Your People

Selection, Orientation, Training, and Reinforcement

The art of anticipation requires, at its core, the right people. People who have been chosen correctly for their positions, who understand their purpose in your organization, who are inspired by leadership, trained in the necessary technical skills, and given reinforcement daily.

Let's take a closer look.

We Are Already Our True Selves: Select for Traits

How can you fill the ranks of your company with people who will be superb at anticipating the needs of your customers? To begin with, you need to move away from hiring in most positions for specific *skills* and toward selecting for *talent*. Give that friendly, insightful, responsible applicant who has a knack for making people feel comfortable a shot—even if it means passing over an applicant with a résumé that more closely matches the job's day-to-day functions.

Why? Although we all want to believe that our personality traits and aptitudes can shift at any time throughout our lives, such change rarely happens in adulthood. Decades of research have consistently shown that most of us persist throughout adult life with more or less

the same personalities and aptitudes with which we began it. So if Jane has always tended to become quarrelsome under stress, she'll probably have that tendency throughout the decades ahead of her. If Jack is now a superbly patient and supportive listener, he's very likely going to stay that way until his dotage.

Can we be certain that any particular employee will conform to this rule? Absolutely not. But successful businesses are built on a series of well-calculated bets, not guarantees. And your likeliest bet is that your employees have already settled into the personalities and aptitudes that they'll have in the future. Remember this whenever you are selecting representatives of your brand, and you'll come out ahead. Recognize this, and you'll understand why we recommend using the best personality and aptitude assessment tools available to you—appropriate testing, appropriate evaluation—to find people with the talents you're looking for.

Isn't it important to hire the applicant with the best job-specific experience? Quite often, the answer is no. Job functions can be taught, but it's nearly impossible to teach empathy, energy, or cognitive flexibility. So go ahead and set up your hiring process around lifelong traits such as a sincere and pleasant way of interacting with other people, a good command of language, a sense of responsibility and commitment, and so forth. Generate your own list of the traits that are crucial to your business.

Here are the top five traits we have found to be the most important for the people we select to join us in our enterprises. We find these five traits useful in selecting candidates for a service position from a hospital to a bank, from a tech support counter to a call center that serves an online florist.

1. Genuine personal warmth. Ask men and women what they want in a spouse, and they'll tell you slightly different things. But interestingly, in survey after survey, men and women from various cultures agree on the single most important characteristic: *warmth*. Genuine warmth (or, as it is sometimes called, *kindness*) in a mate is valued more than any-

thing else. It even trumps physical attractiveness, compatibility of interests, or success. From infancy onward, warmth serves to reassure us that somebody won't double-deal us, turn on us, or abandon us in our moment of need.

People are hard-wired to pick up on warmth, or its absence, very quickly. They're also excellent at detecting phony warmth *simulations*. That's one reason why it's foolish to hire cold or stand-offish representatives in the hope of training them to *act* warmly with customers. Customers, like people everywhere, are superb at detecting counterfeit warmth.

2. Empathic skill. Warmth and empathic skill are interrelated, but it's helpful to know the difference between them and to make sure that both are represented in your employees. One way to think about the difference: Warmth involves a tendency to express sincerely positive feelings toward people. Empathic skill is the ability to understand what another human being is going through and how to interact helpfully in that situation.

An example: Joan is a company employee with abundant warmth but low empathic skill. Because of her warmth, we know she will *want* to say exactly the right thing when a long-term client blurts out that he just lost his job. But without strong empathic skill, she won't know which kinds of reactions are likely to be helpful, which are likely just to be awkward, and which are likely to actually cause the poor fellow more pain.

Now Kevin, who works in the same company as Joan, has high warmth *and* high empathic skill. He cares about his clients, but he also knows when to avoid a personal topic, when to offer an opinion, and when to just ask gentle questions. Kevin almost certainly would have been able to help the same client feel understood, supported, and gently encouraged.

3. An optimistic, upbeat attitude. Service can be draining. This is true when you're learning the ropes, and it's still true when you've been in the business a long time. Setbacks are common, reversals of fortune

occur—and if you are inclined to a pessimistic view of things, you won't be able to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman has studied the importance of positive attitude in business. Seligman's research shows that in many positions, including those he calls ''high burnout jobs,'' the single most important difference between success and failure is not intelligence, luck, or experience. It is whether employees have an ''optimistic explanatory style''[1] or a pessimistic one. That's because a pessimistic attitude *(''That customer doesn't really want to hear from me'')* tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy *(''I can't call on that customer out of the blue now—we haven't spoken in months, and she's probably taken her business to another company.'')*

How employees understand causation helps determine performance in service positions. Consider Kevin, the employee with considerable warmth and empathetic skill. If Kevin is also an optimist, he will avoid feeling demoralized by a customer who takes out frustrations on him— and therefore he'll find it easier to snap back and regroup later in the workday. When an order goes awry for a customer, a more pessimistic service professional may become paralyzed by fear—not only for his client's well-being, but for his own.

(However, it is important to have some of the potentially adaptive aspects of pessimism represented within your company ranks as well. Pessimism can positively lead to: thinking things through to avoid errors, inhibiting impulsive or brash actions, and not being easily satisfied that ''everything is great now.'' Excessive optimism can be downright dangerous in certain positions in any organization: from financial forecaster to safety officer to professional driver. There is no one profile that is going to fit every position within an organization.)

4. A team orientation. It's easy now to imagine our Kevin interacting warmly, insightfully, and optimistically with a discouraged client. But suppose that Kevin is poor at keeping others on his team informed about how the client is doing, rejecting any offers of support in meeting her service needs *(''You know I can handle it all myself'')*. Kevin's work style is likely to cause trouble on any tightly interrelated team. If Kevin lacks the teamwork trait, he will wreak havoc on his teammates.

5. Conscientiousness. Conscientiousness is a broad trait that subsumes concepts like responsibility, work ethic, diligence, and attention to getting the details right. The conscientious employee takes pride in doing things well, pays close attention to his work, stays organized, and follows through. All the warmth, empathy, optimism, and team spirit in the world won't suffice if you lack conscientiousness. A client of a representative like that will say things like this: *"Yes, Kevin has been wonderfully encouraging. He really seems to understand my priorities, and he has helped me connect with some terrific resources. But I've had a lot of trouble reaching him, he tends not to reply to my emails for days, he forgets to do even the most basic things, and, to cap it all off, he called today to say he's lost my file! I'm sorry, I've had it."*

Whatever combination of trait criteria you settle on, you'll need to vigorously defend and promote its use, especially when your company is growing quickly. Others will pressure you at such times to fill positions regardless, without slowing down. Resist.

Keep the Hiring Bar High

Resist the temptation to fill a vacant position with an inferior employee. In the strange-but-true department, in most cases it is better to have a team of superb employees suffer temporary overload than to insert ill-suited employees into the team. This is a very hard principle for service-oriented people to accept, since we want, for example, the phones answered quickly. Yes, that *is* important! But a single bad recruit can poison the mood of an otherwise effective team. The more significant the position, the greater the dose of poison you administer.

Over and over, we've watched an entire team's performance sink when a single wrong employee is hired. To understand why, imagine a group of runners that gets together every Sunday evening. The members of our group have varied paces. Marty is fast, with a six-minute, thirty-second pace. Wanda runs a seven-minute, thirty-second pace— very quick. Leonardo runs at eight minutes, thirty seconds, and Ezra runs a nine-minute pace. What is the speed of our group? It's the speed

of the slowest runner in our group: Ezra's nine-minute pace. Sooner or later, Marty's going to say, *"Hey, nine minutes is too slow. I'm out of here."* He'll go somewhere else and find a new group of runners that runs a pace closer to his. It's similar in business: When you hire an ill-suited employee, you don't just slow down your business. You drive away your best-performing employees as well.

You may also drive away your best customers. Whenever you put together a mostly, but not consistently, excellent team, customers will usually interact with at least one sub-par employee. And we know that customers tend to judge firms by the *weakest* links they encounter in the customer service chain. That's why even a few poor brand representatives can jeopardize your hard-earned customer loyalty.

Develop Selection Discipline

Developing an effective interview and selection process takes discipline. Many businesses make use of science-based employee selection services. Leonardo often makes use of the interview design resources from a company called Talent Plus, and Micah's has seen good results with the Caliper system. As with outside survey resources, the best results are obtained when the outside organization or system accommodates your company's own hiring criteria.

Whichever selection approach you decide is right for you, consider incorporating internal *personnel benchmarking*. This means that you systematically compare each new applicant's profile to those of your own best performers and those of your standard performers, to see how they match up. (You won't have this detailed personnel benchmarking data initially. You can build it up over time and incorporate it into your selection processes as it grows.)

Once you settle on a scientific approach to employment screening, don't just use it as "seasoning"—sprinkling a bit here or there as the mood strikes you, and skipping it when it doesn't suit you. Whatever selection process you set up must be used with *every* recruit; otherwise

you will never know how effective your tool is and what work may be needed to hone it.

Create a Powerful Orientation Process

Do you know—for certain—what the first day of work is like for your employees? Is there a chance it runs something like this?

> The chief technician at the body shop looks at his new employee and says, "Welcome to our shop. What's your name again? Jim? Oh, okay. Yes, welcome to our shop, Jim. Let me see your uniform, yeah; your shoes, okay. Do you have a pen, pencil, pad? Yep, you have everything. Okay, follow Bill. He'll show you everything that goes on in this shop."
>
> So, the new employee follows Bill, who has been disgruntled ever since he was demoted in '02 because of his poor work ethic. Since then, Bill's favorite job duty has been orienting new recruits. Out of earshot of the boss, he smiles wanly at Jim. "Let me tell you how it *really* works around here . . ."

Around the world each day, careless orientations like this one are creating lasting negative expectations among employees. And executives and managers typically have no idea it's happening. Be sure your precious first moments with an employee aren't squandered (or worse). Institute a careful, effective orientation process.

Use Orientation to Instill New Values, Attitudes, and Beliefs

Employees are especially impressionable during their first days—and especially their *very first day*—on the job. This is because beginning any new job is disorienting, and psychologists have shown that during peri-

ods of disorientation, people are particularly susceptible to adopting new roles, goals, and values. Those new values and beliefs might turn out to be subversive ones like Bill was trying to plant, or constructive ones like you want to seed. It depends largely on your orientation program.

With this in mind, we recommend that you focus your orientation process not on instilling practical know-how, but rather on instilling the most useful possible attitudes, beliefs, and goals. Keep the focus on what is most crucial for your business: core customer service principles, your company values, and why and how your employee is an essential part of the company's overall mission. Don't fritter away orientation on inconsequential details. *("This is the break room. We clean the employee fridge out each Friday.")*

Involve the highest leadership level possible, ideally the CEO, to personally provide the orientation on values, beliefs, and purpose. Sound impractical, even impossible? Consider this: Horst Schulze personally conducted every Day One orientation at every new Ritz-Carlton hotel and resort that opened worldwide, throughout his tenure. He now continues this tradition at the Capella and Solis hotels and resorts.

So, figure out a way. You only get one Day One.

Defining an Employee's Underlying Purpose

A particularly crucial aspect of orientation is ensuring that a new employee understands her particular *underlying purpose* in your organization and appreciates its importance. An object can only have a function. A human being has both a function—his day-to-day job responsibilities— and a purpose—the reason why the job exists. (For example, "To create a memorable experience for our guests" is the purpose we hope will move our engineer off the ladder at the beginning of this book.)

If an employee understands that she has an underlying essential purpose in your company, she'll tend to respond to customers differently. Among other things, she'll try harder to comprehend what they need and to come up with creative ways to meet their needs. This can be a

huge asset when confusing or stressful service situations arise, including situations that have never been planned for.

Even in a mundane situation, this simple understanding, starting from day one, can make all the difference. Have you ever been to a shopping mall and stared, obviously bewildered, at the map—while a security guard idly stands there ''protecting'' you, all of two feet away? Did the security guard proactively help you out with an *''Anything I can help you find?''* If he worked for us, he would have. At orientation, we would have started him off understanding his higher purpose: *to create a great shopping experience for guests*. Sure, that could include deterring and apprehending bad guys, but it also includes attending to shoppers who have that unmistakable lost look on their faces.

The Orientation Process Begins Sooner Than You Think

The orientation process begins the moment an employee is told she's been hired. From that point onward, every interaction with this incoming staffer will influence her beliefs about your company. So think carefully about all contact with the new recruit, including form letters your company sends her, how she is treated when she calls with a question about benefits, and so forth.

Orientation should then move into the emotionally compelling Day One component, a separate event that marks a dividing line between the past and the future. This conveys an important message: Your work life, your assumptions, even your values at work, are going to be different from this point forward.

On Day One, Nothing Is Tangential

Even seemingly peripheral aspects of your orientation program can influence a new employee's relationship with your company. To get a first-hand appreciation for how important these aspects of orientation can be, suppose for a moment that you're on the receiving end of orientation. You're excited to be newly hired as a junior vice president. That

is, until the day you report to work and find you don't have an active company phone line, a computer login, business cards, or most of the other tools you need. Yet they've known you were coming for three months: plenty of time to get your business cards, your company ID, your company credit card, your parking spot: all the helpful, practical items to get you up and running. You can already tell that the first week is going to be a week in limbo, and it's raising questions in your mind about the company you've signed on with. *Your orientation is already going badly before the scheduled sessions have even begun.*

Now suppose that on Day One, the most influential day of your new job, you are wedged into a messy meeting room and given cock-eyed photocopies-of-photocopied handouts, asked to read them under buzzing fluorescent bulbs, and surrounded by strewn-about computer equipment. You're now subliminally absorbing the kind of messages that lead to customers getting substandard, out of date, poorly aligned, messy service. Some orientation! It's hard under such circumstances not to feel cynical about the speech from the senior vice president about the company's "paramount value of excellence."

So when it's *your* turn to be in charge, avoid conditioning employees negatively. Practice your Day One comments in front of a critical colleague until you can consistently deliver them superbly. Prepare the orientation rooms perfectly, with all the chairs tucked in straight, perfectly aligned, everything clean, and all the visuals effectively prepared. Offer simple refreshments—piping hot coffee, fresh cookies—perfectly arranged. Use only good-quality, closely edited, and up-to-date handouts. (Go ahead and splurge: Print out fresh copies.)

Build a Brand Ambassador

After the emotion and drama of Day One, you settle into the long process of building the necessary skills for the new employee to perform the job. Most importantly, you initiate the "brand ambassador" process: the process that transforms a new recruit into an effective representative for your company. How long that takes depends on the nature of the

brand, the particular employee, and the employee's position. Building a brand ambassador can take two months, three months, six months, or a year. But it's certainly not a one-week, two-week, or zero-week process.

Never permit a new employee to represent you in interactions with customers before he has completed your orientation process. Customers never deserve to be practiced on. The only exception to this is the "following" of another employee by a trainee, clearly represented as such, while the veteran being followed protects the customer from any negative impact.

Everyone's an Expert

We recommend that current non-managerial employees (not just HR employees, but operational employees) participate in departmental recruiting, selection, hiring interviews, and orientation. (Note that your relationship with an applicant is legally sensitive, so you need to do this with some care, and your employees will need training and supervision as they assume such responsibilities.) For any service-minded employee on your team, the chance to be involved in hiring instills a sense of pride in, engagement with, and commitment to the organization. By promoting a positive vision of the company to new recruits, and by working on selecting those recruits, your staff will naturally invest themselves more in the company's mission. So it's a terrific investment of your supervisory time and energy.

Training Employees to Anticipate . . . *Carefully*

A key component of building a superb service team is *teaching*. You need to make a significant, ongoing investment in teaching your employees the skills they need to do their jobs properly. Business types usually call the teaching they do *training*. But training is just a variant of teaching.

If you've observed any teachers closely, you know that theirs is a much tougher job than it seems from afar. Their students only turn into knowledgeable, versatile experts after weeks of intensive, guided learning. The work of a business trainer is tough, too. Effective, consistent service professionalism only emerges after hours of expert instruction, coaching, and guided practice.

There's no way around the difficulties and hassles that excellent training involves, but it is truly worth all the time and trouble. A commitment to and understanding of proper training is a golden ticket in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Few businesses and business leaders show the doggedness needed to commit to, structure, and maintain the training needed to create and sustain a superb service staff. If you have that tenacity and vision, it will help your company lead its field.

The Passion for Training

Starting in the Middle Ages, master craftsmen would bring in young apprentices and teach them a craft—a process that took the better part of a decade. Nowadays it may seem anachronistic to emphasize lengthy, intensive training amid so much preoccupation with efficiency and speed. But it's an important leadership responsibility to ensure proficiency, and the patient, deliberate skill transfer from master to apprentice has huge value. Great organizations understand that they must be "learning organizations": they learn from their customers, from their employees, and from their competitors. Great organizations are also "training organizations." Otherwise, what will happen to all that organizational learning?

We recommend that you begin by developing a specific training curriculum (internally or in conjunction with a training organization) that reflects your particular business context. The details of your com-

pany's curriculum will depend on your industry, your company's culture, and the expectations of your customer segment.

No matter what your business entails, we encourage you to focus on training employees in how to balance two priorities: the need to provide each customer with anticipatory service and the equally important need to respect the customer's protective bubble. We sometimes refer to this as learning how to be bullish in a china shop. It's hard to quantify this balance; mastering it comes with time and experience. But once it has been achieved, it leads to solid, quantifiable increases in customer loyalty.

Let's examine this balancing act with a practical example that's close to our hearts—our selves as a whole, actually—it surrounds us, in fact. While the two of us work on this book, we're sitting in a fully staffed, comfortable airport club lounge. A few minutes ago, a perfectly nice, well-groomed, well-spoken staff person interrupted Leonardo when he was in mid-sentence. What was lacking here? *Training.* So let's look at how training could effectively apply to this environment.

Otherwise-nice service people obliviously break protective bubbles all the time; training can ensure that *your* employees will do better. Assuming proper selection in the first place for empathy and other necessary traits, proper training can turn the principles below into second nature. Here are the principles we would stress:

Principle 1. Service starts the moment the customer comes in contact with you. The first step of service is a warm and sincere greeting. How do you execute that? At a distance, a guest such as one of us might look up from our work here in the airport lounge, turn, and see an employee coming in from the service door. The employee returns the eye contact and begins service with a sincere smile. The "switch" is turned on; service starts.

But perhaps we didn't actually need anything. The employee needs to continue to maintain eye contact; if it turns out we were just randomly looking up, the employee will recognize that and smile. We would then probably smile back briefly and go back to work. Service

has now ended. The employee has reassured us with a smile and should back away, because no service has been requested.

Principle 2: Learn to read the subtle verbal and non-verbal messages the customer is delivering. When customers and guests aren't ready for assistance, they don't like to be disturbed. If they want something, they'll ask. The trick is that the "asking" may be extremely subtle, but employees must be skilled enough to recognize it as clearly as if it had been explicit.

To role-play this principle, we might begin by sitting in the lounge talking with each other; Micah turns his face because he notices peripherally that the employee has walked into the room. The employee makes eye contact and smiles. Micah looks at him, smiles back, and maintains eye contact.

These are sufficient cues: The employee now needs to come a little forward and engage Micah verbally ("Good morning. May I assist you with something?") Why? Because the customer's non-verbal message is "I've seen you; you've smiled at me, and that's super. But I am, by *maintaining* eye contact, trying to bring you closer." (If he didn't need anything, Micah would have concluded the visual exchange as in scenario one: he would have turned right back to talking with Leonardo.)

Principle 3: Adjust to the pace of the customer. You cannot attend to a chatty, meandering tourist in the same way you would serve a time-stressed, introverted banker. It is the server's job to pick up on this.

Principle 4: The bubble is the sanctuary of the guest. If the timing's wrong to disturb the customer, *don't.* Your procedures and timing need to be based on the customer's convenience, not yours. Don't change out the salt and pepper shakers on the table when customers are seated. Don't reach across your customers to light a candle to make the room cozier if the moment's wrong for them, even if it's on your checklist of things to get done. All customer care activity needs to be driven by the *customer's* needs and timing, not ham-fistedly by the employee's rush to check a to-do item off a list. It's simply not service if it doesn't match the customer's timing.

In our lounge example, if the customer opens a little door into his sanctuary and looks up—or makes an obvious break in conversation—*that's* the time to check in. Stay focused enough on your customer that you notice these subtle "door" openings. For example, if Micah and Leonardo have been engaged in constant conversation and then Leonardo turns his head sideways as if looking for somebody, that's the server's chance to step in.

"Yes, sir, how may I assist you?"
"I would like, uh, can you bring another cup of coffee?"
"Absolutely. May I bring a pastry with that also?"
"No, but thanks."

Principle 5: Closing the sanctuary door—or not. When the waiter returns with the coffee, there is a final element. The customer has intentionally come to the foreground with his request for coffee, so the door to his personal sanctuary is now open. The server brings the cup of coffee back, with appropriate niceties. His responsibility now is to ask, *"Is there anything else I can do for you?"*

The customer has two options: "Yes, there is," or "No, there is not." Depending on the answer, the door to the sanctuary may stay open, or it may be shut again. If it's the latter, the server needs to thank the customer graciously and move away.

This is the last principle: the "closing" of service. Too many service interactions end with a cold and impersonal "Bye," or "OK," or nothing at all. The closing of service is as important as the opening. It is the last touch point, and it needs to be handled properly.

Reinforcement: The Daily Check-In

Preparation for serving customers is like a paint job: The thicker and more multi-layered the coating, the more gracefully it will weather. Regardless, over time your employees will suffer wear and tear to their "paint"—from the day-in, day-out strain of working with customers

on the one hand and with the demands of management on the other, compounded always by the pressures of life that come from outside work.

This wear and tear can rub even your most naturally friendly employees down to the grain. You need to polish their coats of paint—ideally, every day.

Strangely, the *technical* aspect of a job can actually compound the problem, can actually be part of the grit that chips away every day at the paint of exceptional service. Why? Because service professionals perform the technical parts of their jobs day after day. If someone is a gate agent at Delta or a retail clerk at Bloomingdale's, he will perform the technical aspects of his job daily. He will check people in and out, process transactions, scan items, run credit card payments, day in and day out. And he will end up being very, very good at it.

This, however, is only a portion of his role in the organization: What maintains him in the portion of his role that demands the delivery of caring service—over and over, in a tireless and always subtly different manner? If a company wants to maintain great service, it needs to find a way to discuss service on an ongoing basis and to include everyone from frontline workers on up in the discussions. One way you can do so is with a daily standup meeting.

We know that every industry and every company culture is different. We are far from dogmatic about applying what you could call our daily "standup routine" to every business situation. We have, however, worked in and advised companies that have made revolutionary improvements from implementing this approach. The key is a daily meeting held in small groups throughout your company at the same time each day. Discuss a single aspect of service (for example, one of your guiding service principles, as exemplified by an encounter with a particular customer). Prove your commitment to brevity and focus by holding the meeting standing up, assuming there aren't attendees with physical disabilities who are put at a disadvantage in this setting.

This procedure gets inspiration from, and yet is 180 degrees removed from, the old hospitality tradition of a check-in with staff

("lineup"), where daily specials and other mundane updates are shared. The difference is, in today's world, the challenge of providing great service is not in such nuts and bolts, skills-and-details-related updates. (Put *those* on your wiki.) The challenge is that even if you start off strong with a great orientation, the daily grind will ensure that functional issues ultimately end up overwhelming company purpose.

A daily standup meeting is a chance to keep your company focused on your overriding purpose and to ensure that all staff are aligned to fulfill it. It only takes a few minutes, and the difference it makes can be crucial.

Try it on for size. There is no more powerful way to create an extraordinary experience for your customers than to maintain a fully aligned company—and there is no better time to align a company than once a day, every single day.