

Service Leadership: The Quest for Competitive Advantage

Recently I moderated a panel of published book authors to discover how they managed to complete their manuscripts and get them into print. One of the panelists, Judith Strother, presented me with a copy of her latest book, Service Leadership: The Quest for Competitive Advantage, co-authored with Svafa Grönfeldt. I offered to review the book for individuals like you – business leaders and consultants; employers and employees working in business and academia. As owner of a small business that delivers communication solutions, I approached the book as a practitioner seeking to learn what might be practical for readers like us.

The Authors

Strother is an academic. As one would expect, *Service Leadership* is a carefully researched textbook with an extensive bibliography.

Grönfeldt is a practitioner. Her work at Actavis, one of the world's top generic pharmaceutical companies, focuses on aligning strategy, structure, and the talent of Actavis personnel worldwide to achieve and sustain competitive advantage through service leadership, defined as “a culture that empowers the organization to strategize its *promises*, design its *processes*, and engage its *people* in a proactive quest for competitive advantage.”

Key Points

Here are five examples of what empowered organizations do.

1. Companies that lead in delivering first-rate service make promises to their customers. “We pledge to our guests and each other: the finest in personal service, courtesy, and respect, and a satisfying experience.” You

- might think this promise comes from a cushy holiday retreat. Yet, it comes from Parrish Medical Center, a leading hospital in Florida.
2. Keeping promises is the collective responsibility of all employees. They know and live the company's values. At Time Warner, for example, company values – creativity, customer focus, agility, teamwork, integrity, diversity, and responsibility – are at work while honoring the promise to entertain.
 3. Companies that lead have unique strategies that guide them to desired outcomes. The book quotes Charles Kettering, founder of Delco Products Division of GM, who said, “Keep on going, and the chances are that you will stumble on something, perhaps when you are least expecting it.” Companies that lead in serving customers are always in motion.
 4. When companies have achieved leadership status, it is time to watch out. Leaders who bask in their glory, forgetting how they arrived there, can become smug. The authors applauded IKEA leaders, who, at the top of their game, challenged employees to decrease production costs, knowing that new leaders were already in the making in far corners of the world.
 5. Service leaders are prepared for the inevitable mistake. For example, business success coach Wolf J. Rinke boarded a United Airlines plane in Rochester, deboarded the plane (immoblie on the ground), and repeated this boarding/deboarding scenario several times before arriving at Washington/Dulles. Though a one-hour flight became a 9 ½ hour experience, passengers thanked the pilot and flight attendant who had expressed empathy; apologized; owned the problem; made the situation as pleasant as possible by serving free

wine, beer, and pizza; communicated at every opportunity; told the truth; and minimized stress. United Airlines made a successful recovery.

Strengths

What makes this book so valuable is the variety of formats from which the reader can choose. The key points, summaries, examples, activities, and words of wisdom from leaders as diverse as Benjamin Disraeli and Beverly Sills empower readers to develop the strategies that will make them leaders.

Improvements

Though the book has many references, they are generally to other books. Recommending organizations could help the readers become effective service leaders.

Public Relations for Toastmasters

For example, the roles in Toastmasters can create service leaders – empowered, valued workers who make our organizations competitive.

1. The Toastmaster role of moderating a meeting makes it easy to moderate other events, such as a panel.
2. In our Table Topics role, we practice asking probing, sometimes provocative questions – another very valuable skill.
3. The Evaluator looks for strengths and opportunities for improvement – a skill I applied when writing this review.
4. And delivering a book review depends on becoming an effective speaker, another key role for Toastmasters.

Service Leadership (Goodwill Speech)

Service Leadership provides the content knowledge and Toastmasters provides the skills. Hand in hand, they can empower us to become service leaders who give our organizations a competitive advantage.