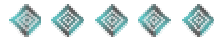


The Five Diamonds of Customer Service Leadership



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In a city celebrated for remarkable architectural gems, the Wentworth Mansion, built in 1886, is clearly one of Charleston, South Carolina's grandest examples of Victorian design. The original owner, Francis Silas Rogers, spared no expense in providing a magnificent home for his 13 children and the attending staff. The conversion in 1998 to a 21 room, small luxury hotel was quite successful; the awards and praise have been substantial.

Today, the Wentworth Mansion is recognized by the American Automobile Association (AAA) as a winner of its exceptional and coveted Five Diamond Award. This designation is awarded annually to the very best hotel and restaurant operations in North America, less than 100 in total, certainly the top 1% by any measure. The Wentworth Mansion's aspiration from its conception was to achieve the Five Diamond Award, and had easily achieved the Four Diamond level in its first 3 years of operation. When I was asked to take on the responsibility as the Mansion's leader, my primary goal was to achieve the Five Diamond Award. In my first year at the property we did not achieve the Five Diamond level, instead maintaining a respectable Four Diamond status. In the second full year of my leadership, we received the Five Diamond distinction. The Wentworth Mansion has received the honor each year since; four consecutive years. As a result, the property is meeting its financial goals and fulfilling the investment group's expectations.

Why has the Wentworth Mansion been so successful? I attribute it, in large part, to a management philosophy that extends a level of service far beyond efficiency and courteous behavior. It is a philosophy providing for the customers' needs through the Five Diamonds of Customer Service Leadership. The guide for providing leadership in customer service

leadership is based on the principles of Polarity Management™, in which an effective leader recognizes and capitalized on the tension, dilemmas and interdependent opposites which exist in organizations. Actions critical for this level of leadership success is to:

- ◆ **Provide Unconditional Caring AND Conditional Respect**
- ◆ **Educate Yourself AND Train Others**
- ◆ **Give Staff Freedom AND Hold Them Responsible**
- ◆ **Seek Customer Feedback AND Create Anticipatory Service**
- ◆ **Manage Costs AND Equip People**

As an experienced manager these principles may sound familiar to you. What makes this approach different is how you apply them. Within each “Diamond” is a range of leadership actions that recognize dilemmas or paradoxes, translating what is complex and challenging into simpler strategies. We will explore these actions in greater detail after I take you to the genesis of my philosophy of customer service at a time when I was emerging from my youth to adulthood.

The Five Diamonds of Customer Service Leadership grew out of my own life experiences that have taken me from cutting lawns as a boy near Cleveland, Ohio, to three decades of hospitality management throughout the Southeast and Midwest. For me, there is no denying that my work ethic, approach to managing organizations, and leadership style all began when I first knocked on doors in my neighborhood, asking for the opportunity to cut a neighbor's lawn for a whopping \$2. Like many boys, I was eager to earn money for the things I wanted. First it was comic books, then a microscope, then a bike. And in the American tradition, I soon had my eye on a car.

Eventually, I saved enough to purchase a well-used Triumph, my first automobile! British-made sports cars are ill-suited for the harsh winters of Cleveland, taking all my rudimentary mechanical skills and ingenuity to keep it running. At one point, I had parts of the

transmission scattered on the garage floor, prompting my father to say: "That car will never run again."

Motivation indeed!! Three hours later it was back on the road again.

Looking back on my teenager years, I have come to realize that mowing lawns taught me the connection between work and reward. Keeping my car running taught me the lessons of resourcefulness, anticipatory maintenance, and the confidence that I could take on difficult and daunting challenges.

Over the course of three decades I worked for savvy organizations that thrived in competitive situations; thinking smart and embracing change as the business community was recognizing that customer service was just as important as the product. In simple essence it was the Golden Rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated. Working for the Marriott, Hilton and Carlson organizations was a series of remarkable experiences, seeing how the best minds in the hospitality industry worked through tough economic climates in a competitive industry where supply typically exceeded demand.

At the Wentworth Mansion, the challenge was to use all my experience to move the operation toward its goal. I began to develop and implement my Five Diamonds of Customer Service Leadership. It was clear to me the greatest obstacle in our path to the Five Diamond goal was a property-wide commitment to service that was consistent, sincere, anticipatory and professional. It's what sets a property apart from its Four Diamond competition, and it is the defining aspect of a Five Diamond operation.

Diamond #1: Unconditional Caring AND Conditional respect

Simply stated, this is the *PEOPLE* aspect of leading an organization. Inherent in providing service leadership is the ability to obtain greatness from the service team. By providing unconditional caring and support, employees know that they matter; they are not just another "warm body." Employees also know that a service leader has the reasonable expectation of giving conditional respect to each employee based on their contribution to the

service strategies. This polarity embraces the need to hire the right team and keep them engaged in their positions. It's personal for me, with each and every person. I want them to participate and succeed as a member of our team. It's my job to create the environment for them to tap into achieving greatness individually and collectively. I have nurtured and supported others, always respecting them as individuals; allowing them to flourish and rise to new levels of achievement within the organization.

An example is Michael, a Wentworth Mansion employee who flourished under this polarity. Michael came to us as a shy, awkward high school junior that was looking for a summer job as a bellman. He was clean cut, polite, spoke intelligently and appeared to have a strong work ethic. I offered him a position, and he seemed eager to start.

Initially, it was a stretch for Michael to interact with guests; he spoke only when spoken to, his eye contact was limited. However, I just wouldn't let him off easy. Through a combination of example, role-playing and positive feedback, Michael began to show signs of service greatness; his name began to appear in our guest comment cards, a sure sign he was doing things correctly. Michael would beam when his name appeared on the "brag board" in the employee break room. I continued to provide caring, and offered cross-training opportunities as concierge and night auditor. In addition, his grasp of the different position came quickly, and we soon turned to him to help train new employees.

The biggest testament to his abilities was evident one weekend when the assistant innkeeper and I were out of town at the same time. This situation had never occurred before, and though unavoidable, it was a concern both to me and the owners.

I approached Michael to be the Manager on Duty in our absence. It required that he have the master keys and access to the safe, clearly a huge leap of responsibility for Michael. His first reaction was surprise, yet he soon steeled into an "I can do this attitude."

His positive attitude served him well during a challenging weekend. First, Michael had to return to the property late one night to release a guest trapped in a bathroom due to a faulty

lock. Later he had to escort an intoxicated and unruly guest from the property when a domestic quarrel turned aggressive, a rare occurrence at our property.

Michael handled the situations with a poise and calmness that belied his youth, and earned my continued respect.

Diamond #2: Educate Yourself AND Train Others

No successful organization ignores the importance of *TRAINING*. Yet many organizations look at the line staff as the sole target of training. In fact, the polarity is that both the leaders AND the staff require ongoing, continuous attention to their knowledge base.

In looking at the expectations, it became clear that we had training issues to contend with. Our previous evaluations indicated we were doing most things correctly. However, we had an inconsistent approach to service details, and failed to perform some very clear AAA expectations.

So it was necessary that I learn those expectations, then teach the staff so that they were understood and consistently carried out. As this cuts across all departments, everyone had a share in the success, or failure, to perform consistently at the Five Diamond level.

We started by re-writing all of the job descriptions to include the Five Diamond service expectations, as well as implementing a series of daily checklists to ensure the broader goals of the operation were understood and consistently performed. Most importantly, to demonstrate our commitment, and to ensure an understanding of our expectations, I personally helped each staff member perform their duties until I was satisfied they had mastered the training expectations. . In essence, I was asking the staff to perform only duties I was capable of performing myself.

Diamond #3: Give Freedom AND Hold Responsible

Is your staff *EMPOWERED*? The staff was hired to perform at a level higher than they had achieved in the past, and trained in the very clear expectations of Five Diamond service.

Once properly trained and demonstrating the needed skill levels, I give folks the freedom to do their work and avoid being a micro-manager. People want to be treated as the adults they are.

At this point, I felt a strong and clear signal would be to provide a financial incentive that was never offered before. I felt it would provide a tangible recognition of their efforts, as well as our commitment to the tasks.

If we were successful in attaining the Five Diamond Award, everyone on the staff would receive a significant cash bonus. And it was all or nothing; a team accomplishment. In announcing the terms of the cash bonus, there was visible excitement; it was clear we had struck a positive nerve. It also provided an unintended benefit - a self-correcting feature. I soon overheard a new term among the staff, "Come on now, you know that's not Five Diamond!!"

Also, I am willing to let employees "mess up," that is make a mistake as long as they reasoned what they had done. We could then teach or learn depending on the result. Those who made mistakes or didn't live up to their attained skill levels would quickly find themselves in a direct, yet caring conversation with me about what issues needed to be addressed and how; always with a follow-up to ensure continued growth and development.

Diamond #4: Get Customer Feedback AND Create Anticipatory Service

Unique to the service industry is the reality that customers are key inputs in the production process. The variability of their demands, and your ability to accommodate them, are essential to your customers' perception of service excellence.

While the majority of customers' expectations can be predicted, it's the less obvious services that can lead to an immensely satisfying experience. Performing at the Five Diamond level creates even greater service demands and expectations.

An opportunity arose where we could implement an e-mail distributed guest comment card. While we had previously been eager to listen to guest comments during their stay or upon

departure, we now had a powerful tool to solicit comments, both good and bad, on a consistent basis.

The results were immediate and clear. We discovered that we were performing many things correctly, quickly earning glowing praise on many aspects of the operation.

We also learned of outstanding customer service from a hidden star, a night auditor who was incredibly hospitable with late evening arrivals and early morning departures, an added benefit to the strong organizational skills for which she had been hired.

We learned that our guests wanted disposable slippers for the cold bathroom floors, a problem that was easily and quickly remedied.

We also took our lumps, learning a breakfast server was aggressively soliciting guests to promote an outside business in which he was involved.

Most importantly, we gained the means to provide a new level of anticipatory service; we were learning what our guests wanted before they told us...a huge step toward the coveted Five Diamond status. The guest comment cards provide a keen insight into the desires of our guests, and we soon developed what I termed the *Top 100 Response List*. It was clear the overwhelming majority of our guest requests and expectations could be predicted from past requests...*nothing new under the sun*. For example, we developed one, two and three day itineraries; recommendations for guests traveling with children; rainy day activities; responding to the special dining needs of late arrivals and early departures. As our breadth of experience grows, we find it increasingly rare that we are faced with novel or unique challenges.

Diamond #5: Manage Costs AND Equip People

As a leader, your greatest responsibility is to ensure your team is provided the tools and resources necessary to do their jobs. Give them the resources to be confident. The environment in which your employees provide customer service must be free of defects; don't give the customer a reason to complain.

I implemented a "Moment of Truth" audit with daily property walk-throughs to test and evaluate every point at which a customer touches our organization. This has been an eye-opening exercise when we take a hard look at what our customers see. As a result we have implemented a much more consistent room inspection program, essentially eliminating nagging maintenance issues, which were our biggest source of complaints.

However, emergencies can creep into your best plan. When that happens a good leader must minimize complaints in the midst of an unavoidable event.

One such potentially catastrophic event at the Wentworth Mansion occurred on a Tuesday evening, 2 days before Thanksgiving. The crisis: No Hot Water! The ignition system on both of the Mansion's water heaters had failed. The water temperature had dropped to 88 degrees. We were over 75% full that evening, and the next day we were going to be full for the Thanksgiving holiday weekend.

What made matters worse; the service company didn't have the water heater parts on the truck or at the local warehouse.

So here is the dilemma: how do you continue to meet the service expectations of guests at a Five Diamond property while swiftly restoring the hot water?

Early Wednesday morning, I arrived at the hotel to take inevitable questions from the guests. I also made the first call to the plumbing contractor at 7:30, the first of many that day. I explained the situation to the service manager, he quickly understood the need for fast action, and immediately got to work sourcing the needed parts.

I let our guests know that swift action was being taken and that we shared their sense of urgency in getting the hot water back. I offered the shower facilities of our Spa as an interim measure for those in need of bathing facilities. I also knew that the guests would have the inevitable questions of compensation to offset their inconvenience. I was willing to entertain any reasonable suggestions.

It soon became clear that ordinary delivery methods would get the needed parts on Friday, a full 48 hours too late. I decided that dispatching one of the staff to the warehouse 180 miles from Charleston was the best alternative. Soon, Wyatt was out the door for a six-hour round trip to pick up \$399 worth of water heater parts.

As if on queue, Wyatt pulled into the parking lot at 3:45 p.m. I called the contractor to let him know the parts were on the property. Two hours later, the water temperature was up to 130 degrees; less than 24 hours after the first guest complaint was received.

So what's the lesson here? First, when faced with a crisis, take swift, bold action, weigh the costs of inaction against loss of future business, and don't take no for an answer. The prospect of giving up a weekend's worth of revenue is a strong motivator.

Second, and maybe most important, keep your customer apprised of a challenging situation. Even knowing bad news is better than an information vacuum.

Finally, service recovery and customer loyalty demands they participate in the recovery process. Given the knowledge we had no hot water and the solution not a guarantee, no reservations were lost, and we gained a measure of trust.

Everybody can provide service excellence when things are going well; the true test of service leadership is how you handle the tough times.

Five Diamonds of Customer Service Leadership



Provide Unconditional Caring AND Conditional Respect

- ◆ Bring the right people into the organization, provide an atmosphere of caring and support to gain respect for the service initiatives.

Educate Yourself AND Train Others

- ◆ Don't let your service staff practice on your customers. Provide appropriate training and be clear about your service expectations.

Give Staff Freedom AND Hold Them Responsible

- ◆ Encourage staff to make decisions and problem solve and know when they are providing outstanding service so you can reward their behavior. Conversely, take a leadership role and confront those who are not meeting service expectations.

Seek Customer Feedback AND Create Anticipatory Service

- ◆ Make sure your customers have a means to let you know about their experience, both good and bad. Use this information to correct problems, restore customer confidence, and anticipate future needs.

Manage Costs AND Equip People

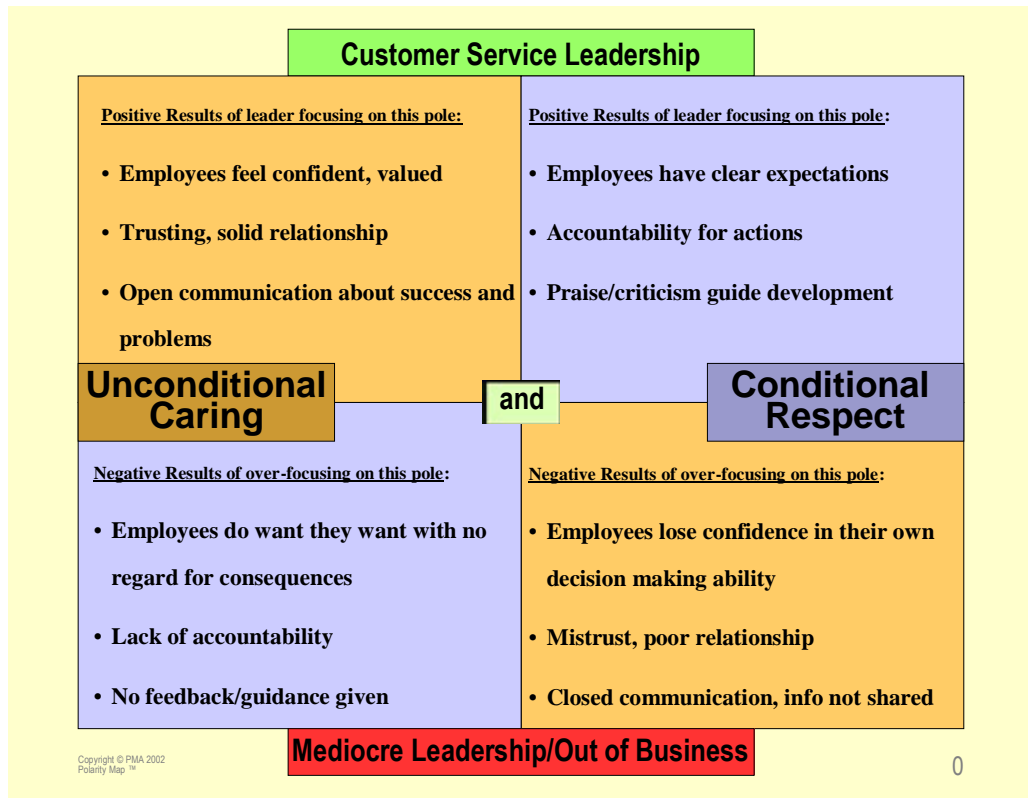
- ◆ Invest in the tools and resources required to ensure your customers are receiving what they expect. Look at your organization through your customers' eyes.



All of this may sound simple, while in practice it is not. The Five Diamonds of Customer Service Leadership requires an expanded view of leadership in order to create a phenomenal environment where staff is lead to success for you, the guest and the company. With discipline and the courage of leadership to consistently apply these principles, the results are clear, tangible and predictable.

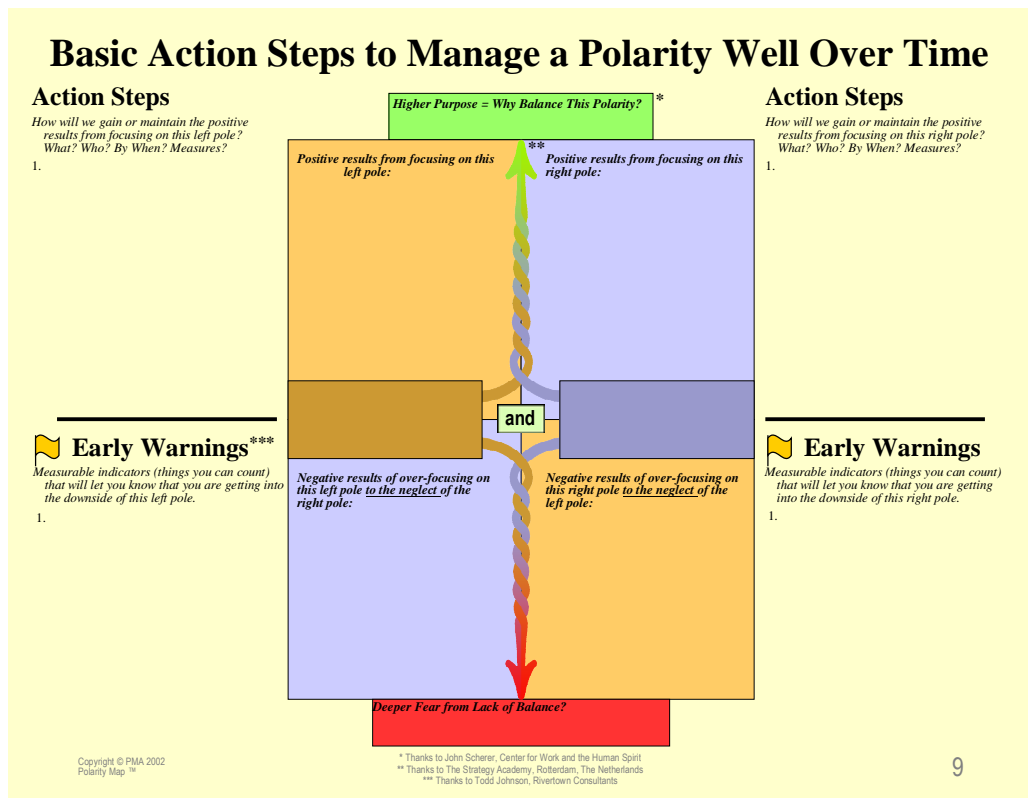
The First Diamond of Customer Service Leadership from a Polarity Management™ Perspective

Unconditional Caring AND Conditional Respect



1. The polarity map above provides a container for the interdependent pairs or “poles”; the infinity loop; four quadrants to contain the upside and downside of each pole; the synergy arrows spiraling up and down; and a box at the top and bottom of the map.
2. The box at the top of the map contains what we call the Higher Purpose. It is the answer to the question, “Why bother to manage this polarity well?” It is the positive direction desired by getting both upsides.
3. The box at the bottom of the map contains what we call the Deeper Fear. It is always the opposite of the Higher Purpose. It is the reason for not getting caught in either or both downsides.
4. The “and” box in the middle of the map is to remind us that the two poles are interdependent so the connection is “and” rather than “or.”

Once you've answered the questions posed in the initial map, you can then use the expanded map, as illustrated below, to create Action Steps to manage the polarity over-time in order to gain the upsides of both poles and become aware through Early Warning indicators and to your need to shift focus.



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