



People Skills

by Jan van Harsseel, Ed.D

Motivating customer service employees is an investment requiring commitment

*Another great article from The Rooms Chronicle, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! ***Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.*** College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com*

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Editor's note: This is the third in a series of four articles on the successful management of the customer service function. Managing the Customer Service Challenge involves a four-step process; it includes the management tasks of hiring, training, motivating, and rewarding guest service employees. In the July/August issue of The Rooms Chronicle, the author introduced principles guiding the hiring process. The September/October edition of TRC presented an article discussing training. This issue's article will discuss step three - motivating.

Consistently finding ways to motivate all employees is one of management's most challenging tasks. The importance of keeping employees motivated and excited about their tasks is crucial to an organization's overall success. Efforts aimed at motivating employees should be an important part of management's policies and plans.

Motivated employees are more likely to be loyal employees. Moreover, motivated employees are more likely to be productive employees. Both can help bring stability to turnover of personnel and increase the level of guest satisfaction. Remember, happy employees create satisfied guests. And satisfied guests can represent a hotel's largest (unpaid) sales force.

The motivation challenge focuses on inspiring employees to want to work efficiently. It involves mentoring workers who are productive not because they are coerced but because they are committed; this is essentially the difference between servitude and service.

There are several approaches that can help create an environment in which organiza-

tions can find keys to success. The following article is based on a series of surveys conducted during the summer of 2004 by the author of front-line employees and their supervisors. Four critical factors emerged: leadership, training, em-powerment, and cultural sensitivity.

Leadership

Leadership is the ability to inspire people to make a willing and voluntary commitment to accomplishing or exceeding organizational goals. Employee performance is a reflection of the direction and supervision they receive from their supervisors.

In order to be good motivators, managers must be good leaders. Good leaders are committed to both the job that needs to be done and the people who must do it. To inspire employees, managers must be willing to do what they expect of their workers, do it better, and do it consistently. To be a good leader, a manager must set an example of all characteristics that are important on the job.

Good leaders are good communicators. They are skilled listeners, considerate partners, and are able to communicate their ideas clearly and in a non-threatening manner.

Good leaders have influence over employees and use it in a positive manner. Influence is the art of using power to move people to certain goals.

Good leaders provide consistent feedback, offer regular training opportunities, and are eager to delegate tasks.

Finally, good leaders are persuasive. Simply expecting employees to do what they are ordered to do will result in limited success. Those who are able to use communication skills to influence and lead people in achieving voluntary commitments can have unlimited success.

Earlier this summer, as part of a focus group experience, the author posed the following question to frontline employees in the hospitality industry:

“What type of actions on the part of your supervisor are most effective in you being motivated to perform the customer service function?”

Here is a sampling of the employee responses (unedited):

- *By receiving recognition from my supervisor for doing a good job. A quick and simple statement that doesn't interrupt her day will make me feel better about the job that I am doing. It makes me try harder to satisfy her expectations of me.*
- *She is personable and always willing to help and listen.*
- *He helps us recognize our ability to do our best. It reflects on our way of doing things for the guests to make it a better place to stay.*
- *Leads by example. My supervisor cares about me.*
- *Knowing that my suggestions are taken seriously and action is taken.*
- *Willingness for supervisor to get out and do the dirty work. Not being overly demanding in a rude way. There are ways to handle things so we want to help.*
- *Training opportunities on a regular basis.*
- *Their own enthusiasm and sacrifice. When I clearly see the sacrifice made by my boss, it encourages me to do the same for my company, and decreases the bitterness when asked to do so.*
- *To know that what I have done is appreciated is the best motivation for me.*
- *Making guests happy in spite of themselves.*
- *Sharing positive guest comments with me. Need to know that supervisor is aware of my actions.*
- *Flexibility with schedules; understanding my needs.*
- *Provide the tools to perform the job.*
- *My manager puts us through extensive training and makes us feel proud.*

Training

Opportunities to grow and learn are valued by all employees. Invest in your employees! What is expected from employees might be clear to management but needs to be shared with both full-time and part-time employees during a structured orientation. An orientation program should go well beyond filling out forms to get insurance and benefits. These are the three important aspects of any initial training program:

- *Company orientation.* Introduction to the history, values, and mission of the organization. This will help shape employee's work values, work ethic, and their ability to fit in.
- *Job specific training.* Employees should know the details of their assigned tasks. People often fail to do what they are supposed to do because they don't know what they are supposed to do.
- *Cross-training.* Everyone in the company should be familiar with the key services the company offers its guests. It gives everyone an idea about the big picture and encourages individuals to step up and fill in when gaps are detected. It also sensitizes employees to understand how what they do, on a daily basis, impacts the next person and the entire organization. It also helps every individual employee understand guest services from a guest's point of view.

All employees should have the benefit of regular training programs throughout their careers. Employees, in order to function well, must be well trained and be assured that management values their commitment. Daily routines in hospitality industry settings are hectic and often stressful. Employees who understand their role in the organization and the importance of their contribution to the well being of the organization are not afraid of taking risks to do their best.

Empowerment

Involving employees in decision-making, and the thinking process that precedes decision-making, is a key to motivation. What is empowerment? Empowerment is employee involvement that matters! Empowerment pushes responsibility and decision making down the organization to those employees closest to the customer. Empowerment is about getting employees to help themselves. It helps employees develop a sense of ownership of their ideas, their job, and the company. This, in turn, leads to a greater willingness on the part of employees to take actions, resolve guest complaints, and take risks in an effort to make improvements.

Empowerment results in a culture of self-mentoring. Empowerment increases guest satisfaction through speedier and more effective interactions. Numerous inhibitors will often cause employees to resist the responsibility that comes with empowerment. Here are a few things management can do to facilitate risk taking and spur initiative on the part of employees:

- Believe in the employee's ability to be successful
- Be patient and give employees time to learn
- Provide employees direction and structure when it is needed
- Teach employees new skills in small steps
- Ask questions that challenge employees to think in new ways
- Share information with all employees
- Give employees timely feedback
- Exhibit a sense of humor
- Focus on results
- Celebrate personal improvements

Cultural sensitivity

It is important to consider that all workers have been socialized in their respective cultures. People don't do what comes naturally; they do what comes culturally. Approaches to motivating a diverse workforce needs to take into consideration that differences among people are strengths to build on.

People of different cultures are motivated by different actions. Whereas traditional management literature often stresses the virtue of individual achievement as a major motivating factor for individual employees, employees of various cultural groups differ in their perception of values toward work, wealth, achievement, time, and (resistance to) change. Asian influenced value systems rely on the internalization of the group's goals by every employee and on the ability of employees to work harder to attain group goals. Northern European values tend to center on the successful completion by an individual of the previously, mutually agreed upon goals and tasks. Latino values focus on interpersonal contacts, a protocol often misinterpreted by Americans as a delay to getting down to business. There are also clear differences between numerous ethnic groups in the United States. Opportunities for interaction, cultural respect, and self-directed choices are critical ingredients in any employee empowerment initiative. Hispanics will often demonstrate a strong sense of loyalty to family, which is their basic support group throughout life. They appreciate ethnic role models and tend to work more effectively in cooperative rather than competitive settings. African-Americans tend to be person-centered and are highly sensitive to the moods of others. They are especially receptive to multiple stimuli and variability. Native Americans prefer to have private experiences before engaging in public performances and often are not strongly competitive.

Although not all members of a particular ethnic group are alike, these observations are useful to manage a culturally diverse workforce effectively. To the extent possible, try to appeal to personal interests and offer personalized rewards.

Conclusion

The ability of an organization to successfully motivate and train employees is crucial to its success and profitability. It all starts with the frontline employees who have the most interaction with guests. Business organizations can spend considerable energy ensuring that leadership teams are trained and that correct strategic plans are in place, which is important, but it will be a waste of money if frontline employees are not motivated, trained, and inspired to implement the policies designed to exceed customers' expectations.

Finally, don't be afraid to discipline and terminate someone who is not performing. The good employees will appreciate it and be motivated when management holds people accountable. Conduct regular reviews and keep the process simple. Regularly give positive feedback, provide constructive guidance, and discuss job specific goals.

In the next issue of TRC

- Jan van Harssel will continue with Part IV: Rewarding the Service Employee. ✧

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