



A Road Warrior's Observations On Safety and Customer Service

Insights

10.02.13

I am writing this post as I sit on a bench in front of a Homewood Suites. As I sat working on documents, I struck up a conversation with an employee who was emptying the trash and straightening up outside. I'll call him "Nate." One could and should use Nate's example to train professionals, including members of my benighted species, lawyers. His customer service attitude translates to professionalism and engagement in countless areas of "legal" responsibilities.

Despite being busy with uninspiring routine tasks, Nate greeted every customer, some of whom knew him from past visits. As staff arrived, they too received a cheery greeting. At some point our occasional conversation veered to customer service. Nate, like any "professional," was "purposeful." I suspect that he is a genuinely good guy, and his friendliness was integral to his character. However, he also told me that he knew that his job security at Homewood was intertwined with making people feel "at home." This statement was not corporate-generated. Nate meant his words. he did not consider superior customer service to be a burden. In fact, he commented that he did not understand why someone would get up at some pre-dawn hour to come to work, and then not fully apply themselves. Nate received satisfaction from doing his job well and understanding his role in the property's success.

We talked about how a single good or bad experience can undue years of good efforts or can create lasting loyalty. Nate explained that if he cleans a restroom, he is fastidious about it, because few things more turn off a guest than dirty public restrooms. As a constant traveler, I pondered nice hotels whose public restrooms were dirty, and concluded that they never got my return business. Nate was "analytical" about customer service.

Nate talked about what he liked about work - his co-workers and the atmosphere. Later, I saw an professional woman give him a quick hug in greeting as she entered the hotel. The professional woman was the General Manager, and as she greeted staff with genuine pleasure, I better understood the hotel atmosphere. She showed basic appreciation of her staff's efforts and treated them with respect. Everyone seemed to take pride in their job, felt a part of delivering the product, and took an enterprise view of their job. Just ask the kitchen staff, whose eggs I have eaten for five years. They will express their pride in creating variety in those same eggs. They want the hotel to shine. Even when swamped, I have not heard them whine. And keep in mind that while this is a nice property, it is not a luxury property or one of those extraordinary gems like the Davidson Village Inn down the road. Yet their customer service is superb.

So what's the relevance to safety?

We all know to do certain things to ensure an engaged and productive workforce, but we are inconsistent and we are not purposeful in our efforts to create this atmosphere. So here's my lessons for safety:

1. Effective Safety Programs will not occur in an atmosphere where employees do not feel as if they have a role in the organization's success. We focus so much on self-actualization and meeting an employee's individual needs, but common sense and various studies show that employees' greatest work need, after basic needs are satisfied, is to have a sense that they contribute to the organization's success. I am convinced that sense of one's role is one of several reasons that the 9000 employee Children's Health care of Atlanta is on the best places to work lists every year.
2. Neglecting safety is a clear message that you don't care about employees, so don't be surprised if the employees in turn, do not care about their work and your customers. honestly, how many bosses walk right by their employees and are more difficult to talk with than one's physician? One must have boundaries in order to get anything done, but that efficiency is no excuse for isolation.
3. Don't wait to address problems. Praise successes. Upon seeing this blog, the GM excitedly commented that "I can't wait to share it at the 'morning huddle.'" We talk a good game but most of our safety efforts focus on punishing errors and tracking lagging indicators.
4. Involving employees in safety is an effective way to focus employees on their role in the overall enterprise's success. give employees latitude in "how" to accomplish their jobs. Let them solve problems or come up with improvements. the only area where the kitchen staff can meaningfully alter the breakfast menu is the eggs, so they have fun coming up with variations and cute names.

My readers already recognize these suggestions, but are we "*purposefully*" encouraging the atmospheric that keeps the Nates coming to work and impressing customers? Do our actions substantiate our statements that we are "*pro-employee*" and that "*safety is number one?*"