

The Duplicity of “Have a Nice Day”

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I was already angry. Cable company representatives had repeatedly promised installation services. Once again, I stayed home to meet the technician. The phone rang. A customer service rep informed me that unfortunately, they would not be doing my work today.

She apologized, saying she would work to schedule the service in the next 48 to 72 hours.

I was livid! “I have to wait three more days? Why should I believe you when your company has broken its promises THREE DIFFERENT TIMES! Problems on your end caused each delay!”

She replied aloofly, “That’s why I’m telling you I’ll obtain your appointment in the next 48 to 72 hours, sir. I will work to arrange an appointment for tomorrow, but I can’t guarantee that. If I tell you the appointment will occur tomorrow and it doesn’t, I’ll be disappointing you a fourth time.”

With great resignation, realizing that she was not responsible for the previous broken promises, I thanked her. She promised to call me when she had arranged the appointment.

Then it happened. We were about to end the call, and she said, “Have a nice day, Mr. Hooper.”

I jumped up, screaming. “Wait! DO NOT HANG UP!”

She didn’t. “Yes, Mr. Hooper?”

I lit into her. “Do you not understand how angry I am with your company? I was well on my way to having a nice day when your call has made it quite unpleasant! How can you, with any degree of integrity, say to me, ‘Have a nice day’?”

It’s not her fault, of course. Someone trained her to be courteous to the customer, and that includes the ubiquitous, yet in this case, duplicitous “Have a nice day.”

As a leader in your organization, please hire people who have some interpersonal awareness and teach them to exercise good judgment. I’ve shared this story with several friends, and each said, “Oh, that’s pretty typical for (name of cable company).”

Is that the kind of reputation you want for your company?

Let’s apply the example in a more personal way. Is there anyone in your organization who could tell a similarly suspect story about you? Are you guilty of oppressive behavior, for example, then trying to smooth it over by being even a bit solicitous?

It’s hard to know if your good intentions come across to your colleagues as insincere, superficial, or inconsistent. Granted, we all want to look good, and we can go to great lengths to avoid looking bad—even to the point of severe pretentiousness.

In his *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey described his study of success literature over the past 200 years. He found a stark contrast between the “character ethic” emphasized in the first 150 years and the superficiality of the most recent 50 years. Shortly after World War I, the “personality ethic” began focusing more on positive mental posturing and public relations skills. What has developed, Covey asserts, is “clearly manipulative, even deceptive, encouraging people to use....quick fix influence techniques, power strategies, communication skills, and positive attitudes.”

A genuine desire to serve can't be reduced to a formula. As soon as you attempt to systematize compassion, it becomes disingenuous.

Set this article aside for a moment and do some introspection, first on yourself and then on your organization's processes. As objectively as you can, evaluate how your colleagues experience your behavior. If I interviewed them, would they report to me any hypocrisy or duplicity?

How do outsiders experience your organization? Admittedly, this is very hard information to obtain. First, if you (personally or organizationally) are guilty in any way, then people will be suspicious about why you are asking these questions. They'll presume you have some underlying motive that is not obvious, and they'll be very careful with their answers.

Second, your ego-protecting human nature will seek some justification for why a particular incident that someone brings to your attention is not characteristic. Rather than considering that the example may be more typical than you desire, you'll explain it away as an outlier.

My purpose with this article is to raise your awareness. I was not very effective in doing that yesterday with the customer service technician. Having spent some time clarifying and organizing my thoughts, this article is my gift to you.

If you want to make some improvements, consider looking for “How to Change Your Reputation” on my website (see address below). Simply scroll down to find it alphabetically.

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