

Where Does Service Excellence Begin?

I work with organizations all over the globe, and there is one question that I am always asked, “Where does service excellence begin?” In other words, they want to boil it down to the very beginning, and fully understand what steps should be taken to successfully embark on this service excellence journey. If I can just bottle up the answer in a magic pill for senior leaders to administer to their staff, I would not have to work another day in my life. Suffice it to say, the “answer” to the service excellence question is not that simple...however, it's not that complicated either. The journey really begins with what the senior leaders consistently think, speak, and do. Then it trickles down to what

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everyone else in the organization consistently think, speak, and do. The point is this...service excellence is not some abstract milestone that the company will achieve “at some point”; it begins with what you do...right now.

Now, let's take this discussion and focus on three important variables. First, you must be absolutely clear about what is “world-class”. Next, you must understand the power behind creating your own reality. Finally, you must fully leverage the power of your organizational values to steer your journey.

What is World-Class?

Let's start with the abstract concept of “world-class”. In the Olympics, if an athlete wins the gold medal, that award becomes a tangible symbol that represents the absolute best in the world. However, in many industries, there is not a definitive symbol such as a gold medal to show who the best is. For us who serve others for a living, it can truly be a subjective assessment (by the way, when I say “serve others”, I am referring to any organization that has customers, regardless of whether you call them guests, clients, tenants, patients, residents, members, etc.). In my courses, I often ask if someone wins a race, would that person be considered the best. Usually everyone in attendance says yes. Then I ask, "Would that person be considered world-class"? There's often a mixed reaction. My next question is "What, then, truly defines world class?" Is it simply being better than everyone you consider to be your competitors? Or maybe it is your competitors in your geographic region. You might also consider world-class to be the top in your industry...right? Maybe not. Being the best among your competitors, in your region, or even in your industry does not qualify your organization as world-class. Frankly, it is possible to be the best of a bad bunch...so the word “best” is truly relative. A word like “world-class”, however, conjures up images of people, teams, and organizations that transcend their industry. The mere image of their name or logo generates a feeling of excellence that is more than just being the best.



As it relates to service, world-class can mean doing basic things in such a consistently excellent manner that it is rare to find that type of consistency elsewhere...in any industry. This reminds of a telephone customer service representative that I dealt with less than two months ago. Now I don't know about you, but my experiences with



customer service reps (over the phone) are usually very poor. Not so in this instance. I was fortunate enough to be served by a true service professional by the name of Stacy. She was a telephone service rep for a health insurance company, and I called the company to get some much-needed assistance for a number of things that went wrong with my service. In such situations, I usually get passed around from person to person like a hot potato, but not this time. Stacy stayed with me through the entire conversation. Even when she would have to call another department or company to assist, she never left; in fact, Stacy would always explain the scenario to the new party so that I wouldn't have to re-explain myself each time. I was never cut off and she consistently paraphrased me to ensure that she understood the message I intended to convey. In short, Stacy made me feel heard, served, and cared for. Both Stacy and her company stood out as world-class because the level of attention and follow through was unforgettable, and the service was astronomically better than any other company...in any industry.

Now, how can you develop the Stacy's of your organization who absolutely love to provide world-class service? Well, it is NOT by studying average. If you want to deliver world-class, you must understand world-class, and to understand world-class, you must study world-class. Let world-class organizations be your benchmark.

In my days as a Director of Quality at a luxury hotel in Atlanta, GA, one of my responsibilities was to analyze guest satisfaction data for the property, then compare that data to other hotels. One morning as I was briefing the executive committee of the property, I started with the average performance amongst the other properties, and I was stopped by the General Manager. He asked, why I was reporting on the average. He emphatically stated that the hotel's goal was not to be average, but to be at the top of the list. So from then on, the hotel's sole comparison, were only the top hotels. ***Key Takeaway: Give your staff an assignment to research and report on an example of world-class performance, and why they believe it is worthy of being called world-class. Have them tell you what lessons can be learned and immediately applied from such performance?***

Define your reality

The second key point in the service excellence journey is to define your reality. In elaborating this point, we will look at three principles from a field of study known as "Appreciative Inquiry". They are the constructionist principle, anticipatory principle, and the enactment principle. The constructionist principle states that "words create worlds". This basically means that the words we use directly lead to the reality we see. Or as Joseph Jaworski once said ... "we don't describe the world we see, we see the world we describe". The concept is that there is a correlation between how you refer to your

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employees and how you actually perceive them (reality). Try it...say the following terms, and gauge your perception; associate, lady, employee, staff member, team member, member, partner, gentleman, etc. Do the same thing for how you refer to those who patronize your business. I know a major department store that refers to their customers as guests. Can you tell the reality they are trying to create?

Next, there is the Anticipatory Principle. It states that we move in the direction of our images of the future. The vivid images of the future directly impact our present-day actions. *Key Point: The stronger the vision, the stronger the action.* When the images of the future is very clear, human systems organize their present actions (consciously and subconsciously) to reach that vision. This is why having an organizational vision is so critically important. World-class companies don't just have the vision statement printed

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on glossy paper or posted on the company website. The best leaders use that vision to guide, inspire, and remind everyone in the organization of the grander future that is in store for everyone.

The third piece is the Enactment Principle. The best way to explain this is by using one of Gandhi's most famous quotes..."Be the change you want to see". I'm sure you've heard this sort of thing before, but if you want your team to greet every person who walks through that front door, guess who must be the biggest greeter of them all? You! If you want every email to have a complete sentence, guess who must lead the charge? You! If your hope is that every customer has their preferences acted upon, guess who must be the first to act on their staff's preferences? You! Once you've finished modeling the desired behavior, ensure that everyone is held accountable for those service standards...including yourself.

The value of organizational values

The final piece of this service excellence puzzle is probably the most overlooked asset in most companies: The organization's core values. The reason that values are so underappreciated is because most executives file them away in the land of "fluff". How much value can the values bring anyway? First of all, if service is not a dominant organizational value, it will not be valued...period. Values, in the truest sense, are basic, enduring, unshakable, fundamental, and absolute. They are meant to be taken literally, and acted upon. There should be an obvious connection between what the company is known for (hopefully service), and the values. Many times, the organizational value of "customer's come first" never was meant to be taken literally or used as the basis for managerial decision-making. So how do you breathe life into those values? Putting values into action starts with saying what you mean, and meaning what you say-or not saying anything at all. It can actually do more harm than good by having a value like "everyone is empowered to make decisions", then not showing support for those who took the value seriously. In short, if the value is not something you are willing to relentlessly talk about and hold everyone accountable for, then don't put it as a core

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value. Your staff and your customers will respect the organization for being “true” to itself and not trying to go along with every industry trend. The values are meant to inspire and navigate the organization through good and bad times. They don’t just drive the business; they drive the people within the business.

As you can see, service excellence truly is an organizational journey that links what is genuinely believed to what ultimately is done on a consistent basis. It doesn’t matter where your company or team currently is on this journey. Remember to keep the vision of service excellence clear and inspiring; then let that vision pull the entire organization towards it like a magnet. Developing or transforming an organizational culture doesn’t happen overnight, but with the right vision, leadership, confidence, and values, it is very attainable.

So you ask, “where does service excellence” begin? It begins with you.

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