

The Super Service Employee



Ed Rehkopf



The Super Service Employee - A Most Valuable Asset for Any Club

Selling Dining Experiences with Knowledge and Enthusiasm

Some years ago, my boss and I were on a trip to Nevada to visit our newest property. During the visit, we had an opportunity to eat at a cozy Italian restaurant by the name of Luciano's. While the food was great, it was the service that blew me away. Let me tell you why.

After we were greeted and seated, our waiter, a middle-aged man, approached the table. He immediately sensed our good mood and engaged us in a pleasant and humorous banter. While presenting the menu, he described the daily specials in a graphic and mouth-watering way (with excellent Italian pronunciation) and ended by saying we should try the mussels as they just came in fresh that afternoon. Of course, we bit and ordered a couple of dozen steamed with wine, garlic, and butter. After taking our dinner order, he suggested a superb Chianti that that proved to be the perfect complement to the meal.

As I observed our waiter, he moved from table to table with wonderful ease, engaging the patrons in conversation, suggesting appetizers, entrees, and wines. He seemed to wait on every table and was supported by a crew of young assistants. He was so good at what he did and seemed to know so much about the restaurant's offerings that I assumed he must be the owner. Certainly, he took a proprietary interest in every table and his many tempting suggestions probably boosted every check by 30-40% – what better way for an owner to ensure his restaurant's success!

After dinner, he again worked his magic by suggesting and describing the fresh, made-from-scratch cannoli. His *coup de grace* was to suggest Limoncello as an accompaniment for the dessert. Thankfully, my boss was picking up the check!

As we left, I complimented him on his service and asked his name. It turned out he was Irish and was a waiter, not the owner. I was stunned, not just that an Irishman could be so Italian, but that he was so effective based upon his knowledge of the restaurant's offerings and his obvious interest in and enthusiasm for the food.

The Growth and Importance of the Service Sector

The economic news frequently mentions service sector jobs with the often-stated assessment that these are low paying, dead end positions reinforcing the notion that they are of little value or consequence. Yet according to Richard Florida, author of *The Great Reset*, service jobs have been and continue to be a growing force in the overall economy. Over the past three decades the U.S. economy has added 28 million "routine service" jobs, which he describes as "food service workers, nurses' aides, janitors, home health care workers, and the like." During the same period more highly compensated knowledge, professional, and creative jobs grew by 23 million and manufacturing jobs by just 1 million.

And this trend is expected to continue. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the next ten years there will be equal growth of 6.9 million jobs in both the creative/professional and service sectors while manufacturing will continue to see a decline or maintain weak current levels as global labor and cost restructurings continue.



These numbers have major implications for our country's wealth and economic well-being. The trend in recent years has been toward greater concentration of wealth at the top of society and a weakening of our long-stable middle class. For many middle-class families maintaining their financial position has come about only by additional income earners in the family. More directly these numbers impact us as hospitality professionals who provide service sector employment. Before discussing service industry jobs let's look back at the history of those manufacturing positions whose loss is so deeply lamented today.

The Industrial Revolution in Europe in the early 19th century and the U.S. in the late 19th and early 20th century and the related migration of relatively unskilled agricultural workers to the cities did not immediately give rise to well-paying manufacturing jobs. Instead, it took generations of labor activism and union organizing to create the kind of jobs that broadened economic opportunity while increasing demand for manufactured goods. Even Henry Ford, who was no friend of the unions, understood that employees with money in their pockets would spend it on goods and services which led to the "five dollars a day" pay for Ford workers.

But after many decades of union organizing and collective bargaining, manufacturing jobs rose in both compensation and status until they became the economic backbone of the country's manufacturing regions, providing jobs, economic security, and prosperity to countless Americans. Yet even as this labor success took hold, advances in transportation and international trade in the latter part of the 20th century began a move toward the globalization that eventually moved most manufacturing to countries in the developing world with significantly lower labor costs. While this was devastating to many areas, the upside for U.S. consumers has been an ever-expanding supply of inexpensive goods of improving quality from abroad.

Today, most Americans realize that these industrial jobs are not coming back in anywhere the near the numbers of bygone times. Yet many politicians and labor activists continue to propose props for failing industries rather than recognize and embrace the challenges of the new economic order.

Professor Florida stresses the latter and says, "Our efforts must concentrate on actively building the economy of the future ... instead of bailing out mismanaged old-economy companies, we must use whatever resources are available to accelerate the transition to an idea-driven economy, while improving the jobs that have survived or are now being created."

In offering his thoughts on how to do this, he goes on to say, "As service jobs continue to grow and be point-of-entry jobs for many, we need to make them into better, higher paying jobs. This cannot wait any longer. We need a major effort to upgrade these jobs and make them more innovative and productive. We did it before with manufacturing jobs, we need to do it now with service jobs, which can offer a much better way of life for many people and contribute meaningfully to the productivity and prosperity of our economy."

And this will only happen in one of two ways – through union organizing which is already happening (the Service Employees International Union is now the largest union in the country) or by the enlightened self-interest of employers.

It is likely that union organizing will not directly affect much of the hospitality industry which is dominated by small independent operations. But in the broader perspective many independents and private clubs will be competing for quality employees with larger unionized chain hotels,



restaurants, and entertainment enterprises. The net effect will be rising wages and benefits for service employees.

If this expected scenario is at all accurate, independent operations and clubs should for once be on the leading edge of progress to add value and status to their service positions. While club members are probably as cost conscious as other consumers, many value those longstanding locker room attendants, servers, or golf course employees who understand and epitomize personal service.

But before examining the need of higher wages and better employee benefits, let's examine the true value of service employees.

The Value of a Super Service Employee

For those of us who eat out with any regularity, we've all had the experience, unfortunately too rarely, of being waited on by what I call a "super server." From the moment she approaches the table we know we're in for a treat. Sparkling with personality, she overflows with knowledge about the food, beverages, and accompaniments. She immediately sizes up our interest in engagement and calibrates her contacts accordingly. She speaks with confidence and authority, questioning us regarding our preferences and without hesitation recommending what she thinks we'll enjoy. The best of the best can unerringly take and serve orders without benefit of pen and dup pad or hand-held device – an ability that never ceases to amaze me.

Such extraordinary individuals are worth their weight in gold. Not only do they serve with flair and expertise, but they sell, thereby increasing the average check, while making a distinctly favorable impression of competence and professionalism that brings diners back again and again. This is true in restaurants as well as in private clubs where diners appreciate the recognition and special touches that a super server adds to the dining experience.

Far more frequently, we've experienced the norm of service – undertrained, inexperienced employees who may understand the basics of service, but little more. Often lacking in knowledge, personality, and attitude, their service may meet minimum expectations but seldom inspire the diner to sample the extras – appetizers, desserts, wines, and specialty drinks – which enhance the overall dining experience. If truth be told, these employees are doing no service to their employers and in many cases are doing outright harm by driving customers away.

The often-repeated maxim for employers "to hire for personality and train for technique" encompasses a basic truth. Attitude, personality, and engagement seem to be inborn skills and are difficult to teach. While training can provide service skills and knowledge, thereby increasing a server's confidence and maybe even engagement skills, the best service employees possess an indefinable quality that is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate.

Given the dearth of these extraordinary service employees, they should be recognized and compensated for the rare skills they possess. Too often though, their presence on an employer's staff is viewed as simple good fortune with little or no effort made to differentiate them from the common herd. The result is that in short order they move on to greener pastures where their talents are more fully appreciated. When this happens, the loss to the establishment is often more than can be appreciated at the moment. Not only has the employer lost a super server, but an ambassador, money-maker, and an example for less accomplished



co-workers. And everything said about food servers applies just as much to super service employees in lodging, retail, recreation activities, golf, tennis, administration, and other areas of hospitality operations.

So why don't we recognize and reward super service employees for their special abilities? I suspect it's a combination of cost consciousness, a lack of appreciation for their true gifts, an unwillingness to move beyond the status quo, and a fear of exchanging real costs for what may seem to be intangible benefits.

Employment Reality Check

But let's stop a moment for a reality check. If truth be told the "value" of manufacturing jobs has become defined more by their compensation and benefits than by the rarity of the skills necessary to do the jobs. Certainly, there are highly skilled manufacturing positions – welders, machinists, metal fabricators, electrical workers, etc. – but more and more these tasks are being handled by robotics. Assembly workers are usually people of limited skills who are taught to perform a small number of highly specific tasks. Many manufacturing positions are "tenders," people who monitor the equipment that does the manufacturing. They make minor adjustments but call in the truly skilled mechanics or electricians to repair equipment malfunctions.

Another comparison of skill levels would be to government sector positions, another area of current job growth. The skill levels of many positions within federal, state, and local government offices are, in fact, quite like the often denigrated "service sector" jobs. As with manufacturing positions, the major differentiator between many government jobs and the private sector service positions is the compensation and benefits – not inherent skills, abilities, or education.

Now compare the skill level of such positions with the super server. First, super servers possess the rare traits of personality and have mastered the challenging subtleties of interpersonal engagement. Often, they are well- or self-educated, knowledgeable, and possess the level of sophistication necessary to interact with well-heeled patrons. In the case of food servers, they have taken it upon themselves to educate themselves about food and beverage – a limitless body of knowledge. They act as sales agents by suggesting and upselling various menu items. Remarkably our society values salespeople and compensates them accordingly, but seldom does so for food servers. All in all, I would argue that true super service employees have skills seldom matched by commensurate manufacturing and government sector jobs.

Since the status of so many manufacturing and public sector jobs hinges on their compensation and benefits, it appears that we as service sector employers have ourselves created the negative perception of service sector positions by traditionally under-compensating these jobs in both wages and benefits. In any case, such perceptions are a gross disservice to those who qualify as super service employees.

Who Are These Super Employees and Where Do We Find Them?

The following assessments are not based on any kind of scientific sampling or study; rather they are based on my experiences in over 35 years of hospitality management in hotels, clubs, and resorts in numerous positions throughout the country. I simply ask that readers validate my statements with their own managerial experiences.



Super service employees tend to be:

- Educated and intelligent, whether possessed of formal degrees or self-taught,
- Intellectually curious and knowledgeable about anything that touches their lives. They want to know why, enjoy learning new things, are alert and aware of their surroundings (an important attribute for any service employee), and are often avid readers,
- Artistic or creative, pursuing their own creative interests,
- Counterculture or living an alternative lifestyle,
- Possessed of an independent streak, quick to challenge rules that don't make sense or poor leadership, and unwilling to put up with "Mickey Mouse BS,"
- Highly mobile and, therefore, quite willing to leave if not treated well or valued as an individual.

While these are broad generalities that can be disproved by any specific case, in job after job I've come across these individuals. In the early days of my career, I sometimes felt them to be a challenge to my knowledge and authority; yet I came to recognize their extraordinary talents, often finding their complaints and criticism of management and my leadership to be valid. By engaging them in dialogue, taking the time to explain my decisions and directives, and being willing to listen to them and treat them with respect, I became a better leader and they, indispensable contributors to my efforts.

But where are such employees to be found? Again, my experience indicates that super service employees are abundant in big cities, college towns, and near artistic/creative communities, though this does not in any way preclude suburban locales, small towns, and rural or remote areas. I was somewhat surprised to find such employees while managing at a remote desert resort, as people of an artistic or counterculture bent sometimes prefer quiet, rural settings in which to live.

My assumption, then, is that you will find such people almost anywhere and simply need to establish your operation as the kind of establishment that values them and their unique gifts and then seek them out.

What Do Super Service Employees Want and Need?

The easy answer is that super service employees want what every employee wants, that is, to be treated well, trained, and supported in their jobs, competitive compensation, and for some, particularly the older employees with families – benefits. What sets the super service employee apart is that they have valuable skills and a lower threshold for departure if their needs are not met.

Beyond these basic needs are some other preferences:

- A more mentally challenging work environment to engage their intellectual curiosity. They dislike boring, monotonous work. It's the very reason some are attracted to the adrenaline rush and stimulation of fast-paced service positions.



- A greater sense of participation and contribution. They want to feel like what they do makes a difference or contributes in a meaningful way.
- Many want flexible schedules to allow for the pursuit of education or their creative interests.
- Recognition by management and customers of their value and contribution.
- Compensation appropriate to their skills. If they get paid the same as less competent and productive employees, they'll quickly go elsewhere.
- Some want opportunities for advancement, particularly as they grow older and take on the financial responsibilities of home and family, with greater concern for their economic security.

What they don't want is:

- To be treated as if they and the work they do doesn't matter,
- To work in chaotic, stressful environments where a few carry the workload and others screw off without consequences,
- To deal with managers who are all wrapped up in their egos and authority, caring more about position and perks than performance,
- To be ignored and not have their ideas and input listened to, and
- To be hassled and jerked around by an aloof management that doesn't recognize or interact with them as individuals.

Given their special skills, intelligence, work ethic, and overall contribution, super service employees deserve to be accorded status and respect for their clearly superior work and contributions. Yes, they want financial rewards, but more than anything such individuals want to be treated with respect and honored for what they do.

What Can Operations Do to Attract and Retain Them?

By analyzing and considering the wants and needs of super service employees, it is possible to set up programs to attract and retain them. In simplest terms it boils down to respect, status, meaningful work, and enhanced compensation. I would focus on the following:

- Establishing consistent **Service-Based Leadership** at your business (see *Insights and Ideas - Service-Based Leadership* for more information). The underlying premise of Service-Based Leadership is leaders at all levels who recognize the essential task of serving all constituents, including employees. Weak or self-serving managers will drive them away.
- Implementing **employee empowerment** (see *Insights and Ideas - Employee Empowerment*) which is a natural extension of Service-Based Leadership. Empowered employees are enlisted as partners in the company's effort to improve the operation and provide high levels of service. Super service employees want and need this enhanced participation and contribution.



- Improving communications with employees. All employees, but especially the super service ones, want to know what is going on and how the operation and direction of the enterprise affects them.
- Mentoring employees. Often curious and intelligent, super service employees appreciate the time and effort made in giving them the big picture and a deeper understanding of the workings of the operation.
- Creating “master” service positions that recognize higher skill levels and greater knowledge. The job descriptions for these positions must clearly lay out those distinguishing skills, characteristics, and duties that warrant more responsibility and higher compensation. Such master positions can then become the aspiration of new or less accomplished employees.
- Creating a clear career path of knowledge, skill development, and certification which allows other employees to set their sights on the more highly regarded and compensated master level.
- Assigning master level employees the task of teaching and training those who aspire to the higher level. Such tasking serves the super service employees’ need for participation and contribution while improving the overall skill level of other employees.
- Challenging super service employees to engage in creative project work such as taking a larger role in training, creating more effective training programs, formulating and executing member relationship management strategies, and establishing a “wow” factor program to impress members.
- Recognizing and rewarding super service employees. Ensuring they know they are appreciated. This not only serves their needs, but demonstrates to other employees their value, thereby motivating others to follow their example. Rewards should also be tangible, such as: higher pay based on their higher levels of performance and contribution; incentive opportunities based on clearly defined performance benchmarks; preference in scheduling, and educational opportunities to further enhance job skills, knowledge, and opportunity.
- Providing benefits to all employees based on well-defined employment statuses, i.e., full time, part time, and seasonal or temporary. At a minimum, benefits should include holiday pay for designated holidays, vacation time, personal/sick time, health benefits, and retirement benefits. Unionization will directly or indirectly force this on large hospitality employers, but independents should provide them as well, if only to compete for the best employees.

As an industry we can no longer view employees as a disposable asset, which is what we do when we view ongoing turnover as a cost control measure. Operating small, stand-alone hospitality organizations with multiple businesses in highly competitive markets with high levels of service, as well as lean management staffs covering long hours and weeks is too difficult a task to do without a stable, competent workforce. When we view labor as a disposable, easily replaceable commodity, we condemn ourselves to high levels of turnover with its attendant training costs, turmoil, and loss of organizational continuity. High levels of turnover must be



viewed as a critical organizational and leadership failure that is damaging in all ways to the enterprise's mission and operation.

None of these solutions is easy to implement and will certainly add costs to the operation, but I believe the current employment paradigm is far more damaging to success and remains a significant "hidden" cost for many operations.

The Thrust and Reward of a Different View of Service Employees

Providing super service employees with the status and compensation deserved by the scarcity of their gifts and abilities would go a long way toward improving the general view of service sector positions. It would provide the means to engage and retain them at their place of employment while simultaneously creating both the inspiration and career path for others choosing to pursue service positions.

On the other side of the cost coin for the club industry are numerous benefits such as higher service levels, greater employment continuity, less costly employee turnover, greater member engagement and satisfaction, higher average checks, and an overall more vibrant operation.

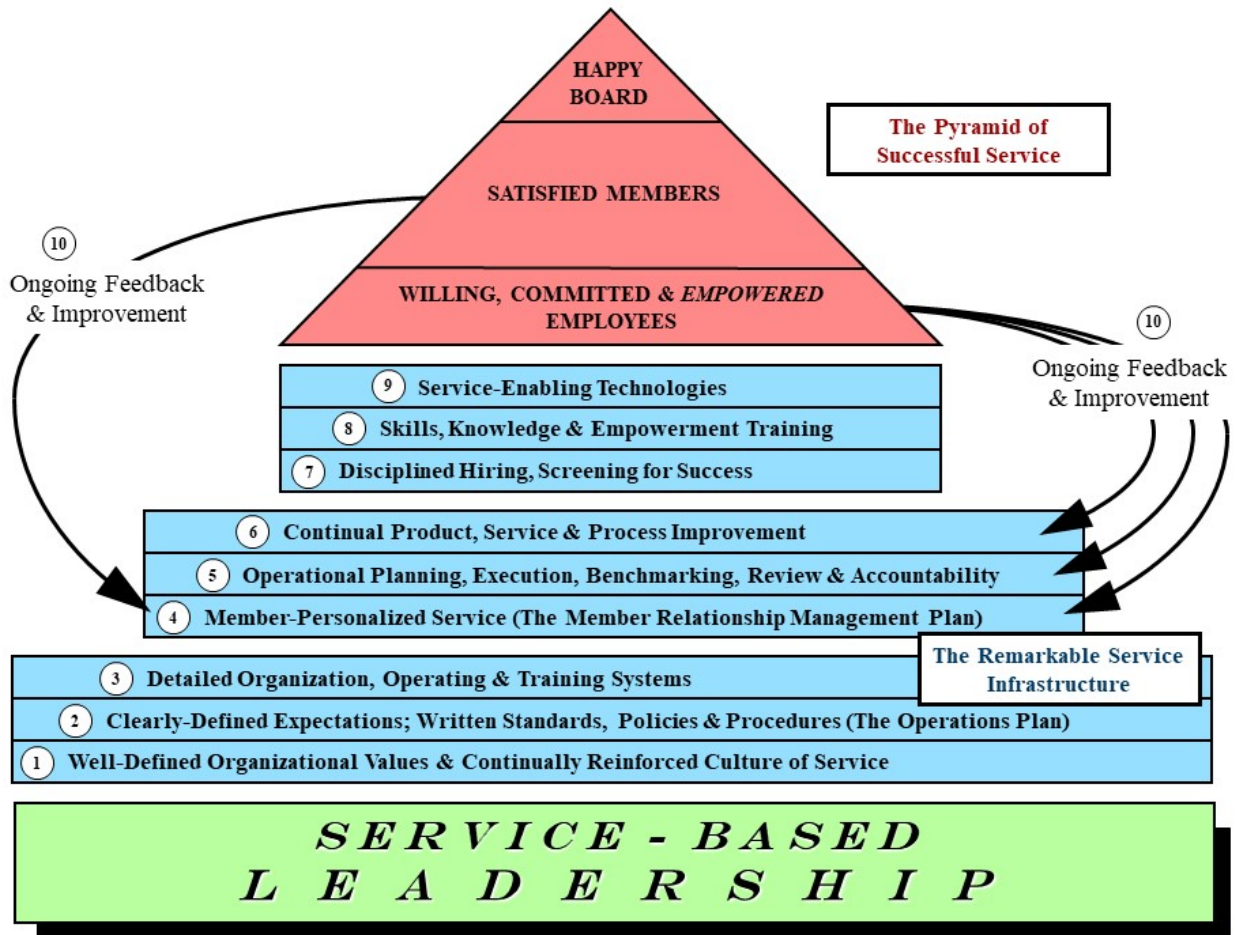
Summary

Service positions will always be part of our business. In the future, competition for super service employees may be more intense as large hospitality enterprises reacting to union organizing attempts will offer better wages, benefits, work conditions, and opportunities. This has already happened in destination resort and entertainment locales such as Las Vegas, Atlantic City, Orlando, Myrtle Beach, and Branson, and may be coming soon to a city near you.

Recognizing this trend, enlightened operators should modify hiring and training practices, institutionalize Service-Based Leadership and employee empowerment, and provide the appropriate compensation, benefits, and career paths to attract and retain super service employees.

While independent clubs will never fill all positions with super service employees, a handful of such talented individuals scattered throughout the workforce will have a dramatic overall impact on service, member engagement, and ultimately the operation's bottom line.

The overarching plan to attract and retain super service employees is found in the Remarkable Service Infrastructure seen below.



The Quest for Remarkable Service

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(See *Insights and Ideas - Remarkable Service Infrastructure - An Overarching Plan for Club Excellence* for more information)

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.