

# Service the Ritz Carlton Way



Ed Rehkopf



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Some years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a one-day training seminar at the Ritz Carlton Leadership Center in Chevy Chase, MD, to learn how they provide their “legendary service.” The seminar was eye-opening and impressive. The Ritz Carlton Hotel Company is a management company that operates properties worldwide for the Marriott hotel chain. As most of you know, they serve the international luxury market and are celebrated for their high service levels and attention to detail.

While the instructor provided ample handouts to explain and illustrate the Ritz Carlton way, I took over fifteen pages of notes. I shall try to summarize the main elements of how they consistently provide such high-level service.

1. Ritz Carlton has a well-defined corporate culture of service built upon: Mission and Vision statements, Key Success Factors, revised and refined each year, and what they call their “Gold Standards Foundation,” which is made up of five elements: The Credo, The Motto, The Three Steps of Service, The Service Values, and The Employee Promise.

The company culture is so important to Ritz Carlton that they review aspects of it every day, every shift, in every property worldwide during what they call their “Daily Line Up.” By this discipline all employees from the CEO and President down to each line employee are constantly reminded of their “reason for being.”

2. Ritz Carlton has devised a new hire screening process that focuses on 11 basic talents and every position in the company is indexed on how much of each talent that position needs. For example, a housekeeper position needs high levels of “exactness” (attention to detail) because there are over 150 items or details that must be checked in every room every day; on the other hand, front desk and guest service employees need high levels of “relationship/engagement” skills to interact and engage guests in a multitude of ways.

The hiring process with Ritz Carlton can take up to eight separate phone and face-to-face interviews to ensure they hire people with the right set of talents for the positions they seek. One impressive element of the interview process is that specially trained line employees conduct the first telephone screening interview to ascertain the candidates “Talent Index.” If the candidate does not meet certain minimum levels in this interview they are eliminated from consideration.

The success of their screening process can be seen by their employee turnover rate. When they first started the company in 1983, they experienced a 73% turnover rate. More recently, it was 23% with 15 of that 23% being voluntary resignations for a variety of reasons.

3. Ritz Carlton invests in training. Each new employee receives a two-day orientation which is heavy on company culture and values, then 20 days of on-the-job skills training for their position. The trainers of the skills training are line employees who have been trained to train and who derive prestige and a higher compensation level for their role as trainers.



On day 21 of the initial training period, each employee without exception receives a recap of the values and culture, benefits enrollment, training in guest recognition and how to handle difficult situations. The end of the day is a celebration for completing the initial training. Finally, they are asked to fill out a questionnaire to ensure that the promises made to them at the outset of training have been met.

Leaders are responsible for ensuring that all employees are certified in their positions. Employees must be certified within 21 to 30 days of their orientation. As Ritz Carlton says, "We never want to practice on our guests."

Each year, line employees receive 320 hours of ongoing and refresher training. Leader/Managers receive 250 hours of training per year.

At the end of an employee's first year, on day 365, each employee has a one-day refresher session designed to "psychologically engage" with employees and "figuratively hire" them all over again. At the end of this day, they receive their one-year service pins.

4. The company trains and **empowers each employee** to solve problems. Any Ritz Carlton employee can spend up to \$2,000 a day per guest to solve problems and, not to just satisfy their guests, but to wow them with outside-the-box service.

As an example: An international guest at the Ritz Carlton, Washington DC, checked out and flew to NYC to catch an international flight. Upon arrival at JFK airport, he realized he had left his overseas flight tickets at the hotel. He called the Ritz Carlton in a panic. The desk clerk with the OK of her supervisor and the hotel GM, took a flight to NY and personally delivered the guest's tickets in time to catch his plane.

5. Ritz Carlton is heavily invested in **benchmarking** all areas of their operation to include conducting random surveys of guests each thirty days. The results of their ongoing measurement of processes and guest feedback are used for **continual improvement** of their products and services.
6. Ritz Carlton has designed a proprietary software and database package called "Mystique," to record guest preferences. Each property has two designated individuals, the Mystique Manager and Mystique Coordinator, who have access to this confidential database. Every employee carries a pad of "Guest Personal Preference Communiqués" with them at all times. Any time an employee notices a personal preference of a guest or overhears a guest mentioning some detail that would enable the company to better serve them, the employee fills out and submits the communiqué to the Mystique staff, who enter the information in the database. This system, designed to better help the company personalize their service to individual guests, is a central part of their building a strong service identity and a loyal base of clientele.

Overall, I was impressed with the thoroughness of the Ritz Carlton systems; their training, treatment, and empowerment of their employees; and the degree to which everyone from the highest executive to the most recently hired line employee is dedicated to service – not just to their guests, but to each other in the performance of their duties. As one employee said during our late-afternoon Q&A with line employees from the Washington DC property, "I've never worked anyplace where I feel like I'm such an integral part of the team, where my ideas and input matter so much, and where I feel like I'm part of a big, caring family."



While there are clearly aspects of the Ritz Carlton Way that are beyond the reach of many hospitality operations due to budgetary constraints and economies of scale, there is also much we can learn from them – probably the most important being their absolute dedication to high levels of service and their will to make it happen.

*About the Author*

Ed Rehkopf is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and received a Master of Professional Studies degree in Hospitality Management from Cornell's School of Hotel Administration. During his long and varied career, he has managed two historic hotels, managed at a four-star desert resort, directed operations for a regional hotel chain, opened two golf and country clubs, worked in golf course development, and launched a portal web site for the club industry.