Navigating through the "perfect storm" of leadership confusion

By Gene Ference

Successful leaders in 2010 will recognize the total organization envisioned as one culture of trust, writes **Gene Ference**, President of **Ference Leadership and Strategy**. Company vision, mission, values and guiding principles will provide direction in an environment of collaborative leadership, while efficient systems and procedures will identify how work is best accomplished with impassioned people providing the heart, soul and spirit of the customer experience.

In recent years, expectations regarding leadership behaviors have undergone significant change. Some changes regarding what service leaders should say and do challenge the very core of thinking regarding how work gets done. Questions are asked: What leadership practices are no longer appropriate? What are today's leadership expectations? How will collaborative leadership be the focus for tomorrow's success?

Changes in leadership style have not occurred overnight, but the greater impact has accumulated over recent years. Pressures from a down economy, customer expectations of increased value, challenges of employee retention and entitlement attitudes have all contributed to a perfect storm of leadership confusion. Indeed, the leadership style of some managers is in crisis and, at best, in need of reorientation and restructuring. In 2012 we will see this happen.

In this article, I am not solely predicting next year's leadership challenges, as multitudes of potential sub-topics can be placed under the umbrella of leadership challenges. Rather, in conducting an informal survey of hospitality general managers and executive team members, I have asked them for their top leadership challenges for 2012. Although it's a relatively small survey (n=21), responses nevertheless come from global settings on four continents. I have taken their topics and distilled them to headline:

- Energizing talent
- Developing leadership capabilities, and
- Improving performance for customer value.

My personal text commentary has been developed from primary research, industry trends and executive retreat discussions conducted globally.

Energizing talent
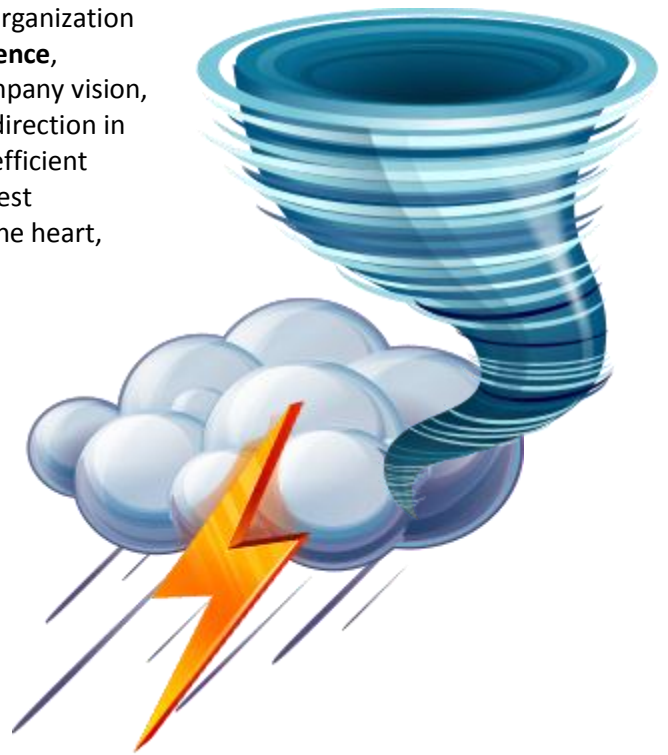
Every person has limited energy to expend in one 24-hour period. How we spend our day depends on what is important to us. In the workplace, we are influenced mostly by the person to whom we report and by fellow peers. Most people look upon a new day as an opportunity to accomplish positive, constructive contributions that will culminate in making people happy. Part of leadership's role is to ensure positive team member interactions occur continuously in order to ultimately create an environment of thrilling the customer.

As we all have only so much attention to give in the daily pursuit of quality products, personalized services and memorable experiences, why is it that some employees are able to consistently go above-and-beyond in providing services to guests? Moreover, some companies will generate spirit, passion and soul in each and every employee for each and every moment of customer interaction on a 24/7/365 basis. How do they do this? What are their secrets? In achieving this synergy of emotions, three practices are evident:

1. Every employee understands the *big picture*. They develop a deep understanding of vision, mission, core values, guiding principles and expected standards.
2. Every employee develops *personal passion* for what they do. They feel a part of the team rather than apart from the team. Their passion regarding what they do stems from pride in the contributions they make to the guest experience. Research shows that pride is a key motivator in achieving and sustaining success.
3. Every employee *provides inspiration* to teammates who, in turn, are inspired by their team leader. By definition, leadership is an influencing process and all leaders affect attitudes and behaviors of others. Inspiring people to want to create great memorable experiences is one of the over-arching goals of excellence and peak performance.

Developing leadership capabilities

General managers, department heads and supervisors fall short of becoming great leaders when perceived to be monarchs of their own kingdoms. "My-way-or–the-highway" philosophies once practiced under the guise of providing direction to employees have gone by the wayside. Environments full of fear of making a mistake and lacking in job security go the way of the pre-industrial age. Providing direction without the human elements of support, respect, compassion, and patience fails to develop human capabilities and the peak-performing teams of tomorrow.

Today's effective leader represents a collaborative relationship between employee and manager. Collaboration is a key element in building trust. Working as a team for common objectives develops relationships and, over time, nurtures the tenets of trust. Collaborative leadership embraces a process in which employees share their differing points of view, solve issues and overcome challenges by joining together in open communication in the pursuit of discovering solutions.

The strength and success of collaboration depends on building a foundation of transparency, trust and open communication. Throughout this process, individual thoughts and personal feelings are explored and shared among team participants. Success is achieved by putting aside individual self-interests and personal agendas and focusing on developing excellent communication skills and dynamic interactions. Decisions are derived from both hard facts as well as the intuitive feelings of what will and will not occur. Ultimately this interactive

combination taps into the wisdom of teams. Collaborative leadership principles include but are not limited to:

1. Being visually acute in observing and reading people from moment to moment.
2. Engaging employees in positive mindsets and proactive behaviors.
3. Assisting others in their development of effective communication.
4. Developing trusting employee relationships through organizational transparency.
5. Developing synergies among individuals and between teams for the achievement of organizational objectives and departmental goals.
6. Being a quality engineer by observing, reporting and/or correcting shortcomings in brand vitals: quality products, personalized services and memorable experiences.

While points of view may differ on exactly how some personalities best collaborate in different situations, the fact remains that fundamental human motivations remain the same. Today's younger generations do represent similar needs and wants to those of previous generations; however, youth can and often do view their work environment with different value priorities. To establish a base for developing tomorrow's leadership capabilities, today's youthful employees seek fulfillment in three high-priority values:

1. The need to *respect* their manager – the person completing their performance evaluation.
2. The need for continuous *learning* – enabling career advancement.
3. The need to have *fun* on the job – engaging in team interaction breaks.

These three youth-generated *priority* values relate to customer interactions as well. To what extent do staff members *respect* the wishes of each customer, answer questions in such a way as to provide information as a *learning* episode for each guest, and turn a routine interaction into a *fun* experience?

Improving performance for customer value

Ineffective leadership results from lack of sensitivities to change. The comfort zone of "what has worked in the past will work in the future" no longer holds true. Often this point of view serves as the downfall for efforts to improve performance and customer value. Why? Because priorities in values have changed with multiple generations now represented within one team; communication patterns have changed with social networking and the lightning-fast transfer of information; individuals and teams expect increased transparency, and top management is aging and characteristically more set than ever in their ways of what has worked in the past.

With the world economy in slowdown, one continuous challenge is to reexamine how our products, services and experiences are best offered. This involves thinking strategically about the true nature of the business: deluxe hotel, destination resort, high-end casino, theme-entertainment, signature food and beverage, or one of the many fusions in today's hospitality industry. All of these businesses produce value-chain vitals: products, services and experiences. What is needed is an examination of how quality products, personalized services and memorable experiences are created and valued? An analysis of each value generated element

may be made following three phases: 1) creating Ideas, 2) real-time production, and 3) brand power.

At which of the above phases is improved performance generated? Often real-time production becomes value neutralized by your competition's quality products: your prime steak competes with your competition's prime steak, one dream bed competes with another's cloud bed and brand name amenities equally compete with other up-scale amenity lines.

Let me propose that increased performance is generated mostly through No. 1, creative ideas, and ultimately through No. 3, brand power. While No. 2, real-time production, is certainly critically important (remember chefs are only as good as their last meal, engineers their last installation of the latest gadget, and interior designers their last renovation), long-term improved performance and increased value are realized mostly through the creation of unique ideas and their marketing through the power of the brand. So be sure to tap into the creativity of all employees. Those at the front lines often have the most insightful ideas. And be sure to include all employees in your big picture; everyone needs to be confident of your strategic plans and the brand's future if they are to put their heart and soul into organizational vision.

In sum, i**mproving performance for customer value can be achieved** with every guest, every time, every day by concentrating on crafting personalized services and creating memorable brand experiences. This focus will add to customer value and in turn will raise the bar for improved performance.

So here are my thoughts on leadership challenges for 2012:

1. Identify core values that everyone understands, embraces and follows. Use these values as a basis for employee selection, on-the-job performance and leading a successful collaborative culture.
2. Communicate the big picture to all employees so they develop personal passion. Remember the story of the passer-by who asks the stone masons, "What are you doing?"
   The first flatly states, *I am laying down stones.*
   The second sarcastically responds, *I am making a wall.*
   The third enthusiastically replies, *I am building a cathedral.*
3. Create the right motivational environment for leaders by adapting to the personal drives of diverse generations. Tune into each employee's thinking patterns (right and left brain do make a difference) and be sure to actively listen to the collective voices of your entire employee base. In balancing management-by-walking-around practices, confidential employee feedback surveys also provide a very important avenue of communications.
4. Embrace change as a constant. While we have come a long way from simply guaranteeing room reservations, American cheeseburgers, French onion soup and efficient air conditioning, the creative stretch for instilling excellence and achieving peak performance will always be a challenge.
5. Quality products and personalized services today provide only two of three critical factors for tomorrow's success. Like a three-legged stool that cannot stand without all its legs, a separate and distinct third performance factor needs to be addressed. To ensure this leadership seat at the high-stakes table of success, organizations in 2012 will

increase their strategic bandwidth by identifying what they can do to further stabilize their service seat by providing memorable experiences 24/7/365.