Case Studies in Exemplary Service Delivery

Karen Kelly Wollard
Florida International University

> *Twelve exemplary service providers from three highly acclaimed resorts discuss and demonstrate what it takes to deliver award-winning service consistently. This research, using a qualitative, explanatory case study method, sought to investigate how they do it. Three themes emerged from the data that should have a profound impact on HRD practitioners and researchers working to improve service performance and influence organizational culture.*

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Service delivery is different from product delivery in important ways. Products can be counted, measured and shipped, unlike services which are created and consumed at the point of interaction between the provider and the customer (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). The process of service delivery, rather than the product, affects consumer satisfaction (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1988). Consumer satisfaction with service quality has become an increasingly competitive way for organizations to differentiate themselves (Gould-Williams, 1999) and organizations that are viewed as delivering highly satisfying services often position themselves as more expensive, but worth the price premium (Enz & Siguaw, 2000).

Just as services are different from products in important ways, exemplary service is different from average or acceptable service. Top service providers think differently (Walsh, 2000), viewing service delivery as complex and understanding how they fit in the overall organizational strategy, while also manifesting superior interpersonal abilities. At the very highest service levels, the thinking is about going to great lengths to transcend the guest's expectations, and even to anticipate their unexpressed wishes (Sherman, 2007). For example, the proprietor at the Inn at Little Washington, Patrick O'Connell, discusses his beliefs about the potential of the dining experience, which he says can be, "a life-changing, transcendental experience that takes you completely away from your own reality. It can raise your level of self-esteem, it can be a sort of healing process, and it can make you feel that life is worth living. That is what we aim for." (Levin, 2000, p. 50).

Consistently delivering exemplary service is a rare occurrence (Zeithaml, 2000), even though much is known about how to improve service quality. More than 19 models of service quality have been postulated since the early 1980s (Seth, Deshmukh, & Vrat, 2005). In spite of the models and other research (Dube, Enz, Renaghan, & Siguaw, 1999), the Academy of Management published a special issue addressing continuing customer dissatisfaction with service quality (Bowen & Hallowell, 2002). Even in luxury hotels, where guests expect high service quality, few have instituted many of the proven human resource practices (Presbury, 2004) or services marketing concepts into their service strategy (McColl-Kennedy & White, 1997), and even fewer have been able to maintain consistent service levels and retain excellent service personnel (Zeithaml, 2000).

Organizational learning, performance and change, the three professional practice domains of human resource development (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000), have practical and theoretical contributions to make to the improvement of the processes of service delivery. Yorks (2004) suggests that HRD practitioners need to wield influence even without authority, and one way to accomplish this is to screen, adapt and develop best practices from other organizations and link them to strategy (p. 203).

Problem Statement

Little research has investigated excellent service personnel and the skills, standards, controls, competencies, knowledge, attitudes, or approaches they use to create great service. What if top service providers are different in ways that can be taught or supported? The purpose of these qualitative case studies was to explain how exemplary service providers in luxury hotels provide consistently excellent service. The main research question was: How do exemplary customer service providers deliver consistently excellent service? Excellent service refers to genuinely meeting customer's needs in a way that creates a pleasant, satisfying memory (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Conceptual Framework

A service interaction is an experience, created and consumed simultaneously, involving interaction between a service provider and the consumer who purchases the service (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Service focuses on creating a memory that meets the unique requirements of the consumer, who is the co-creator of the memory (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). Service delivery is complicated because it involves two types of people—providers and customers — each with their own agenda and expectations (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). The ephemeral and emergent nature of the experience challenges the development of policies, standards, and processes that can be applied consistently across an organization with satisfactory results (Berry et al., 1991; Chase & Dasu, 2001).

No single service strategy or approach guarantees great service outcomes or builds upon the same essential factors (Anderson & Oliver, 1987). Outstanding service organizations work from the premise that what is offered to customers is less important than how it is offered, that success is won or lost at the point of contact (Dube et al., 1999). Yet, the literature on service quality is diverse, with advice ranging from arranging the staging of theatrical performances (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) to instituting compensation strategies that support the organization's customer orientation (Anderson & Oliver, 1987).

The Role of Organizational/Management Controls in Service Delivery and Quality

Customer service quality is influenced by organizational and managerial controls and by the skills and knowledge of the customer service providers (Bittner, Booms, & Tetrault, 1990). Jaworski (1988, p. 24) defines control as "attempts by management or other stakeholders within the organization to influence the behavior and activities of personnel to achieve desired outcomes." Formal controls are distinguishable by the timing of the management intervention: input controls precede the start of activities, process controls attempt to influence the means employed to reach the output controls, represented by the evaluation of outcomes or results. Informal controls are distinguished by their *level of aggregation* (Jaworski, 1988, p. 27) including individual controls based on personal reflection or self-monitoring, team or social controls, based on team norms or professional standards, and cultural norms, based on broad patterns that guide organizational patterns of behavior (Jaworski, 1988).

Formal and informal controls influence performance. Organizations must provide structure, set performance standards, monitor implementation, and correct poor performance, if their goal is to consistently deliver quality service (Maguire, 1999). Performance improvement, therefore, depends on organizational understanding of the impact of training, controls, and standards on employee practices.

Exemplary Performance and Luxury Service

By 1995, staying in luxury hotels had already become a status symbol for wealthy Americans (Catrett & Lynn, 1999). These hotels charge higher prices and attract customers who consider quality to be worth the price. This price premium allows the organization in turn to select, effectively train, and support better personnel while implementing strategies to develop loyalty. This leads to higher profits due to increased employee retention and morale, reduced costs from errors, and greater customer loyalty (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991; Enz & Siguaw, 2000).

Star performers are defined as the top 5% of all those in a job classification category. Yet, just 30% of a star's success is attributed to the individual and 70% to the star's organization (Groysberg, Nanda, & Nohria, 2004). Exemplary service providers, as identified through customer interviews, view the service encounter differently than average providers (Walsh, 2000). Exemplary providers demonstrate four distinct characteristics: the ability to create a sense of a long-term relationship, a realization that service provision is complex, recognition of their roles in success of their organizations, and awareness of their managers' often conflicting roles and goals (Walsh, 2000). This research sought find out how top performers think about and actualize exemplary service, and to gain insight into the individual attributes and organizational resources needed to deliver great service.

Research Design

The research design, an explanatory multiple-case study, required collection of several sources of data including interviews, observations, and documentation, to increase the understanding of the complex interactions involved in creating exemplary service. The case study method was selected because it is an effective strategy when the questions posed are designed to understand how or why a particular phenomenon occurs (Yin, 1994). Case selection focused on purposeful sampling of top service providers in award winning resorts, who could be expected to manifest the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). Less than one-quarter of one percent of hotels and resorts in North America qualify for top honors through two independent rating organizations, the American Automobile Association and Exxon-Mobil Corporation. Florida has eleven properties that earned one or both awards in 2005; three properties were approached to be included in the research.

Four individuals were interviewed and observed at each establishment/case: the general manager and three individuals he/she selected as their best service providers. This number is consistent with the research on star performers that found the best of the best constitute 5% of an organization's employees (Groysberg, et al., 2004).

The general manager served as key informant (Patton, 2002). Two interview guides were used, one for general managers and one for service providers. The questions elicited stories from participants, rather than asking direct questions (Wengraf, 2001), so questions were phrased, "Tell me about … easy, typical, difficult and challenging customer situations." Interviews lasted from one to two hours. A case is a bounded system. These are bounded by the physical location of the resort and its organizational structure. Space does not allow for the extensive descriptions that were written during the analysis of the data, which captured each resort's style and unique orientation. Resort A, named the case of the golden rule because of its company motto, is presented first. The case of the insightful traditionalists, Resort B, reflects the long family history and service traditions of this resort. Resort C, The case of water and stone, has a unique décor and traditions that integrate natural elements.

The case of the golden rule. This modern, elegant oceanfront resort is part of a moderately-sized chain known for exemplary and luxurious service. Four individuals, collectively possessing more than 50 years of experience, were interviewed. The General Manager, Mr. Robbins, was interviewed first, followed by the Spa Manager, Andrew. The Resort Manager, Denise and the Chef Concierge, Juan, were also interviewed

The case of the insightful traditionalists. The second case, Resort B, is a legendary, one-of-a-kind, independent oceanfront resort with more than a century of tradition and history that continues to guide its culture of hospitality. The interviews here included an international program associate, Annette, who was working at the front desk. Next, the Hotel Manager, Ms. Jones, and her assistant Linda were interviewed together. The concierge of the exclusive hotel within a hotel, Francois, then discussed and demonstrated his legendary service talents, followed by a 25-year veteran of the front door, Robert.

The case of water and stone. The final case, Resort C, is a metropolitan hotel, located directly on the bay overlooking the city and the ocean. The staff is as diverse and as cohesive as the elements in the lobby. Sixteen nationalities are represented. My first interview was with the General Manager, Mr. Molina, and the Director of Human Resources, Deirdre. The next interview was with the Training Coordinator, Donna, during which we were joined by Scott, the VIP Services Colleague.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved reading and re-reading the data collected and coding it beginning at the individual level (embedded cases). The within-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) began with the individual service providers and once this was completed the other materials were examined. Field notes were reviewed before going over the transcripts, then the audio and text of the transcript were checked. The second step involved multiple readings of the data (documents, field notes, and transcripts) to create outlines that included key points and stories organized around emergent codes. The codes generated from the 12 embedded cases were compared and contrasted until 20 codes remained. The codes were then compared to the conceptual framework of formal and informal controls (Jaworski, 1988). This is consistent with Yin's (1994) preferred strategy of following the theoretical propositions that underpin the case studies The result of this phase of the analysis was to create individual case descriptions to organize the data (Yin, 1994). Once the descriptions were complete, the data was again reviewed across cases, seeking similarities and differences associated with service performance, as reflected in the secondary research questions or the literature. The similarities were clustered around concepts including communication, interpersonal relationships, culture, human resource development, standards, and organizational structure. After sorting these concepts, three themes were identified. The themes will be discussed following the case descriptions.

Case Descriptions

Exemplary service delivery involves complex interactions between guests, service providers, management, and the entire corporation. Each resort has its unique way of orchestrating these interactions. This section briefly describes the formal and informal controls used to create their unique service delivery approaches.

The case of the golden rule. Resort A is a modern and elegant property that offers guests calm, relaxing experiences. This is because behind-the-scenes everything is organized, coordinated, planned and structured. Service quality is assured by maintaining clear and consistent standards and having in place systems and strategies for service recovery. There is a hierarchy of control in this organization but also a commitment to having each person take personal responsibility for their own actions, all in an effort to ensure exemplary service delivery. The focus is on guests and their satisfaction, as the General Manager, Mr. Robbins, explains, "When it comes to controlling a guest's experience, that's when you have to be able to trust your staff because they're the ones touching the guests over and over again." The trademark of service in this organization is its ability to personalize while maintaining a high degree of formal control. Currently, there are more than 200 written standards, streamlined within the last several years from more than 400, designed to meet the minimum requirements that guarantee a happy guest. Core standards have been created by constantly monitoring guest expectations and are based on guest feedback.

The organizational culture reflects the commitment to taking pride in excellence. There is an expectation that associates are responsible for every interaction with guests, and that every service provider is backed by a team, and

by the organization's commitment to getting it just right. The General Manager sets and validates the culture when he responds to a call for help when the restaurant is overwhelmed with an unexpectedly large group of tourists. Instead of walking in and taking over management of the dining room, he proceeds to the kitchen and pitches in doing dishes and plating desserts. By doing so, he claims, he empowers the restaurant staffers whose job it is to resolve the situation, and he validates the culture.

The case of the insightful traditionalists. Guest feedback is the driving force behind this resort's service standards. Standards are set, maintained, or updated based on verifiable guest input and requests for everything from special pillows to preferred service times. Standards include always offering further or additional service, and innovative ways to serve and offer more service are encouraged and rewarded. This constant effort to look for more ways to satisfy guests seems to enhance the ability of exemplary service providers to create and personalize memorable guest experiences. Annette, reflecting on her experiences being a guest, noted: "little things like the housekeepers will greet you, if you're looking for your room, they will ask where you would like to go. If you see that from line staff that extra service is already coming then there is a wow factor."

This resort puts employees at the very heart of the organization and demonstrates their importance. "We talk about guest satisfaction and team member satisfaction equally" (Ms. Jones). For example, inappropriate behavior toward another employee and a guest is treated equally harshly. The company also shares a lot of information with employees, including financial and performance data. Open sessions with executives are held every few months, and employees are welcome to discuss the company's mission, vision, and opportunities. Daily shift briefing meetings are the forum for sharing more immediate goals, including examples and stories about good and bad service.

Culture influences everything from the moment an individual applies for a job. The company maintains and regularly uses the "Elements of Culture," as training, development and discussion tools. Culture is an organic and vital part of the organization's being. "You can't work here and violate our culture" (Ms. Jones). The elements are:

The first is respect for all people, then accountability, energy and great work ethic, customer orientation, financial orientation, decentralized management, recognition and rewards, commitment, humility, integrity, team orientation, quality orientation, results orientation, talent, discipline, ability to stay focused, positive attitude and achievements and continuous improvements.

The case of water and stone. A challenge for a hotel that is part of an international chain is to figure out how to work from the same blueprint while customizing experiences to fit the individual location. Resort C uses standards to create the necessary structure. Their service reflects their Asian origins; subtle and discreet while always considerate and observant. Standards are the essential components of control here. Recently, the number of standards was reduced from over 1200 to approximately 200. The standards help everyone understand the level of service that surpasses expectations.

The HR Department is an essential driver of service quality. Deirdre, the HR Director, explained, "That is because, first of all, he [Mr. Molina] makes, and the company makes, my job a lot easier by supporting 120 percent of the HR function, where I've worked at another company where it is viewed as a necessary evil." The HR Department's careful hiring and constant monitoring of the organizational climate works to ensure that the organization's goals and standards are exceeded. There is a tendency to hire very creative people, such as designers, artists, actors, and singers. In fact, twice a year the organization has an employee talent show to showcase the abilities of their staff. Finding the balance of detailed versus spontaneous, leader versus team player, service-oriented versus process-oriented is HR's role. Donna and Scott reiterated the centrality of the partnership between HR and the executives. Deirdre has the ability to celebrate unique individuals and their contributions and to navigate the space between helping people feel good and getting business results. This organization has an HR group in place that recognizes their opportunities to influence the entire guest experience.

Discussion of Themes Across Cases

Three emergent themes are discussed: (a) emotional generosity, (b) exemplary and ubiquitous communication, and (c) effective interactions of culture, tradition, and control. This is followed by implications for further research.

Emotional Generosity or Love as a Business Strategy

One compelling similarity among all of the interviewees and even among the other service providers at the resorts was their high level of interpersonal abilities. Beyond excellent manners, they are genuinely concerned with the welfare of others, and almost have a sixth sense for offering help before it is requested. This can be described as emotional generosity; the use of love as a business strategy. Love may seem a strong word to use in a business situation, but it captures the passion and commitment that is essential to the delivery of exemplary service.

This theme emerged early in the interview process, fueled by individuals trying to find language to describe what sets the best service people apart from the very good ones. During every interview the words *caring* and

genuine were used to distinguish top performers. Juan talked about the need to get the trust of the guest, to free the guest from worry and so allow them to enjoy their time. Andrew discussed the fact that the guest's experience of feeling like royalty is priceless, and that he goes to great lengths to deliver that feeling. Mr. Robbins, when asked about his organization's commitment to service excellence, related his view:

> Hotels are where everything happens in people's lives. We're here to celebrate weddings, honeymoons, unfortunately even the death of loved ones. We have an opportunity to make a huge emotional impact on them. It's done because we have people who have great attitudes and a love for their job … and are loyal to their guests. They're just very passionate people who enjoy what they're doing.

Donna called it *generosity of spirit*. Others talked about the importance of bringing the total person to every interaction (Denise & Scott). Francois shared his philosophy: "What I do I talk to them a lot. They are sitting there. It's like if it was my living room and if it were my home." Denise talked about "getting emotionally charged by what the guest is saying." Mr. Robbins controls the guest's experience by trusting his staff to "touch the guest."

Emotional generosity explored. The discovery of emotional generosity, a term that seems to encompass the diverse words and descriptions used to describe the passion, commitment, and almost extra-sensory interpersonal abilities of exemplary service providers, was serendipitous. *Emotional generosity* is a term that appeared in searches in the literature on dating, art criticism, and spirituality, but not in any specific business or service context. In *The Life You Were Born to Live,* Millman (1995) defines emotionally-generous people as those who are highly creative and who get pleasure in uplifting others, by reaching out and building emotional bridges (p. 185). Many of the exemplary service providers interviewed fit this description of creative, artistic individuals who saw their roles as genuinely contributing to the well being of others. Ms. Jones suggested, "Personally, it's about taking care of people … So, a lot of my job is taking care of the team or taking care of guests." Ms. Jones goes on to talk about the best service providers as people for whom their work is a personal commitment, not something they turn on and off. She attributes it to a passion or desire to want to be of service.

This theme of emotional commitment and generosity is consistent with literature on emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and love in the business arena (Sanders, 2002). Sanders (2002) discussed sharing knowledge, networks, and compassion as opportunities for differentiation in business. His theory is that "our humanity can be defined as the ability to involve ourselves emotionally in the support of another person's growth" (Sanders, 2002, p. 18). Goleman (1995) discusses empathy— the ability to know how others are feeling— as being built on self awareness, which allows people to become highly skilled in reading other people's emotions and needs through non-verbal cues. Goleman's (1995) further contention is that star performers had extensive informal networks of people throughout the organization who could help them address challenges. In discussions with Donna and Scott, they specifically mentioned that their success depended upon having "friends in every department," a skill they tried to teach every new hire. This finding has important implications for HRD practitioners.

At Resort C, the HR Director has greatly influenced the tone of the interactions between people. She is known for her ability to celebrate individual achievements and appreciate individual characteristics. Deirdre takes what people like and love, things that make them feel good, and turns them into business results. The culture of Resort C leaves room for whimsy, amazement, delight, love, and generosity, without fear that these threaten profits. When asked about the emotional component of service, Donna added, "You are running a business at the end of the day. But your business is people and people, I don't care how logical they are, use emotions in their decision-making."

Love as a business strategy linked to theory. These findings suggest that service organizations should look more closely at the Service-Profit Chain theory (Heskett et al., 1994) as an appropriate theoretical frame to tie employee commitment, emotional generosity, management strategy and organizational culture together. This theory postulates that profitability is tied to both customer loyalty and to employee satisfaction, commitment, and productivity. Heskett et al. (1994) documented the links between internal operating strategies and systems and external success, finding that service quality and productivity were related to employee loyalty, satisfaction and capability. This meant that the design of HR practices, job configuration and workplaces had to support the employee, if customer loyalty, satisfaction and profitability were business objectives.

The links identified in the Service-Profit Chain were visible across all three cases. Team member satisfaction is monitored, measured, and aggressively sought after by the management in these luxury hotels because employee satisfaction is clearly and expressly linked to guest satisfaction (Mr. Molina). The Service-Profit Chain's (Heskett et al., 1994) concepts have been studied and taught since the early 1990s, yet their implementation is rare. The opening paragraph of Heskett et al. (1994) clearly states the importance of the link between organizational success and employee satisfaction.

> Successful service managers pay attention to the factors that drive profitability in this new service paradigm: investment in people, technology that supports frontline workers, revamped recruiting and training practices, and compensation linked to performance for employees at every level (p. 164).

Management of these resorts has actively created a culture to support those who support their customers because they know that employee satisfaction leads to guest loyalty and propensity to return.

Exemplary and Ubiquitous Communication

Extraordinary and effective communication drives and supports service delivery. The transcriptionist even pointed out her surprise at how the interviewees never interrupted, and paused to think before answering questions (S. Chasin, personal communication, January 27, 2006). Communication issues appear throughout the data. Juan said, "You have to have a good listening ear, you have to be knowledgeable and resourceful, and you have to be genuine." Francois underscored the importance of listening: "The thing is to listen to the guests. Really listen to the guests and then from what they ask you, evaluate what they want." Scott added that the goal is not to create starched-suited butlers. "Rather it's to take a person who can effectively interact with a guest and meet their needs. And a big part of that is communication, to communicate effectively back and forth."

Communication facilitates seamless service. This was reflected in the way that the resorts' personnel communicate with each other. Work culture standards dictate that team members or colleagues greet each other pleasantly. When the shifts change, employees are expected to spend a few minutes communicating about the guests, schedules, changes, and other information that ensures a smooth transition.

Communication can create seamless service. Resort B uses one database for both associate and guest input to ensure that important information reaches the proper person. This database helps maintain the philosophy that "customers shouldn't have to bring something to our attention twice" (Ms. Jones). Donna tells her trainees:

> You need to have buddies in all the other departments. You do not want to put yourself in a position where you have an enemy in another department. We cannot have in-room dining thinking that they have to protect their goods from people in (the restaurant). It just can't work. The goal we're trying to achieve, we can't do it alone.

Open-door management policy. All three resorts maintain open-door policies that allow anyone to talk to any manager at any time. Numerous comments attest to the fact that the managers are accessible and approachable. At Resort C, the integration of human resource development into the fabric of management creates a communication climate that keeps problems from festering.

Communication at macro level. Resort B holds bi-annual meetings that everyone is encouraged to attend. Resort C offers festive events that simultaneously support the business strategy. Resort A encourages people to work temporarily at sister properties in the chain and then return and share their impressions with teammates. Positive, proactive communication is part of the culture. For example, storytelling is used extensively in training and on-the-job sessions to demonstrate and share creative solutions to service challenges. This is consistent with recent HRD literature that suggests storytelling can be a powerful way to teach values, culture, expectations, and problem solving, while promoting insight and understanding (McLellan, 2006).

Effective Interactions of Culture, Tradition, and Control

The three resorts have distinctive cultures and traditions. Culture reflects what the organization stands for, its mission, vision, and values, in the everyday actions of its people (Davidson, 2003). Traditions further shape the culture by adding stories, legends and customs as part of an organizational memory. Controls are the means by which management attempts to influence performance (Jaworski, 1988). The interactions of culture, tradition, and control show how the resorts carefully and consistently they work toward integration and alignment. Beginning at orientation, controls are introduced in the form of standards, while stories are told of service performances and the company's history and culture are discussed. Of interest here is how seamlessly the controls support the culture. New employees are taught how to use culture and tradition to help them make the service standards work. For example, the standard may be to take responsibility for a guest's problem. To meet the standard and resolve the problem, employees use the organizational culture and tradition of focusing on the guest's satisfaction and putting guests first, while not neglecting other aspects of their responsibilities (Donna). Blaming others and passing the responsibility to someone else are not part of the culture. Examples from best practices of each organization demonstrate how culture, tradition and controls interact.

Systems management. At Resort A, formal systems have been created to deal with *glitches*, defined as any service inconvenience a guest might encounter. *Crunches* represent service bottlenecks (Mr. Robbins), and the goal of calling a crunch is to redirect resources so that the organization quickly takes back control. Clear standards and language exist to define and apply these systems. The crunch system is based on teamwork, completely depends on individuals responding instantaneously, and has been thoroughly thought through in advance. Recovery systems at this property serve the bigger goals of keeping the vision, putting people first, and getting the job done. What makes the crunch system one of their best practices is not its existence but its implementation. How often would such a system be used if when a crunch was called everyone wanted to be in charge?

One database, many applications. One of Resort B's best practices is keeping everything in one computer registry system, including guest information, team comments, and feedback. The key here is supporting a variety of

activities from the same data. Information as diverse a guest's pillow preferences and employee uniform improvements are captured and maintained. What comes out is service recognition opportunities, guest profiles, monthly reports, annual trends, regular updates to management on issues, and more. The sheer volume of data can be used to customize an amenity, flag problems in a department, indicate a potential bottleneck, or provide data for executive decisions. The data history also makes it possible to review past problems and eliminate future ones.

Correlating colleagues and guests. Resort C's best practice is correlating their colleague commitment survey to their guest satisfaction surveys (Mr. Molina & Deirdre). They have found this to be an in-depth way to identify inconsistencies in the organization's cohesiveness and flow. They ask guests if they would consider staying anywhere else in the city, and they ask questions to find out how guests *feel* about the resort. They ask colleagues about their role in delighting guests. The big picture here is that this is an organic system and all of the parts have to be thriving. Even the standards say little about thread counts or paint colors; the standards are about how people are to treat each other and deal with guests. Correlating those two measures is essential to the organization's well being.

Implications

These findings clearly challenge HRD practitioners and scholars to demonstrate the strategic advantages of treating employees as assets and partners in the organization. Treating employees well and optimizing their satisfaction and commitment are essential to turning business strategy into reality (Rummler & Brache, 1995). When exemplary performance is expected of employees, it is preferable to create environments where employees feel committed, cared for, and even loved. HRD practitioners can improve service by studying best practices of luxury customer service organizations. All HRD practitioners are service providers to internal customers. Improving the service delivery competencies of HRD practitioners would make them more effective (Mafi, 2000). Gilley & Maycunich (2000) suggest that a customer service strategy is an essential building block for HRD professionals to establish themselves as crucial participants in their organizations. Individuals need the tools, systems and strategies to perform and the communications networks and opportunities to constantly improve their performance. Mafi (2000) suggested that HRD practitioners use the Gaps Model (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1988) as a framework to improve HRD Service. This research suggests that practitioners might be better served by the Service-Profit Chain (Heskett, et al., 1994) which details how employee productivity and satisfaction are influenced by operational strategies. HRD practitioners are already expected to understand these operational requirements and HR management strategies, and to support them.

HRD practitioners, acting as performance consultants (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000), can help organizations develop strategies to improve and maintain service quality, which is vital to many organizations' survival. Helping to improve service delivery has the potential to ensure HRD practitioners have a strategic place in the organization's leadership. If HRD is to be seriously involved in the strategic decisions of service organizations, it is essential that the goals of HRD are aligned with those of the organization and that HRD professionals become facilitators for improving the capability, satisfaction and loyalty of front-line service employees, a role they are competent to fill.

Human resource management and human resource development have in the past been classified as being "soft" if the focus is on treating employees well and encouraging commitment as ways to improve performance (Worsfold, 1999). Strategic HRM, seemingly on the other hand, stresses the need to integrate policies and practices with the organization's business model, often leading to the treatment of employees as costs to be managed and minimized (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000). This research found the three cases integrated both approaches, adopting HR practices that encourage colleagues to commit to alignment of their personal goals and values with the organization's mission.

Organizational scholars have not targeted service settings for research, in spite of the fact that more than 65% of the United States' Gross Domestic Product is generated by service firms (Schneider, Ehrhart, Mayer, Saltz & Niles-Jolly, 2005). HRD scholars are in a unique position to study and interpret services, since service quality is specifically related to the patterns of interpersonal interaction between service providers and customers. Scholars could help improve service quality by looking at the outcomes of learning experiences, at performance improvement strategies, and at the results of change efforts.

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