

## In praise of *Leadership on the Line* . . .

“ Thank you so much for your book. I shared it with our Guest Services Manager at our resort and she liked it so much she wanted her own copy, so I gave her mine. I want to order 8 more copies . . . I just did our second program last week at our resort Divi Tiara, on Cayman Brac. They loved the books. Your book is a great tool for me!”

*Ray Hobbs, Chief Operating Officer, Divi Resorts*

“*Leadership on the Line* is the single best source of information for the development of strong service team leaders. I use it almost daily as a resource guide for the ongoing education of all service managers.”

*Chris Connor, General Manager, Peninsula Yacht Club, Cornelius, NC*

“ Got your book today . . . and couldn't put it down! I love the format and how you used real life experiences. I wish I had read something like it years ago. This is fabulous!”

*Wendy Hanavan, Meeting Planner, Olson Meeting Management, Raleigh, NC*

“*Leadership on the Line* is the first great book I have read on how to become the best supervisor/leader you can be. This book is a must read for anyone entering the service business. You not only learn how to treat your employees and customers, you can learn how to better yourself and become a great team leader.”

*Allison Dettorre, Recreation Director, Northborough, MA*

# Leadership on the Line

A Guide for  
Front Line Supervisors,  
Business Owners, and Emerging Leaders

*By*  
*Ed Rehkopf*



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The characters used to illustrate points in this book are fictional. The anecdotes are composite sketches of various situations faced in a long career. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Service Breakdown</b> . . . . .	1
<b>Service-based Leadership</b>	
Success in Business . . . . .	5
Leadership . . . . .	8
Fear-based Management . . . . .	14
Service-based Leadership . . . . .	15
Summary . . . . .	19
<b>Becoming a Service-based Leader</b>	
Leading Your Service Team . . . . .	21
Recognizing the Limits of Your Influence . . . . .	27
Problems as Opportunities to Lead . . . . .	28
Adding Value to Your Company . . . . .	31
Summary . . . . .	35
<b>Serving Your Employees</b>	
Principles of Employee Relations . . . . .	37
Directing Employees . . . . .	38
Training Employees . . . . .	42
Communicating with Employees . . . . .	47
Motivating Employees . . . . .	54
Summary . . . . .	59
<b>Serving Your Customers</b>	
Think Customers First! . . . . .	63
A Service Ethic . . . . .	64
A Service Attitude . . . . .	68
Creating Enthusiasm . . . . .	71

How Best to Serve Customers . . . . . 73  
Summary . . . . . 73

**Serving Your Shareholders**

Who are Shareholders? . . . . . 73  
Ensuring Pride of Ownership . . . . . 75  
Ensuring Shareholders' Return on Investment . . . . . 79  
Protecting Shareholders' Assets . . . . . 86  
Operating a Professional "Going Concern" . . . . . 87  
How Best to Serve Shareholders . . . . . 92  
Summary . . . . . 93

**Leaders Beware!** . . . . . 95

**Practical Exercises**

Making Lists . . . . . 103  
Overcoming Obstacles . . . . . 105  
Expecting the Worst . . . . . 106  
Getting Pumped Up . . . . . 108  
Giving Thanks . . . . . 110

**Summary** . . . . . 177

**Related Articles**

Personal Leadership . . . . . 115  
Organizational Leadership . . . . . 119  
Focusing on Solutions . . . . . 124  
Managing your Boss . . . . . 127  
Developing the Competitive Edge . . . . . 130  
Hand in Glove . . . . . 135  
The Annual Plan . . . . . 139

The Mission and Vision Statement . . . . .	145
A Different Cast of Characters . . . . .	151
Exercising Leadership . . . . .	155
Building a Disciplined Organization . . . . .	158
Freedom to Fail . . . . .	167
Getting the Right People on the Bus . . . . .	171
The Ultimate Value of People . . . . .	175

## **SERVICE BREAKDOWN**

### **A Failure of Leadership**

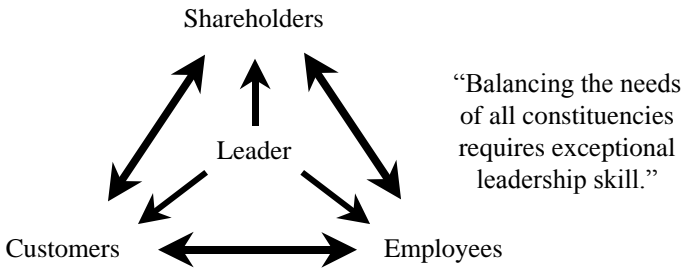
After thirty plus years in the hospitality business in both hotels and private clubs, I can state categorically that poor service comes from poor leadership. Show me an operation with poor, shoddy, inconsistent service, and I'll show you an organization with a failure of leadership. This observation flows from the understanding that leaders who recognize service problems in their organization will take corrective action. They will establish a plan of action, set priorities, lead employees to execute the plan, and follow through to completion.

Why, then, is poor service so often the rule rather than the exception? I have met many competent, hard-working, and professional general managers who voiced a clear and unequivocal service vision for their operations. They understood the need for well-defined standards, thorough training of employees, and constant reinforcement of service ideals within their organizations. Yet, they struggle to establish and maintain high standards of service. While we all recognize the many demands on our time, the challenge of employee turnover, the training burden in a detail-intensive business, time constraints, and ever-present budget pressures, these are not the root problem.

In examining this challenge that never seems to go away, I believe I have discovered the most significant source of the problem – the lack of well developed and consistent leadership skills among subordinate managers, those who direct the day-

balance these competing needs. If one gets out of balance, the other two suffer.

For example, employees are unhappy with poor working conditions and request a new break area. Shareholders don't want to bear the expense. Poor employee morale affects the customers who sense hostility and a less-than-helpful attitude. Customers pick up on the bad vibes and take their business elsewhere. The decrease in sales reduces profit and ultimately the shareholders' return on investment. Everyone is unhappy and blames the leader.



Not only must you be an outstanding leader, capable of maintaining a positive attitude in the face of daily challenges, but you must also remain focused on goals, lead by inspiration and example, and hold employees accountable for results. Further, you must be able to maintain this effort and pace over the long haul. Clearly, this requires men and women of uncommon talent, dedication, drive, and temperament.



In extreme cases, new supervisors believe that it is only through their efforts that progress is made, that employees can't be trusted, that goals can only be achieved by driving people hard, and that discipline is the only way to keep staff in line. Quite naturally, these attitudes create an environment where employees are fearful. Such fear-based management is damaging to your service team and, ultimately, to the company. Consider the case of Michael, an eager first-time supervisor.

*Michael was a bright and ambitious recent graduate of a respected university. He was hired based upon his enthusiasm, energy, and obvious intelligence. The company expected great things of him.*

*Sure enough, there were immediate results. He analyzed his department's operation and identified areas for improvement. He presented his superiors with a detailed action plan and a timeline for accomplishment. As the months passed, he met each deadline and his department's numbers were showing a definite positive trend. Senior management could not have been more pleased. Michael was quickly establishing himself as a rising star in the company.*

*However, seven months after Michael started, his assistant manager, Willard, a longstanding and trusted employee, abruptly resigned. In his exit interview with Human Resources, Willard was bitter in his denunciation of Michael and of the company for hiring him and failing to properly supervise him.*

*It seems that Michael's meteoric success had been built upon a hard-nosed, bullying management style. He frequently flew into tirades if his employees did not perform to his*

*state, Maggie was asked by her General Manager to take over the position.*

Your success in balancing the needs of those you serve lies in ensuring that you build strong relationships with individuals. How do you do this? Begin by:

- Treating everyone you meet with courtesy, respect, and good cheer.
- Focusing on each person you deal with as if he or she were the most important person in the world.
- Taking the time to get to know people; sharing your time and attention with them.
- Learning about other people's jobs and the challenges and difficulties they face.
- Keeping promises and following through on commitments.
- Being principled, showing fairness, and demonstrating integrity.
- Recognizing the ultimate value of people in all you do.

Relationships depend upon how you view yourself in relation to others. If you see yourself as separate and apart from your constituencies, if you view others as the means to your end, if your vision and goals lack a broader purpose than your own needs and ambitions, establishing meaningful relationships will be impossible. On the other hand, when you see yourself as part of a team with a shared mission, then a sense of service will be an intrinsic part of your service team relationships.

## **BECOMING A SERVICE-BASED LEADER**

By conscientiously following and practicing the principles of leadership, by working to develop the traits of service-based leadership, you can become an effective leader in any situation. As a first-time leader in a service industry, your focus should be on those employees who make up your service team.

### Leading Your Service Team

Line employees are the most important staff a company has because they interface directly with customers. Their daily performance in meeting customers' needs establishes and maintains a company's good name and reputation. Clearly their performance is critical to a company's success.

Shoddy, surly, disorganized, and inconsistent service are clear signs of a lack of leadership. Employees are not to blame; rather it is management that must be held accountable. Conversely, high standards of service flow naturally from effective leaders. Your service team's performance is a direct result of your leadership. This leadership must include taking personal responsibility, possessing the will to lead, owning your failures, effectively utilizing your resources, and knowing your limits.

## The Freedom of Taking Personal Responsibility

Personal freedom is often thought of as the absence of responsibility. In this respect, no one is free. Everyone is responsible for and to someone else. There is, however, a freedom that comes from accepting personal responsibility for oneself and one's sphere of influence.

When you blame no one else for the challenges you face, when you realize that where you stand today is the result of all your past decisions and indecision, you look to the true source of any difficulties. It is never the undefined "they." It is always the ever present "I."

Realizing this is the true source of your freedom. Instead of being buffeted to and fro by uncontrollable forces, you accept the power of your own authority. For good or ill, you are the one in charge of your life.

For the supervisor, this means that, as you seek opportunity, you also take responsibility for all aspects of your duties. Size up those around you: your superiors, peers, and employees. If they demonstrate responsibility, learn to depend upon them. If they don't, find ways to compensate for their inadequacies. In the case of your employees, take action as necessary.

In the end, you are the only one responsible for your success or failure. If something goes wrong, there is always more you could have done. In the case of the truly unexpected event, it's not so much what went wrong as how you respond to it. Instead of blaming circumstances or others, take responsibility to make things right. By accepting this degree of

## Manage Your Boss

*Randy was the long-standing maintenance supervisor in a hotel that I was hired to manage. My first impressions of him were not good. The property was poorly maintained and he always had excuses for the many problems of the hotel.*

*As I began to dig deeper and deeper into the challenges of the hotel, Randy took to stopping by my office each morning. While I was anxious to learn as much as I could from him, each morning became a litany of complaints, usually that he did not have the necessary tools, staff, or time to take care of all the things for which his department was responsible. Frequently, he disparaged his employees and their lack of necessary skills. Further, I had the distinct sense that Randy was looking to me for solutions to his problems, both real and imagined.*

*After repeated attempts to prod Randy into positive action, I had a serious heart-to-heart with him. In particular I told him that if I had to make all his decisions and solve his problems, I clearly didn't need him. Unexpectedly he resigned on the spot. While surprised by his sudden action, I was relieved to see him go. On an interim basis, I appointed John, his assistant, to run the department.*

*From the day he took over, John made a huge difference. He reorganized the department, held weekly meetings with his staff, presented me with requests for tools and equipment supported by detailed justification and cost/benefit analyses, established a new work order system, met with department heads to foster improved communications, designed a guest*

*Less than six months after he was hired, Tony suddenly quit. The job had taken a tremendous toll on him physically and emotionally. While Tony's cooking was spectacular, his leadership and interpersonal skills were sadly lacking. He had alienated other departments and his own staff was happy to see him go.*

*In many ways Tony's story was a tragedy. He was incredibly talented, yet had a serious overarching flaw. He could not direct or even get along with others. Repeated counseling could not help him see the light. I could only hope that someday his disappointments would cause him to examine this failing.*

People are complex and unique. They have their own ideas, experiences, and problems. As a leader you have to get them to accept the goals, standards, procedures, and culture of the company. If you do nothing else well as a leader, you must manage people well. The following ideas will help you to direct your employees:

- Telling an employee to do something is only the first and smallest part of the job. Constantly remind your employees of the important things. What is seen as important to you becomes important to them. Never give the excuse that you told an employee to do something – check to ensure that it was done and done right. Check and double-check.
- When you tell employees to do something, set a deadline or give priorities, so they have some sense of how

underlying issues must be sought out, alternative solutions explored, discussions with other affected departments held, and finally, a DECISION MUST BE MADE. Even then, the solution is not complete until employees have been informed of the decision and changes have been completely implemented.

*Carolyn joined our four-star desert resort as Guest Services Manager. She came highly recommended and made an immediate impact on the operation. She was instrumental in advocating and purchasing a new computerized front office system that streamlined reservations, check-in, and housekeeping.*

*She worked long hours to make the installation a success, always scheduled herself to work on busy days, and was unfailingly pleasant to guests. Seeing Carolyn's smiling face behind the desk always gave me great comfort in knowing that everything was in good hands.*

*In time, I began to hear grumbling from Carolyn's staff, noticed an increase in departmental absenteeism, and fielded frequent guest complaints about the inefficiency of the desk staff when she was off. In a closed-door meeting requested by her staff, I discovered that Carolyn had ignored complaints about lack of proper training and problems with the system.*

*Since the new systems and procedures came easily to her, Carolyn dismissed the challenges her employees found in the system, claiming that they were "just stupid." In speaking with her about the situation, Carolyn grew defensive, blamed her staff for attitude problems, and was particularly angry that they had come to me.*

to them every day. Ask for problems; hound them for problems. If they honestly believe you will try to solve the problems they face, they will open up.

### Painting the Vision

As a leader you must have a vision of what you are trying to achieve with your operation. If you have no vision of what you want your operation to be, how it is to function, or what quality of work your employees will produce, you are merely maintaining the status quo and are providing little value to your company.

Vision is useless if not shared. Talk about it day in and day out. Vision should be so ingrained in the work lives of your employees that it is constantly on their minds. When it is, all of their abilities and efforts are directed by and toward it.

### Goal Setting

Have goals for your service team. While each leader often operates from goals that are unstated, it is far better to share them with employees. This way, every employee can assist in working toward goals.

Many companies have a strategic plan that outlines long-range goals. Using these organizational goals for guidance, develop and communicate team goals, giving employees an opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification.

You may want to establish individual goals for employees that include their input or feedback to foster a sense of ownership. This can be done during performance evaluations.



## Ensuring Pride of Ownership

Shareholders take pride in their ownership of a company. They want the company to be successful and to have standing. This is true whether the company is local or global.

Usually, the smaller the company, the greater the owner's personal stake in the company's reputation. Often in small businesses the owner's reputation is synonymous with a company's standing.

But whether large or small, it is important that employees faithfully and professionally represent their company. Unseemly, unsavory, or unprofessional conduct on the part of employees, whether on or off the job, can damage a company's standing and discredit its owners or shareholders.

On the other hand, establishing and maintaining the company's reputation for integrity, product quality, and customer service gives owners and shareholders cause for pride. It is here that you, as a supervisor, can make a difference.

In leading your service team, you have both the opportunity and the responsibility to indoctrinate your staff in the importance of the impressions they make on people in general and your customers in particular. Friendly, outgoing, courteous, and consistent service will cause customers to sing your company's praises to everyone they meet. It is also important that your leadership efforts focus on establishing and maintaining consistent quality and service.

revenue challenges. He also posted the month-to-date actual results compared to the budgeted numbers.

*It was incredible to see how this simple technique galvanized the servers into action. Every day they checked their progress and there was a continual hum of interest and excitement about their efforts to beat “the numbers.”*

*Next, the floor manager tied some simple awards into the process as further incentive. Not only did we continually exceed our revenue projections, but there was also a noticeable improvement in employees’ attitudes and enthusiasm for the job.*

### Controlling Costs

Payroll cost is the single largest expense in most service organizations. Be aware of your payroll hours on a daily basis. Keep close control of overtime. Staff schedules must reflect forecasted levels of business.

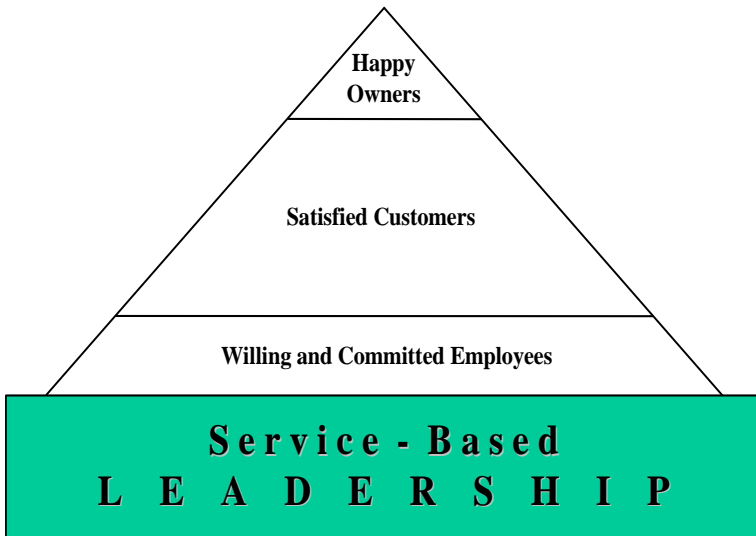
There is a natural tendency to overstaff for the expected peaks of business. Because payroll is such a large part of your expense structure, plan to fill in during busy times, thereby maintaining service while controlling payroll costs.

In order to do this you must analyze the flow of your business to determine when you should be available to step in. By routinely checking your operations during traditionally busy periods, you can readily determine if your help is needed. When you are both willing and able to step in, you build camaraderie, morale, and loyalty among your employees; help control labor costs; and ensure consistent service to customers.

Another major cost that must be controlled is consumable items. This can be done by tracking usage rates for key items

In simplest terms, when you serve your employees, they will serve your customers, who by their continued enthusiastic patronage will serve the needs of your shareholders.

The Pyramid of Successful Service depicts these relationships.



The Pyramid of Successful Service

So for every leadership position, one must identify the constituencies served. Once you have identified these, then make a list of each constituency's needs and how you and/or your unit can best serve them. In most cases you need to visit with constituents to hear directly from them what they need or expect from you.

With a clear understanding of their needs, you are in a far better position to understand and execute your responsibilities and priorities.

### **EXERCISE #2: Making Lists**

Ask your service team to make a list of the ten most frequent customer complaints and the ten most frequent customer requests. Give them several days to accomplish this. If they can't come up with ten, that's all right. The benefit in this exercise is not so much in the quantity of items, but in the overall process. Ask that they not compare their lists among themselves before giving them to you. They need not identify themselves on the lists unless they want to.

When you receive the lists, correlate and rank the complaints and requests. Share the results with your team in a meeting and ask for their input and help to address the complaints and meet the requests.

Some items will be relatively easy to deal with; others will be more complex and difficult. Involve your employees in designing solutions. Should any be too difficult or costly to resolve, share the reasons with your staff as appropriate. This exercise will accomplish several important things:

## SUMMARY

Developing sound leadership skills is an evolutionary process. No one is perfect. Errors are made, but if you face them you will learn from your mistakes. The gradual accumulation over time of an understanding of what makes people tick, of what motivates and de-motivates, of what does and doesn't work, will eventually develop into a storehouse of common sense.

This accumulated wisdom should bring the leader to a state of profound humility. What gets accomplished is not so much a result of your efforts, but the efforts of your willing and committed employees. Your singular role is to articulate the vision and stand aside while coaching and cheerleading.

In reviewing a career, what often stands out are not your accomplishments, their luster having diminished with distance, rather it is the meaningful relationships you forged with employees, coworkers, customers, and bosses that will remain bright in your memory.

Thinking about this points directly and dramatically to where you should focus your attention, not inwardly on yourself and your ambitions, but outwardly on the quality of your interactions with others. This is the crux of service-based leadership.

## ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

What does it mean to be an “organizational” leader? Much has been written to define what constitutes leadership, the role of the leader, and the habits of successful leaders. Though the exercise of all leadership is situational, the following traits can invariably be found in those who lead *successful* organizations.

### **Leading with a Vision**

Moving large and complex organizations in a particular direction requires the ability to formulate and articulate a vision of what the organization should be. "Selling" the vision requires constant hammering home of easy-to-grasp themes. Without the "big picture" sense of direction, employees become lost in the day-to-day detail and monotony of their jobs. Leaders must engage with employees on all levels and view such interaction as an opportunity to "spread the gospel."

### **Transforming Vision into Day-to-day Action:**

Long range vision must be broken down into a concrete plan of action for managers and supervisors at all levels. Annual plans, performance reviews, and goal setting sessions play an important part in establishing and communicating near and long term objectives. Many organizational failures result from faulty or inadequate communication of the vision. Informed employees are better employees. Leaders should strive to create an environment that facilitates communication flow where superiors and subordinates keep each other informed, quality and performance standards are communicated,

## About the Author

Ed Rehkopf is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and he received a Masters of Professional Study degree in Hospitality Management from Cornell's School of Hotel Administration. During his long and varied career, he has managed two historic, university-owned hotels, managed at a four-star desert resort, directed operations for a regional luxury-budget hotel chain, opened two golf and country clubs, and currently manages projects and directs communication and training for East West Partners Club Management.

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