
Serve in Order to Lead



By Venugopal Gupta , Founder, The Business Parables (INSEAD MBA '06J)

Management progression should not be based on greater insulation from customers. Emerging leaders must spend time on the ground to build a true customer service culture.

The CEO of a big fast-food chain sat in his corner office looking out into the bright blue sky with his childhood friend. Through sheer grit and determination, he'd built the company from his father's modest neighbourhood food outlet thirty years ago.

It was now his fiftieth birthday and he was reflecting on his life. 'I have this feeling that there is something missing,' he complained to his friend who was sitting across the table.

"Take a break," said his friend, noticing the tinge of gloom, "God knows you have earned it!"

The next day, the CEO and his friend boarded a bus that would take them to the most challenging trek up in the mountains. 'A new challenge,' thought the friend, would set the CEO right.

As the bus wound up the spiral mountain roads, the two friends chatted freely while the scenery from their window alternated between deep valleys and dense forests. After four hours, the bus stopped at a small roadside tea shop for a short break where they sat on the modest plastic chairs. A little boy was busy waiting tables.

‘What can I get you?’ said the tea shop owner’s boy.

‘We will have two cups of tea please,’ said the friend.

‘What is that?’ asked the boy to the CEO.

‘Oh, this? This is a phone. But it doesn’t work. No signal,’ said the CEO.

‘Can I see it?’ asked the boy, ‘I can give you an extra biscuit.’

‘Sure,’ said the CEO smiling, ‘but I will need two biscuits for this.’

After fetching the tea and the biscuits and tinkering enough with the phone, the little boy returned.

‘What do you do?’ asked the boy, impressed with the phone.

‘I run a company,’ said the CEO.

‘What is a company?’ asked the boy.

‘Okay, I have a shop just like yours here,’ said the CEO.

‘Do you sell tea?’ said the boy, a little worried.

‘No, no,’ the CEO let out a chuckle, ‘I have a shop that sells food.’

‘What do you do in the shop?’ said the boy, ‘my father brews tea, looks after cash and I wait tables.’

‘Well, I don’t do any of those things myself, I have people who make the food and I have accountants, people, who manage cash and people who run around to serve customers,’ said the CEO.

‘But, what do you do?’ said the boy now studying the CEO as if he was an exotic mountain flower.

‘Well, I manage people who do all the stuff,’ said the CEO, a little startled.

'The whole day?' said the boy.

'Yes,' said the CEO turning to protest to his friend, 'that's what I do the whole day. Day after day after day.'

The boy shrugged his shoulders and was about to leave when he was stopped by the CEO.

'Wait! What do you think I should do?' said the CEO.

'I don't know, but if it was my shop, I would serve the customers. It is so much fun, they have such interesting stories!' said the boy.

'But I have many shops,' said the CEO, 'I can't serve customers in every shop!'

'But you can serve customers in any shop,' said the boy, shrugging his shoulders and leaving.

Designed to Serve

His Holiness the Dalai Lama believes that we are 'designed to serve'. He talks about how compassion is intrinsic to human nature and that we are happiest when we exercise compassion.

In a **recent study** Stanford University professor Jennifer Aaker, found that doing something nice for someone else is a reliable source of personal happiness. However, she adds, acts of kindness that are abstract and ill-defined (for example, making people's lives better), usually create frustration and fatigue. On the other hand, concrete acts (for example, serving tea to people) create positive results for both the donor and the recipient.

Helping others not only comes naturally to us, but if done through concrete acts is a reliable way to achieve happiness.

Yet, customer service languishes.

In a survey of over 362 companies, Bain found that while 80 percent of the companies thought they delivered a superior customer experience, only eight percent actually did as per customer feedback.

A call centre manager (cited in the Bain research), working at a leading telco, points out: 'as long as we are treated as second class citizens in charge of protecting management from 'pesky customers,' our company will fail to keep our promises.'

True, the senior management can't serve 'every' customer, but that should not prevent them from serving 'any' customer. Career growth shouldn't be based on greater insulation from the customer.

In the current reality of the corporate sector, senior executives, either by choice or design, seldom get opportunities to do something concrete for their customers. Each time a company serves a customer, it is a test. Yet, often the senior management is so busy preparing for the test that they don't have the time to write it.

As a result they lose not only the chance to gain happiness and draw meaning from their work but also to build a true customer service culture in their companies.

Combine abstract aims with concrete acts

Mahatma Gandhi led the freedom struggle for India. He had an abstract aim: to liberate 350 million Indians from autocratic rule. Yet, he carefully combined that aim with concrete acts too. Wherever he travelled (he insisted on travelling 3rd class carriage to be with the masses), he worked for people too.

He weaved cotton with them, made salt, and fixed their wounds with natural herbal pastes. In fact, apart from the little time he would spend in meetings, he would spend all the remaining time engaged in physical labour trying to serve people through concrete acts.

In his own words 'the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.'

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