

The Guest REPORT

Service excellence

‘Iceberg of Ignorance’ leads to chilly service

Imagine an iceberg, appearing on the horizon of the Atlantic Ocean, during one of our hot, sunny days in South Florida. Imagine the flurry of activity to admire and analyze this unusual phenomenon.

As we examine its structure, we discover that only 4 percent of the iceberg is visible atop the water. The majority of the structure exists below the ocean’s surface, yielding potential danger and undiscovered portions.

Relate this image, the tip of the iceberg, to hospitality and customer service leaders. The view on top is beautiful and the horizon looks clear. Yet, below the waterline, trouble may lurk.

Consider frontline employees, their managers and supervisors to be the remaining 96 percent of the iceberg’s structure. They make up the core of any organization and have the most exposure and direct interaction with guests and customers.

Yet most of the problems and challenges rank-and-file employees encounter are hidden from senior management, from that top 4 percent. With each layer of management, it becomes more difficult to get data from down below, especially from those who touch the guest most.

These untapped chunks of information can create the “Iceberg of Ignorance” (a term introduced in total quality management days) for senior management, a dangerous dilemma in a world striving for service excellence.

The ignorance usually develops from differences in perceptions and communication. Standards and expectations for service delivery will vary from individual to individual based on their own experiences and values.

Those variances create the inconsistencies, confusion and perhaps even conflict on what it means to provide exceptional or even satisfactory service. To attempt to align the differences and unite perceptions, hospitality leaders must first define the standards they want and then train employees on how to integrate those standards into their daily routines.

Employees look for management’s commitment to performance standards and develop respect for managers who give priority to well-planned, high quality training. They also respect and need communication on how to do it, when to do it and what’s expected in service delivery.

Employees also can be an invaluable source of market data and on the impact of service standards based on their day-to-day experiences with guests and even fellow employees. Management should determine how to gather this data on a regular basis as well as encourage employees to share their observations through defined communication channels. It is critical that management and the employees they supervise perceive service delivery in the same way and that communication is a constant two-way process.

To lead employees in proactive customer service behaviors and encourage their active commitment, management must recognize, understand and practice these same behaviors. As with the iceberg, leadership is a top-down process, not just in a management sense but as an individual.

An effective leader, an evangelist who believes the customer and guest will provide

the bottom line profits they need, begins by understanding what to do. Next, he or she accepts, believes, values and internalizes the key concepts they expect of their employees.

When both of these take place, these same leaders can “walk the talk.” Desired behaviors only will take place when each leader and their respective managers and supervisors start modeling these behaviors to those they manage.

When employees see their leaders actually leading by example, they feel good about their work and are more motivated to satisfy their customers. Customers feel good when they deal with companies who seem to treat their people well.

Employees respond to respect, caring and communication just as much as customers

do. Satisfied employees are more likely to produce satisfied customers. Satisfied customers make the employees experience more satisfying. Satisfied employees stay longer and give more. Satisfied customers stay longer and come back.

On the other hand, when needs are not met, uncovered, satisfied or even worse ignored, both customers and employees experience a sense of loss. This difference between satisfaction and dissatisfaction actually creates a loss effect. Perception of loss leads to complaints, turnover and even worse, indifferent performance. Once again, management is stuck on the top of the iceberg and the majority of problems lurk below.

To avoid the loss effect and to clear the horizon for service excellence success, hospitality leaders must pay attention to the wealth of information below the waterline.

Take steps to capture data from the frontline. Challenge supervisors to develop ways to communicate better with employees.

Acknowledge employee concerns, don’t ignore them. Find out how to get employee input on trends and anxieties or pleasures guests seem to be experiencing. Analyze the data and integrate it into service standards. Make sure all perceptions and expectations at all levels are aligned and understood. Provide training, even on the basics.

Be a leader and service role model from your head and your heart before you expect your employees to do the same. If you are insincere or don’t really “do as you say,” your employees will notice and customers will receive the same treatment. Treat your employees as your best customers and they will treat your guests to the experiences that matter most.

Get rid of the ignorance and welcome the excellence, ... and that’s only the tip of the iceberg.

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