

The Spirit of Service

What leaders actually do.



by Chip R. Bell and John R. Patterson

AT AN EXECUTIVE RETREAT, WE WERE asked what “walking the talk” looks like for a service leader.

We opted to avoid answering the question, but used a small group exercise instead. “Assume you implemented today a new unconditional service guarantee, promising that if customers were not happy with the service they received, they would get a refund equal to 10 times the price. What actions would you take to avoid quickly going bankrupt?”

The mood in the room shifted. People started filling up flipcharts with actions aimed at keeping the service spirit alive and taking care of customers. They generated over 100 actions.

Five Common Themes

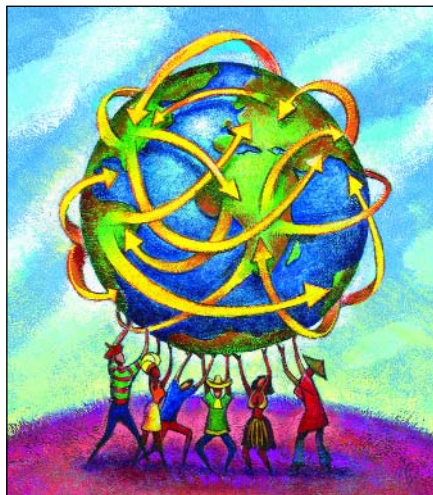
Leaders who are known for inspiring and sustaining a service excellence culture share five traits:

1. They connect. “He’s everywhere,” say people of Ed Fuller, president of Marriott International. The words are not just about a man who travels the globe. It is the way Ed takes time to greet the bellman from a previous trip, to ask the “Was it a boy or girl” question of the front desk clerk who was pregnant on his last visit, or to tell a story about great service by a supervisor in the presence of her general manager. Fuller is more than a people person; he’s a people lover. And, he connects with openness and enthusiasm.

Great service leaders avoid getting “stuck in meetings.” If you want to meet with Larry Kurzweil, president of Universal Studios Hollywood, you are likely to get, “Sure, if you don’t mind walking the park while we talk.” You get Larry’s focus, only it is punctuated with stops to ask questions of associates or give directions to lost guests. He

is an energy source for the park when he is out there meeting and greeting people. And, he has plenty of company—his leaders are out there as well.

2. They trust. Trust happens within people only when it is created between people. However, trust does not happen by accident; it is crafted “by hand.” It takes personalized action and attention to the impact that leader actions have on associates. Great service leaders are quick to credit others. They believe in associates, and in coaching instead of censuring when excellent effort produces disappointing results. When employees experience trust, they show trust to customers.



3. They enrich. “Add value to every moment by taking it personal,” advised Greg Haller, president of the Midwest Region for Verizon Wireless. The words come from a man renowned for his passion for the customer. Great service leaders look for ways to add value. Instead of barking orders, they inspire by telling a story. Rather than waiting for information, they go and get it. Instead of learning about customer experiences from a survey, they find out face-to-face. They abhor excuses and blame.

When motivational speaker Ed Foreman was scheduled to do a workshop at an event in Scotland, he arrived there only to learn the sponsor had not en-

listed a single participant. “Don’t worry,” the sponsor told Foreman. “We’ll pay your fee and expenses; you can take the day off.” “Not a chance,” responded Foreman. “We’re going to call on your customers together and get as many as we can enlisted in your next event.” Foreman’s passion turned customer resistance into customers registered.

4. They inspire. Don Freeman, Chairman of the Freeman Companies, says of his commitment to customers: “Freeman’s success is largely due to our legacy of excellent customer service. We can be a great general services contractor and still give customized service to every customer.” Don and CEO Joe Popolo speak from the heart when they talk about customer loyalty. Leading out loud means irrefutable passion behind vision-aligned actions.

One of the leading full-service contractors for expositions and conventions, Freeman delivers great service to its key customers—show management. Eager for rapid growth, Freeman realized it must create that same reputation with customers who exhibit at shows. In response to customer suggestions, Freeman opened a new Customer Support Center to assist exhibitors with show service questions and quickly resolve their issues.

5. They focus. Pegasus Solutions, a global leader in bringing information technology and services to the hotel reservations arena, realized that world-class customer service was becoming a key to marketplace success. CEO John Davis reports: “Our efforts to improve customer loyalty began with a customer survey. Our people embraced the results and quickly created action plans to address the feedback. They assembled metrics to help measure progress and a service vision to keep us accountable to our goals. Now, we celebrate dozens of customer success stories each month.”

When the stakes are high, great service leaders set the standard. Modeling under pressure is most memorable. Great leaders connect, trust, enrich, inspire, and focus. They listen to employees, customers, vendors in a quest for service improvement. **EE**

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