

New York Times Bestseller

UPLIFTING SERVICE

The Proven Path

*to Delighting Your Customers, Colleagues,
and Everyone Else You Meet*

RON
KAUFMAN

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“UPLIFTING SERVICE: The Proven Path to Delighting Your Customers, Colleagues, and Everyone Else You Meet”

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CHAPTER 26

Learning from Experience

Karen was young and curious and wanted to know what was inside the box. Why did grandfather always make a point of putting it on the top shelf outside her reach? What was she not supposed to handle? She watched and waited until one day he left the small box lying on the table. It was a mistake and Karen knew it, but she said nothing to her grandfather. Instead, she waited patiently for him to leave the room.

She picked up the box and shook it, her little hands trembling with excitement. One side slid open and many small sticks fell out. They were colorful on one end and just the right size for her fingers. Karen rolled them back and forth in her hands, admiring the bright red bits on the ends, sliding them happily in and out of the box.

Then it happened in an instant, a spark, a flash, and a flame erupting in her fingers. It seared her skin with no warning, and she ran away, screeching in pain.

Grandpa came charging around the corner. He was alarmed by her scream. Immediately he smelled and saw the reason. He

stomped out the small fire on the carpet that already threatened to spread. Then he swept Karen up in his arms and they cried together. She cried from the pain of learning the hard way. He cried from knowing that keeping the box out of her reach was a proven strategy for safety, and leaving it within her grasp was almost a disaster.

Matches are concentrated energy. They can light a candle or a campfire. They can also ignite an inferno. Building an uplifting service culture also requires energy and great concentration. Success illuminates everyone it touches. Failure can be painful and expensive. How do you reconcile your vision, passion, and aspirations with the politics, realities, and constraints of an organization? What are the proven steps to follow? What are the difficulties and disasters you must avoid?

For more than two decades, I have been working on uplifting service programs with clients all over the world. Many have succeeded, some far beyond expectations. Others have stalled or delivered less than expected. Experience is a wonderful teacher, especially when you can learn from mistakes made by someone else. Learning from experience shortens your own learning curve, so you can do what works sooner, and avoid what doesn't work altogether.

“Wisdom is the daughter
of experience.”

Leonardo da Vinci

Don't Sell Snow to the Eskimos

Where is the right place to start a service improvement program inside your organization? The answer may seem obvious. You start with team members who sell to and serve your customers. After all, customers are the ones who buy your products and use your services. They come back when they are happy and complain

when they are not. It makes sense that salespeople, delivery teams, and support and service representatives should be the first to participate in a service improvement program, right?

Well, no. If your objective is to build an uplifting service culture, this approach is very problematic.

It's true that people in "customer-facing" roles are closest to your customers on a daily basis. They already understand that service is important. They know that upset customers complain. They know happy customers are easier to serve. And they know from experience that only satisfied customers come back, buy again, buy more, and recommend their friends. Customer-facing team members have many incentives to serve your customers well. And they may very well be doing the best they can, under the circumstances.

When you provide new service education, greater encouragement, and more recognition for this team, they will be inspired to serve better, smile wider, and strive even harder to delight. But at some point (and possibly quite quickly), they will bump against the constraints of your current systems, budget, or procedures. At some point they will start to wonder how they can give customers better service if their colleagues do not give them better service. How can they go the extra mile when they don't get support they need from their colleagues around the organization?

And they have a point! Asking customer-facing team members to give better service before they get better service from those behind the scenes is a recipe for disappointment for both parties. This approach not only frustrates those serving customers in front; it also upsets team members in the back who don't understand why their colleagues are always asking for more. So they push back,

which frustrates those in front even further. It's an unfortunate and unnecessary lose-lose situation.

Now compare this with an alternative approach. Suppose you begin by focusing service improvement efforts on your internal service providers. Imagine the finance and legal departments offering to make things easier for those who sell and close new deals? Imagine teams in production and manufacturing going out of their way to make things faster or more flexible for those who see the customers each day. Imagine warehouse, logistics, and delivery departments doing everything they can to help their colleagues serve customers even better. Imagine software developers asking software resellers what they could do to make the job easier. Imagine how welcome this offer would be for those who face your customers, clients, and competition every day. Imagine their surprise and delight.

Then what happens when you ask these front-facing team members to serve their customers better than ever? With surprising service coming from the inside, it's easier to step up your service on the outside. When front-facing team members come up with new ideas and turn around to seek support, they find colleagues able and eager to assist. Why? Because those internal service colleagues were educated and inspired to provide better service first.

When launching an uplifting service program, don't start with only customer-facing team members. It would be much better to begin with internal service providers: production and design, hardware and software, warehousing and logistics, facilities, finance, legal, IT, and HR. Or start both groups together—and teach them together—for end-to-end service commitment. Let those on the inside inspire those who are serving on the outside.

It's a proven win-win situation. Following this advice will lead to success, while ignoring it is flirting with failure.

Launch from the Top Down and from the Bottom Up

Starting from the top with an uplifting service initiative makes sense. When high-level leaders speak up and role-model with commitment, it's easier for everyone else to follow—and take the lead at their own levels. This is why Leadership Alignment is first on the Implementation Roadmap and why the Lead section of this book precedes the Build, Learn, and Drive sections.

However, a top-down approach on its own can leave your leaders in an uncomfortable position. Launching from the top down means those at the top make the earliest efforts and then wait for the cascade to see practical results. While this is logical—a cascade does not happen overnight—it can be frustrating for leaders who are accustomed to impact quickly following their actions. In fact, a lack of quick and observable impact can cause some leaders to question whether the outcomes will happen at all.

It takes time to achieve measurable gains in market share, reputation, and financial performance—the ultimate objectives in business. And leaders understand that. But in the meantime, it is vital for high-level leaders to see and hear about early successes on the ground. Don't expect the boss to give endless support and sponsorship without hearing about some practical applications, real stories, and uplifting examples they can believe in and tell others about. These do not need to be big breakthroughs or quantum leaps—leaders know that a little precedes a lot. What they need is evidence of practical action inside the organization, and positive impact on the outside.

Do you remember our earlier discussion about achieving the ultimate objectives in business? It all starts with new ideas and actions, which lead to positive compliments and feedback, which lead to higher satisfaction and loyalty scores, which lead to better market share, reputation, and profits. Stories of frontline effort, excellent recoveries, and customer compliments are leading indicators of the ultimate objectives in business. They are a bracing tonic and necessary fuel for high-level service leaders.

Beware of launching from the bottom up without support from the top—the classic mistake of stand-alone “frontline service training programs.” It won’t take long before a motivated frontline service provider bumps into a supervisor or manager who does not share the understanding or the passion.

One leading tour operator brought its frontline employees a novel campaign called “Be Service Entrepreneurs.” The objective was for staff members to make decisions as if they were the owners. Real entrepreneurs have an appetite for risk and are willing to make mistakes. And so did one enthusiastic frontline service provider. He chartered a plane to move customers along when the company’s tour bus broke down. It was a gutsy move his customers loved, but two steps up the corporate ladder, it created an unexpected shock. Most of the company’s leaders had never heard of this frontline program and were not pleased with this result. The program was quickly retired as word spread throughout the company that “Be Service Entrepreneurs” was no longer supported.

Launching from the top down and from the bottom up at the same time puts a great deal of responsibility on your people in the middle. In the cascade from the top down, middle managers and supervisors must translate the messages into action, connect company objectives to frontline concerns, and make uplifting language appear practical and useful. In the bottom-up bubbling

of new ideas and action steps, the middle plays three culture-building roles: praising team members who do a great job, raising good suggestions for higher-level review, and spotlighting roadblocks that require leadership action for removal. Managers and supervisors need recognition and support from above and below to succeed in these essential roles.

What about launching in the middle and letting the top and the bottom follow later? This may be the weakest approach of all. When leaders are not prepared to lead, and the frontline employees are not prepared for action, then asking middle managers to start the journey alone is a formula for pure frustration.

A top-down cascade brings commitment, alignment, and support. A bottom-up program stimulates new ideas and new actions. An activated middle connects, enables, and empowers. Your successful Implementation Roadmap should start with attention to all three.

Help Your Leaders Lead

Deep inside an enormous software company, a team of passionately committed individuals works day and night to improve their customers' and partners' experiences. These committed service heroes know that satisfaction is not enough to retain loyalty and gain market share. They want more than quick recovery when things go wrong; they want to prevent things from going wrong in the first place. They want more than just meeting expectations; they are serious about customer delight. And though the company is sprawling and diverse, these employees believe everyone should step up in service, creating the next great experience together.

Unfortunately, their leaders do not seem to agree. Or perhaps they do not understand. During a workshop, one thundered that he

was sick and tired of all the problems and simply yelled at his people to “Fix it!” Another took the stage in front of hundreds, with thousands more watching on video around the world and said, “Customer satisfaction is our number one goal. We must strive to meet expectations.” Our service heroes cringed.

Demoralized but still committed, they returned to fighting for a cause these leaders did not promote or defend. One of their leaders told me candidly, “We don’t have a business case for improving our service. There is no crisis now we need to fix, and even if we do improve our service, we won’t make any more money.” This is sweet music to their competition’s ears. And then, as if to accentuate the complete lack of alignment at the top, yet another senior leader publicly announced, “We must make all our customers deliriously happy. Anything less is failure.”

How can anyone reach the top of a large organization and not understand the value of an uplifting service culture? That’s an easy question to answer. Most people who reach high leadership positions are experts in their industry. Often they have strong financial skills and equally strong personalities. But rarely are they experts in building or leading a service culture. That’s not what earned them bonuses or brought them up the ladder in the first place.

But a winning service culture must have effective service leaders and uplifting leadership teams. If you are one of the passionate and committed service heroes inside your organization, you may need to help your leaders lead. It may seem odd for managers, supervisors, and frontline staff to tell their leaders what to do—but who else is going to give them help if you won’t step up to do it?

You can help your leaders lead by creating opportunities for them to walk the talk, talk the talk, and model uplifting service.

Organizing a customer meeting, focus group, or panel discussion? Invite your leaders to join you, and brief them well when they arrive. Holding a team meeting, cross-functional workshop, or problem-solving session about service issues? Let your leaders know in advance and ask them to stop by to hear the new ideas. Have you got a method for recognition of top-notch service providers? Ask your leaders to participate with a visit, a handshake, a photograph, and a short speech.

Afraid your leaders don't know what to say? Then take the initiative and take responsibility to help your leaders lead. Write short descriptions of service problems that have been recently solved: Who worked on the problem? What did they do? and, How has service been improved? Many of these examples exist inside any organization, but rarely do the details make it to the top.

Concerned your leaders don't see the impact, power, or competitive necessity of uplifting service? Then clip or snip interesting stories about other service leaders—or service disasters—and send them up with a handwritten note sharing your admiration or concern. Or you can organize a benchmarking visit, and invite your leaders to come along. They are too busy to make the visit on the date? Send them a single page report of what you saw, what you learned, and what you will apply.

Afraid customer service is simply lost on the busy agenda of your leaders? Then organize an executive summary of current complaints—and what you are doing about them. Add to this a few carefully selected compliments you have received. Some leaders are drawn to trouble—and your summary will attract their attention. Others are in need of some uplifting themselves, and the compliments you send up the chain of command will be most welcome.

First Choose Your Target, Then Fire at the Bull's-Eye

One of my clients launched a vigorous service improvement program to create greater value for external customers. Hundreds of classes were conducted for thousands of Service Champions around the world. The business objectives were clear: reclaim market share and rebuild a slipping reputation. Bounce back in recovery situations. Focus on external customer experience, not internal political issues. Demonstrate passion for existing customers. Go all-out to win new business.

But something unusual happened as the program rollout expanded. Rather than focusing on these identified external business targets, earning high internal course evaluations became the course leaders' primary focus. Being rated highly as a very engaging course leader was viewed as great success. Scoring 9 out of 10 for leading a wonderful class became a cause for celebration. That's a great score, but a very different bull's-eye.

Customer success and better business results are why the program was originally conceived. High course leader scores are not the same as valuable business impact. Eventually this lack of alignment became painfully apparent—the focus had drifted away from the early goals, and the entire program needed to refocus. Don't let this drifting happen to you.

A clear bull's-eye should always be at the center of your efforts, well articulated and understood by everyone involved. Your goals can be externally or internally focused. External goals are the improvements you commit to achieve for people outside our organization: customers, clients, partners, distributors, and suppliers. Internal goals are also completely valid targets: improvements in collaboration, performance, engagement, retention, and

more. It is fine to have more than one key target, as long as each target is consistent with the others. For example, aiming to reduce complaints and increase sales are naturally aligned targets. Higher levels of employee engagement and excellent course leader scores are very compatible objectives.

My clients often ask how they can measure the Return on Investment (ROI) from a service improvement. They want assurance that their investment will reliably move the needle. I always reply with a simple question: “Tell us specifically what you want to achieve. Which needle measuring results do you want to move?” When I hear a meandering answer lacking clarity and focus, or a wish list of every possible improvement, then I know it is not yet time to start. Don’t launch your service improvement efforts until you are crystal clear about your measure of success. Don’t pull back the string until you are aiming at the bull’s-eye.

One way to increase the odds of impact from your investment is by asking each participant at the end of the program this sequence of five questions.

1. What did you enjoy about this learning experience? This question creates appreciation for the opportunity.
2. What actions will you take to apply what you have learned? This question encourages reflection and review.
3. How will you apply what you have learned? What new actions will you take? Answering this question requires focus, thought, and planning.
4. What value will your actions create for customers or colleagues? The answer to this question should land clearly on your chosen bull’s-eye.
5. What is the ROI from your participation and your actions? This question weighs value created against investments in time, cost, and effort.

For some team members, this will be the first time they have been asked to consider the value of their learning and the impact of their actions—which is exactly what you want everyone to think about, appreciate, and improve.

Take the Slow Road to the Fast Track

The principles of uplifting service are so empowering and the practices so effective that some leaders push their teams to solve the most difficult and complex service problems right away. That's a mistake to avoid. Warming up a machine before you go full throttle is good practice. Warming up your service team with a series of "early wins" is good practice, too.

One large company in global logistics applied the methods in this book to improving a series of transactions including customer visits, operational review meetings, and a prospect's experience from inquiry to completed contract. After early success with a fairly easy project, improving customer on-site visits, the regional manager dramatically raised the bar. He asked his team to work on improving the customer's experience when the company responded to complaints. This was one of its most challenging service transactions, with legal and financial implications.

With only a thin layer of past experience and a high threshold of challenge, the service team stalled and struggled. Eventually team members applied the principles of uplifting service and worked their way to success, but the experience was emotionally exhausting. It didn't have to be this way.

When planning a sequence of service problems to tackle, take a gradual approach. Build momentum with early wins on easy

issues. Let your team taste the pleasure of uplifting service success. Highlight achievements and celebrate the compliments you earn. Restrain the urge to work on your toughest problems first—their day to be conquered will come.

The same is true when choosing participants for an uplifting service program. Some hard-nosed managers will challenge a new program by sending their most cynical and problematic employees. Their view is, “If a new program can work on these tough nuts, then perhaps it has some merit.” But the opposite approach will work much better. What you want in the early days of your journey is good feelings, good results, and good gossip. That comes more easily from participants who want to participate and are eager to succeed.

There is an old saying that “A rising tide lifts all boats.” This is also true when building an uplifting service culture—except for those who are stuck in the mud. Practicing generous action raises everyone to a higher level—except those who will not budge. For deeply cynical, resentful, or unwilling employees, there are two successful options. First, they may come to see the light and climb on board for an unfamiliar but uplifting ride. And second, they may feel so out of place as everyone else moves ahead, they no longer feel welcome, and leave. For the success of your organization, either outcome is welcome.

Connect the Building Blocks Together

Visit a building site before construction begins and you will see stacks of lumber, bags of cement, pallets piled high with bricks, cartons of floor tiles, and many doors and windows waiting to be installed. Visit the same site months later and you will see a house,

an office, or a building. It's not the building materials that changed, but the way they are connected to each other. It's the connections between the blocks that allows new value to be created: a living room, a conference room, a factory or a store.

Architects understand that connections deliver the value: open spaces encourage open thinking, and closer quarters encourage closer teams. They engineer the outcome from the start by designing for function, beauty, economy and strength.

The 12 Building Blocks of Service Culture offer a similar opportunity for building greater strength. They are useful separately, but their real power comes when you knit them tightly together. Connecting the 12 Building Blocks is like epoxy glue, holding your culture firmly in place and making it stronger than ever.

When guests check out of Marina Bay Sands, they are sent a link by email to a survey seeking feedback about their stay. The first section asks about "Your Overall Experience," and the first question is simply "How was your stay at Marina Bay Sands?" You have four choices: Very Good, Good, Poor, and Very Poor. Of course the integrated resort is aiming for Very Good, but occasionally a guest clicks on the other end of the spectrum. The moment a guest clicks on Very Poor, a white box pops up on the screen with this message: "We do apologize. Please tell us more so we can fix it." Whatever a guest types into this box is carefully studied, and is shared with service teams in the morning "Jump Start" meeting the very next day. The guest is also called or contacted by email with a personal apology and an inquiry about how the resort can set things right.

Let's look at what is happening here from a Building Blocks perspective. The survey accumulates satisfaction scores (Service Measures and Metrics) and, if the customer is unhappy, asks for a

written comment (Voice of the Customer). This feedback is studied and sent to the departments that can do something about it (Service Improvement Process), and is shared with all team members in the morning meeting (Service Communications). And Marina Bay Sands contacts the guest directly, seeking an opportunity to bounce back (Service Recovery and Guarantees).

Imagine a contest for service improvement (Service Improvement Process) based on comments received from customers (Voice of the Customer). The contest includes praise and awards for the best improvement ideas (Service Rewards and Recognition). The contest is promoted and winners are applauded on the company website, newsletter, and in quarterly town hall meetings (Service Communications). During final-stage interviews job applicants are asked how they might handle the same situations (Service Recruitment). And new hires study past contest winners as examples of service culture in action during their first few days on the job (Service Orientation).

Learning Your Own Lessons

One nice thing about learning from experience is you often get another chance to try. For example, you may find yourself out of balance from time to time: too much work, too much to eat, not enough exercise, not enough rest, not enough time enjoying life. The good thing is you can always do something about it. As long as you are alive, you get another moment, another chance to do things better. And you can learn from the experience. The same is true in service.

Another upside in learning from experience is you don't have to do everything all at once. For example, if you want to build a

healthy body, you can take many actions. You can improve what you eat, drink more water, do some exercise, get more sleep, manage your stress, or clean up the environment around you. You can start with a change in any of these areas and feel the benefits right away. If you work on several of these at once, your benefits will rapidly grow. Your effort to improve will be rewarded. The same is true in service.

Meet Ron Kaufman

Ron Kaufman is the world's premiere thought-leader, educator, and motivator for uplifting customer service and building service cultures. Ron is the author of 14 other books on service, business, and inspiration.

Ron provides powerful insights from working with clients all over the world in every major industry for more than twenty years. Ron is an inspiration to leaders and managers with his content rich and entertaining speeches, and his impactful, interactive workshops. He is rated one of the world's "Top 25 Who's Hot" speakers by *Speaker Magazine*.

Ron has been featured in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*. He is passionately committed to uplifting the spirit and practice of service worldwide.

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A breakthrough book
that will surprise, delight, and uplift you,
your organization, and your team.

In *Uplifting Service*, Ron Kaufman takes you on a journey into the new world of service. Through dynamic case studies and best-practice examples, you will learn how the world's leading companies have changed the game, and how you can successfully follow this path to an uplifting service transformation.

“Read this book, apply the steps. Watch your culture transform and your perspective on service change forever. Ron Kaufman has unlocked the mystery of service. Get ready for a magnificent journey into a new world.”

Marshall Goldsmith

Bestselling Author of *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

“Ron Kaufman has pinpointed a massive wound in society, and offers a strategy to uplift the world around us. For mankind, it's transformational. For business, it's a clean and clear path to a sustainable competitive advantage. This book is long overdue, and will create a legendary shift.”

Thomas Moran

Director, Customer and Partner Experience
Microsoft Operations



Ron Kaufman, the founder of Uplifting Service, is the world's premiere thought-leader, educator, and motivator for uplifting customer service and building service cultures.

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