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Written by: Bryan K. Williams

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5 Star Leadership: What does it take to be a 5-star leader?

Five-star leaders share many of the same qualities. One such quality is to believe that their team CAN be great. If they are not great, they ask themselves if the employees are incapable of being great; or if the leaders' low expectations are inhibiting the employees' potential to be great. Yes, low expectations promote average and low performance, while high expectations promote high performance. I've heard many managers of low-performing teams blame their staff for the teams' low performance. "Oh, we can't find good people", "we don't pay high wages, etc." All of those excuses are surmountable. I've seen businesses in the same city or even on the same street, providing the same product, hire from the same labor pool, and yet have vastly different service experiences. Most times, the only difference is the caliber of leadership in the building. I've even witnessed a 5-star hotel go from exceptionally high service ratings to mediocre ratings. The staff was the same, the labor pool was the same, the tools were the same...the only difference was the change in senior leadership. The hotel initially had a general manager who believed in the infinite potential of the teams' service ability and subsequently treated the team like world-class professionals. The subsequent general managers didn't, and the hotel has not been the same ever since.

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There are many employees who want to work for a leader who has high expectations and believes in them. I recently had the opportunity to stay at the Marquis Los Cabos resort in Los Cabos, Mexico. The entire experience was among the best I've ever received. During my 3-day stay, I never walked by any

employee without them extending a warm greeting. Everyone was always eager to serve. One day I asked the hotel's general manager to tell me one thing that keeps the service levels so incredibly high at the resort. Without hesitation she emphatically said, "keep the employees very happy". That's it. As business leaders, you may have repeatedly heard the mantra before: happy employees lead to happy customers. But there was something different about what she said and how she said it. I got the impression that "keep the employees very happy" was not just a public relations or HR jargon. The emphasis in her voice and the intensity in her eyes made very clear that employee engagement is a top priority at her hotel. The Marquis Los Cabos general manager is convinced that there is a direct link between high employee engagement and exceptional service delivery. Engaged employees lead to engaged guests.

One of the great things about benchmarking is that there are many examples of how highly successful leaders are able to keep employee engagement high. Five-star leaders who are able to build and maintain a world-class service culture do so by keeping their team engaged.

These leaders do the following:

- They always maintain high expectations of the service they expect to see (no exceptions!).
- They always believe that each person on their team knows that they are a critical part of delivering the service experience.
- They never allow a team member to give less than 100% effort. 5-star leaders know that one under-performing team member can jeopardize the entire team's momentum.

- They talk about “excellence” everyday.
 - Newsletters are commonly used to share “standard of the day”, company mission statement, story of service excellence, and business results like occupancy %. Five-star leaders know that engaged employees are well-informed employees
- They reward excellent performance on a regular basis (usually daily).
- They are always an integral part of the on-boarding process (hiring, interviewing, orientation). The general manager from the Marquis Los Cabos personally meets and/or interviews every employee from the dishwashers to the front office manager. Many of the world’s finest properties don’t allow new employee orientation to occur without the general manager present to meet and greet the new recruits.
- They ensure that the purpose of the role is communicated during the interview and on-boarding process (ex: your job is not too open doors, it is to welcome guests and make each one feel individually cared for).
- They continuously invest in employee development (this does not have to be a training class, it can be a book club, one-on-one meetings, mentoring, or cross-training in another department.)
Note: Five-star leaders know that employee development is not dependent on short-term financial woes.
- Mandate that everyone on the team serve each other with the same sense of urgency, excellence, and attention to hold as they would for an external customer.
- Make sure that everyone is fully aware of their benefits (Distributing the benefits brochure during new employee orientation is not enough. Use lunch & learn sessions, along with other ad-hoc opportunities.
- Work along side team members when needed. One of my fondest memories of a 5-star general manager took place early in my career. My restaurant co-workers and I were behind schedule in getting a room set for a large banquet function. Out of nowhere, the general manager arrived with every manager in the hotel to help us get the room set.

I heard once that if you must say that you are a gentleman, then you really are not one. Your actions should speak for themselves. The same is true of a 5-star caliber leader. Be a walking, talking embodiment of service excellence. Inspire your team with actions and words. 5-star leaders know that the delivery of exceptional customer service is only about 20% of the formula. The other 80% (employee engagement processes) are what truly builds a sustainable culture of service excellence.

Know that your team can be great, and never stop believing in everyone’s potential. That is the true mindset of a 5-star leader.

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