year-old startup, has traditions and even legends that can be tapped to help build employee commitment. Great customer service should be based on dynamic principles rather than a rigid formula.

— Paul Hemp That kind of commitment serves as a driver of excellent customer service only when employees are empowered to take initiative. And that sort of empowerment has no potency unless employees are motivated to seize it. I am haunted by my failure to point out the confusing bin numbers on the hotel wine list, which led my guest to mistakenly order that half-bottle of burgundy. Certainly, I was encouraged during my time at

the hotel to point out problems that needed fixing. Why didn't I follow through in this case? I'm not sure.

But for staff to delight customers, managers must do more than grant their employees the freedom to do what is necessary; they must motivate employees to exercise that freedom. Doing that depends in part on the kinds of people you hire. Ritz-Carlton has an elaborate system for assessing in job candidates the qualities the company believes are crucial to its success. One night while I was working at the hotel, I went through the basic interview to see how I'd do. I was fairly confident I was just the sort of caring, conscientious person the Ritz was looking for.

In fact, though, even after fudging my answers to a few questions, I got only ten points out of a possible fifteen in the composite hospitality assessment. Tim said that wasn't bad—"though, honestly, we'd shoot for someone with a twelve." I later discovered that I fell short in my response to a question asking me to cite an instance when I took care of someone else. I said I'd often provided emotional support to my sister during tough times. But the company was looking for something more than this, an "extraordinary" example of caring. "Helping your sister? You better," Tim said with a laugh.

"Now, if you'd moved out of your house for a month and let her move in, that would be different." Since instituting its candidate assessment system in 1991, Ritz Carlton says it has reduced its annual turnover rate from 55%, roughly the industry average, to 28%. Certainly, a genuine concern for the well-being of guests is key to providing superior customer service. But that isn't enough to truly anticipate customer needs. Another component of the

Ritz Carlton's hospitality assessment is empathy—being able to imagine guests' emotional responses to their experience in the hotel.

I am reminded of Steve's care in preparing the champagne setting for the newlyweds that night and how he thought back to his grandparents' wedding seventy-five years before. To truly achieve empathy, however, I wonder if you need to jettison at least some of your personal perspective. One of John Rolfs's comments during the Day 21 session—about the dangers of employees focusing solely on the successful fulfillment of their duties—resonated with my experience as a waiter.

If you're constantly assessing how well you're doing in your job—even in your genuine efforts to satisfy guests—you, not the guest, become the point of reference. Your self-consciousness, natural though it may be, distracts you from providing superior service. It's getting dark. And this train of thought risks hurtling far beyond the practical demands of a frenetic evening of room service. But, when you get down to it, my musings don't seem all that far from the Ritz-Carlton philosophy.

Companies dedicated to providing what might be called "extreme" customer service may need to recognize that—like great military, government, or religious service—it is, in the end, a truly selfless endeavor. They may need to establish such practices as the formal inculcation of a customer-centered credo. They might even consider providing workers with a weeklong immersion in the experience of being a customer! Whatever the means, the aim would be getting employees to leave their egos at the door and adopt the mind-set of the people they're serving.