

Human Resources

Guest satisfaction starts with employee empowerment

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Service recovery starts with management's ability to trust employees to resolve situations and improve the guest experience.



By [Alicia Hoisington](#)

REPORT FROM THE U.S.—Guest complaints are inevitable. And while experts agree complaints don't turn into problems unless they aren't resolved, the path to recovery starts with management's ability to empower employees.

"Engagement hinges on first setting the expectation that every member of the team is capable and has the ability to serve our guests," said Chris Manley, COO for Stonebridge Companies. "Our duty is to instill a sense of ownership by the teams in their critical role in guest satisfaction."

That's why the company includes empowerment as one of the four pillars of its mission statement. Every team member is permitted to resolve guest complaints regardless of where the issue occurred during the stay, Manley said.

"This shows we appreciate all feedback and that each and every member of the team is adept at addressing (guest) concerns and resolving the problem in the moment," he said.

Teri Xavier, VP of people and culture at Kokua Hospitality, said giving employees the ability to remedy a complaint is critical to guest satisfaction.

"Most travelers today when they go to the front desk, they are probably expecting to have to tell their story more than once. That can be frustrating for a traveler," she said.

By allowing front-line employees to resolve guest complaints without calling in management, issues can be solved faster, she said. The quicker a guest is made happy, the better for the overall service recovery.

“It not only lends credibility to the position as a guest service agent; in the end, it alleviates some stress or concerns from the guest,” Xavier said.

Garry Cox, Area GM of The Axiom Hotel, Napa Winery Inn, and Carmel Mission Inn, said there are two types of guests: walkers and talkers.

“The majority of people out there are walkers and don’t want to make a big deal and complain. They are the most hurtful to business because they won’t say anything to us, but they will tell their friends when they get home,” he said.

The “talkers” might be unpleasant to deal with, but Cox said they are the most beneficial to business because they give hoteliers an opportunity to fix any issues. But, those talkers could become walkers if employees aren’t allowed to handle their concerns, he said.

“They might complain to the desk clerk and if the clerk says, ‘Let me go get my manager,’ then they might say, ‘Don’t bother,’” Cox said.

Training employees

Proper training is the first line of defense and the tool that can build employees’ confidence—especially when every situation will differ, sources said.

First, Cox said it’s important to drive home to employees the idea that guest complaints aren’t personal, which can be difficult to remember when faced with an irate guest. Role-playing scenarios can help employees build confidence when they then face those real-life situations, he said.

“We teach them how to receive guest complaints, and we teach them how to listen,” Cox said. “Listening can be hard to do when someone is telling you something negative; it’s human nature to interrupt. Most times when guests are upset, if you just listen, they will talk themselves off a ledge.”

Xavier agreed that listening is key to successfully handling a guest complaint. At [Kokua](#), employees are trained to give guests time to talk uninterrupted until they feel the guest is ready to be asked questions or to clarify.

“The second part of that is that clarification. When a guest is complaining about something, you need to fully understand it,” she said.

Beyond that, employees are trained to remain empathetic and apologize, she added. It might not be the employee’s fault the internet doesn’t work, but he or she is the one hearing the complaint—and that’s all the guest cares about.

“And sometimes the answer is obvious as to how it can be corrected. If the internet was spotty, simply take the charge off the bill,” she said.

Then, employees are trained to thank the guest for bringing the issue to their attention and let the guest know how they will follow up internally so that it doesn’t happen again.

Going above and beyond—a little too much?

Training employees to handle complaints that are easily remedied is one thing. Empowering employees to handle the really tough situations is another challenge. And what should management do if employees go a little too above and beyond?

Manley said [Stonebridge](#) doesn’t have standard operating procedures for service recovery because it must always be tailored to the guest and the situation. That means sometimes employees might offer high-value solutions to guest complaints.

“Strong leaders develop a culture of hospitality within our properties. They must instill the confidence in each team member’s ability to solve complex problems in creative ways,” he said. “We would never chastise anyone who goes above and beyond to do so, but thank them for exceeding our guest’s expectations.”

In the event that a situation could have been handled in another way, management would have a respectful conversation with the employee and discuss suggestions to resolve the same type of issue in the future.

Cox agreed that ongoing support is crucial to employee empowerment—and ultimately guest satisfaction.

“We empower all team members to do what they need to do. When an employee does something they felt was right, I never tell them it was the wrong thing to do. I wasn’t there to deal with it, so I need to support them,” he said.

For example, if an employee offers two complimentary nights as a remedy for a situation that perhaps called for a free breakfast, sources said management can’t just take it back. Guests don’t care about an operator’s standard operating procedure for service recovery; they only care about the solution to their problem. If management doesn’t honor the employee’s solution, that guest will become an enemy.

“Even if they are a guest once a year, look at what you lost,” Cox said. “You always have to make it right with the guest so that they feel valued.”

On the other hand, Xavier said management can’t take back employees’ empowerment either. It’s just as detrimental to break an employee’s trust as it is to break a guest’s trust.

“The employee was in the situation and did the best they could given the circumstances. Maybe they were on the late night or graveyard shift and no manager was around,” she said. “Support the employee. Talk about what went right, what went wrong and how to help alleviate the situation the next time around.”