

Three Reasons

By T. Scott Gross

Service stinks. Service is sorry. Service has gone straight down the drain.

And I know why.

Three reasons: miscast employees, uncertain management, and antagonistic systems have come together in a perfect storm of incompetence that has left consumers thinking three thoughts of their own—price, price, and price.

It doesn't have to be this way. Our research says that customers will pay more (not a lot), drive further (a lot further), and wait longer if they think that there is an outside chance they will be waited on by a friendly, knowledgeable service person. They're even willing to take some of the blame for poor service. Our survey of ten thousand consumers cited rude customers as the fourth leading cause of stinky service! Let's take a closer look at the big, bad three causes of stinky service.

We Hire People We Don't Want for Jobs They Don't Want

Culprit number one: miscast employees. A huge number of under-performing employees are working in jobs that simply do not fit either their talent or temperament. Simply put, never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time and it irritates the pig!

We worked with eighteen top corporate managers in a small study to determine what a quality service person might look like. We asked managers to participate in a brief survey to create the psychological profile of the ideal service person for a specific job in their company. We then asked them to identify their best service persons which we in turn profiled and used the results to create a

composite profile of a winning employee as defined by the boss.

Just for grins we profiled the worst service employees in each of our participating companies. (We didn't call them losers, merely "strugglers.")

No surprise! The winning employees had a profile completely different from the "strugglers." But much to our surprise was the discovery that the composite profile of the best servers did not in any way resemble the profile created by the boss! In simple terms, most bosses wouldn't recognize a great hire if one fell on them!

Back up for a second. Our 10,000 consumers mentioned rude customers as a major cause of poor service. How can this be? Why would customers blame themselves for crummy service? Well, it turns out they didn't exactly blame themselves; they blamed "the other guy." You see, customers aren't customers full time. At work, they sit on the other side of the fence! But how do we explain this? If nearly everyone complains about poor service, who is left to actually deliver poor service?

The answer is this: Rarely is poor service either intentional or recognized as being poor service by the person doing the serving.

Finding number two: For even the worst performers there is likely to be a job where they *could* be successful. It's too bad so few have found their niche. Nobody wants to look stupid. Nobody ever says, "I can't wait to get to work. I am such an idiot in that job!" Think about it. Your poorest performers are the same folks most likely to show

up late or perhaps not show up at all. But trust me, the employee you'd like to kill could be just perfect—somewhere else!

The challenge is to get the right people in and the people who are right for someplace else...out!

If the Boss Is Lost...

Culprit number two: Uncertain leadership. Quick! What is your mission statement? Don't go digging out the stupid wallet card the consultant/change agent had printed for you. Just stand up and belt out that mission! And while you are bellowing give us a chorus of core values.

You can't do it, can you?

The team will usually follow where the boss decides to lead so it's mighty helpful if the boss knows where this train is going. When you aren't certain of your destination most any direction will do.

The most boring function of leadership is hammering out those values, mission, and vision statements. It's too bad they are also among the most important things we can do. They are fundamental.

Leadership must behave in a way that is one hundred percent congruent with the values, mission, and vision. If not, a new set of values, mission, and vision will be created de facto.

It's Not the Stupid Worker!

Demming was right. It's not the stupid worker...it's the stupid work! We are so afraid that an employee is going to miscount the change, mess up the inventory, or make a decision that's going to cost a dime that we have dummied down jobs in an attempt to make them idiot proof. When you make a job idiot proof should you be surprised to discover that

only idiots can stand to work them?

When you run employees and customers against stupid rules, you frustrate employees and send customers scurrying to businesses with more flexibility. Visit the nearest fast food restaurant and ask for a large cup of ice water. You will find yourself face-to-face with an employee looking very much like a deer caught in the headlights. They're likely to offer you several of their small courtesy cups. They may even offer to run a garden hose to your table but "please, please don't make me give you a large cup!" Why? Because to prevent theft the large cups are counted. For every large cup missing there should be a large drink sale recorded on the cash register. It's not the stupid worker; it's the stupid work!

Everywhere you will find policies that stand in the way of good service. Show up early for your flight and you may see a half-empty plane depart the gate while the flight you are on is over-booked. They would rather send a plane out with unsold seats than risk the integrity of their policy to charge a penalty for changing a reservation. It's not the stupid worker.

What Will We Do?

What we will probably do is—nothing! We'll remain in our comfort zone, calmed by conventional wisdom: You can't get good help; the schools don't teach kids to count; parents have given up teaching values; and if you watch the pennies, the dollars will follow.

That's fine. If you've come this far without being a service fanatic perhaps your luck will hold. But Katy bar the door if one fine morning you watch a new competitor move onto your turf and this one is different—they hire hard and fire easy; they are fully

focused on their values, mission, and vision; and they go to any length to stamp out stupid policies.

Until then, you are safe.

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