

Customer Perceptions of Workplace Incivility in Singapore

Introduction

Workplace rudeness and incivility are current problems that are widespread and on the rise. In a poll conducted by the U.S. News and World Report on incivility and bullying in the workplace, 89% of respondents felt that incivility was a serious problem and 78% believed that it had worsened in the last decade (Marks, 1996). Another study conducted by University of Michigan researcher Lilia Cortina and her colleagues from two other universities that collected data from 1,180 public sector employees also reported that nearly 71% of the respondents experienced workplace incivility in the previous 5 years (Cortina et al, 2001). This trend is also found to exist widely in Asian workplaces (Yeung & Griffin, 2009). Using data procured from the Hewitt's Best Employers in Asia 2007 exercise, Yeung & Griffin, (2009) found that 77% of respondents experienced uncivil behaviour from coworkers, including peers, managers and senior leaders. Bad manners and rudeness at work destroys workplace relationships and hinders productivity and job commitment, which can limit an organisation's success. Especially for hospitality establishments such as hotels and restaurants, workplace incivility pose inherent challenges that will hinder service excellence. We suspect that hotels and restaurants in Singapore are not fully aware that workplace incivility could cause their share of the local workforce to become less productive and inefficient. This exploratory study in Singapore aims to examine whether workplace incivility is prevalent in Singapore hospitality organisations, wholly from the perspective of the customers.

Literature Review

Incivility can be defined as "rudeness or discourteousness; to act rudely and to be discourteous without regard for others" (official definition obtained from Oxford dictionary). Andersson & Pearson (1999) described workplace incivility as "low intensity deviant behaviour in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect, characterised by rudeness, discourteousness and a lack of regard for others" (p. 457). Workplace incivility may not necessarily be full-on aggressive. This subtle, rather than overt form of deviant behaviour, can be verbal, passive and indirect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Examples of rudeness at work include not greeting or acknowledging a colleague at the office, undermining a co-worker's credibility in front of others, starting an email without a salutation, interrupting a co-worker speaking to someone else,

shouting at a co-worker or superior, arriving late, making inappropriate attire decisions for the specific work environment, taking the last cup of coffee without making more (Pearson, 1999a), or leaving a jammed printer for someone else to fix (Johnson & Indvik, 2001). These seemingly trivial acts can relentlessly "erode collegial working relationships" (Johnson & Indvik, 2001) and may be a precursor to workplace aggression and violence (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003).

Causes Of Incivility At Work

Over the past decade, the combination of organisational, socio-cultural and technological factors has changed the nature of work, contributing to a significant surge in workplace incivility (Farkas & Johnson, 2002; Pearson et al, 2000). The authors (Forni et al, 2003; Johnson & Indvik, 2001; and Graham, 1993) found that work-related stress has been the main catalyst for workplace incivility. A Cambridge University study (cited in Johnson & Indvik, 2001, p. 708) revealed that respondents in all types of occupations reportedly faced a significantly-increased pace of work in the past five years. Business factors contributing to organisational changes such as downsizing and budget cuts requiring workers to multi-task and accept increased workloads with minimal managerial assistance as well as job insecurity, have contributed to increased workplace stress (Moddie & Borthwick, 1999). Furthermore, productivity-driven companies adopt result-oriented performance measurements that set goals beyond previous limits (Johnson & Indvik, 2001). Not surprisingly, these goal-driven, overworked and thoroughly stressed workers develop impatient and curt behaviours in their work environments. In a worrying finding, 40% of respondents in a survey conducted by Pearson & Porath (2004) viewed acts of civility as being too time-consuming. The mounting evidence has shown that work pressures fuel uncivil behaviour and co-workers are venting their frustrations on one another, in an unprecedented way that would never have been condoned before (Pearson & Porath, 2004; and Johnson & Indvik, 2001).

Other researchers argue that the less formal organisational culture - a reflection of the informality of society today - has also contributed to the increase in incivility at work (Gonthier,

2002; and Andersson & Pearson, 1999). The flattening of organisational structures and less autocratic management styles also play pivotal roles in eroding long-standing workplace norms and values. Without obvious cues about respect and politeness, employees become unsure of what connote acceptable and unacceptable business behaviours (Morand, 1998). Some examples are greeting one another using a flippant “yeah,” and neglecting to say “thank you” and “please” when requesting help or attention. Consequently in a vicious cycle, co-workers gradually stop being cordial towards each other and common day-to-day professional conduct and courtesies like respect and politeness that were once fundamental values, are now increasingly not being observed.

Furthermore, with the advancement of technology in the last millennium, face-to-face interactions are increasingly unnecessary. Consequently, people are more competent in dealing with machines and software than human relations (Weststaff, 2007). This has eroded the fabric of workplace civility and the need to be people-oriented in order to create harmony in the environment and to achieve common work goals.

The Negative Effects Of Incivility

Johnson & Indvik (2001) revealed that rude employees and managers could cost a company millions of dollars annually. Incivility amongst co-workers can result in adverse effects on productivity, employee retention and service delivery. Yeung and Griffin (2009) state that employee commitment and their willingness to strive for organisational success are significantly affected by whether they are treated with respect and dignity in the workplace. We can infer that an unpleasant working environment characterised by incivility and an inability between colleagues to harness mutual respect will directly affect employee productivity. Pearson (1999) found that 22% of the workforce deliberately decreased their work effort as a result of workplace incivility. Studies also reveal that individuals have a tendency to treat others as they are treated, making the golden rule a universally applicable principle. Employees experiencing workplace incivility are therefore less likely to offer professional and courteous service to their customers (Gonthier, 2002). This phenomenon can have damaging consequences for service-oriented industries like the hospitality and tourism industry.

Consequences Of Incivility In Hospitality Businesses

The hospitality and tourism industry is a multibillion-dollar industry and is a key driver of economic growth for many countries. In Singapore, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has set targets to lure 17 million tourists and triple annual tourism revenue to \$30 billion by 2015 (STB, 2005). To achieve STB's target, it is imperative for hospitality businesses in Singapore to promote a culture of service excellence, raise service standards and provide unforgettable experiences for tourists and locals. Although Singapore may have climbed up to the 10th position in international service rankings, a report in The Straits Times revealed that customer satisfaction levels here have dipped compared to 2007 (Lim, 2009: The Straits Times). The survey conducted by the Singapore Management University's Institute of Service Excellence found that hotel and accommodation services recorded the biggest drop in customer satisfaction levels by 2.4 points to 68.6 out of 100. The next worst-performing was the food and beverage sector that showed a decline of 2.3 points to 65.4. These findings are a huge cause for concern for the Singapore Government, who have invested vast amounts of money over the past few years to launch service campaigns like Going the Extra Mile (GEMS) and the Excellence Service Awards (EXSA) that recognise service providers for their efforts in embracing service excellence qualities. Despite these national campaigns and government initiatives, a survey conducted by the Workforce Development Agency (WDA) in 2007 revealed that only 52% of business decision-makers were motivated to inculcate a service-oriented culture within their organisations. These reluctant key stakeholders could hinder Singapore from sustaining world-class service excellence since transforming Singapore into a service-oriented society requires a holistic approach that includes educating stakeholders to build a gracious and civil environment. Only then will this environment encourage service excellence at all levels of interaction amongst service providers.

Pine & Gilmore (1999) find that guest expectations today are dramatically different from those of previous years. Guests of today seek experiences that are personalised according to their needs, responses and personality traits. In his article about the current needs of hotel

consumers published in the Hotel Yearbook 2009, Christopher Norton, Regional Vice President and General Manager of the Four Seasons Hotel George V, firmly believes that “these sophisticated consumers and more educated critics expect service staff to be genuine providers of human, warm, friendly, humble and super efficient service” (Hotel Yearbook, 2009, p.2). They are extremely sensitive to the quality of service they receive and are not prepared to compromise on service that is inconsistent, inattentive and disengaged. In order to make a positive difference to guest experiences through consistent delivery of excellent service, hospitality companies require a workforce comprising gracious, courteous and cohesive employees that can work well together (Norton, 2009). The actions of just one employee can send guests away with a negative memory of an establishment. This means that the permeation of incivility amongst hospitality workers can have dire consequences on the industry as a whole. Employees who witness or become aware of acts of incivility may model the deviant behaviour in their interactions with co-workers or customers. Consequently, deviant behaviour and patterns of interaction become part of the organisational culture. This can potentially spiral into increasingly intense hostility and aggressive behaviours (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) that can be devastating for the hotel and restaurant businesses. In these businesses, the need for civility becomes even greater when the interactions among people increase in complexity and frequency (Carter, 1998; Chen & Eastman, 1997; Elias, 1982; Erickson, 1962; Goffman, 1967).

Scheuing (1996) maintains that it is essential for organisations to create a service culture that promotes service excellence and team spirit among employees, so that they render exceptional service to each other in order to extend the same quality of service to their customers. This is strongly advocated by J.W. Marriot who stated; “Take care of your employees and they will take care of your customers” (Marriot & Brown, 1997, p. 34). In fact, the essential service strategy of award-winning companies such as Mary Kay and the Ritz-Carlton is to create a work environment where employees at all levels are expected to follow the golden rule and to treat each other with respect and dignity (Yeung, 2006). These values that promote internal service excellence have a significant impact on external guest service delivery.

As such, it is critical for hospitality companies to create the right service culture among their

employees that will in turn result in customer-oriented behaviour towards both external and internal customers (Paraskevas, 2001). Within such a culture, the fundamental values of civility and mutual respect among staff create a positive emotional workgroup climate that supports them on an ongoing basis as they deal with difficult customers or situations (Hartel, Gough & Hartel, 2006). Such a supportive service climate enhances job satisfaction and encourages constructive engagement with the customers (Schneider et al, 2005), thereby bringing about increased customer satisfaction and positive engagement.

Additionally, there is growing evidence that positive behaviour among service providers cultivates positive customer perceptions (Lemmink & Mattsson, 2002). Customers have a tendency to use tangible cues such as courtesy, responsiveness, competence and positive interpersonal skills to infer superior service quality (Bitner, 1990 and Hartline & Jones, 1996). Although the providence of products and services consists of many attributes, consumers tended to base their overall perception of quality on just a few notable attributes, and in some cases, just one is suffice to steer customer judgment and opinion (Olshavsky, 1995 & Zeithaml, 1998).

Factors such as employee courtesy and billing errors have a significant impact on customer perception of service quality (Bolton & Drew, 1991). Previous research has also suggested that the overall measure of quality and value are attitudinal and develop over time (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Boulding et al, 1993 & Zeithaml, 1998). This means that the behavioural and attitudinal characteristics of just one employee can alter a customer's perception of the overall service experience. In addition, an employee's general attitude towards their co-workers and the organisation has significant impact on the perceived service quality for customers. Good employee behaviour and relationships have been linked with increased perception of service quality whereas poor employee behaviour has been linked with increased complaints and brand switching (Darden & Babin, 1994; Keaveney, 1995; Zeithaml et al, 1996). This is why the authors feel that it is pertinent that the issue of workplace incivility has to be addressed and solutions expounded upon, given the comprehensive body of literature that points to the adverse effects that this has on customer satisfaction, brand loyalty and overall productivity.

Despite the existing literature and research about the negative effects of workplace incivility, this problem is not well-understood and many companies choose to ignore this problem (Waggoner, 1998), or choose not to recognise it as an issue that requires attention (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). This is particularly damaging for hospitality companies since incivility amongst co-workers can critically hinder the ability of staff in delivering excellent service to their customers. Furthermore, acts of incivility when witnessed by customers, have a significant impact on their experience and could quickly alter their perception of the organisation's service quality, resulting in the aforementioned problems of lodged complaints and brand switching. However, little research has been conducted on the customers' perception of the prevalence of workplace incivility within hospitality organisations, specifically in hotel and restaurant establishments. We suspect that hotels and restaurants in Singapore are not fully aware that workplace incivility could cause their share of the local workforce to become less productive and inefficient. This exploratory study in Singapore aims to examine whether workplace incivility is prevalent in Singapore hospitality organisations, wholly from the perspective of the customers. The authors chose hospitality customers as research subjects because they recognise the importance of unearthing and monitoring customer response over workplace incivility and negative work culture. This carry-over phenomenon has direct impact on the success of any hospitality organisation, given the emphasis on impeccable seamless service within the industry. Within the context of this study, customers at 5-star hotels and premium restaurants were surveyed because of their strong hospitality culture and commitment to customer orientation and service excellence.

Methodology

Research data was collected via a combination of purposive and convenience sampling methods. The channels include online questionnaire surveys and face-to-face interviews. The online platforms include "surveymonkey.com" and electronic restaurant and dining guide "yum.sg". A total of 38 people responded to the online survey while 32 face-to-face interviews were conducted with guests of hotels and restaurants.

This section presents the data collection and data analysis procedures used in the study. The objectives of this research study were to:

- (I) identify if there is workplace incivility prevalent in the service industry;
- (II) identify if there is a relationship between workplace incivility and service encounters.

Given the exploratory nature of the research study, the data was collected through a combination of online questionnaire surveys and a semi-structured interview format.

As the study was conducted from the customer's perceptions, the responses were collected from the customers instead of the employees. An important advantage this brought was objectivity and decreased social desirability bias, a problem that would have been greater if the research was conducted directly with hospitality employees in their workplace. Reynolds and Harris (2006) have also emphasised that the frequency and closeness of contact with a customer in the hospitality industry makes it an appropriate site for field research.

The online platforms included "surveymonkey.com" and an electronic restaurant and dining guide "yum.sg". For "surveymonkey.com", an informal group of frequent patrons of the hospitality industry was approached to participate in the survey. For "yum.sg" - a popular and high traffic online restaurant and dining guide - subjects were approached through the director of the portal.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted on various occasions, with each interview lasting between 10 to 15 minutes. Interviewees were given a short briefing before the interview to introduce them to the objectives of the study and the profile of the researchers. This information was repeated at the beginning of each interview. As personal demographics are immaterial to the findings, interviewees were not required to provide any personal information and this also

worked to assure them that the information provided would be kept anonymous and confidential.

For consistency, the questions asked during the face-to-face interview were the same set of questions asked in the online questionnaire survey. The questions were designed for simple identification of civility traits within the short encounter that the customer has with the service employee.

Results

The results indicated that guests perceived a prevalence of workplace incivility. From the survey, 11.4% of the respondents felt that co-workers did not display courteousness and friendliness to each other while 34.3% of respondents perceived that courteousness and friendliness were only displayed sometimes. Although 68.6% of the respondents experienced being greeted and acknowledged by service staff, only 31.4% of the respondents perceived that co-workers greeted and acknowledged each other.

The results also showed that 2.9% of respondents perceived that staff exhibited rudeness through interruption from co-workers when staff were attending or speaking with guests while 15.7% perceived that this type of incivility were exhibited sometimes. In addition, 4.3% of respondents perceived that co-workers were impatient towards each other and 17.1% of respondents perceived that co-workers were impatient to each other sometimes.

Furthermore, out of the 23 respondents who encountered problems with service delivery, 30.4% of them felt that the service staff did not take ownership of problems and were quick to delegate problems to other co-workers to manage.

Conclusion

This study has shown that, based on respondent perceptions, workplace incivility is prevalent to a large extent in Singapore's 5-star hotels and premium restaurants. Customers are not oblivious to the nature of the service environment and how service staff interact with each other. As perceived by customers, even the most basic acts of civility and respect such as greeting and acknowledgment were not practiced widely among the staff of Singapore's 5-star hotels and restaurants. In line with the literature review, this may be due to the fact that hotel and restaurant staff are too busy to observe these basic courtesies or that informal organisational cultures resulted in overly casual relationships where staff found it unnecessary to greet or acknowledge each other (Pearson & Porath, 2004 and Johnson & Indvik, 2001).

What is of great concern within the findings is that courteousness and friendliness, considered to be the most basic and critical service values of hospitality employees, were not consistently demonstrated by Singaporean hospitality staff towards both their external and internal guests. This lack of consistent display of critical service fundamentals of courteousness and friendliness will undoubtedly cripple Singapore's quest for service distinction on a global level. Furthermore, the prevalence of rudeness and impatience amongst co-workers as well as the reluctance of service workers to take ownership of problems encountered by guests could erode collegial working relationships, hinder cohesiveness and hamper service efficiencies. We suspect that, the prevalence of workplace incivility could have resulted in a drop in service performance that in turn could have led to the decline in the customer service index ratings that has been observed recently, as mentioned earlier in this paper. However, we feel that key stakeholders (i.e., the local government, hospitality business owners and general managers) here are unaware of the devastating effects that workplace incivility can have on the success of hospitality businesses in their quest to achieve service excellence. What must be prevented is the further spiralling of increased hostility and uncivil behaviour that becomes the norm within the organisational cultures of Singapore's hotels and restaurant businesses.

Rather than focusing on service delivery skills and strategies, perhaps STB should ensure that hotels and restaurants pay greater emphasis in inculcating a strong internal service culture that embraces civility and values of courteousness, respect and consideration amongst their staff. This will help to raise Singapore's service standards and promote a culture of service

excellence. As such, it is important that hospitality establishments accord as much attention to their internal service culture as they do for their external service culture. With the increased emphasis on continued learning and professional and personal development, many pertinent training programmes have been introduced and there is no lack of courses that teach the fundamentals of service excellence. If STB could look into going a step further and engaging trainers to conduct programmes that move beyond external service excellence to also focus on internal service excellence, it would be an important milestone to establishing distinction in overall service quality.

Practical Implications and Future Research Suggestions

This exploratory study introduces a different perspective to help Singapore understand the greater problems underlying the gaps in service delivery and the consequential decline the Republic has attained in the customer service index. The findings of this exploratory research study have practical implications for the hospitality businesses in Singapore and their contribution to the long-term health of the economy. It would have been preferable to have had a larger sample size from specific hotels and restaurants. Future studies can be made to draw a direct correlation between internal service cultures of specific hotels and restaurants, and the prevalence of workplace incivility and guests' perception of service quality. For a direct causal relationship to be established, an experimental study will have to be conceptualised and carried out; although it will prove challenging to do so, this is something STB should consider exploring if they wish to prove that workplace incivility truly is a factor that will undermine service excellence and affect the tourism industry consequently.

Through this study we can see that it is in the interest of hospitality companies in Singapore to limit workplace incivility. Sometimes incivility happens despite the definitive service values instilled in their staff members by hotels and restaurants. These organisations need to understand the greater problems that lead to workplace incivility and create training programs that help staff practice workplace civility and set up processes to prevent incivility and the corresponding deviant behaviour.

For a follow-up study, surveying employees in the said 5-star hotel and restaurant establishments will also be ideal. If stringent research methods and measures can be put in place to ensure that social desirability biases and the fear employers might have that their staff would be negatively affected by the study can be prevented, such a study would go far in partnering this current one in examining the harmful effects of workplace incivility. Should the follow-up study be accomplished, a cross-analysis can be conducted to combine the results of the two studies and draw relevant correlations that are both valid and reliable.

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