

Raving Fans

Introduction

Recently I was at a conference for afterschool, early childhood and camp practitioners. We shared a certain “look.” It was obvious that there was also another group present. They also shared a certain “look.” They were bikers, bikers of all ages and genders. It was obvious they shared an enthusiasm for a particular brand of motor cycle. Everywhere you looked someone from this group proudly displayed the Harley-Davidson Motor Cycles logo. That logo was on the hats, bags, shirts, jackets, wallets, and about every piece of apparel of the people in this group. Many had the logo tattooed somewhere on their body. This guy had it tattooed on his head. I thought, WOW – how cool would it be for my customers to love my organization so much that they would tattoo my logo on their head! These aren’t just satisfied customers; they are Raving Fans!



Raving Fans is a best selling, must-read book on customer service written by Ken Blanchard.

Service Stinks!

We could share lots of personal stories about **poor** customer service that we have received at restaurants, department stores, hotels, service stations, movie theaters, vehicle repair shops, and grocery stores. Our guess is that this is unnecessary because we ALL have stories of bad service – too many stories. The reason is that these days, SERVICE STINKS! There is an abundance of people working in service fields that are clueless, powerless, thoughtless, lazy, apathetic, rude and even hostile.

They’re Coming for My Daughter!

We were once doing a training event for a conference event at a Marriott hotel, and brought our three-year old daughter with us. Lunch was a fancy, four-course meal that was included in the conference fee. Our three year old was not a registered participant, so when we entered the dining room, I was worried that someone would want to see my daughter’s badge or have a problem because we hadn’t paid for her.

I intended to share my lunch with my daughter and so pushed the place setting away from her seat to show that I did not intend for them to serve her lunch. All waiters were rushing around the room trying to serve lunch to about 2000 people. They were very busy, so I thought they might not notice the small intruder sitting next to me.

Then I noticed one of the waiters looking at my daughter. He picked up his radio and spoke into it. As he began walking toward us I thought, “Oh no they’re coming for my daughter.” I assumed he was going to cause us trouble and embarrassment.

His name tag said simply, “Fred.” He said, “Excuse me sir, this luncheon was prepared with adults in mind.” I was opening my mouth to explain that she would only be sharing my lunch when he continued, “Would it be OK with you if I asked the kitchen to prepare her a children’s meal.”

I said, “OK, but we didn’t pay for her, can I pay you directly?” Fred responded, “Oh don’t worry about that.” He then asked my daughter what her name was and what types of food she liked and chatted with her a bit. He noticed that she was wearing a “Birthday Girl” pin and asked if it was her birthday. She told him that she was turning four in a few days.

After preparing and serving her a special kid’s meal of chicken nuggets, green beans and French fries, the man came back with an entire chocolate cake with four candles, decorated with her name! He and several of the other extremely busy waiters then sang “Happy Birthday” to my beaming child.

This man was not the hotel manager. He was a lowly waiter who was empowered to provide great customer service, to overlook the rules, and to get the kitchen staff to do something special for a customer – something that made US feel special and made us loyal customers and raving fans of that hotel brand. When I commented that I rarely witness such great customer service he said that he had worked in similar jobs in similar hotels where his job was just to serve food, but that here his job was first to make HIS guests feel wonderful about their experience and after that to serve food. Great customer service providers are empowered and independent thinkers, who make decisions and respond to changing conditions every day in order to fulfill a higher mission of making customer say, “WOW!”

This one waiter and many of the consistently helpful and professional at this hotel chain made us Raving Fans of Marriott.

Making Connections: Who are our Customers?

In the food service industry the identity of the “customers” is fairly obvious – the ones who consume the food and especially the ones who pull out the wallets, write the checks or sign the credit card bill. In the child care, afterschool, and camping fields identifying the customer is not that simple. Many people “consume” what we provide: the children, parents, extended families, and even the schools and greater community benefit by the learning we supply. If we “produce” caring competent young people, then schools, their future teachers, and every human that comes into contact with them is our customer. Many people pay the bills: parents, sponsoring or contributing individuals and organizations, the government, and the sometimes the taxpayers. We are in a world changing profession – developing the future leaders of the world – so depending on how you look at it, the entire world is our customer.

Customer-Friendly Skies

We fly frequently, doing staff training with early childhood educators, school-age care, and camping staff teams. We travel as cheaply as possible, in-flight meals are never served—just sixty million bags of peanuts a year, so we eat a lot of nuts. For most places we fly, Southwest Airlines is the least expensive option.



Customer service is very important to our child care organization and it is one of our training topics, so we pay close attention to the practices of restaurants, hotels, and airlines. We like Southwest because we like the people who work there. They seem happy and relaxed and that makes us happy. The employees are playful, which makes flying enjoyable.

Southwest Airlines’ maxim is "Hire people with a sense of humor." During interviews, applicants are asked how humor helped them out of difficult situations. Halloween is practically a national holiday at Southwest!

We boarded a flight to find a flight attendant greeting us from the overhead cargo bin. We’ve experienced them singing the flight safety instructions to a country and western tune. On other airlines the flight announcements are exactly the same every time. On Southwest they might be sung to the passengers or laced with jokes. “If you are traveling with more than one child and the oxygen masks drop down, pick the child with the most potential and secure his oxygen mask first, and then...” On a flight with some newlyweds the flight attendants asked us all to write advice on napkins for the couple. On Southwest our daughters have always been treated well, sometimes they receive extra special treatment – and they love to fly.



I got a chance to fly while writing this and was in a hotel shuttle van with a flight crew from Southwest. They were talking excitedly. I kept hearing the name Herb and recognized it from my research. So I eavesdropped thinking, "These people couldn't be talking about their own CEO. People at their level wouldn't even have met him." I had to ask. They were talking about him, told me how much they liked him, had met him several times, and talked to them and listened to them. They told me, the good-natured feelings at Southwest have everything to do with Herb - his down-to-earth, "everyman" demeanor, and his wacky behavior, which has helped set the tone for the airline's offbeat culture.

His employees credit him for the culture; Kelleher credits the employees for his success. He states he simply hires the best people, treats them with respect, and gives them the freedom to make decisions and to have fun being themselves (Public Broadcasting System, 2002). Kelleher is well known for constantly flying on Southwest Airlines' planes, talking to customers and employees. This strategy comes from a customer-focused belief: "We tell our people, "Don't worry about profit. Think about customer service." Profit is a by-product of customer service. It's not an end in and of itself" (McConnell, 2001).

Southwest Airlines has become the most consistently profitable, productive, and cost-efficient carrier in the industry (Kelleher, 1997a). At the same time, they have made us Raving Fans! How can you create this kind of customer loyalty? Ken Blanchard suggests 3 Magic Strategies: Decide what you want; Discover what the customer wants; and Deliver the Mission plus 1%.

#1 Decide what you want:



Envision Perfection

It is absolutely crucial that the leader have a vision for the future. A good vision is ideological, but possible, challenging, but realistic. It is not a wishful fantasy, but an attainable picture of our future. A good vision should be imaginable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible, and communicable. A good vision portrays a picture of the future with some implicit or explicit commentary on why people should strive to create that future (Kotter, 1996). A vision can be a mental picture of the "ideal" organization, community, or youth program. Studies have shown that people are more likely to reach a goal if they can envision it and can imagine the steps to reach it. Our vision includes world-class quality – a model of best practices in a youth development organization.

Quality Doesn't Cost, It Pays

When we began our organization we were very poor. We mortgaged our house to get enough money to purchase basic start-up supplies. We knew it would be crucial for us to be fiscally responsible if we wanted to create a viable organization. We invested in money into quality improvement. We invested in staff salary increases and professional development. We invested in top quality supplies and equipment. We raised quality standards. Staff morale, customer satisfaction, and financial surpluses increased. Investing in quality improvement created systems that had a positive impact on the bottom line. We paid staff more; we purchased more and better supplies and equipment; we served healthier (more expensive) food; we invested in staff training. We didn't invest in quality because we were wealthy. We didn't do it because we were reckless fiscal managers. We did it because we knew we were creating positive/amplifying feedback systems. We knew that if we invested in quality it would result in escalating quality improvement. Parents recognized this increase in quality, word-of-mouth spread, and more parents enrolled their children, so we had more funds to work with. We invested these funds in improving



quality. Children were happier and better behaved, which led to happier staff, so turnover was low and we spent less time and money on recruitment and orienting new staff. We invested these savings on better staff training which resulted in higher quality and a safer program which resulted in lower insurance rates.

The coach at our first school noticed the quality. When she was transferred to a new school and promoted to assistant principal she called us and asked us to start a new program at this school. Our budget doubled overnight. We invested this in quality systems. We became the first nationally accredited school-based program in the country. Our reputation for quality grew.

A parent whose child attended our first school moved and transferred her child to another school. She noticed that the program there was of much lower quality than ours, so she contacted the principal. Together they visited one of our programs. The principal noticed a dramatic difference in quality and asked us to open up a new program at her school. Our budget grew and again we invested in quality. This principal told her best friend who was also a principal about our program. She asked us to start a program at her school. Again we invested in quality.

The coach who was promoted to assistant principal was promoted to principal and transferred to a new school. The first thing she did was request that we bring a program to her new school. Bigger budget – invested in staff raises, staff training, and quality programming.

The nurse at our very first school transferred to a newly constructed school. The day the principal was selected she told her that she had to recruit us to provide a program. Every single program we have started can be traced to the word-of-mouth and reputation for quality that were created by these systems. Our first year we had an annual budget of \$60,000; this year our annual budget is \$1,500,000. To date we have declined to provide child care at thirteen schools who have requested our services – we only state this to point out that we have more demand that we can handle and to point out intentionally limited our growth so that we guarantee high quality.

The point is that creating systems of quality and continuous quality improvement does not cost – in financial terms – INVESTING IN QUALITY PAYS! Create systems that drive quality improvement, customer service, the development of competencies, and continuous learning. Create systems in the environments, relationships, and experiences that propel innovation and creative problem solving. Create systems that fuel teamwork, attention to detail, and accountability. Create systems that engage emotions and develop leadership skills in people. Investing in quality creates Raving Fans!

Keep it Real

A good statement of your vision is ideological. It should sound fairly utopian. If it is slightly embarrassing you are on the right track. Now bring it back to reality in the here and now, not in the future - bring it up close, so close you can see the warts. Decide what quality systems you can realistically invest and how much investment is prudent. Make the tough decisions and define a clear vision of how you really want your organization to look and operate in the present and short-term future.



#2 Discover what the customer wants

Making Connections: Needs & Wants

Now that we've identified who our customers are, now discover what they want. What would help their kids to develop more? What would reduce their stress? What would their kids enjoy? What would

make their life, and their child's life easier, more rewarding and more enjoyable? What are they excited to pay for? Don't assume you know what they want, ask them! Survey them, ask them personally. Don't stop there though. Sometimes we know what they might want before they've even considered it! Get those innovative juices pumping and come up with things you THINK they might want and then ask them about it. Use their data to drive your decisions. When they complain, listen to them. Pay attention to what they say and how they say it. Listen to the lyrics and the music! A complaining customer is like a free consultant – LISTEN!

Show Some CLASS when they complain.

In order to be effective we must have a strong sense of Awareness - What are the underlying issues for the customer? We must have Language skills - Key words or phrases that strengthen a partnership or defuse a conflict. We must learn effective Strategies - How do we approach them in ways that are productive and build good relationships? Being a "professional" includes managing one's own personal reactions, likes and dislikes in order to accomplish our mission and do the work that is to be done.

Customers do not need our judgment. They need our "best selves—skill; thoughtful consideration; our "know how." We tend to stop being our "best selves" when:

- customers make us "wrong"
- we feel our competence is being attacked or questioned
- we over-identify with children or their situation

Often more important than knowing what to say is getting oneself in the emotional space—the mindset—of being calm, self-possessed and therefore deliberate enough to be effective! This often requires detaching from ones anger, whatever sense of feeling threatened you may have, or any guilt that may be created by a parent trying to manipulate you. Showing some CLASS when the feeling becomes intense. This is a powerful strategy to help you retain your composure and move a parent into a more reflective, meaningful discussion about what their concern is for their child. Here's what it stands for:



C = Context:

Physical Setting. Arrange for the conversation to take place in an appropriate place that respects their need for confidentiality.

Be aware of body language. Body language of the parent is a good clue to what they are feeling. You should also be aware of messages sent by your voice, body, posture. Stand up, lean forward, show with your body language that you are taking their concern seriously.

Avoid dismissing people. (I call this making them "wrong"). The better able you are to acknowledge the other person's situation, reality, underlying feeling or intention, the better able you are to "get through" to them.

Common denominator. What is it you and the customer both want? See if you can get back to that common denominator!

L = Listen:

Listen, Listen, Listen. When customers complain, listen for the real problem. Are the customers asking for reassurance, information, or is there a bigger problem? Customers will communicate only with someone who is responsive to them, so respond with interest.

Repeat what you have heard for clarification—make sure you’ve got it right!

EXAMPLE: “Let me see if I’ve got this right.”

EXAMPLE: “So what you’re saying is…”

EXAMPLE: “Wait, I’m not sure I got that! Tell me again!”

Ask clarifying questions to make sure you understand things before responding. It is especially important to do this when people use a label or speak in generalities.

“What do you mean by ‘hyper’ (etc.)?” “Can you give me an example?”

“What did he do and say?” “What did you have in mind?”

“What was it you were trying to do?” “What have you tried so far?”

A = Acknowledge:

Acknowledge the feeling behind the concern or demand. Learning to acknowledge the parent’s reality can be enormously helpful. Whatever turn the dialogue takes, it is important that you handle it with respect. Even when customers are upset or angry, tell them that you are glad that they called or came to speak with you. Tell customers that you can’t do anything about a problem you don’t know about. Tell them many customers might not come and talk to you, and you are glad they did! There are many ways to acknowledge another person, whether a parent, child, a caregiver or colleague, as follows:

- acknowledge a person’s feelings.
- acknowledge a person’s situation or reality.
- acknowledge a person’s positive intention OR their lack of negative intention.
- take responsibility for anything you may have done to contribute to the problem.

S = Strategy

Get all of the information you need to begin to create a strategy. Ask thoughtful questions. Get to the heart of the matter by being thoughtful about what a person is saying and asking probing questions. Take an interested posture. Defuse the emotional charge by repeating back what you hear – often times this alone is enough to dissipate the intensity and open communication to move towards resolution.

Customers Tend to ‘Lead with their Solution

What this means is that anxious parents, accustomed as they are to this daily contact with their children, feel it is their job to argue and fend for their children. Anything short of that is, well, simply not being a good parent! (“I want you to fire that caregiver!” “Change my child into that group!”). We often enter the discussion arguing about the merits of that request, or proposed solution, rather than finding out what the concern is and creating a more palatable solution together.

Don’t get fooled! Look for the concern behind the challenge or demand and avoid becoming defensive. Don’t pick up that rope!



(Meaning, don't take the bait and get into an argument about the merits of what a parent is demanding.) Instead of entering the discussion with a parent arguing about the merits of their request, first acknowledge the feeling behind their action or demand, then use inclusive language to find out what the concern is and create a more palatable solution together. ("I can hear how upset you are. Help me out here...what's causing your alarm?")

If necessary, investigate the situation. Assume your staff have behaved correctly and that an some investigation will be required before you develop a plan of action. Useful phrase, "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. This is very important to me. I want to respond effectively to this. Give me a day to gather more information. I will get back to you by 6 pm tomorrow."

Not that, but this (ntbt!)

When customers make a request or demand that you feel you can not comply with, sometimes saying, "Well, we can't do that, but how about this?" is a way to move forward while maintaining your mission or values and yet giving customers something they can feel good about.



Feel, felt, found

When a customer complains or is upset, and leads with their solution, this phrase helps to take customers from where they begin and move them forward. "I know how you must feel, Mrs. P; many parents have felt the same way; (I have sometimes felt the same way); but what we have found is...."

Useful Phrases

A good line to remember: "If what you're saying is true—and I have no reason to doubt you; I just haven't had a chance to look into it—then I am glad you told me, because that's not what we stand for here. Those are not our values. It's not what we teach here. Let me check into it and I'll get back to you." A parent tells you something their child has told them ("my counselor's been mean to me") that you discover is not true. If the parent responds by saying, "Are you telling me my child's a liar?!" You answer, "Of course not! Children always tell their version of things to parents. Usually they are trying to tell us something. We just need to figure out what that might be. Have any ideas?"

Educate parents

Explain about "code," which is behavior with a message; knowing how children learn best or most effectively; knowing appropriate developmental milestones. For example, when a parent says, "It must be something you're doing there in your program. My daughter never acts that way at home!" Instead of doubting the truth of this statement, even if you are right, it will be more effective simply to explain to parents how children act very differently depending on what group they happen to be in at the time and the point is to help her daughter act more appropriately in this particular situation.

S = Summary:

Prepare a plan of action.

Once again, describe what steps you will take to correct any problem identified through a parent complaint. Let the parent know exactly what steps you will take to prevent the problem's recurrence. How will you educate all staff members? Have new policies or procedures been developed? What environmental changes will you make?

Follow up with the parent. Check back in with a phone call. Let them know the status of your action plan. What steps you have taken to alleviate their concerns?

Once you have a sense of what is truly bothering customers, fashion your response. If you need to check something out first, your response will be that you will look into things and therefore be better able to respond at some specified time in the future. When you have decided on an action plan to address a valid concern,

specify a multi-modal plan: how will your train staff, what new procedures will be implemented, how will you ensure the problem is fixed?

Use this technique when the emotion gets intense. Showing some CLASS is a way to understand customers where they are coming from and take the heat or intensity out of the situation. It may take time and it may not work—some customers are intent on picking a fight at all costs!

Making Connections: Identify YOUR Window of Service

After discovering what the customer wants, it is your turn - your turn to decide what you are willing to provide. I run youth development programs after school. If I ask my customers what would make their life easier, more rewarding, and more enjoyable, I might hear ideas like: provide child care 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, 365 days per year. Parents might suggest that they could drop off their dry cleaning with their child, we could take it to the cleaners, and they could pick both their kids and their dry cleaning up at the same time; maybe we could even pick up dinner for them! I completely understand how that might make their lives easier! I might decide that I want to provide these services! I might decide that one or more are not in my window of service. When there is a disparity between what your customer wants and what you are willing to provide, go back to your mission and vision. If it helps you to accomplish your mission, it may tip the scales in favor of providing that service.

High Maintenance Customers

They are unreasonable. They have no consideration of how their demands are not aligned with what we offer. They are so caught up in their own experience that they do not consider others. They are emotionally charged and often accusatory, even worse, starting from an orientation where they are scanning for evidence of anything that might be wrong. High maintenance parents annoy us because they spoil their kids rotten and this conflicts with our values. They take everything their children tell them at face value and are suspicious of us when we tell them otherwise.



Wish upon a STAR: Don't let them drive you crazy. Take the high road. When you are confronted by an unreasonable, angry and rude person, try this! STAR stands for Stop, Take a Breath, And Relax. While you are doing this upload a peaceful positive energy into yourself, and send it telepathically to them – wish them well. It is surprising how good it feels and how it makes it difficult for them to remain angry.

There are two factors in why these people demand so much of your time. One is about them, and the other is about you. The fact is that no one can have your time unless you are willing to give it to him or her. If you are spending inordinate amounts of time with these people, ask yourself, why? Is it a matter of just not knowing how to address their concerns so they get it and all can win? Is it an unwillingness to say what you'd really need to say to make your point, either because it is so uncomfortable or because of a fear of losing business?

Knowing what to say: If necessary, decide what your position is and state it and DON'T EXPLAIN YOURSELF any more than to state the facts and YOUR PROGRAM POLICY AND MISSION STATEMENT IS ENOUGH FACTS! The moment you get into a philosophical debate, there is no winning since by definition, in a debate, both sides are in it to win.

“Taking back your program” – If you've gotten to the point where these customers are dominating your time, and inhibiting you from providing the quality you want to provide, then you are partially responsible for this. When they make unreasonable demands, here is a useful phrase: “There are definitely programs that accommodate those kinds of requests. They do not share our mission or philosophy. There are referral specialists who can help you find them.”



#3 Deliver the vision plus 1%

First you decide what you want, then you discover what the customer wants, then you decide what you can realistically deliver. Deliver that realistic vision each and every time, plus a little bit more!

In order to create Raving Fans, you first need consistency. Consistency is paramount to trust and trust is essential to loyalty in customers. A customer will forgive mistakes if on the whole you have proven to provide the quality they come to expect. When organizations try to meet the needs of every customer, when they spread themselves too thin, when they underestimate and do not plan for the challenges that might arise, consistency might suffer. Sometimes less is MORE! Ensure above all that after you decide what both you and the customer want, you plan to deliver your service with consistency!

Your goal should be to deliver more than you promise. If you say your product will be delivered in 4-5 days, - you make a promise, and most of the time you deliver on that promise, but OCCASIONALLY you do not deliver, and it takes 6 days, you are NOT creating Raving Fans! You should promise 7-8 days and then when your customers receive their package in 4-6 days, you have exceeded their expectation!

Deliver what you promise to deliver, but exceed it ever so slightly – just 1% - and you WILL create raving fans.



Engage and Involve Them

Maintain an open invitation for parents.

Have an open-door policy and invite parents to drop by at any time announced or unannounced. Utilize parents to help with special activities or to teach children a specific thing. Parents have many hidden talents that are not always related to their job. Make a list of these talents.

Use informal daily contact.

Help parents feel good about their children and therefore about themselves by sharing with them some of the positive and fun things that happened with their children that day. This kind of sharing also helps build a positive and trusting relationship between parent and staff.

Use Newsletters, happy grams and personal letters.

Have something in writing to let the parents know what is happening in the program. Write notes to inform the parent about their child's development. It is important that these notes have a positive tone. Concerns that you have should be discussed in person.



Make phone calls.

Short phone calls when parents have said they are available can keep them involved in their child's activities.

Hold social events.

Social events can help parents get to know other parents, become more comfortable dealing with caregivers and become relaxed in the caregiver's environment. When you host a family event, do not simply post signs. Look every parent in the eye and invite them personally.

Give Kids a ROLE!

Give every child a role to play in a family event. If just a few kids are actively involved your parent turnout will be much smaller than if everyone has a role.

Reference Notes

Blanchard, K., & Bowles, S. (1993). *Raving Fans*. New York; William Morrow and Co. Inc.

Ditter, B. (2006). *Can You Hear Me Now? Better Parent Relationships for Better Camping*.

Maxwell, J. (2004). *Winning with People*. Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson publishers.

Kelleher, H. (1997b). Testimony before the National Civil Aviation Review Commission.

Retrieved September 27, 2003, from <http://www.library.unt.edu/gpo/NCARC/testimony/swa-te.htm>

Kelleher, H. (1997a). A Culture of Commitment. *Leader to Leader*. 4 (Spring 1997): 20-24.

Leiken, J (2006). *Dealing with Difficult Parents*, ACA Conference Workshop.

McConnell, B. (2001). The wild flying turkey with wings. Retrieved September 15,

2002, from http://www.creatingcustomerevangelists.com/resources/evangelists/herb_kelleher.asp

Public Broadcasting System (2002). Innovators: Herb Kelleher. Retrieved September 29,

2003, from <http://www.pbs.org/kcet/chasingthesun/innovators/hkelleher.html>

Rose, C. (2002). Q&A with Southwest's Herb Kelleher. Retrieved September 29, 2003,

from <http://business.cisco.com/prod/tree.taf>

Southwest Airlines (2002). Time flies when you're having fun. Retrieved September 10, 2002, from

http://www.iflyswa.com/about_swa/airborne.html