
CHAPTER ONE

The Engineer on the Ladder

Reaching for the Highest Level of Service

Suppose you're the manager of a group of hotels. In one of them, a maintenance engineer is replacing a light bulb in the lobby ceiling. Out of the corner of his eye he notices a woman and her two sons coming from the pool, wrapped in towels but still dripping wet. The woman has her hands full with bags. She fumbles with the door that leads into the lobby, looking exasperated. The man on the ladder becomes alert to her predicament, puts down his tools, climbs down, crosses the lobby, smiles, and opens the door for her.

"Welcome back to the hotel, ma'am," he says. "Let me help you with your bags. How was the pool? Did your two little guys have a good time? What floor are you going to?" He presses the button, exits the elevator, and heads back toward his ladder.

When we spin this story out for executives and managers in our seminars, the most common first reaction is envy: "I'd be thrilled to have my rank and file achieve this level of customer service," runs a typical response. "The customer expressed a need, and 'my' employee responded energetically," says a manager. "He got off the ladder rather than saying 'That's not my job.' So what's not to like?"

It's true: We've all seen worse. But there's still plenty to dislike. As

upbeat as this encounter was, it was reactive: The woman had to fumble with the door, thereby making her frustration known so the engineer would react. Reactive service is a pretty ineffective way to create loyal customers. To get on the fast track to customer loyalty, your company needs something better.

The magic happens when you, your systems, and the employees throughout the ranks of your business *anticipate* the needs of your customers, learning to recognize and respond to the needs of your customers before they are expressed—sometimes before your customers even realize they have a need. That is the difference between providing ho-hum service by merely reacting to customer requests and building loyalty through true *anticipatory* service.

Function Versus Purpose

Picture this instead: What if the moment your fellow on the ladder sees the overburdened mom returning from the pool, he thinks to himself, “My routine daily *function* is to change light bulbs, paint ceilings, and fix pipes, but the reason I’m here, *my purpose*, is to help create a memorable experience for guests”? Understanding this, he immediately climbs down and opens the door for her—*before* she has to fumble with the door handle or knock to get attention.

The maintenance engineer—inspired by your leadership—has now provided genuine service that *anticipates* the customer’s needs. The timing of the engineer’s intervention is the only measurable change, but what a difference that tiny change makes! Suddenly this employee has anticipated a customer’s need, a need she has not yet expressed. In doing so, he has honored her idiosyncratic life circumstances—her individual humanity.

This extraordinary kind of service is a highly reliable path to winning customer loyalty. In the chapters ahead we will equip you to make such service encounters the rule rather than the exception, at all levels of your company.

You probably have doubts.

You may doubt that *your* maintenance engineer or other rank and file worker would ever anticipate the needs of customers so masterfully. We'll show you how and why he can and will.

You may doubt that you can afford to create such lavish standards of service. As one of our students put it, "In one of Leonardo's five-star resorts, I can see it, maybe. But in Micah's bootstrapped ventures—how does *he* pull off that level of service? As for my own company, I need my maintenance workers to stay up on their ladders, thank you very much!"

Actually, creating extraordinary service systems is a cost-effective proposition for almost any business: the natural outcome of a systematic approach to customers. And such service pays great dividends in reasonably short order.

First Steps First

Before we get to the creation of those all-important loyal customers through anticipatory service, we'd like to ensure you've pinned down a more basic initial step: creating simple customer satisfaction. We'll head there first.