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5 Stars vs. 4 Stars: What's the difference?

Championship winning coaches have a habit of demanding excellence from everyone on their team. They never tolerate mediocrity from anyone. Incredibly high standards are discussed everyday (yes, everyday). This article, however, is not about sports. Nor is it about AAA ratings, Mobil ratings, or Michelin Guide ratings. It is about what separates very good from exceptional. I've had the privilege to work with 5-star hotels, restaurants, and spas. I have also worked with 4-star establishments. The difference between the two is like night and day. 4 star properties are reputable and very good. In most cases, the staff knows what they are supposed to do, and they even have an idea about what great service is. In a 5 star establishment, excellence is demanded from everyone every day. Mistakes are always reviewed. Follow

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through is always done. The best employees are always recognized. Everyone works like they have a personal stake in the property. To put it bluntly, good is never good enough...employees in 5 star properties strive to be perfect all the time. The leadership in 5-star properties always challenge their teams and themselves to get better. Being 5-stars is more about a mindset than it is about adhering to certain standards.

So what are the best ways to implement this 5-star mindset? First, recognize that 5-stars is not about an award or designation. It's about a mentality...a way of working...discipline...and most of all, a healthy disdain for anything mediocre. Whenever you find yourself thinking, "Well that's ok" or "It's not that bad" or "It'll be perfect next time", then you're drifting away from the 5-star mentality. Let me be clear, you don't have to work in a 5-star establishment to have a 5-star mentality. I've seen 3 and 4 star establishments with the 5-star mindset. I've seen grocery stores and airlines with the 5-star mindset as well. 5-stars is about excellence and striving to be world-class in whatever you are doing...all the time.

I recently stayed at the Wynn Las Vegas, and had a 5-star experience. One of the true testaments of a 5-star experience is how well the staff takes ownership and follows through. Shortly after checking in, I ordered room service. When the order came, the server was refined, yet very personable. She asked me where I would like the table to be set up, and I told her in front of the television. She then asked about my television station preference, turned the channel to the desired station, and placed the remote control right next to me. After uncovering my food and describing each dish, she asked if there was anything further she could do to assist. I had forgotten my lint roller at home, so I asked if the hotel might have one for me. She said that she'd be happy to take care of it, and I would have an update within a half-hour. Less than 15 minutes later, someone was knocking at my door. It was a laundry attendant with a silver tray and 3 lint rollers for me to use. By the way, the attendant also used my name and inquired about further assistance also.

Keep in mind that these were the laundry attendant and the room service server. Those are not the highest paid employees, but their actions created a 5-star experience. The true test of a 5-star establishment is not whether they can create a single memorable experience. It's whether they can create memorable experiences repeatedly everyday. From a leadership perspective, one of the best ways to do this is to continuously solicit and share examples of memorable experiences. Every week, solicit examples from your team, or you can read letters submitted by past guests. Just make sure that you focus on the level of service you want to see repeated. Focusing on excellence will stimulate more excellence. Talking about excellence will stimulate more excellence. Rewarding excellence will stimulate more excellence. One

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general manager with 5-star hotel experience put it perfectly... "It is the small, simple, special moments that we create through personal engagement with each guest that they will recall when they return home. To accomplish this type of sustainability we carefully and methodically select our employees, and then continuously train. It's not about the tactical as much as it is about speaking the language of the guest".

So as you begin 2009, become very clear about your vision for service excellence. Share some examples from various industries. Ask your team about the most memorable service they ever received. Most importantly, challenge everyone on your team to take ownership and follow through on guest requests all the time.

5-stars is not an award, it's a declaration to your team that good is not good enough; only excellence will do.

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