

teaching note

Where Did Our Server Go? A Case of Service Failure in a College Hotel Restaurant

Summary

The MacArthur Hotel and Conference Center (“conference center”) is a new venture by Upstate College, a 4-year public college. Besides serving as a revenue-generating facility, the conference center is meant to be a “living laboratory” for Upstate College’s hospitality students.

Erica is a hospitality student at Upstate College. A young single mother, she finds it necessary to work as well as attend school. Upon finding out that dining service student workers are paid a higher hourly wage than other student workers, Erica applies for a kitchen position. She is placed in the kitchen of the conference center’s restaurant, performing dishwashing and cleaning responsibilities.

On the morning of the first day of the conference, Erica is abruptly reassigned as frontline wait staff in the conference center restaurant. Erica is concerned about her lack of preparation. She also knows that wait staff ordinarily supplement their wages with tips, so she is also worried about a possible decrease in wages. Significant service failures occur and attempts at service recovery are made.

Target Audience

The intended target audience is undergraduate students enrolled in a hospitality human resources class. This case study may also be used for graduate-level students with additional readings and completion of a “consultation” assignment, acting in the role of the faculty who offered to assist the manager in the case study. These students would develop and present a short online customer service training outline or workshop for student workers such as Erica.

Service failure and recovery issues and the importance of staff training are pertinent throughout the hospitality industry. However, this scenario is purposely set in a college-based hospitality facility so that students participating in this class exercise will relate to a student worker such as Erica. Students are likely to have considered or have been employed in campus jobs like Erica, and may thus be able to suggest pertinent strategies for training and service recovery.

Prior to Class

Students will be expected to read the case study and to include consideration of the pre-class discussion questions in the group exercise and their group report. Use of this case assumes students have been introduced to basic concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (e.g. Maslow) but students may be referred to such information prior to class. The instructor could also present a basic review of the case in addition to a review of the concepts at the start of class.

Groups can be formed prior to class to save time, to ensure diverse groupings (e.g. mixing genders, ethnicities, ages, etc.) and to allow

students to work with those they may not have met before. Each group should be kept small enough to allow full participation by each student.

Class Instruction

Approach I (50 minutes)

1. Provide a brief summary of the case study (5 minutes).
2. Present a PowerPoint presentation to introduce/review the concepts of service failure, service recovery and motivation as they pertain to work behavior (including: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Adams’ Equity Theory, and Herzberg’s Motivation-Hygiene Theory) (10 minutes). Graphics illustrating the theories of Maslow, Adams and Herzberg are readily available on the Internet.
3. Divide students into their assigned groups. Have the students introduce themselves, provide their contact information to each other and select a reporter. Assign each group a particular question to answer (10 minutes).
4. Ask each group to present their answers (10 minutes).
5. Have students participate in brief two-question electronic poll with either clickers or a free online service such as PollEverywhere (www.poll Everywhere.com) which is easy-to-use and uses smartphones, computers, or tablets (5 minutes). Instructors may use a simple show of hands instead.
 - Question #1: Typically, how many people would you tell about a great service experience?
 - Question #2: Typically, how many people would you tell about a poor service experience?
6. Facilitate class discussion, filling in gaps, linking concepts with points in the case study and electronic polling, and soliciting recommendations (5 minutes).
7. Summary of key points (5 minutes).

Approach II (75 minutes)

1. Provide a brief summary of the case study (5 minutes).
2. Present a PowerPoint presentation to introduce/review the concepts of service failure, service recovery and motivation as they pertain to work behavior (including: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Adams’ Equity Theory, and Herzberg’s Motivation-Hygiene Theory) (10 minutes). Graphics illustrating the theories of Maslow, Adams and Herzberg are readily available on the Internet.
3. Divide students into their assigned groups. Have the students introduce themselves, provide their contact information to each other and select a reporter. Assign each group a particular question to answer (15 minutes).
4. Ask each group to present their answers (20 minutes).

5. Have students participate in brief two-question electronic poll with either clickers or a free online service such as PollEverywhere (www.polleverywhere.com), which is easy-to-use and uses smartphones, computers, or tablets (5 minutes). Instructors may use a simple show of hands instead.
 - Question #1: Typically, how many people would you tell about a great service experience?
 - Question #2: Typically, how many people would you tell about a poor service experience?
6. Facilitate class discussion, filling in gaps, linking concepts with points in the case study and electronic polling, and soliciting recommendations (15 minutes).
7. Summary of key points (5 minutes).

Questions for Groups – Not all of the questions may be addressed. After working with the group to generate a summary of responses, the group’s reporter will submit the summary to the instructor.

1. **Besides how the case study’s guests responded to the service failures, how else might a dissatisfied guest respond? How might each of these responses influence a hospitality organization?**

Students should identify responses such as: never returning, posting complaints, going to a competitor, and bad-mouthing, and possibly responses such as seeking new legislation, filing lawsuits, organizing boycotts, and picketing. Students can also consider how much responsibility a manager might have for the service failure. Could a guest’s response then be different (e.g. more forgiving)?
2. **Evaluate how the manager dealt with the service failures. From a guest perspective, how effective were her efforts? What else might you have wanted?**

Students should refer to Magnini (2007) and compare the severity of the case study service failures with what the manager offered as restitution. Would the offer of free desserts have been perceived more positively perhaps if it was earlier in the day when the faculty members could have anticipated having another meal, rather than late at night with little chance of eating dinner elsewhere? Students should also consider what types of restitution employees could be authorized to offer without involving the manager.

As noted in Magnini (2007), students should also be encouraged to consider conditions leading to service failures that may not be in the control of hospitality managers (e.g. natural disasters, power outages, labor strikes). Would guests be more forgiving of such service failures?
3. **How can management better avoid this kind of service fail-**

ure in the future?

It should be emphasized that even the best hospitality organizations will occasionally fail, and that it is important to plan for when (not if) such service failure occurs. Students should offer ideas such as mandatory staff training, daily briefings, rewards for staff initiative in resolving problems and making suggestions for improvement, soliciting guest evaluations, and following up with guests.

4. **What could help student workers to be more confident in their service recovery ability?**

Students should offer ideas such as increased training, role-playing, daily briefings, mentoring and empowerment to resolve service failures.
5. **What can motivate a worker to stay or leave a job? Do these motivations change during an individual’s life span?**

Students should identify: compensation, sufficient work hours, work-life balance, advancement, recognition, training, work autonomy, and feelings of self-efficacy, equity, and commitment.
6. **If you were the manager and the guests in the case study posted a negative review of the restaurant on TripAdvisor, would you have responded? If so, how? If no, why?**

Students should weigh the pros and cons to responding to online reviews, including issues such as the labor needed to track and respond to online reviews and becoming involved in online disputes. Students may also discuss the ethics of a manager removing negative reviews posted to company-owned websites.
7. **What role do you think the college’s Human Resources Department or other departments (e.g. Alumni Relations) should take regarding the operation of the restaurant in this case study?**

Students should be able to identify legal liability, employee orientation, training, and assessment as important issues that Human Resources should address. As potential alumni themselves, students should also consider how Upstate College’s relationship with Erica as a future alumna could be jeopardized depending on how she perceives she has been treated as a student employee.

Additional Readings for Undergraduate Students

- Adams, J.S. (1963). Towards an understanding of inequity. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67, 422-436.
- Herzberg, F. (2003). One more time: How do you motivate employees? *Harvard Business Review*, 81(1), 87-96.
- Magnini, V.P., Ford, J.B., Markowski, E.P., & Honeycutt, E.D. (2007). The service recovery paradox: Justifiable theory or smoldering myth? *Journal of Services Marketing*, 21(3). doi: 10.1108/08876040710746561
- Richardson, S. (2009). Undergraduates’ perceptions of tourism and hospitality as a career choice. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 28, 382-388. doi:10.1016/j.ijhm.2008.10.006