

My Week as a Room-Service Waiter at the Ritz

by Paul Hemp



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My Week as a Room-Service Waiter at the Ritz

by Paul Hemp

Managers love to talk about delighting their customers. But how does it feel to be one of the people who actually have to deliver the goods?

THIS WAS TO BE MY FIRST REAL test. After completing a two-day orientation program and spending the same number of days shadowing Stephen Posner, a veteran Ritz-Carlton room-service waiter, I was going to take the lead on delivering a dinner order. As we headed up the service elevator with a light meal for two – a cheeseburger, a salad, a beer, and a bottle of mineral water—I again went over in my head Steve’s instructions on what to say and do. He noticed my furrowed brow. “Don’t be so serious,” he said, as I awkwardly maneuvered the room-service cart down the hall. “Feel out the guests and try to match their mood.”

I knocked on the door of Room 1036 and swallowed: “Good evening. In-room dining.” A cheerful woman opened the door and I pushed, rather than pulled,

the jiggling and tinkling cart over the threshold—nearly tipping over the bottle of San Pellegrino in the process. When the woman, who was watching a game show on television with her husband, learned from Steve that I was in training, she tried to put me at ease with some conversation about the program. But I didn’t have the excess mental capacity required for casual banter. I was focused on my task.

“Would you like me to open the water for you?” I asked.

“Oh, sure, if you’d like to,” said the woman.

Then I stood there, slightly slack jawed, hands behind my back, surveying the cart and trying to recall what my checklist said to do next. The woman stood there looking at me expectantly. Steve stood there looking at me quizzically.

cally. Ah, I know! Explain what I've brought for them. "You have a Caesar salad and a grilled beef burger with cheese, medium rare," I said, lifting up the warming cover. "And I brought some extra mustard and ketchup, in case you need it." Steve, having finally despaired of my ever opening the San Pellegrino, deftly stepped forward and did it himself. "Please don't hesitate to call us if you need anything else," I said, as we prepared to leave. The woman smiled. I forgot to offer to open the Heineken. As Steve and I stepped into the hallway, he closed the door behind us and said: "We have a few things to talk about on the way downstairs."

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It's easy for senior executives to hold forth about the importance of getting close to customers, anticipating their needs, exceeding their expectations. But how many of them have ever been out there on the front lines, experiencing firsthand what this actually feels like? What might they discover if they tried to find out—particularly at a company known for its obsessive commitment to customer service? Certainly, they would learn a lot from observing the operation at close range. But they would also glean useful insights from *being part of* the operation, from standing in the shoes and getting inside the heads of employees trying to satisfy demanding customers.

I recently spent seven days at the new Ritz-Carlton/Boston Common hotel getting trained and then working as a room-service waiter. I chose the hotel chain not only because of its reputation for customer service but also because it takes training seriously: Indeed, Ritz-Carlton's Learning Institute offers employee-training seminars to companies in a variety of industries. Ritz-Carlton set no restrictions in granting me permission to train and work at the hotel. Naturally, I wasn't paid, and my tips went to fellow waiters. (This was the source of considerable amusement among my colleagues, as I enjoyed some beginner's luck in the gratuity department—something I attribute solely to guest pity.)

Clearly, a week wasn't enough time to fully experience the job I had signed on to do. In that short period, I never encountered a rude or an unusually demanding guest. But participating in the company's orientation program did give me a chance to see how Ritz-Carlton inculcates its service philosophy in new employees. And my four days of full-time work gave me, however briefly, a sense of the challenges that even a motivated employee faces in trying to deliver first-rate customer service.

The Ritz-Carlton where I worked sits directly across the Boston Common and the Public Garden from the original Boston Ritz-Carlton, the chain's flagship property. So the new hotel has positioned itself as an edgier, hipper sort of place. This attempt at differentiation, however, risks alienating guests used to the Old World elegance of the original hotel—which closed for lengthy renovations as soon as the new one opened. The new hotel faces other challenges. For example, whereas the original Ritz looks out over the Public Garden from Boston's fashionable Back Bay neighborhood, the new one backs up against the city's Combat Zone, once full of prostitutes and strip clubs and still the home to a number of flophouses and seedy bars.

That drawback has only made it more imperative that the hotel deliver the flawless service Ritz-Carlton is famous for. And, with a few exceptions, the room-service staff did seem to provide guests exactly what they might expect from a stay at the Ritz. Viewing this process from the inside allowed me to distill a number of lessons that managers in any service business—indeed, in any business—might use to improve employee-customer interactions. It also taught me some life lessons: For example, the finest bottle of wine—or mineral water—offers little refreshment if it remains unopened.

Day 1 **Putting the Ritz in Ritzy**

When I arrive at the hotel for my first day of orientation, a tall concierge with a sonorous voice ushers me to the lobby

fireplace, where other hotel trainees—a security officer, a front-desk clerk, a housekeeper—are chatting. The men and women are dressed in suits, making me feel somewhat shabby in my business-casual attire. I feel more at ease when we are led upstairs to a banquet room where Tim Kirkpatrick, the hotel's down-to-earth director of training and development, warmly greets us. "You are a gift," he says to the group. "We're lucky to have you here."

Tim, who started with Ritz-Carlton 13 years ago as a waiter in the original Boston hotel's lounge, leads the dozen or so new employees in a round of introductions. As they speak, it is apparent this group has been selected with certain qualities in mind. Erin Garrity, the front-desk clerk, says her goal is to be invited back to her alma mater, Johnson & Wales University, as a distinguished visiting professor from the hospitality industry. Damien Simpson, the security officer, describes himself as someone with a "knack for serving people," adding that he "likes working for the best because it makes me feel like I'm the best." Zheng Chen, an assistant finance director, who goes by Chris, hopes someday to hold a "world-class leadership position in finance." These people certainly seem to welcome the prospect of serving others; they also are unusually upbeat and ambitious.

The orientation includes presentations by various hotel executives, and the first one focuses on the rich tradition of the Ritz-Carlton chain. Leslie Oliver, a sales manager, asks us what comes to mind when we think of Ritz-Carlton.

"High class," someone says. "Luxury," says another. "Puttin' on the Ritz," says a third. "Ritzy," another trainee chimes in.

"So," Leslie asks, "who put the Ritz in ritzy?" She then recounts the legendary story of Cesar Ritz, a Swiss sheepherder's son who had been fired from four jobs before he opened a hotel under his name in Paris in 1898. Ritz—who by some accounts coined the phrase "the customer is never wrong"—formed a management company that grew to include the Carlton in London and other hotels throughout Europe

and North America. Of the Ritz-Carlton hotels in the United States, only the Boston hotel, opened in 1927, survived the Great Depression. But that establishment helped set the standard for hotel luxury in this country, with its elegant dining room, private baths, and scrupulous attention to guest needs.

The chain's recent history is somewhat more prosaic. The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company was founded in 1983 by William B. Johnson, the owner of an Atlanta-based chain of waffle restaurants, who bought the Boston hotel and, with it, the U.S. rights to the Ritz-Carlton name. In 1998, Marriott International acquired the business, which manages but does not own the more than 40 Ritz-Carlton hotels. (Millennium Partners owns the Ritz-Carlton/Boston Common.) Still, the Ritz mystique remains. "What did your friends and family say when you told them where you were going to work?" we are asked at one point.

"Most of them said, 'Ooh!'" replies one of the new housekeepers. "Or, 'Wow!'"

Much of the credit for retaining the Ritz's vital tradition goes to Horst Schulze, a German-born hotelier who ran the company for nearly 20 years before retiring last year. His philosophy of customer service is embodied in the Gold Standards, a somewhat dizzying array of principles—the Three Steps of Service, the Credo, the Motto, the 20 Basics, the Employee Promise—all crammed onto a wallet-size, foldout card that employees are expected to carry at all times. "The Gold Standards are part of your uniform, just like your name tag," Tim says. "But remember, it's just a laminated card until you put it into action."

Indeed, the orientation focuses on how employees can "enliven" this philosophy in their work. Doing so will be particularly important as Ritz-Carlton—which, in the eyes of some, has slipped behind the Four Seasons as the premier luxury hotel chain—adds nearly 20 hotels over the next two years. Chris, the new assistant finance director, asks Tim how the company will maintain its high standards in the face of this growth. The

answer, Tim says, lies in employees following—no, bringing to life—the Gold Standards.

At the core of these principles is the three-paragraph Credo, which we go through sentence by sentence, and we plumb its meaning with discussions of various hypothetical situations. The Credo states that the Ritz-Carlton's main mission is the "genuine care and comfort" of guests. "No one remembers if you served a guest from the left or the right," says John Collins, the hotel's human resources director. "But they do know and remember if the service is genuine, if you actually enjoy being of service. They can tell if you're forcing a smile." The Credo also pledges that guests will experience a "warm, relaxed yet refined ambience." Despite the formality—some might even say stuffiness—that is a hallmark of the Ritz-Carlton image, we are urged to seek a balance between refinement and relaxed warmth. During training, we frequently hear the phrase, "Elegance without warmth is arrogance."

As the day winds down, John Rolfs, the hotel's general manager, stops in. If the presentations so far have been somewhat touchy-feely in tone, the general manager—stern and imposing in an impeccably tailored, double-breasted suit—snaps everyone to attention. "The owners of this hotel opened it for only one reason—to make money!" he says forcefully. "Our job is to help them make money." But wait, what about our pampered guests? What about the Credo? What about the Ritz-Carlton mystique? The GM continues:

"And how do we help them make money? No matter what our work is and no matter where we do it in the hotel, our job is to *make guests feel good so they come back!* We listen to what a guest is asking for and then we say, 'Yes, my pleasure. I'd be happy to do that.'"

He pauses. "Everyone say no." We obey. "Now say it again. That is the last time you should use that word in this hotel. You may have to say that something will take a while or that it may cost a bit more. But you can't make a guest feel good by saying no. Ladies and

gentlemen, people do not come to our hotel to sleep in our guest rooms. They want an experience. And it is our job to do everything in our power to deliver that experience!"

Yikes! Am I up for this?

Day 2 Talking the Talk

I walk into the hotel for my second day of orientation, still feeling some trepidation from the previous afternoon. But I'm also psyched; this feels like it's going to be exciting. The first order of business is trying on our uniforms—in my case, a double-breasted white jacket with gold buttons, black trousers, a white shirt, and a gold tie with black stripes. Then we run through a mock "lineup." At this daily gathering, employees in each department meet with their managers to discuss hotel goings-on, particular guests' likes and dislikes, and any of their own concerns. It is also a forum for reviewing the Gold Standards. Each day, all hotel employees around the world are supposed to discuss the same Ritz-Carlton basic—one of 20 key principles employees must follow—and then discuss the same one again 20 days later. The aim of this rotating tutorial is to keep the Ritz-Carlton philosophy front and center in employees' minds.

Today, the subject is Basic 14, which admonishes employees to use the right sort of language with guests and one another. For example, we are to say, "Please accept my apologies," rather than, "I'm sorry"; "Certainly, my pleasure," instead of, "Okay." (In a famous interdiction, former president Schulze is said to have once exclaimed, "No more okey dokey!") Tim acknowledges that Ritz-Carlton verbiage can sound stilted at first. But when those words are infused with warmth—a friendly "hi" should resonate behind the formal words—they take on a new meaning. "If you don't feel comfortable or natural saying, 'Certainly, my pleasure,' don't say it," he says. "But someday it will just tumble out."

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We then return to the Credo and its goal of fulfilling “even the unexpressed wishes and needs” of guests. “If you go to a good hotel and ask for something, you get it,” says John Collins, the HR director. “If you go to a great hotel, you don’t even have to ask.” This means always looking for signs that someone needs something – and then breaking away from whatever you are doing to provide it. “If the guest says he’s lost, it’s too late,” John says.

A more formal way of anticipating the needs of Ritz-Carlton guests is the chainwide guest-recognition database, which, like so many company programs, is honored with an acronym. CLASS (Customer Loyalty Anticipation Satisfaction System) tracks the preferences and complaints of everyone who stays at a Ritz-Carlton. Most of the information is fairly mundane: a partiality for foam pillows, certain newspapers, a particular kind of mineral water. Some preferences, though, are more unusual. In the days when the original Boston Ritz-Carlton had manual elevators with attendants, two regular guests would commandeer the elevators for an 11 PM race. CLASS took note of that fact so that the elevator operators would be prepared to hand over the controls to the dueling visitors.

In this system, employees are the data gatherers. For example, if a housekeeper notices that a guest has moved the desk in her room to get a better view out the window, the housekeeper might log that observation on a guest-recognition slip so that the furniture would be arranged accordingly on the guest’s next visit. (Hotel personnel are instructed to use their discretion in reporting such preferences, however: If a guest watching his weight has a handful of M&M’s at the bar in a moment of weakness, he won’t appreciate regularly finding a bowl of the candy by his bed!)

During orientation, we also talk about handling guest complaints. Employees are given great latitude to resolve problems and can even bend hotel rules, if necessary. In fact, every employee is informally allotted \$2,000 to spend on solving a particular customer’s com-

plaint. “You’ll never get in trouble for taking the extra step,” John Collins says.

But while the reflex reaction in addressing a problem may be to subtract the cost of a room or a meal from the bill, the most effective approach often involves simply empathizing with a guest and promising that the problem won’t happen again. However handled, incidents are supposed to be reported – by filing a QIA, or Quality Incident Action – with the aim of preventing similar problems.

Empowering employees in that way is a sign of the respect with which the company vows to treat them. And employees are expected to treat one another the same way. Yet another Gold Standard is the corporate motto: “We are Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen.” In terms of human dignity, the argument goes, Ritz-Carlton customers and employees are equals. “You’re service professionals, not servants,” a video we watch on company values tells us. “If you feel good about yourself, you’ll treat others, including colleagues, well.” The two notions of delighting the customer and treating coworkers with respect converge in the concept of lateral service – the requirement that all employees pitch in to help one another out, no matter what the task.

During the two days of orientation, we have been exposed to a rich array of goals, principles, and practices that are meant to ensure the highest levels of customer service. Some of them, to be honest, seem kind of hokey. Some of them, as I will learn on the job, are occasionally ignored in practice. But even if the goals sometimes seem unrealistic, employees are undoubtedly pulled along in the draft of these lofty aspirations. Certainly, I will try my best to achieve them. After all, I’ll be working at the Ritz.

Day 3 **Learning the Ropes**

At 4:30 the next afternoon, I arrive for work, change into my uniform, and report to Michael Fantuz, director of banquets and in-room dining. I’m nervous.

It’s not that I’m coming to this cold. Years ago, I waited tables at a small hotel in southern France. But I’m still haunted by the memory of my debut at the Hotel Mas Provençal, when I destroyed the cork of the first bottle of wine I tried to open – eliciting a high-volume reprimand by the owner in the middle of the dining room. Although I have since become proficient at opening wine, visions of that crumbling cork stay with me. I certainly don’t want a repeat performance at the Ritz.

Consequently, when Michael introduces me to my trainer, Steve Posner, I am hoping that he is a pro – and an understanding one. He turns out to be both. Steve started working at the original Boston Ritz-Carlton in 1988 after studying screenwriting at UCLA. An earnest man with a puckish sense of humor, he grew up working weekends and after school in his grandfather’s hardware store. From the start of our time together, it is clear that Steve takes his job seriously.

After a lineup during which Michael goes over Basic 2 – a reminder that our motto requires us to treat “our guests and each other with respect and dignity” – Steve walks me through the process of setting up and delivering an order. He rattles off what seems like an endless litany of instructions: “You check the number of guests and the promised delivery time. You’ve got the written order that was taken over the phone, a dupe sent to the kitchen, and a check. You triple-check that all three are identical, to be sure the guests get what they ordered. Then you get the table ready.” The table setup varies in seemingly countless ways, depending on the food served. And there are little touches to remember. “Be sure the ‘Ritz-Carlton’ on the condiments is facing outward,” Steve says. “And in case another guest is in the room, I like to bring an extra wine glass.”

Steve says he constantly tries to anticipate what guests might want. He puts extra silverware on the table: “This may be for a child, so I also bring a small spoon for the soup.” He includes A1 steak sauce with hamburger orders: “They may not even have thought they

wanted it, but they're happy to find it there." He puts a plate of lemon wedges next to a Coke: "Always bring more than you think people need." The aim isn't to lay out the table in some fussily proper way, but to make sure that guests' "unexpressed wishes and needs" are met.

As Steve explains the job, I cling to his words, hoping they will successfully guide me in my work. My relationship with Steve – not unlike a child's with a parent – will evolve over the next few days. My current clutching reliance will soon give way to a feeling of independence. (Doesn't Steve see that loading down the table with all this stuff is excessive?) That independence will in turn evolve into respect for my mentor. (At one point, I will deliver an order of coffee for one and find two people in the room waiting to drink from the single cup I have brought.)

Steve continues his lesson as he prepares the table for a \$325 meal for one, including hors d'oeuvres, a filet mignon, a bottle of 1996 Mondavi-Rothschild Opus One, and a dish of ice cream. "I get the cold items from the kitchen first, then the hot food, then the frozen," he says. "We want to keep the cold food cold and the hot food hot. Now, I don't want the ice cream to melt, so I'll put it on ice." Meanwhile, the clock is ticking on our promised delivery time. But Steve is unruffled. He waves his hands over the table like a magician, moving a vase here, a glass there, ensuring that everything is in place. "You make sure you've got a Ritz-Carlton pen, and you check that it's working," he says, scribbling on the kitchen's copy of the order. We head upstairs and arrive within the promised 30-minute delivery time with a minute to spare.

As we go back downstairs, Steve reflects on the complex challenge of delivering first-rate room service. "You want the experience to be as elegant as it would be in the restaurant downstairs," he says. "At the same time, you want people to feel as comfortable as they would at home – because this is their home away from home." The dual challenge makes a room-service waiter's experience in some ways more chal-

lenging than his or her restaurant counterpart's. "In a restaurant, the guest is on your turf. Here, you're on the guest's turf. You never know what you're walking into," Steve says.

Has he ever encountered a particularly rude guest? "If you're kind to them, they're kind to you," Steve says. "After all, we're ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen." He stops to pick up some litter in the hall and puts it in his pocket. "We try to help out housekeeping," he says, "just like they help us when they clear our carts out of the hall." His comments seem scripted for my benefit. So does this small act of lateral service. Still, I'll hear Steve voice like sentiments and see him perform similar acts over the next few days.

Midnight approaches, and Steve and I work with the other room-service waiters to set up the carts for tomorrow's breakfast service. Then we return upstairs to walk the floors, looking for stray carts to take back to the kitchen. It's a quiet way to unwind at the end of the shift. In a service elevator vestibule, we find a pileup of tables that someone had removed from the hall earlier. As we load them into the elevator, a security guard making his rounds wanders by – and stops to give us a hand.

Day 4 **Hitting Some Wrinkles**

When I arrive at work today, I learn that we are short one waiter. Room-service director Michael Fantuz and Scott Powers, an assistant room-service manager, are also effectively out of commission. Dressed in blue jeans, they spend much of the evening helping to empty a storage area slated to be remodeled into a ballroom. And there are nearly 40 "amenities" to deliver – elegant snacks the chef has prepared for VIPs or people with birthdays or anniversaries. Steve says I may be pressed into service earlier than anticipated.

Indeed, I am quickly assigned several trivial tasks. I take a menu up to a room. I deliver salt to an actress headlining a play in the theater district, so she can gargle with saltwater before the show. On my way back to the kitchen, I run

into Scott and he sends me back up with a big order of appetizers set up by another waiter. Steve intercepts me as I arrive on the 11th floor, checks the order slip – and sends me back down for a spoon for the ice bucket and for rolls and butter, which should accompany the order, he says.

Having temporarily been separated from Steve, I try to be helpful in the kitchen by setting up a few tables with tablecloths, silverware, and vases of cut flowers. Then, during a brief lull in the action, we are called to a lineup. Michael discusses not only the chainwide basic of the day but also food-and-beverage Basic 3, featured in today's hotel bulletin: "All linen will be free of wrinkles, holes, stains, and frays." Michael eyes the tables I've just prepared – easily identified by their wrinkled tablecloths. When I confess to setting them, he laughs but asks whether I'd like my dining room table to look like that for one of my own dinner parties. "If it's not good enough for you," Michael says, "it's not good enough for the guest."

The pace of the evening continues to accelerate. Marlene Stringfield, who takes room-service orders on the phone, calls out, "A birthday amenity for Room 923 is 40 minutes late. They're calling." Someone asks for one of the waiters. Marlene replies, "He's doing a DND" – that is, returning to a guest's room with an amenity that couldn't be delivered earlier because a Do Not Disturb sign was on the door. From the kitchen, a chef calls out, "In-room dining!" He is worried that a meal he has prepared will get cold. "Tell him we'll be right back," Steve shouts as we head out the door with another order. The pace is frenetic. But then the adrenaline kicks in, and the evening's arc toward its busy peak brings with it a euphoric rush.

Not that everything runs smoothly or in textbook fashion. During my stint at the hotel, I witness numerous deviations from a single-minded devotion to customer service. Managers, supposedly charged with energizing their teams, occasionally ride waiters for slacking off or complain about having to "babysit" them. Waiters, supposedly dedicated

to guests' needs, often seem unconcerned about missing promised room-service delivery times. While some of the glitches are part and parcel of a new hotel's operational kinks, others reflect the fact that human beings don't always perform by the book, no matter how often it is read to them.

Steve's and my last delivery of the shift is a wedding amenity to the room of newlyweds who will be arriving later that night. It includes pastries and a bottle of chilled champagne on a silver platter, with rose petals scattered over the ice and around the base of the ice bucket. The champagne glasses are crossed and lying on the platter, joined at the stem by a paper collar embossed with the Ritz-Carlton insignia.

Steve decides to take the extra step of accordion-folding the linen napkin that will encircle the neck of the bottle. "It's a wedding," he says, as if to justify this extra bit of work. In a characteristic move, he also decides to include two small plates and a serving spoon, in addition to the two dessertspoons, in case the guests choose to divvy up the pastries on separate dishes.

We take the order to the room. Steve lays it out on a table next to a mirror, fanning out the cocktail napkins and the three spoons. "The mirrored reflection of the bottle is a nice touch," he says.

Then he decides to cross the dessertspoons on a plate, echoing the crossed glasses. Everything is perfect. "They may take a picture of this and have it for many years," Steve says quietly. "When my grandparents celebrated their 75th wedding anniversary, they showed us photos of their wedding. Sure, they were old-fashioned pictures. But they really meant something."

Day 5 **Taking the Lead**

Today turns out to be slow, with the orders dribbling in. During one lull, Michael Fantuz shows me around the hotel's main restaurant. We chat about the challenge of having two Ritz-Carlton hotels almost across the street from one another. He points out that this hotel, with its contemporary look and feel,

represents a new direction for the company. While it will be a challenge to satisfy longtime guests of the original Boston hotel during its remodeling, the new hotel has the potential to attract another type of guest.

Even if the two establishments are positioned a little differently, however, their core philosophy remains the same. Michael, a high-energy Australian who paces back and forth even when he's talking about the weather, grows exceedingly animated. "You could give us a tent in the middle of the Boston Common," he says, "but when you came to stay at the tent, it would still be ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen. It's not what a Ritz-Carlton hotel looks like – it's not the \$50,000 chandeliers or the \$100,000 carpets or the \$50 crystal glasses – it's what happens inside the hotel." He stops abruptly and looks over my shoulder. A guest has tentatively wandered into the restaurant, which won't open for another 20 minutes. As I open my mouth to offer my thoughts on the Ritz-Carlton philosophy, Michael briskly steps over to the man. "How may I assist you?" he asks.

Because the night is slow, Steve lets me take the lead on a number of orders. My performance improves somewhat after my first halting experience with the unopened mineral water. Indeed, I serve coffee and a cheese platter to three college-age kids in a smoke-filled room – and get a \$20 tip on the \$31 order. When business is good, room-service waiters at the Ritz can earn upward of \$70,000 a year. But even for a pro, such a tip is unusual. "Wait till the guys downstairs hear about this," Steve says with a laugh.

At one point, I overhear Marlene take an order for barbecue chicken, which isn't on the menu. "I'll see if I can get the chef to prepare that for you," she tells the caller. The chef does so, and another waiter, Joey Cross, goes to the kitchen to pick it up. "You'd pay \$16 for that, a single piece of chicken?" Joey exclaims. He is annoyed – on the guest's behalf. He returns it to the chef and asks him to prepare a second piece. Marlene calls

the guest and says the order will be a few minutes late. This is Basic 10 – employee empowerment – in action, but Steve sums up the incident best: "As a waiter, you're the pre-guest. You have to try to think the way a guest would."

Day 6 **Going Solo**

Shortly after I arrive, the orders begin pouring in, and it looks as though it's going to be a brutal night – particularly because one waiter, with no phone call of explanation, has failed to show up for work. Steve and I start out with the delivery of a fruit platter to a particularly important guest: one of the hotel's owners. A bellman is in the room, trying to figure out why the gas fireplace isn't working. When we get back to the kitchen, I remind Steve that we should call engineering to be doubly sure the fireplace problem gets taken care of. I feel faintly satisfied that I've thought of this. I won't be so assiduous, however, in following up on a problem later that evening.

In the meantime, an order comes in for some appetizers, a bowl of soup, and a relatively inexpensive half-bottle of wine. Steve, who knows the story of my fiasco at the Hotel Mas Provençal, decides that this will be a good opportunity for me to dust off my wine-opening skills. As insurance, the service bartender suggests that I practice on a bottle of house wine. After I successfully remove the test cork, Steve and I head up to the room.

"My, two people to bring up a bowl of soup," says the guest, a woman who frequently stays at the hotel.

"If truth be told, one of us is in training. You have to guess which one," I say with a laugh, wondering if my pleantry represents the right mix of relaxed warmth and refinement. We chat about her grandchildren as I open the bottle of wine. She tastes it, and I fill her glass. I describe the items we have brought her. I'm feeling pretty cocky. "Well, for the one of you in training," the woman says, "you should move the plates and silver from the center of the table so the guest doesn't have to reach

to eat.” And she’s right: Once I put up the table leaf, her dinner is more than an arm’s length away from her chair. I offer my apologies and scramble to correct the situation.

My first solo order, which I expected to be a momentous occasion, sneaks up on me. Typically, a new hire would train for a few more days before going solo. But as the orders pile up—and with Scott and Michael overseeing the preparations for singer Eartha Kitt’s 75th birthday party in one of the hotel’s restaurants—I find myself agreeing to handle an order on my own. It’s a simple hamburger, and I deliver it without incident to a nice fellow in jeans and bare feet. I remember to place his plate within easy reach.

On my way back downstairs, I see a guest in the upper lobby who looks uncertain. “Can I help you?” I inquire.

“Where are the coin phones?” she asks, in halting English. Amazingly, I know where they are, and I walk her over to the phones rather than simply pointing to them. “Thank you,” she says.

“You’re welcome,” I reply, feeling the glow of helping a customer begin to rise from my toes. Then I suddenly remember: The preferred response is, “My pleasure.” I still have a ways to go.

Now the orders are coming fast and furious, and I take my share. Most of them go well, though in serving a somewhat formal, elderly gentleman, I end up doing a kind of dance around the guest. First, I step in front of him to get out of his way in the confined space next to his bed; then I pass behind him as he goes to the desk to sign the check. As I leave, I realize that I didn’t give him a pen with the check and am now walking out with his—which requires one last turn, an extension of my hand to offer him his ballpoint, and a slight bow as we conclude our *pas de deux*.

Untethered from Steve and high on excitement, I accept Marlene’s offer to handle a relatively complicated order by myself. It includes a nice half-bottle of Beaune. But when I get to the room, the tired-looking businessman, standing there in his suit and socks, says he thought he ordered a full bottle. At this

moment, I don’t need to summon up manufactured empathy for him; I can easily imagine his anticipation of that first sip of burgundy with his sizzling steak. Although he has a salad to start with, his steak is going to cool down.

I race downstairs to get the full bottle, thinking the entire way about how I can make this up to him. Should I comp him the bottle of wine? I don’t think I have the nerve. I have a rushed hallway discussion with another waiter, Patrick Legagneur. “Is there anything I can do?” I ask. If he hadn’t already ordered dessert, we might offer him one on the house, Patrick says. But, he adds, “an apology may be sufficient.”

On the way back up with the full bottle, I pass Steve, who offers to go with me to open it. I decline his offer because I want to follow this one through to the end. When I return to the room, I apologize profusely. The guest tells me not to worry, and he seems to mean it. I offer to open the wine—and he declines *my* offer. Wait, does he know about my past? Unlikely, I realize. He probably just wants to relax without someone hovering over him. After all, his room is supposed to feel like home.

I leave him a corkscrew. In the kitchen, I look at the wine list and see the source of the mixup. The half-bottle’s bin number on the wine list could easily be mistaken for the full bottle’s. During the days immediately following my time at the hotel, I intend to bring that potential for confusion to someone’s attention, if not with a formal QIA, then with a phone call to Michael. But I never get around to it.

The evening finally slows down. Steve and I set up some tables for breakfast. Then we head upstairs and walk the halls, retrieving the odd table, chatting quietly about the night’s events.

“Day 21” Reflecting on the Experience

One element of the Ritz-Carlton training is a follow-up session, known as Day 21. It typically takes place about three weeks after the initial orientation. The aim is to review the Gold Standards after new employees have had a chance

to put them into practice. Though I didn’t work the full 21 days, I sit in on the half-day session (which, amidst the frenzy of the hotel’s early months, actually takes place on the 49th day after our orientation).

Training director Tim Kirkpatrick starts with another mock lineup. He discusses the new-employee job certification test that department managers should have administered. He announces a new guest-recognition hotline, which employees can use to call in guest preferences. And he unveils an updated version of the company’s principles, now in the form of a three-dimensional pyramid. This supplements the existing Gold Standards with an additional category of seven “key success factors.”

Employees are asked about their experiences on the job. Erin Garrity, the new front-desk clerk from Johnson & Wales, is disappointed she has been assigned the overnight shift but looks on the bright side. “I get to see a lot of celebrities” at that time, she says. Her goal for the year is to be named one of the hotel’s select five-star employees, and she intends to continue being the “friendliest person I can be.”

John Rolfs reinforces his message from orientation that our sole job is to “make guests feel good so they come back.” The hotel’s 320 employees have countless interactions with guests, he says, and it takes just one interaction to make a guest feel bad. “If you’re thinking about doing your job well, trying to understand and master your day-to-day routines but not thinking about how guests feel, they’ll have a difficult time forgiving you. They’ll probably forgive us if the air-conditioning fails. But they won’t forgive us for failing to make them feel good—because that’s why they selected Ritz-Carlton.”

Tim’s final announcement concerns the results of the first monthly Gallup survey of Ritz-Carlton guests, released to managers earlier that day. The Ritz-Carlton/Boston Common leads the company’s hotels in overall customer satisfaction. There is a stunned silence—after all, this is a new hotel still smoothing

out the rough spots – followed by loud applause.

As I leave the hotel and walk across the Boston Common in the gathering dusk, I reflect on what I've learned about teaching and motivating employees to provide truly memorable service. One thing seems clear: Great customer service should be based on dynamic principles rather than a rigid formula. You don't demand that employees say, "Certainly, my pleasure," until it feels right to them. You don't mindlessly assume every guest wants to be pampered; some people just want to eat their dinners.

I also ponder Ritz-Carlton's efforts to win the hearts and minds of its employees by, for example, making them feel part of a proud heritage. A recent study of hotel workers by researchers at Cornell's School of Hotel Administration found that, while job satisfaction plays a major role in employee retention, it isn't the key factor in a hotel's ability to provide excellent customer service. Rather, it is employees' emotional commitment—which is achieved in part through symbols and rituals that enhance employees' sense of identity with the company – that contributes most to superior performance. Ritz-Carlton certainly has an unusually rich tradition to draw on in creating that feeling of identity. But every company, even a two-year-old start-up, has traditions and even legends that can be tapped to help build employee commitment.

That kind of commitment serves as a driver of excellent customer service only when employees are empowered to take initiative. And that sort of empowerment has no potency unless employees are motivated to seize it. I am haunted by my failure to point out the confusing bin numbers on the hotel wine list, which led my guest to mistakenly order that half-bottle of burgundy. Certainly,

I was encouraged during my time at the hotel to point out problems that needed fixing. Why didn't I follow through in this case? I'm not sure. But for staff to delight customers, managers must do more than grant their employees the freedom to do what is necessary; they must motivate employees to exercise that freedom.


Doing that depends in part on the kinds of people you hire. Ritz-Carlton has an elaborate system for assessing in job candidates the qualities the company believes are crucial to its success. One night while I was working at the hotel, I went through the basic interview to see how I'd do. I was fairly confident I was just the sort of caring, conscientious person the Ritz was looking for. In fact, though, even after fudging my answers to a few questions, I got only ten points out of a possible 15 in the composite hospitality assessment. Tim said that wasn't bad – "though, honestly, we'd shoot for someone with a 12."

I later discovered that I fell short in my response to a question asking me to cite an instance when I took care of someone else. I said I'd often provided emotional support to my sister during tough times. But the company was looking for something more than this, an "extraordinary" example of caring. "Helping your sister? You better," Tim said with a laugh. "Now, if you'd moved out of your house for a month and let her move in, that would be different." Since instituting its candidate assessment system in 1991, Ritz-Carlton says it has reduced its annual turnover rate from 55%, roughly the industry average, to 28%.

Certainly, a genuine concern for the well-being of guests is key to providing superior customer service. But that isn't enough to truly anticipate customer needs. Another component of the Ritz-

Carlton's hospitality assessment is empathy – being able to imagine guests' emotional responses to their experience in the hotel. I am reminded of Steve's care in preparing the champagne setting for the newlyweds that night and how he thought back to his grandparents' wedding 75 years before.

To truly achieve empathy, however, I wonder if you need to jettison at least some of your personal perspective. One of John Rolfs's comments during the Day 21 session – about the dangers of employees focusing solely on the successful fulfillment of their duties – resonated with my experience as a waiter. If you're constantly assessing how well you're doing in your job – even in your genuine efforts to satisfy guests – you, not the guest, become the point of reference. Your self-consciousness, natural though it may be, distracts you from providing superior service.

It's getting dark. And this train of thought risks hurtling far beyond the practical demands of a frenetic evening of room service. But, when you get down to it, my musings don't seem all that far from the Ritz-Carlton philosophy. Companies dedicated to providing what might be called "extreme" customer service may need to recognize that—like great military, government, or religious service—it is, in the end, a truly selfless endeavor. They may need to establish such practices as the formal inculcation of a customer-centered credo. They might even consider providing workers with a weeklong immersion in the experience of being a customer! Whatever the means, the aim would be getting employees to leave their egos at the door and adopt the mind-set of the people they're serving. 

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