We exist to serve others so they may better serve the world. SM

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Engaging Service Part 2: It's all about the culture

It's been said that one bad apple can spoil the bunch. Well what if the entire apple tree was bad to begin with? Let's pretend that the "apple tree" is a company's culture, and the "apples" are the workforce. Most times, it is the company's culture that will dictate how the workforce performs. Even if the culture isn't displayed on catchy mottos or mission statements, you can bet that it exists. I've worked with companies long enough to tell what the culture is like by just spending 10-15 minutes observing how the leaders interact

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with their employees and vice versa. I can also tell by how the staff interacts with their customers. In some cases when there is a poor company culture, there may be a handful of employees who are star performers, and will continue to be stars regardless. More often than not, stars want to be surrounded by other stars and they all take pride in working for a company that has a positive culture. If not, those star employees will either quit and leave or quit and stay. Neither option is favorable. While some readers may file this "culture-talk" away in the land of fluff, please remember that a company's success is a direct result of its workplace culture. That culture will affect everything inside your company, and your customers will see it…good or bad. Allow me to give you an example to illustrate my point.

On a recent trip from DC to Miami, I decided to fly with an airline that I normally don't use because of bad past experiences. At any rate, I wasn't surprised that no one, from the ticket agent…to the gate agent…to the flight attendants…to the captain…even to the phone operator didn't smile. When I went to the gate attendant, she never looked up from her desk. I had to go in front of her face until she eventually acknowledged me. The passenger standing next to me was being given the same type of treatment by another attendant. I then boarded a small bus to be shuttled to the plane. The employee who drove the passengers from the gate terminal to the plane never greeted or gave us a farewell; as a matter of fact, he didn't speak at all. When I boarded the plane, there was no welcome, no farewell, and definitely no smiles. I asked the flight attendant for napkins because of spilled water on my seat, and she told me to "get it from the bathroom". I felt like everyone was just "doing a job". There was no genuine caring, and they certainly did not make me feel like my patronage was valued. Will I fly that airline again? I will try my absolute hardest not to…ever.

I need to point out that by simply reversing what the employees did would not have lead to engaging service. It simply would have been them doing what they were supposed to

do in the first place (greet me, be nice during the flight, say goodbye, smile, etc.). Engaging service requires much more.

Could it be that this airline magically hired ALL the apathetic, under-performing employees in their region? Or maybe the pool of applicants is just poor to begin with (which by the way is a popular excuse given by senior managers when their company is known for underperforming). There are, however, other airlines that serve the same markets, hire from the same pool of applicants, and yet give considerably better service than Airline X.

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At Airline X, perhaps the outward behavior of the staff is a direct reflection of the workplace culture. It can not be hidden, no matter how hard you try. Front-line employees don't create the culture, the senior leaders do.

So the obvious starting point is for the senior leaders to become crystal clear on what culture they want the company to have. Then they should engage their best staff throughout the company in determining what it should look like.

Culture-driven leaders are known for bringing out the absolute best from each employee at all times. They believe in their staff, personally role-model excellence, reward superior performance, give timely performance feedback, invest in developing their staff & constantly remind them of what the company is passionate about. They give their vision for the future, and find out the best way to connect the vision to each employee's individual aspirations. Companies that have a strong culture seldom fail…the workforce won't allow it. These managers, supervisors, and employees take too much pride in "their" company.

My challenge to you is commit to being a culture-driven leader. If you want your staff to give 100%, then you must believe in them 100%. If you want star employees, then you must treat your employees like stars. Be known for growing and developing your team, and above all, be known for giving excellent service to your staff and to your customers. Remember, an excellent culture will lead to an excellent workforce that delivers excellent service.

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