

Sorry to say...but some people should not be serving other human beings.

(Written by: Bryan K. Williams – 9/30/06)

In my travels all over our great country and across the world, I have been fortunate enough to meet some fantastic people, dine in wonderful restaurants, and stay in world-class (and not so world-class) hotels. No matter where I am or how “acclaimed” the service experience promises to be, one startling revelation hits me over the head time and time again...some people should not be serving other human beings.

On the surface, it may seem like a cynical thing to say, especially coming from someone who makes a living training, coaching, and consulting on the topic of service excellence. The prevailing wisdom from many organizations is that any person can be hired to serve. Given the right tools, training, and coaching opportunities, they too can become a service-delivering superstar. Not so. Being service-minded requires the presence of certain innate talents; namely, “caring”, “empathy”, “relationship building”, and the list goes on. As you’ve probably observed, some individuals are naturally good at those things, while for others it seems like such talents were surgically removed at birth. That is not to say that in order to be successful, one must be caring or friendly. It just means that “service” may not be their best opportunity to maximize their effectiveness.

From a coaching perspective, what about benchmarking? Conventional wisdom says to put the smile-challenged employee with the service superstar. That seems to work right? If you take employees who do not like to serve people, and tell them exactly how the very best service professionals do it, they still won’t like to serve people. It is not about “knowing” what to do, it has to do with genuinely wanting to be of service.

Just last week, for example, I was in a well known electronics store, and I had a basic question about setting up an in-home network. After waiting in line for a few minutes (without being acknowledged), it was my turn, and I thought I would be receiving some assistance. The “customer service” agent was standing right in front of me but blatantly ignored me...he pretended that I did not exist. After I made a few audible sighs, he finally looked up, although regrettably, and told me that he wasn’t ready to help me yet, then walked away. He should not be serving other human beings.

I went to another store. This time, it was a nationally known home improvement store, and I needed some assistance. After hunting for someone who could assist, I finally saw an employee reluctantly assisting a lady. I patiently waited approximately six feet away so I could be close enough to be seen but far enough to not impose. After briefly looking up at me, he continued talking with the lady, then took her to another aisle without ever acknowledging that I may have needed assistance. He might also be a candidate for the “Do not serve other human beings” award.

After some reflection, it is easy to infer that the agent in the electronics store was just “having a bad day” and that the home improvements store employee was “busy” with the other patron. While both may have been the case, I, the customer, should not have to see, deal with, or tolerate such blatant service tragedies.

So now the important and constructive leadership question to be asked is, “How can my organization prevent such scenarios from occurring?” The first potent answer is to select for service talent. Under all circumstances, do not hire a warm body. Of course you’ve heard this before, but selecting for service talent means more than hiring nice people. It means that probing and open-ended questions are asked about what the candidate is passionate about, what they enjoy most at work, and how have they exceeded (not just met) expectations in the past. The ideal responses should revolve around helping, assisting, or serving other people. To paraphrase, one author noted that the best predictor of future performance is frequent past behavior. If the candidates can’t give you concrete examples of what they are passionate about and when they have exceeded expectations in the past, then chances are good that service is not a frequent past behavior.

An alternative to selecting for talent is to select for values. As we know, a value is anything that has worth to us. The same way individuals have values, families have values, and of course, organizations have values...whether they are articulated clearly or not. For instance, if one of your organization’s top values is responsiveness, then try to select (not “hire”) people that are very responsive.

There are other steps besides selecting the right people, and they will be covered in subsequent articles. For now, here are some points to consider:

- Have a discussion with your staff (individually if possible) and find out what are their true talents. Besides discussions, there are some great assessments to do this. Find out who enjoys serving the customer, who enjoys problem resolution (and yes, there are some people who LOVE problem resolution), who enjoys dealing with numbers, who enjoys organizing projects, etc.
- Give everyone ample opportunity to do what **they** do best with constant support, feedback, and recognition.
- Some people that have been labeled as a “bad apple” may just be in the wrong role. If you don’t believe me, try putting someone who loves the back of the house in front of the customer or vice versa...chaos, misery, and frustration may ensue from all parties.
- Above all, to enhance service excellence, you must talk about service excellence, model service excellence and reward service excellence at every given opportunity.

Whether everyone in your organization enjoys serving human beings or not, each person has the ability to make a positive impact if given the right opportunity to shine.