

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Act As Though It's Your Responsibility

by Dr. Mike Armour

For our fortieth anniversary my wife and I took a twelve-day cruise. We chose a lesser-known cruise company that serves a niche market.

What drew me to the company was not the cruise itinerary, although it was a perfect overlay of the destinations we wanted to visit. Nor was price the primary attraction. Cheaper cruises on better-known lines were readily available.

No, what drew me to the cruise line was a radio interview with their CEO. The program caught my attention, not because of what the CEO said, but because of what the interviewer said.

"I took a cruise on one of your ships a while back," the host commented as she introduced the CEO. "Much of the luggage was late getting to the ship from the transfer service and did not arrive until almost time to sail. I looked out on the pier and there you were, shoulder to shoulder with the crew, grabbing bags and rushing them to staterooms."

A Customer Service Culture

Prior to that moment I had never heard of his cruise line. (It's relatively new.) But I immediately said to myself, "As soon as I get to a computer, I'm going to check this company out." Any CEO who models this kind of customer service probably has a corporate culture that is similarly customer-focused.

And my assumption proved to be spot on. The twelve days of port calls on our cruise, we never had even a minor complaint about the courtesy, attitude, or professionalism of a single crew member.

How easily the CEO could have stood on the pier that day, never lifting a hand to help the crew members scurrying about. "Nothing in my job description calls for hauling bags," he might have said.

But instead, he epitomized a principle that Andy Groves frequently iterated during his tenure as CEO of Intel. "Act as though it's your responsibility," he said time and gain. It's a great mantra.

In other words, if you seen an opportunity to enhance a customer's good will, act as though it's your responsibility to act on that opportunity, even if it calls for doing something outside of your job description. If a client or a customer has a complaint, act as though it's your responsibility to solve the problem, even though the problem is not in your purview.

Taking Responsibility for the Problem

This doesn't mean that you must personally jump in and fix the problem. But it does mean that you take immediate action to get the process of resolution underway. It's always tempting (because it puts fewer demands on our time) to say, "You know, that's really not in my arena. You should talk to so-and-so about that."

How much better to respond, "You know, the best person to resolve that matter for you is our VP for Quality. Would you like me to get her on the phone right now so the three of us can talk about a solution?"

A few days later check back and ask, "Was that matter with the VP for Quality resolved adequately and to your satisfaction?" Perhaps the problem was entirely outside your area of responsibility and stemmed from people or procedures over which you have no control. It hardly seems incumbent on you to close the loop by seeing if the matter was adequately resolved. But if you are acting as though it's your responsibility, closing the loop is indeed incumbent upon you.

Taking Ownership of the Problem

This then leads us to a corollary: acting as though it's your responsibility means that whoever discovers the problem owns the problem. They can't shrug it off as something someone else should take care of. Instead, they either fix the problem themselves. Or else they initiate dialogue promptly with those who can resolve it.

A few years ago I stayed at a large resort and conference venue for several days. The employees of this complex had fully grasped Andy Groves' principle. On my first day there I was looking for the place that some colleagues were meeting, but having no luck. A maintenance worker, passing by, his arms filled with boxes, noticed my consternation.

"Can I help you find some place?" he inquired. "Yes," I told him, assuming that he would reply with a quick set of instructions. So I named the group that I was looking for.

"I'm not sure where they are meeting," he said, stooping down and putting the boxes on the floor along the wall. As he stood up, he pulled out a telephone, called the front desk, and asked for the group's room assignment.

Smiling, he turned to me and said, "It's not very far. Let me take you there." He then escorted me along three hallways to the place where the group was gathered. En route, he plied me with questions about my stay, whether the meals and accommodations were to my liking, and whether there was anything else he could help me with.

Over the next few days I discovered this same spirit and attitude with every employee that I met. It was extremely clear that leadership had spared no effort in making service to others part of the cultural DNA. Cultures like this don't just happen. They develop because some leader, like Andy Groves, hammered incessantly at the message, "Act as though it's your responsibility."

This principle serves a corporate culture well in every arena, not just in customer relations. You are walking through a public area and see litter on the floor. Act as though it's your responsibility to pick it up. Everyone else rushes out at the conclusion of a meeting, leaving the conference room in disarray. Act as though it's your responsibility to straighten things up before you leave.

When we habitually act as though such mundane tasks are our responsibility, the habit generalizes. We soon find it equally natural to act as though issues of far greater consequence are our responsibility, as well.

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