

Professional Skipper – Sep 2003 issue

“Going the extra 1.6Km”

Doesn't have the same ring, does it? I wonder if Roman Centurions ever discussed among themselves how some of their Legionaries had that special 'something' that made them stand out, perhaps commenting 'Ave! There goes a Legionary that is prepared to transit the extra league'.

On Monday, you put your car in for service at 8am. The person at the Service Reception desk doesn't make eye contact with you, makes 'Good Morning' sound like an accusation, an aggressive threat and a question at the same time, makes it clear that they are very, very busy, and that life would be bearable but for the existence of, and continuing unreasonable demands for attention of, bloody Customers. Sorry, the courtesy bus has just left while you were waiting at the counter queue, it won't be back for an hour, but there's a phone 'over there' to ring a cab...

At 3pm you arrive to pick the car up, a different person is at the desk, you are smiled at, given a cheery greeting that actually sounds genuine, referred to by name, offered a coffee, a comfortable seat, and told that your car is being washed right now, but will arrive at the door in ten minutes or so. Ten minutes later you are on your way in a clean smelling, washed and freshly vacuumed vehicle, somewhat lighter in the pocket of course, and pleasantly surprised at the difference between your emotional state now, and what it was seven hours ago.

The strange thing is that, in the above scenario, I have used two different people – but what is also common is that the two different sets of behaviour can sometimes be exhibited by the same person...

Those of us who travel, and who prefer to stay in the same Hotels each time, quickly get a 'handle' on which of the staff are willing and friendly, and the grumpy ones, or the cold ones, whom you try to stay away from... OK, I know the Hotel needs to be told who these people are, but being busy, being Human, and being the nice people we are, we tend not to say anything. We are there (and paying) for a good night's sleep, good food, peace and quiet, and nice surroundings – not to get mixed up in the Hotel's HR issues.

In Sydney a few months ago, I was sitting in my hotel room staring glumly at my brand-new suitcase which (I had only just noticed) had been leaking sundry items after having been substantially redesigned by the airport baggage-handlers and was now subsequently useless, when my room phone rang. It was the client I had come to see. "Where's your mobile phone?" she asked. With a sinking heart I looked around the room. Nowhere to be seen. "I've just had a phone call from the cabbie who brought you in from the Airport. He found your phone, hit 'redial', I was the last person you spoke to – and I told him who & where you are. He's on his way to you now."

By the time I got down to reception, he'd been and gone. He'd had to come back over the Bridge, too. He didn't even charge me – and I would have been happy to pay. I couldn't thank him so I rang his Boss. It was Legion Cabs, so there's a free plug to offset the cost. I've told people this story and they look at me as if I'm telling a porkie – but it's true. Full of optimism I rang the airline to see if they wanted to fix the problem with my bag, and that's where the dream ended... I guess I shouldn't have pushed my luck. I flew on to Auckland with a taped-and-strapped up bag, and here's

the strange bit; the Auckland service counter staff of that same airline couldn't have been more helpful, and a couple of days later I came back with a brand new bag - so good on yer, Qantas Auckland.

So what is it that causes these hugely different service experiences? I've had Customer Service Managers make comments to me along the lines of 'If I could find out what it is that makes the difference, and somehow clone it, I could fix all my service problems and create an unbeatable team'.

Having worked with my fellow Humans in a behaviour-modification (training) capacity for many years now (and a lot of that in Customer Service or Relationship-based issues), I think I can safely admit that training only goes so far. This may sound defeatist or arrogant, and I certainly don't mean it that way, but I can look around the faces in a Customer Service workshop, including those pitched at Management level – and within the first hour I can sense the ones who will 'go forth and make a difference', conversely I can also pick the ones who really don't give a damn, or who just fail to see the importance of Customer Service.

I hope you will agree with me that there are those who join your organisation straight from school, or Polytech or Uni, and from day one (prior to any training) they are already demonstrating an eagerness to 'go the extra mile', even if at this early point they are not sure in which direction that mile lies – they give it their best shot anyway. I well remember a cheerful, smiley young bloke that started –straight from school- as a CS person in an organisation where (for my sins) I was the Marketing Manager. The Customers liked him, so did his workmates, and then we had a complaint. Turned out

he was helping a regular Customer load some stock into his car, made a crack about our dear Prime Minister of that time, and the Customer unfortunately happened to be a staunch supporter... As I launched into a 'severe talking to', the guy's face just seemed to crumple up, my guardian angel must have whispered in my ear because I found myself laughing at what this Customer's face must have looked like, and then we had a 'guidance session' as to exactly which areas of life are safe to joke about with Customers, unless you know those customers really, really well. He learned something from it, and so did I. Had I done as I fully intended to, maybe I might have damaged that very spontaneity that made him different.

I'm getting around to admitting my belief that the Customer Service Person who 'goes the extra mile' has something inside them that others do not, and it has nothing to do with knowledge or skill, since when we apply those things to a range of Humans who are otherwise equal, we get a range of different outputs. We can 'sense' it in their demeanour at recruiting interviews, and of course there are batteries of psychometric tests that can help. Reference checking helps, as does Behavioural Interviewing, but that's not so easy when they don't have much in the way of work experience. There's a training video on Behavioural Interviewing Skills that has the title 'More than a Gut Feel', and it's a good video too - even if some of the acting is a bit cheesy - but the point of the video is not to say 'don't go with gut feel'; it's saying gut feel shouldn't kick-in until you've exhausted every other technique. Just as well really - if this 'thing' that makes them go the extra mile comes from inside, and I firmly believe it does - then how the hell are you going to measure it?

Obviously pay and conditions has something to do with it, but then I've met some highly paid people who don't give a toss. I accept that some people only come to work in order to fund their out-of-work-time activities, that there is 'life after work', and that many are dedicated to their family or their Church or the Community Group they're a member of, and the job you give them simply funds all that.

Even so, 'we have a deal' – if I pay you 100% of the pay then I expect 100% of the effort, and I include 'caring' about my (our) customers as an integral part of the 'effort'. You can say 'D'ya want fries with that' in many different tones of voice, volume, and facial expression – next time you're shaving or putting your make-up on (or both – let's be all-embracing here) give it a try. You can make it a threat or an invitation, make it sound like the fries came from a suspect source, give it an erotic-suggestive appeal, or (as intended) make it a helpful suggestion by way of a reminder, when in fact it's an up-sell. I think the first step is to identify, in relation to 'going the extra mile':

What are the Behaviours?

How are they exhibited?

How will we describe them, and measure the existence of them?

How will we train them?

Then from a recruiting point of view, try and identify what would we want a previous employer to tell us, in a ref check. If there is no previous employer, what would we look for in School reports, or in references from people in their Community?

It seems to me that Excellence in Customer Service comes from teams composed of individuals who will 'go the extra mile' as a matter of course – to the point where

they don't see anything unusual in their Excellence, it being the 'accepted thing', and that Going the Extra Mile in Customer Service terms, is as much about 'how' you do something, as it is about 'what' you do. The guy at Kingsford Smith showed me by his tone of voice, as much as the words he spoke over the phone, that hell would freeze over before he would get off his lazy butt and make something happen about my ruined suitcase. In doing so he rendered pointless his own existence, damaged the reputation of his employer, and squandered the millions that are spent by the airline (in advertising) trying to create an image of an Airline that cares. Advertising makes promises that Humans have to fulfil. Perhaps some of the money should come off the advertising pile and be put on the 'people improvement' pile, and by that I mean putting resources in to better recruiting practices, improving pay & conditions in some cases, providing quality training programmes that inspire and persuade instead of numbing the senses, and rewards and incentives other than pay –including simple recognition and the giving of credit- for top performers.

I sincerely believe that the driver that makes someone 'go the extra mile' is an internal one that lurks in some, but not all, of us. The trick is for those in *recruiting* to be able to detect it, for those in *training* to nurture, inspire, guide and support it with knowledge and skill, and for those in *leadership* positions to provide the positive role model, create the right environment, and give it the opportunity to come out and shine.

Carpe Diem - Steve Punter FHRINZ

Staff Training Associates Ltd 1867 words