

Heightened Stress Doesn't Have to Lead to Lesser Service

written by Lori Jo Vest

There's an interesting new phenomena, at least it's new to my experience, that I'll attribute to today's overstressed workers. Though the economy has picking up, many companies aren't in a position to staff up, so front line staff members are overworked, stressed out and on edge.

Twice in the last few months at two of my favorite restaurants, I've had a server imply that I was asking a dumb question. In the first case, I was taking one of my staff members for lunch at a local upscale restaurant that is known for its exquisite food and fabulous service. As we walked in, we noticed it was busier than it had been over the last year. There was a group event on one side and there were a lot of people enjoying lunch, though there were several open tables.

The Maitre D' hurriedly met us at the host stand. "Do you have a reservation?" she asked.

"No, did we need one?" I asked.

"We're very busy," she said shortly, waving her hand across the restaurant as if to say, "Isn't it obvious?" I was a bit taken aback. I'd been a regular at this restaurant for several years and had a longtime friendly relationship with this particular staff member. I chalked it up to an exceptional service provider experiencing heightened stress during a busy lunch hour.

I chalked it up to an exceptional service provider experiencing heightened stress during a busy lunch hour.

When I experienced the exact same situation at our favorite family diner a few days later, I realized it's most likely a result of the current economic reality. Many companies – from large corporations to smaller entrepreneurial enterprises – drew on their credit lines and took advantage of available loan financing to get through the last two years of economic recession. Now that business is picking up, they're having to pay down their outstanding credit before they can hire new staff members to handle the increase in sales. It's a situation we'll most likely be facing for the next few years.

If you're one of the many organizations in this circumstance, what can you do to motivate your staff to provide the best possible service, in spite of their higher workloads?

DEFINE YOUR MISSION AND VALUES: Even if you have the right people on board, if no one knows why they're there or where they're headed, you're not going to get anywhere. If you already have a mission statement, does everyone know it? If not, revamp it so that it's concise and easy to remember. Then take some time to define the core values that will guide all company activities. Examples of core values are: acting with integrity, giving back to the community, being profitable and having fun. This exercise doesn't have to be incredibly time-

consuming, as there are a plethora of resources available for reference. It's well worth the effort it takes.

MEET REGULARLY: Create a schedule of regular team or staff meetings. Reinforce the company mission and core values. It works well to discuss policies and other “big picture” items every two weeks. Depending on your business, try a quick 15-minute meeting at the start of every shift to keep people informed about their work schedule that day. An informed employee is better equipped to provide great service.

TALK ABOUT THE NUMBERS: Review company finances with your staff. Be transparent and explain what those numbers mean in staff meetings. Don't use scare tactics. Instead, rally your troops around increasing sales and decreasing expenses. Ask for creative ideas in employee surveys. Consider offering an incentive of some sort for every employee – perhaps a bonus – when a certain level of profitability is reached or a specific loan is paid off. Take a look at offering additional financial compensation to any employee who brings in a new customer.

MEASURE EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION: There's an adage that states “you get what you measure.” Use a survey tool to query your employees every 90 days. Ask them what they'd change if they ran the company. Ask them to rate their satisfaction with company policies, benefits and practices on a scale of 1 to 10. Then set about improving those numbers by adjusting those things with which a number of employees are less than satisfied.

While the economy is starting to show signs of growth, customers are more concerned about service than ever before. According to an American Express survey, 71% of customers say they are more sensitive to service issues than they were before the recession. While it's not always easy during tough economic times, it's more important than ever to support your co-workers and staff in delivering the best possible service.

2012 Copyright Lori Jo Vest

What do you think? *What could you do to help motivate your staff or your coworkers to provide exceptional service, even when times are particularly stressful?*

Co-author of the customer service bestseller, “Who’s your Gladys? How to Turn Even the Most Difficult Customer into Your Biggest Fan,” Lori Jo Vest has been involved in relationship-based sales and customer service for over 20 years. She has developed extensive marketing, sales and customer service expertise through her work in business-to-business sales and marketing positions. She consults with mid-sized and second stage businesses on methods to enhance their sales and customer service efforts through one-on-one awareness campaigns, methods for developing personal connection and custom strategies for long-term relationship building. You can reach Lori at lori@lorijovest.com.