

**Legendary Customer Service**

**Moving to a New Way of Life in MWR**

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## **Legendary Customer Service: Moving to a New Way of Life in MWR**

### **Introduction**

My journey began seven years ago upon my return from a ten-year assignment in Europe. The Army Communities of Excellence competition had just been initiated by the Chief of Staff of the Army and our Commanding General wanted to win that competition. I was assigned to head a committee of Garrison deputy directors to address quality service within the Garrison activities. We identified Disney University as one of the most celebrated companies known for outstanding customer service. When I contacted the Disney University Administration for information on a “Train the Trainer” course, they told me they didn’t have one. They informed me that they had gotten most of their materials from Blanchard Training and Development, based out of Escondido, California. Their curriculum was called Legendary Service. I enrolled in the Legendary Service Facilitator’s course in September 1991 and flew to Escondido for what proved to be the turning point in my career as a Department of the Army civilian employee. This article will retrace the steps that helped me move my organization to a new way of life in customer service.

### **Background**

Customer service in our Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) programs was a crap shoot. Sometimes a customer received good service, other times he received poor service. It varied from day to day, facility to facility, and staff member to staff member.

As the person in charge of all the Army's MWR programs in Hawaii, much of my time was devoted to answering or fixing customer complaints. While some of those complaints were the result of policies or regulations which hampered good customer service, more often than not the complaints were about our employee attitudes and how they treated customers. Customer comment cards pointed out a lack of sincerity, initiative and friendliness on the part of our employees. It was a job to them: come to work, do the bare minimum at work, and then go home. Of course, there were some people who did provide good customer service but they were the exception rather than the norm. My goal was to make great customer service a way of life for our organization. A change in our organizational culture to strive for consistently top-quality customer service was needed.

The Legendary Service facilitators course seemed to provide the necessary tools to make that happen. The overarching premise was to exceed the customers' expectations. The fundamentals of Legendary Service included: a total commitment to service; an all-out recovery strategy; continuous improvement; listening; facilitating the changing role of management; setting boundaries; empowerment; measuring; holding everyone accountable for great customer service; and finally, celebration. These fundamentals were the building blocks from which we began our change.

### **In the Beginning**

Change began on 26 January 1992 at 0800 hours in a banquet room at our Officer's Club. Twenty four people were present for my first training session in Legendary Service.

Six Division Chiefs, sixteen Branch Chiefs and my Administrative Support team made up the group. I personally conducted the training then as I do today. Commitment from the top is one of the keys toward changing the service culture. My commitment starts with my personal involvement with the training of each and every employee who works in our organization. I feel that providing great customer service is our number one mission and my folks need to hear it from the “horse’s mouth.”

Unfortunately, not everyone shared my commitment or my enthusiasm for Legendary Service. I could see it in the eyes of some that my message was not being received. It seemed as if I could read their minds: “Here we go again. Another training program that will fizzle out in a couple of months.” I was determined to not let that happen. The lessons I learned while at Blanchard Training and Development came back to me. The hardest part of changing our service culture was middle management’s reluctance to change. I needed to convince my Division Chiefs and Branch Chiefs that Legendary Service must be a new way of life for all of us. Discussion followed. Most agreed with me. A couple were still apprehensive but willing to give it a try. The training of the rest of the staff continued. In the first four months, we trained more than 400 employees and have continued training with a monthly class ever since. With more than 1,100 employees and a turnover rate of 65% in a year due to rotations and low Non-Appropriated Fund wages, our training efforts are ongoing with at least one class per month. New employees hear directly from me that great customer service is their number one mission. The Legendary Service seed was now planted.

## **Sustainment**

As we trained our staff, the next step was a little more complicated. Now what do we do to keep the momentum going? Some policies and procedures had to be rewritten to be more customer-friendly. For example, a refund from any activity used to require filling out forms and waiting 2-3 weeks for a check from our Central Accounting Office. We changed that to a cash refund of up to \$100 on the spot rather than making the customer wait for the check. Other policies were revised to exceed the customer's expectations. A golf cart that ran out of power on the course would now be handled in a different manner. Rather than just an apology for the inconvenience, the golfers were given a replacement cart, a full refund and a certificate for a free electric cart when they played their next round of golf. This strategy reversed the negative attitude toward the golf operation to a positive one. We accept the fact that we will make mistakes but how we recover from those mistakes is one of the keys to Legendary Service.

I conduct quarterly "All Hands Meetings" with my supervisors (125) to discuss Legendary Service concepts, talk about great service examples within the organization, and how we can make things better for our customers and our employees. During these sessions, each Division is invited to present an idea to improve customer service within their organization. These ideas are then voted upon by the Division Chiefs and the winning idea is awarded \$500 to be used to improve services within that program. This initiative has generated a lot of new ideas from the lowest levels of the organization to improve our services and programs.

Customer feedback cards along with drop boxes were placed in all of our facilities and customer service hotlines were also established. In many of our programs, we have

advisory councils that meet regularly to discuss how we're doing. Many of our managers conduct informal feedback sessions and customer focus groups during the course of their day.

We also initiated a "Mystery Shopper" program that helps us check on the quality of our customer service. I personally meet with the volunteers, brief them on what I would like them to look for and then send them out with a formal checklist to a specific facility. My emphasis is looking for things that we're doing right, especially examples of great customer service. Upon completion of the "shopping experience," I receive an outbrief from the mystery shopper. I then bring in the Division Chief, Branch Chief, Program Manager and Facility Supervisor to discuss the findings. If there are problems or negative feedback, we discuss ways to improve and correct or retrain the employee involved rather than impose punitive actions. This approach emphasizes the positive feedback of the experience and employees now seem to welcome mystery shoppers to their facilities so they can show off their stuff.

### **Spirit of the Eagle**

Our final challenge centered around the recognition and reward system for the employees who provided great customer service. We decided to use the eagle as our symbol for excellence. The system needed to be simple, inexpensive, equitable, timely and effective. A Legendary Service certificate and a gold eagle pin for the employee's name tag were the initial recognition items given to outstanding service providers. Simplicity of the system meant no bureaucratic process to hinder nominations. The system we adopted included a nomination form that was available in any of our facilities

and offices. Nominations could be made by a customer, coworker or supervisor of any employee who provided great service. When a nomination was received, it was logged into a data base and then sent directly to me for approval. I reviewed and approved every nomination. Upon approval of an employee's initial nomination, the certificate was prepared, signed and framed. I would personally deliver the certificate to the employee at his or her work site along with the gold eagle pin. Using a portable drill that I carry with me, I would drill a hole in the employee's name tag and secure the gold eagle pin onto it. The certificate would then be mounted on a wall in the facility for all to see under a large gold sign that reads "We provide Legendary Service." This little award ceremony goes a long way in reinforcing our legendary way of life. Employees who haven't received their eagle strive to earn theirs with improved customer service. Sooner or later, someone will recognize their efforts and nominate them for the award.

Additional nominations are awarded with gold stars that are placed on the certificate. Simple and inexpensive but very effective in maintaining the Legendary Service attitude. We also pass out small gift certificates (\$5-\$10) to employees who truly go beyond the call to take care of a customer. These certificates can be used in any one of our facilities for services that we provide.

In 1995, we implemented another recognition program called the "Spirit of the Eagle" award. While the certificate and the eagle pin had accomplished our goal of recognizing all who provided legendary service, it did not address employees who were also outstanding performers of their jobs. It was possible for employees to be great with customers but poor in the other aspects of their jobs. For example, a file clerk who did an outstanding job of taking care of the customer but did not file papers according to

prescribed regulations and procedures could still receive a Legendary Service certificate and pin. We wanted to recognize our top employees; employees who embodied all the characteristics that we held high: integrity, outstanding job performance, initiative, and, of course, a Legendary Service attitude. We also wanted to recognize a team or facility that provided outstanding service with a Legendary attitude. We created a “Spirit of the Eagle” award that we presented once per year at our annual Holiday celebration held in early January. Nominations for individual and group awards were received in November. A screening process was then undertaken with all Branch Chiefs and Division Chiefs reviewing nominations. If one negative vote appeared in the process, the nomination was dropped from consideration. There were no quotas established for the number of awards to be given. If no one received a unanimous vote, then no awards would be given. As it turned out, in the first year, ten employees received the “Spirit of the Eagle” award along with three facilities. In the second year, eleven employees received the award and two facilities. This year, nine employees received the award but no facilities. With approximately 1,100 employees in our organization, they were our top 1%! The individual employee received a gold eagle trophy, a gold name tag and a \$150 cash award. It is not an expensive award but the prestige and admiration that these employees received from their peers, supervisors and customers went beyond our expectations.

The group award was also very well received. A beautiful poster of an eagle was matted and framed. A large engraved plate was mounted to the picture citing Legendary Service efforts from the staff. This picture was then hung prominently in the facility for all to see. We also allocated \$500 to the group to spend on improving their facility or

operation. The esprit de corps among the staff increased significantly, working towards new and loftier goals.

Positive reinforcement encourages positive behavior. Since we started recognizing our employees for outstanding customer service we have processed more than 5,000 Legendary Service awards.

### **Validation**

Our efforts to move our service culture to a new way of life have begun to show signs of success. The Army Communities of Excellence program has recognized the United States Army Garrison, Hawaii as a Community of Excellence in each of the last six years. In its evaluation reports, the committee applauded the Legendary Service efforts within the Morale, Welfare and Recreation program.

Legendary Service is not just for MWR or other retail or consumer operations. Every organization deals with a customer of some kind. Any federal, state or county agency can and should adopt its principles. It would greatly improve the customer service currently given.

In 1996, the Garrison Commander made the decision to implement Legendary Service training throughout the command. He directed me to take charge of the process to train and implement the fundamentals of Legendary Service within the Directorates. A "Train the Trainer" course was contracted with Blanchard Training and Development in October 1996. Twelve individuals were selected for training and tasked to train employees within their own Directorates upon completion of the course. They have a difficult task but together we will slowly bring the entire Garrison staff into the Legendary Service way of

life. To help them move toward this goal, my Training Coordinator and I meet with them regularly to discuss roadblocks, training, awards and sustainment. We helped each of them with their training workshops until they became comfortable with the training materials.

We've also taken our "show" on the road to other organizations that are interested. The Navy and Marine MWR Chiefs here in Hawaii have asked me to make presentations to their staffs. We've even had inquiries from private companies that have heard about our Legendary Service training.

In June, 1996, the Community and Family Support Center (CFSC), my higher headquarters, sent a team out to Hawaii to evaluate Legendary Service for possible implementation Army wide. I briefed the group on the concept and allowed them to talk to our employees. They left Hawaii very impressed with what they had seen. Two months later, however, I received information from my major command element that CFSC was going to adopt another customer service training program for Army wide implementation. The Legendary Service concept was too difficult to implement. It required total commitment by management to change their organization's customer service culture. That commitment comes from within. It is their attitude towards their job, their mission and even their life. Legendary Service goes well beyond the "checklist" approach to customer service. However, Hawaii was given an exemption from adopting this new program because Legendary Service exceeded the new requirements!

## **Conclusion**

Our efforts to change our way of life in MWR in Hawaii are ongoing. We've only scratched the surface. Continuous improvements, slowly but surely, will help us in our journey. The attitudes of many of our naysayers are changing. Positive feedback and reinforcement have been keys to this change. My commitment is firm and unwavering. We continue to train and retrain. We continue to refine our policies to be more customer-friendly. We invite our customers to critique our programs and services because their feedback shows us where we still need to improve. Their comments and suggestions may seem minor but we now realize that we don't do the big things wrong anymore. We now need to concentrate on improving the smaller details within our programs.

At the same time, we recognize the need to treat our employees fairly. If we expect our staff to provide Legendary Service, management must also be Legendary with the subordinate staff. Legendary Service starts from the inside out. If we take care of our employees, they in turn will take care of our customers. Hal Rosenbluth's The Customer Comes Second writes about this premise in more detail.

The path toward great customer service is long and winding with potholes lining our path to success. We have taken the first steps toward making our organization a Legendary one. Our continuing efforts in training, recognition, systems improvements and sound business management are helping us get there, but the journey toward Legendary Service will never end.

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