

Secrets of Service Excellence in the Public Service

An Article by Derek Hendrikz © 2003

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In the article that precedes this one, 'The six Poisons of Government Service', I've covered the toxic issues of Government Service. The question that remains unanswered is 'what now?' Many would argue that it becomes extremely complicated to stimulate Service Excellence in the Public Sector, since there is no competition, and no economic system that enforces the capitalist law of: 'Only the Excellent will Survive'. In order to find the path to service excellence in the Government Sector, we need to study a non-profit system where service excellence, is applied effectively. Of course there is only one place to find this system, that being 'mother nature'.

The most incredible thing in nature is the collective commitment of the natural environment to maintain its own system. Nothing goes to waste, and every single specie has total committed to maintaining a specific part the natural system. After the lion has eaten its pry, the other predators ensures that nothing goes to waste, and what these predators cannot use, the vultures will clean up. In its turn the honeybee ensures that plants are pollinated. These plants grow from fertilized ground, which the dung beetles manage by cleaning up decaying matter and carrying the nutrients underground. Every part of the natural ecosystem is managed by a species commitment to focus on that specific part.

The above is extremely inspirational, but doesn't really help us to become service excellence gurus. We know and understand that commitment and focus is extremely important, but what motivates this. Why are the lions, vultures, honeybees, and dung beetles so focused and committed?

The natural environment has no conscious leadership; there are no rulebooks, and no capital gain. What then is their secret? Here goes my theory. I truly believe that the secret of the natural environments excellent service to its system is rooted in one word. This word being PURPOSE! Consciously or unconsciously all species in the natural ecosystem is driven by the purpose of collective survival.

This fundamental principle should be the driving force in Government Service. Each and every civil servant should be focused and committed to a specific aspect of providing an excellent Public Service to their citizens. Service Excellence in the Public Sector starts with PURPOSE. We didn't build Police Stations and Hospitals because we had no idea what to do with the money or the open space; they were constructed to serve a specific purpose. Government Service is all about PURPOSE!

Now that we've become aware of the six 'poisons' and the foundation of Government Service, what do we do? After many debates, discussions and thought I've come to the conclusion that there is only one remedy to service excellence. We need to become passionate about RESULTS. Service excellence is an 'end' and not a 'means'. In order to achieve service

excellence we need to focus all our energy on RESULTS. We need to know what it is that we want, and find ways to overcome the stumbling blocks in getting there.

If we're ready to start practicing the gospel of results, we need to understand the four ingredients of service excellence.

The first ingredient of service excellence is to focus all our energy on results. We need to know that focus determines our reality. If we focus on being important, impressing superiors, or on meaningless procedures, then that will become our reality. We are the creators of our own world, and therefore our thinking will ultimately shape the organization we work in. Focusing on results teaches us that service excellence is not about procedures, strategic retreats, and endless documents and plans. As your customer I couldn't care a hoot about what the Director is planning, I want results. My (the customers) reality of your Department is created by the person I meet at the front desk. If s/he cannot provide me with an excellent service, I will label your Department as incompetent. This teaching takes us into the flow of the next ingredient.

If we want to become results driven we need to empower our front line employees to produce results. Imagine trying to buy a flight ticket at the airport, and the airline front desk attendant tells you that the person who works with ticket sales is in a meeting, and that you should come back later; or imagine going to a furniture store, and the sales person tells you that he is on lunch and cannot help you right now. Customers are not interested in your problems, they want results and they want it now. If you're serious about providing an excellent service to your customers, you need to empower the people who the customer meets first. The moment of truth takes place at the front desk, and not in the Directors Office!

Once your employees are empowered to produce results, you need to give your employees a reason to produce results. Of course there is only one way to do this – you need to Reward Results! Behavior is conditioned when it is rewarded. A child, who gets attention through crying, will use this strategy whenever in need of parent affection. Behavior is one of the most prominent human strategies to attain specific results. If you reward internal politics and incompetence, your employees will start behaving accordingly. If you reward results, that's what you will get. Of course it's extremely important to know that there are various ways of rewarding, and that financial benefit is only one of them. Rewarding employees with financial benefit definitely works, but its effect is short term. The most effective way of reward is, and always was, making people feel good about themselves.

Finally, it is important to know that powerful change is the result of small decisions made on a consistent basis. One doesn't lose weight through one decision to become thin. You need to decide this every single morning as you wake up, and every time before and during meals. Of course the decisions become easier as your behavior is slowly conditioned, but they never end. Your life and circumstances is the inevitable result of small decisions, one built on top of the other.

Change is the result of new behavioral patterns. This is not easy, and needs a lot of perseverance. The Champions of Change need to make a commitment and confirm this commitment through small decisions every single day. If a Government Department decides to become a champion of service excellence, their commitment needs to be demonstrated by every employee and manager, every time he or she starts work, or enters the department's premises. Implement Service Excellence through small decisions made consistently.

Lest recap on the four ingredients of Service Excellence:

1. Focus all energy on results,
2. Empower front line staff to produce results,
3. Reward Results, and
4. Implement Service Excellence through small decisions, made consistently.

We now know what the poisons of Government Service entails, we understand that Purpose is the foundation of Service Excellence, and we have learned the four secrets of creating a 'people first' culture. To make things happen, we are left with one significant ingredient. The final ingredient is you! If Service is going to become Excellent, you are going to be the one who will make this happen. The spirit of 'People First' is a demonstration of passion for Service Excellence, and it should become your vision.

We can't all be rich, and we can't all be beautiful, but we can all make a difference. The next time a customer walks through your door you will know that this is your opportunity to make the difference. This is your moment of truth. Remember the customer does not want to know about your company policies, or about your complicated bureaucratic structure, neither does he want to be referred to 10 other offices. This customer has walked through your door, he needs your complete attention, he needs a specific result, and he wants you to deliver that result. Give him what he wants, and you will become a service delivery superstar.

You can make the difference.

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