



Seamless Systems: Four Ways to Make the Right Thing the Easiest Thing to Do

After a boat ride up the Potomac one October afternoon, I stopped by a Washington Harbour cafe with my family. While struggling to put two tables together, a server scolded, “You must check in with the host, and you can’t sit here unless you order entrees!” Needless to say, we took our \$70 elsewhere. When we experience poor service, our first inclination is to blame the staff. But the real culprit is in the systems. How do you uncover and fix breakdowns?

Listen

The key to delivering great service lies within the people we expect to be hospitable. Tune in to those closest to the action — dishwashers, servers, hosts, bussers, bartenders. One of our best questions was, “If you owned this restaurant, what would you do differently?” says Kathy Stewart, former director of training for Great American Restaurants. “We got gems on how to build and improve systems and extraordinary insights into our company culture. Our most powerful tool was our yearly anonymous survey.” Listening, whether in focus groups, pre-shifts, or one-on-ones, uncovers the cogs in the wheel.

Involve

Years ago, while working with the View Lounge, a rooftop bar at the Marriott Marquis overlooking Times Square, it didn’t take long to find out why its service scores were in the tank. I overheard a server



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reprimanding a group of patrons pounding down martinis, “Sorry folks, fire policy says you can’t sit by the windows in groups larger than five.” Servers were put in the position of playing the bad cop. So, we worked with the team to create a gracious approach, “Ladies and gentleman, thanks in advance for your understanding. It’s important for your safety to sit on the second tier. I’d be happy to move your snacks and drinks, and the next round is on me.”

Reengineer

It was bad enough when groups flying from Newark to Aruba had to endure long

security lines, a two-hour Miami stopover, customs, luggage retrieval, and a bus to the Marriott. So, when beleaguered guests finally arrived, they reached their breaking point as they elbowed their way off the bus to be first in line at the front desk. Taking action, we had bus drivers greet guests at the airport with bottled water and cold towels. Then, when the bus arrived, we had a gracious host hop on the bus with, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Aruba Marriott. There’s no need to rush to the front desk. Greeters will direct you to tables where you can pick up your key packets and go straight to your room, slip into your bathing

suits, and stop by the pool bar for a ‘Funky Monkey’ piña colada!”

Make It Easy

“How can you work in that guest-packed nuthouse with a two-hour wait,” friends often asked when I served at Paolo’s in ‘87. My manager, Michael O’Grady, built a salesman’s paradise. He set up the wines behind the service bar for easy access. He assembled a cadre of Thai bussers who could clear and reset a table in 15 seconds flat. Our highly proficient hosts packed the room tighter than a drum. Michael’s super teams, along with brilliantly crafted systems, created a workspace where guests were dazzled, and I could thrive.

I wonder if that server is still at that Washington Harbour cafe spending all of her time policing guests. Poorly designed systems create incompetence, demoralize staff, and make for angry and defecting guests. Artfully designed systems guarantee seamless service, boost morale, and build sales and guest loyalty.

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