

Hospitality Review

Volume 1

Issue 2 *Hospitality Review Volume 1/Issue 2*

Article 3

1-1-1983

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Recommended Citation

Dessler, Gary S. (1983) "Interpersonal Techniques Boost your "Hospitality Batting Average", " *Hospitality Review*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

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Interpersonal Techniques Boost your "Hospitality Batting Average"

Abstract

The ability to listen and comprehend the intrinsic meaning behind the words people are saying is an important skill for those in the hospitality industry. The author provides some prescriptions for "winning friends and influencing people."

Keywords

Gary Dessler, Dale Carnegie, Interpersonal techniques, Active listening, Cues, Non verbal, FIU

Interpersonal Techniques Boost Your “Hospitality Batting Average”

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The ability to listen and comprehend the intrinsic meaning behind the words people are saying is a important skill for those in the hospitality industry. The author provides some prescriptions for “winning friends and influencing people.”

Individuals in the hospitality industry must cultivate the art of being active listeners. The ability to understand and respond to both the words and the feelings expressed by individuals in those words is important to people in the industry who interface directly with the public.

Consider the following dialogue:

You what! You gave away our room? You can't! We've been stuck on the highway all day and we had a reservation!

Chris and his wife Jean arrived at the Expressway Motel three hours later than planned, and as Chris said, “That was just not our day.” No sooner had they left home than they got a flat tire, and in maneuvering their new space saver spare onto the wheel, they found that the canister used to inflate the spare was inoperable. They had to wait two hours for a trooper to call for a tow, and by the time they limped to a mechanic, they were three hours behind schedule and \$80 poorer. Against Jean's advice they stopped off for lunch (“to unwind,” said Chris), and while the lunch was delicious, Jean had to change her blouse when a waitress--apologizing profusely--spilled a Coke down the back of her blouse. “Oh well,” said Chris, “at least we got our meal for free.”

The rest of the trip was uneventful, until they ran into rush hour traffic around 5 p.m. After spending almost an hour traversing 10 miles, they heard a noise in the engineering compartment which turned out to be the air conditioning drive belt breaking. Chris and Jean spent the next two hours or so in silence, perspiring in the deep summer heat and breathing in the expressway's fumes. So disgusted, in fact, were they that neither thought to extend their 6 p.m. arrival

time at the motel. Therefore, when they arrived, they were told by Mark, the individual at the desk, "We're sorry, but there's a convention in town and we weren't able to save your room. When you didn't arrive by 6 p.m., we gave the room to another guest." This conversation followed:

Chris: You what! You gave away our room? You can't! We've been stuck on the highway all day and we had a reservation!

Mark: I'm sorry, but your reservation was only held until 6 p.m. Look at your confirmation.

Chris: I don't give a damn about my confirmation! I want my bloody room or I'll write the president of your chain.

Mark: I'm sorry, but we couldn't hold your reservation after 6 p.m.

Chris: You get me the manager, you twerp; we're exhausted and we'll sleep in the lobby tonight if we have to.

Mark: I'm sorry, sir. I am the manager, and it's against the fire code to sleep in the lobby. I know you're upset, but I also would prefer to keep personalities out of this discussion. Why don't you try our competitor across the street?

Chris: Because if you're totally booked, he probably is too! I'm leaving, but let me say you haven't heard the end of this. I'm writing to the Better Business Bureau, the president of your chain, and anybody else I can think of. You'll be hearing from us again, fella.

Active Listening

A basic problem underlying this heated exchange is that Mark (and, for that matter, Chris) were not "active listeners." As an active listener you have a definite responsibility, according to communications expert Carl Rogers. You don't passively absorb the words that are spoken. Instead, you actively try to grasp both the facts and the feelings in what you hear. And you try (through this active listening) to help bring about the change you would like to accomplish in the other person.

For example, let's have a replay of the conversation between Chris and Mark, but this time with Mark trying to be an active listener:

Chris: You what! You gave away our room? You can't! We've been stuck on the highway all day and we had a reservation!

Mark: You've really had a heck of a day, haven't you?

Chris: You can say that again. First, we got a flat tire and had to wait two hours for a tow. Then someone ruined my wife's blouse. Then we got stuck in traffic and were so disconcerted that we forgot to call to tell you to extend our reservation. We're so exhausted now that we're ready

to collapse. Really, all we need is a room--any room.

Mark: Well, I can certainly understand why you were held up, and while we can't accommodate you here tonight, I am personally going to get you a room close by. I'm sure we'll find you something to get you through the night and then first thing tomorrow we can get you checked in here. I know you're both exhausted, and I can promise you that we'll have you in a room within an hour.

Chris: Gee, I'd really appreciate that. Thanks a lot, Mark.

Probably the main difference between the two exaggerated examples above is that Mark is using the active listening approach. He is listening and responding in a way that makes it clear that he appreciates both the meaning and the feeling behind what Chris is saying.

Psychologists know this sort of active listening can be used effectively to change a person's behavior, especially when the person is upset. Misery loves company, and when you give a person a sympathetic ear and make it clear that you are really sensitive to the way the person feels, it's like building a bridge that allows the both of you to attack constructively the problem and develop a solution.

What To Do and Avoid

Your main objective as an active listener is to get "inside" the person to whom you are listening to grasp what he or she is saying from his or her point of view. And, you must also convey that you do in fact see things from his or her point of view. Active listening, then, requires you to do (and avoid doing) several things.¹

First, listen for total meaning. Any statement usually has two components: the actual content and the feeling or attitude underlying this content. Remember that both the content and the feeling are important; both give the message its meaning and it's this meaning that you have to try to understand.

For example, take Chris' first statement in the above: "You what! You gave away our room? You can't! We've been stuck on the highway all day, and we had a reservation!" In this case, the content of the message is clear. And you could respond just to that content as did Mark in the first example: "I'm sorry, but you only had a reservation till 6 p.m. Look at your confirmation."

But if you had done that you wouldn't have taken into consideration the attitudes and feelings underlying Chris' statement. Nor would you have seen the problem from his point of view or gotten him around to the point where you could place him at another hotel. Notice how Mark in the second example effectively does this. He gets Chris to confront his real feelings about the fact that they have had an awful day and are exhausted, and just want a place to sleep that night. In this way Mark is able to get Chris and Jean

to agree readily to a change of hotels.

Second, reflect feelings. You also want the person to whom you are listening to confront his or her feelings, and to see that you understand those feelings. One way to do this is to reflect his or her feelings as Mark does on our second example. Notice how some of his comments are actually reflected feelings, for example: "You've really had a heck of a day, haven't you?" Anyone can passively hear the words that someone else is saying. To reflect feelings, though, you have to actively work at understanding what the other person's point of view is. You have to understand what he or she is trying to tell you and what the situation really means.

Third, note all cues. Anyone who deals with people knows that not all communication is verbal. Various other cues--facial expressions, a yawn, hesitations in speech, the inflection in the voice, etc.--also communicate attitudes and feelings. And, as an active listener, it's essential that you note all these cues, since it's only by doing this that you can understand the message's complete meaning.

Fourth, don't act as a judge. Most people resent having others judge them and give them advice, particularly when they are distraught. As an active listener, passing judgment and giving advice are exactly the sorts of things you want to avoid. Remember that your goal is to get the person to confront his or her own attitudes and feelings, and that you don't want to do anything the person will view as an overt attempt to force him or her to do something against his or her will.

Getting the Other Person to Talk

To get people to analyze their own feelings, and change, it's important that they--rather than you--do most of the talking. One way to do this is with reflective summaries, as in the example above, for instance, "You've really had a heck of a day, haven't you?" Here you reflect back to the person's attitudes and feelings, almost as if holding up a mirror that reflects back to the individual not his words, but the feelings that underlie them. This would usually encourage the person to elaborate on his or her ideas. Another technique is to repeat the individual's key words or phrases, perhaps as questions. Thus if he says, "We're exhausted and just want a place for tonight," the listener can restate this as a question: "You just want a room for the night?" This will usually get the person to elaborate on his or her thoughts and, in this case, might get the individual to admit that instead of the superior room which was scheduled, a bare no-frills accommodation down the road will do. Just a nod of the head or even silence will often elicit an additional explanation from the person.

Winning Friends, Influencing People

In Mark's case, active listening was enough to accomplish his immediate goal of getting Chris and Jean to willingly transfer to a smaller motel for the night. In the long run, though, in this and in most other interpersonal situations, the objective is also to win a new friend, perhaps for an airline, hotel, travel agency, or restaurant, or even with people at work. In fact, whether they are subordinates, peers, or your boss, surveys show that effective interpersonal relations--the ability to get along with and influence other people--are the hallmark of the most successful managers.

What is the most popular book on interpersonal relations ever written? There are hundreds, ranging from popular books like *I'm Okay, You're Okay*, to graduate textbooks in organizational behavior. Yet, first prize for the most popular and probably most influential book of this kind would probably go to one published in November 1936 by a man who rose from the obscurity of a Missouri farm to international fame because he found a way to fill a universal human need--a need to win friends and influence people. Dale Carnegie's book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* sold over a million copies in its first year and stayed on the *New York Times* best seller list for 10 years. It has sold over eight million copies.

Today, not everyone believes that Carnegie's prescriptions for winning friends are sound; some have even labeled his approach manipulative. Yet, in a world where everyone is already trying to manipulate others--with bonuses, enriched jobs, or participative leadership, for instance--Carnegie's prescriptions seem mild by comparison, and his principles for winning friends through improved interpersonal relations provide a useful complement for the active listening guidelines above. A summary of Carnegie's important principles for "winning friends and influencing people" is as follows:²

Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves. Active listening of the sort exhibited by Mark in the second example is a big element in winning friends and influencing others. Few things you can do in a conversation will make the other person feel as flattered as making it clear that you are listening attentively and understanding both the words and the underlying feelings of the message. Active listening will thus go far toward helping make you a better conversationalist, as well as a person more likely to win friends and influence others.

But encouraging others to do most of the talking will do more for you than just make you a better conversationalist. When you're interviewing for a job, for instance, encouraging the employer to talk about his problems will help you describe your own strengths in a way that is relevant to the employer's needs. Similarly, most salespeople know that to make a big sale, the first thing they must do is get customers talking about such things as what they need,

why they want it, and what it's going to be used for. Then, the salesperson can give a sales pitch to those specific needs.

Do not criticize. What happened the last time you criticized someone? If Mark, for instance, had told Chris, "This was all your fault for not calling to extend your arrival time," he probably would have elicited some defensive behavior such as Chris saying, "It was an accident," or "It was your company's fault for not telling me I had to do that." The fact is, says Carnegie, criticism is futile because it puts the other person on the defensive and usually makes him strive to justify himself. Criticism is dangerous because it can wound the person's pride, hurt his sense of importance, and arouse his resentment. No one, says Carnegie, be it the most despicable criminal or the President of the United States, ever blames himself when things go wrong. It's therefore futile to criticize someone. Instead of condemning people, says Carnegie, "Let's try to understand them. Let's try to figure out why they do what they do. That's a lot more profitable and intriguing than criticism, and it breeds sympathy, tolerance, and kindness."

Become genuinely interested in other people. Whom do you think most people are interested in? Whom, for example, do you think Chris and Jean were interested in when they came into the motel three hours late? Certainly not Mark and his convention problem. They were interested in themselves and in a room. From his behavior in the first example, it's apparent that Mark was similarly only interested in himself. The fact is that most people are interested mostly in themselves--their appearance, their careers, and their happiness. As a result, says Carnegie, "You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you." This is one of the reasons why in the second example Mark was so effective in getting Chris to talk about his travel problems and to accept the suggestion of a change in motel.

Psychologist Alfred Adler sums the situation up concisely: "It is the individual who is not interested in his fellow man who has the greatest difficulties in life and provides the greatest injuries to others. It is from among such individuals that all human failures spring." Therefore, in everything you do, from remembering the person's name and birthdate to remembering to ask him about the night class he's taking or his wife's health, make it a point to show the other person that you are genuinely interested in him, and that you've taken the time and effort to remember things that are important to him.

Smile. The old saying, "Laugh and the world laughs with you; cry and you cry alone," applies equally well to smiling. Actions, say Carnegie, speak louder than words, and a smile says, "I like you. You make me happy. I am glad to see you." People who deal a lot

with clients by phone--travel agents, salespeople, maitre d's and reservation clerks, for instance--are often trained to smile before answering the phone. Of course, the party who is calling can't actually see the person smiling, but if you try it yourself once or twice, you'll find it's almost impossible not to be cheery when answering the phone. This upbeat disposition will be communicated to the other person, even if the smile itself isn't.

Remember to use names. Dale Carnegie believed "A man's name is to him the sweetest and most important sound in any language." He tells the story of James Farley, chairman of the Democratic National Committee and Postmaster General in Franklin Roosevelt's administration. Farley prided himself on his ability to call 50,000 people by their first names. Being able to recall that many names is a gift, one which few of us will ever have. Most people, though, could remember a lot more names than they do if they worked at it, for instance, by making it a point to write down the person's name and perhaps a few words about him or her after a meeting.

Few things you can do will illustrate your genuine interest in people more than remembering names; this type of reference indicates that you thought the individuals were important enough to take the time to remember their names and something about them. Conversely, forgetting names, while a common enough occurrence, sometimes says you don't think they're important enough to bother working at remembering their names.

Talk of the other person's interests. Theodore Roosevelt, says Carnegie, knew that "the royal road to a man's heart is to talk to him about the things he treasures most." Therefore, whenever Roosevelt expected a visitor, he sat up late the night before studying the subject in which he knew his guest was particularly interested. Everyone enjoys talking about his or her ideas and interests, and so most of Roosevelt's guests left their meetings with him feeling a bit more important and a bit more positive about him. Roosevelt had thus found a simple and inexpensive way to "win friends and influence people"; he did it by learning what the other person was interested in, and then letting the person talk about his or her interests.

Make the other person feel important and do it sincerely. Much of what Carnegie said boils down to what might be called the golden rule of human relations:

There is one all-important law of human conduct. If we obey that law, we shall almost never get into trouble. In fact, that law, if obeyed, will bring us countless friends and constant happiness. But the very instant we break that law, we shall get into endless trouble. The law is this: Always make the other person feel important.

The next time you're inclined to make someone feel important—whether the person is a guest, sales clerk, competitor, or peer—ask yourself how you would feel if the roles were reversed, and whether the animosity and hurt you're going to cause is really worth it. If you do, then hopefully you will decide that the best way to proceed is to build the other person up, make him or her feel important, perhaps by showing genuine interest, praising the individual's accomplishments, and encouraging the person to talk about himself or herself. Dale Carnegie was one of the writers who popularized the phrase, "You can catch more bees with honey." No where is this more true than in the hospitality industry. In the initial example, Mark went out of his way to aggravate an already bad situation by making Chris feel unimportant, by disregarding Chris' and Jean's interests, by being critical, and, in particular, by not actively listening for the feelings underlying what Chris was saying. In the second example, though, Mark's active attempt to empathize with Chris and to make a friend helped to end an otherwise miserable day for Chris and Jean in a reasonable, pleasant way.

Footnotes

1. Carl Rogers and Richard Brown, "Active Listening," reprinted in Carl Anderson and Martin Gannon, *Readings in Management* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1977), pp. 284-303.
2. Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Pocket Books, 1968).