

# Chapter 2

## Business sector as trendsetters

In this context, business sector is defined as the all-encompassing entrepreneurial community ranging from small, micro to medium and large-scale enterprises including quasi-government business enterprises and multi-national corporations. Even the street corner spaza shop and flea-market stall are included because they are spurred by the same fundamental goal of profit-making.

### SERVICE EXCELLENCE BENCHMARK

The fact that I am a corporate manager with more than two decades' experience obviously makes me biased towards that arena. My conviction is that much against the wishes of the idealist, this world measures success on the basis of materialism, be it cash or acquisitions from it. This applies equally to individuals, organisations and nations. Hence the perpetual love-hate relationship between the rich and poor nations of the world. If money plays such a pivotal role in shaping the world pecking order, credence ought to be given to the fundamental conditions that make it abundant. Without entering the controversial debate of development economics, I will proffer the hypothesis that those organisations and individuals operating in terms of free market forces in an openly competitive environment serve as the real benchmark for service excellence. If they do not meet the needs of their customers, they are eliminated by competition. Therefore, they have to remain excellent to survive.

### 'GOOD SERVICE' IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH

When someone says he or she had given good service to a customer, he or she should not feel inclined to brag about it. All that person has done is to

earn his or her pay honestly by performing to an acceptable level. One gets an accolade only when one has rendered customer service excellence by going the extra mile to the extent that the customer says, 'Wow – I did not expect this.' Too often people are satisfied with good service, which leads to compromised standards. An example of 'good service not being good enough' is this incident. In the very recent past I travelled to East Africa with a business colleague. We were booked into an established inter-continental five-star hotel and arrived around suppertime. We were received by friendly front-office staff who seemed to be working hard but the queue of waiting customers never seemed to end. My associate was served first but not given his room keycard, being told the room was not ready. I was served sometime later and got my room keycard. We went to eat first and came back to collect his key two hours later. He went to his room but the electronic keycard could not open it. On reporting this to the front office, an apology was duly extended but it took the staff three trips to the room three floors up with umpteen different cards before the door could open. After spending ten hours flying including in transit waiting, this delay in getting to bed was not appreciated. Incidentally, the following evening, it happened again until a major discovery was made that the card coding was not the correct mode for a room with an adjoining one.

Service excellence is an all-round overwhelming phenomenon incorporating the time taken to serve, the quality of the product or service, the form and speed of delivery as well as the perception of value for money elicited in the customer. This is predicated upon the old adage that the customer is king. Is this still true in this day and age? The answer is an unequivocal 'Yes' and even more so because customers today have immense power to destroy a poor service provider through the many means at their disposal, led by the abundance of information technology. Thus an unhappy customer no longer just has a high nuisance value but is now an assassin to the provoking enterprise. It still remains an interesting paradox that a satisfied customer tells at most three other people about it, and then only when the subject comes up, but a dissatisfied one will voluntarily tell

ten others. The multiplier effect of bad news is incredible. Let us turn to a simple example of service excellence. Three years ago I went to a restaurant specialising in Portuguese cuisine, in Johannesburg, South Africa. After dinner we were politely requested to complete a service questionnaire, which was quite simple and basic. However, since then my wife and I both receive a personal letter two weeks prior to our birthdays, containing birthday wishes and offering a discount for the birthday dinner plus a personalised cake. Each time we have tested them out and they have duly met our expectations. It is a foregone conclusion that this unexpected service gesture has converted our whole family to that restaurant.

## TEN BEHAVIOURS FOR SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Service excellence has a direct cause-effect relationship with good management practices. Customer service occurs within a particular context in society which can be either highly structured, like a business firm, or a loose formal entity like a community organisation. To both situations there are common fundamentals. These entail the existence of customers or claimants for and recipients of some service or product from the organisation. Second, there ought to be leadership which defines the organisational parameters to create and deliver the requisite service or product. Third, within the organisational boundaries there must be some frontline members who dispense service and receive instant feedback from customers. Thus they have the power of information to instantly improve service levels or impair them. These frontliners are the service champions who make things happen to fulfil the mission of the organisation. (This concept will be extrapolated in the next section to emphasise the profit-making business entity as the pivotal instrument of creating wealth in free enterprise societies.)

Business management is neither rocket science nor a mysterious back-to-the-future whirlwind. It is all about people, as customers, as employees,

as relevant key publics, or as management. If you understand people, together with the forces at play in all these various categories and you are able to blend them into an equilibrium of strategic fit, you are more than halfway to best practice management. Expanding on the philosophy of people skills as the bedrock of service excellence, let us share the critical behaviours to be inculcated in each person who is in a service capacity directly or otherwise. These were adapted from Jan Carlzon (1987).

- 1 *Every service person must always have the big picture of the cause-effect relationship of his or her actions. It is important to start every transaction with the end in mind. This will guide his or her behaviour in handling the situation and all its ramifications. Experience has shown that staff who have knowledge of the desired outcome of their contribution serve customers better.*
- 2 *Understand the needs of the customer and communicate effectively with them. Knowledge is different from understanding. It could even be a self-centred definition of what you perceive as needs which may not be the correct ones. Many people are so oriented towards sales that they try to force the customer to buy what they happen to sell, irrespective of whether it meets the customer's needs or not. The preferred service hero must have a marketing orientation that dictates that the customer's needs must be identified first and effort concentrated on satisfying them.*
- 3 *Customer-care people must have and always display a passion for service. They must be self-regulating and self-guiding to use their reflexes appropriately as each situation demands. Self-discipline is imperative to enable compliance with the fundamental written and implicit rules of customer service.*
- 4 *Develop a constantly learning mode to be ahead of changes in service techniques. Incremental, small improvements are no longer sufficient to cope with today's fast pace environment. Periodical quantum leaps are now the desired form of change. A proactive service provider continuously learns from the best relevant situations and people.*

- 5 *Always show real eagerness to make a difference for the better in every business situation. Whether you are an office cleaner, a taxi driver, a messenger, an administrator or a manager, aim to make a contribution towards improved service in every interpersonal transaction. The moment of truth is the first point of interpersonal contact between a customer and the service provider. The initial 30 seconds are critical in forming a favourable first impression by the customer. At this juncture, employees, irrespective of level of seniority in the organisation, are the de facto representatives of their organisation. They cannot pass the buck to blame the company for poor service. There is never a later chance to make a lasting impression. This is the point where the rubber meets the road. If not well handled, the friction can be most damaging.*
- 6 *Many products today are very similar either in performance or features, as a result of convergence of production technology. Therefore, the main differentiation is value adding through service and quality. All employees must possess these value-adding skills and be empowered to employ them at all times. Thus, the rigid structures of the past which curtailed creativity in staff are contrary to the philosophy of service excellence. Sales people continue to sell products while customers want to buy relationships.*
- 7 *The spirit of serving others demands real inherent respect for other people. You cannot render excellent service to a person to whom you have a condescending attitude. You must serve because you derive absolute pleasure from it and not just money. Needless to say there is no room for racism or prejudice in service excellence. There is no end to the road to quality and service.*
- 8 *Break out of the traditional service mould. Shake off the stereotypes and prejudices based on history that dictate only a certain way of doing things. Service excellence comes from mavericks who defy tradition to do things differently. Tradition must be vigorously challenged constantly to promote a new way of doing things. You cannot dispense service excellence while you are a slave to a precedent set in the last century.*

- 9 *Consistency and perseverance make a most potent cocktail for service excellence. The concept of guerrilla marketing advocates that in pursuit of service excellence you do not leave a stone unturned. Consistent effort creates a critical mass of desired customer care which ultimately breeds favourable perception by outsiders. Devoted providers of service should use this to maintain their leading edge among competition. Recipients of service are more comfortable when they can expect exactly the same service from the same source all the time.*
- 10 *Compete with yourself. Know the real standards of poor, good and excellent service. Set your standards, benchmarking with the best practices and reach for them relentlessly. It is foolhardy to compete with mediocre standards which you invariably exceed without much effort. Your inner self must be the principal driver for your success. It is often said that business is very much like tennis – those who don't serve well end up losing.*

## CONSCIOUS SABOTEURS OF SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Every day we witness less-than-perfect service incidents perpetrated by staff who are either aware of their failure or not trained to know better. Some examples illustrate this point. A year ago my family were on an afternoon excursion at one of the entertainment centres in Johannesburg which has many food outlets. My wife went to a fast-food outlet to buy a packet of fried chips. After some time she returned mumbling that she will never buy from that shop again or any of their brand name. She had stood around for nearly four minutes without any one attending to her. The manager could see her clearly but chose to call one of the staff to serve her. No one came to attend to her, instead a minute later the manager said no one could serve her since it was 16h00 and shifts were changing over. This demands the following questions: Why did the manager not serve her himself? Why should customer service be suspended for shift hand-over? Did the manager and staff have any passion to serve customers or was it only a job? How many such situations have you encountered?

A second incident involves myself at another fast food outlet on the beachfront in Durban, South Africa. I stood at the counter for three minutes unattended while the 'skinhead' manager was chatting to two other skinheads about non-business talk. Being particularly unforgiving of such discourtesy I walked away disgusted and made the usual promise never to go to that place again.

The third example of lack of customer orientation involves a real estate firm operating in the city of Pretoria in South Africa. They manage the leasing of many blocks of apartments around town. One tenant had rented one of them for over a year and she had always honoured her rent obligations. On one occasion she realised after ten days of the rent being due that a very close relation to whom she had given the money to pay rent had not paid. There was no reminder from the real estate but when she went to pay she was told that she was being evicted for non-payment. Indeed she and her three young children were kicked out of the apartment. When her supervisor, a director in a government department, intervened, the real estate personnel then became remorseful and said she could stay. The affected lady had already secured alternative accommodation and her pride urged her to decline their second-thought offer. Again these customer service questions should be asked: Why did the rules suddenly change after the government director intervened? Why did the agent not contact the customer soon after the payment date had passed to remind her? Why did they resort to eviction on a single default? A multitude of answers can be suggested, including sinister motives such as racism, insensitivity to customer needs, lack of human consideration, excessive profit emphasis and so forth, ad infinitum. The general observation is how many potential customers and goodwill did the real estate lose because of this incident? In fact, this was the best way of mortgaging their business goodwill and image for a long time in future.

Another fascinating example of commercialism prevailing over customer respect relates to commuter taxis in most African cities. Passengers are

generally packed like sardines and then told that the person at the back should collect all the fares from the passengers and give them to the driver. If the amount is short, the taxi does not leave until the discrepancy is made up. Is it not a paradox beyond reason that passengers come on board to catch a lift and pay for it, and instead are subjected to harassment and humiliation by the person whose wages they are paying?

Yet another incident of the carefree attitude by service staff happened to me only recently on one of the major airlines in Africa. A colleague and I were flying in business class, in which case one might expect a semblance of personal service. It took quite a long time for the stewards to serve us drinks, and it transpired that only one of the two was doing it. I recognised one steward from a continental flight with the same airline the previous week. I had not enjoyed his service for the four hours of that flight because he displayed the attitude that 'I am only here to do a job to please myself, not you'.

I did not tell my colleague about this, lest I should influence his attitude towards the steward. It soon became unnecessary anyway as the steward's behaviour vindicated my assessment. As he was taking so long to serve the drinks, my colleague, who sat on the aisle seat, took two drinks from the trolley stationed next to us. This is quite common practice during flights and stewards understand it.

When the steward eventually got to us, my colleague asked for some glasses. The man answered in a very matter-of-fact tone saying, 'You served yourself, Sir'. We responded saying 'But we were helping you'. An even more emphatic response from him was 'I am here to serve you'. At his mercy, he eventually gave us glasses but our appetite had already waned.

As if that was not enough, I later went into the toilet. Hardly a minute later the same steward banged the door shouting 'Hurry up, we are about to land'. You can imagine how embarrassed I was when I came out with all the other passengers looking at me in bewilderment. I had to fight the urge to grab him by the collar and respond to his discourteous behaviour in a similar manner.

Indeed, I wrote to the top management of the airline lodging a complaint against the individual but got no response. This is a classic example of how poor staff selection and lack of training lead to mediocre staff becoming senior members of the crucial cadres that are supposed to minister to the needs of customers. By default they may even get to management, which will institutionalise mediocrity permanently.

Many people experience such tardy treatment every day but let it go because they are victims of our culture of acceptance. Inculcation of the principles of excellent service examined earlier by members of society would eliminate this sabotage.

## MASTERS OF SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Indeed there are some organisations which are torch-bearers as masters of service excellence.

*Anecdote one:* A few years ago I flew Qantas Airlines from Sydney in Australia to Auckland, New Zealand. Two days later I flew back with the same stewardess. Soon after take-off she came to me and mentioned in a concerned voice that I did not look as well as I had done on the outward journey. She was so right because I had a severely upset stomach. I felt so flattered, not so much that she had noticed my unwellness (which any adult can do) but that she had taken the care to remember me and show concern. I was so pleased that a couple of hours later I felt much better. What was the magic? Simply the human touch and worth that was manifested by her approach. This demonstrates that relationships count for better customer care.

*Anecdote two:* On another occasion I flew Singapore Airlines to the Far East for the first time. A month later I flew the same route and the same beautiful stewardess in business class knew my name as I walked in and remembered my favourite beverage including the type of wine for dinner. Indeed this left me with the 'Wow' feeling.

*Anecdote three:* We are all accustomed to the tradition of motor repair workshops being restricted to the daytime hours of 07h00 to 17h00. This has become increasingly challenged by the changes of preferences and demands of society. One foreign motor manufacturer in Southern Africa grabbed the bull by the horns and introduced a 24-hour service. The reasoning of the CEO was that they were going to use industries other than motor industry to determine the best-practice benchmark. Pegging your service to another member of the industry encourages acceptance of mediocre standards. Therefore the strategy was to seek world norms and then compete with those. This is a welcome novel idea, which symbolises a departure from established practices. It is such propensity to break out of the mould which creates sustainable leadership in service excellence.

*Anecdote 4:* My fourth delightful experience involves a firm which operates a tracking system for stolen vehicles in South Africa. They fitted that system on my car, but I was unaware of the service efficiency of the firm. As part of the vehicle security, the firm obtains your full personal details and those of your partner if you have one. On one occasion the battery of my remote control unit ran out and I opened the door manually, which set off the alarm. After getting inside, the car could not start. A few minutes later my wife phoned me to check if I was fine because the tracking firm control room had phoned her and told her that my car alarm was going off, but they could not contact me on the number they had. She gave them my mobile number and immediately after that they phoned me to check what was the problem. The gentleman was polite and concerned, starting by asking me if I was physically safe and not in danger of being robbed. I explained what I had done and he told me that he suspected that it only had to do with a battery malfunction for the remote control. He advised that he had cut off the fuel supply of my car as he was not sure that I and the car were safe.

He then said he would reverse the process within two minutes and the car should start. Indeed, I started it after two minutes and he phoned back

to check and advised that I should replace the remote unit battery the next morning.

The whole episode left me with a feeling of satisfaction that this firm executed its responsibilities quite efficiently. Second, the concern and courtesy of their employee was extremely comforting. He even assured my wife that there was nothing to worry about when he first phoned her to get my phone number.

Most of our lives we are slaves to tradition and precedent which may well be out of kilter with new circumstances and thus only serve to retard progress. Contemporary corporate history shows that it is those companies which take the risk to break ranks with convention that become success stories. This theme will be demonstrated in the next showcase of the hallmark of service excellence.

## THE ART OF PLEASING PEOPLE

The organisation cited as a service excellence benchmark in the ensuing analogy is not of African origin, but has established roots on the continent, buttressed by a cadre of skilled African franchisees and staff. The organisation is McDonald's of the United States of America. From personal experience as one of the first African executives of McDonald's in South Africa, I will take time to narrate the following story.

The USA-based international quick-service restaurant giant established itself in South Africa in 1995 as the entry point into the continent. That was the 84<sup>th</sup> country on the world map it was occupying, which meant that much replication of its culture and systems. However, South Africa provided a host of challenges such as racial polarisation because of centuries of apartheid; economic and social deprivation of the African people; deeply entrenched cultural traits amongst African ethnic groupings about not eating out; a tradition of labour unrest as a vanguard of political resistance by the masses of the population and an artificially high quality of life among the white population because of the sheltered separate socio-

economic system. All these variables do, to some extent, run contrary to the art of service excellence because the playing fields of the population are uneven. These are the odds that the fast-food giant had to brave in setting up shop in South Africa.

The first distinctive feature of the organisation was its devotion to people development, commonly known as staff training. The office opened on 1 April 1995 but of the five senior managers who had signed their employment contracts in the third week of March, three had already begun to work in a country such as Turkey or Australia to start their training. Irrespective of whether one was an accountant, engineer, HR practitioner or anything else one had to undergo intensive training in a McDonald's restaurant somewhere in the world. The training could be a gruelling experience that entailed working long shifts and doing such menial work as cleaning toilets, the floor and tables. All this was designed to acclimatise the new arrival to the mainstay of the organisation, which is QSC & V. This acronym means Quality, Service, Cleanliness and Value for money to the customer. You either love it and stay, or hate it to the same extent and quit early.

Exactly a month after opening the office, some 39 South African young men and women plus three franchisees were sent for six months' training in the Far East, where McDonald's is well established. Three months later another large number followed, and this continued for 18 months. Each group would spend six months training overseas and franchisees took their entire families with them for that period. Not even one restaurant was open before November, which could prompt the simple-minded to question the wisdom of such training expenditure. However, the results of the training were far reaching for both the company and the trainees. Apart from gaining unparalleled world-class expertise in restaurant service, the personalities of the incumbents were permanently enriched by the international exposure. The company was able to transplant completely international McDonald's standards in every respect from those countries to South Africa.

Most of these trainees graduated at the Hamburger University at McDonald's headquarters in Chicago, which is a highly coveted certification in 'hamburgerology' (the art of cooking hamburgers). In practice this meant that by the time the first two restaurants opened in Johannesburg and Cape Town nine months later a highly motivated and skilled group of staff and franchisees operated those restaurants. Just to ensure first-class service all round, some 52 general staff (unskilled) were flown to the same country in the Far East for three weeks' training. It was amazing the attitudinal transformation which occurred in these young people in that short period of time.

One may now ask a myriad of questions such as: How much did this cost? Was it really necessary? Is it sustainable into the future? Is the company reaping the benefits now five years later? Did the trainees benefit? Has all this training benefited the customer?

The answer to the first question is 'millions of rands or dollars' and to the rest it is an unequivocal 'Yes'.

## INDOCTRINATION THROUGH TRAINING

It is because of the uniformity and intensity of this training that all McDonald's products look and taste the same in over 100 countries around the world. The BigMac, the chicken, beef and cheese burgers, as well as the famous French fries, are all cooked to a similar temperature in the same manner, on similar equipment and served with a similar smile. Every one of the millions of customers who patronise McDonald's restaurants around the world daily can expect the same fast and friendly service preceded by the same 'Welcome to McDonald's' remark in English, Japanese, French, Italian and any other language.

It was through the power of such training that McDonald's became the world leader in the quick-service restaurant industry. Its focus on customer service goes back to its founder, Ray Kroc, who established such a strong tradition of customer service in 1955. It became the corporate credo that

McDonald's are not in the hamburger business, but in the people service business. The moral lesson here is that customer service excellence is not achieved by accident. It is the result of systematic planning, dedication and hardwork supported by intensive training. Any normal human being is capable of learning the fundamental principles of liking, respecting and meeting customer needs in a fast and friendly way in a congenial environment.

The difference between winning business organisations and losers is primarily lack of staff training. Imagine the number of firms which are managed by people who have never attended one day of managerial training. They in turn employ unskilled people to cut costs and refuse to upgrade them for similar reasons. How many organisations do we come across daily which believe that training is a waste of money, for customers will buy their goods anyway? Indeed such organisations are by far in the majority in Africa. For this reason we are relegated to less than world-class players and we will remain net importers of skills that are supposed to be commonsense. Customer orientation demands a complete overhaul of our approach to business as Africans, to adopt a more sensitive and competitive attitude.

## RECIPE FOR SUCCESS THROUGH CUSTOMER CARE

History has proved that success is not an accident. This holds equally true for individuals, organisations, communities and nations. A certain discipline is required of market leaders at every level that involves every component of each respective entity.

The first requirement for service excellence lies in the organisational culture. It must be conducive to excelling in customer care and not inhibiting in any way. Earlier we discussed how the founder of McDonald's built a culture of quality and service excellence that became enshrined in the organisation's, philosophy. The challenge is to perpetuate this culture through the passage of time and technology. It is only possible through a

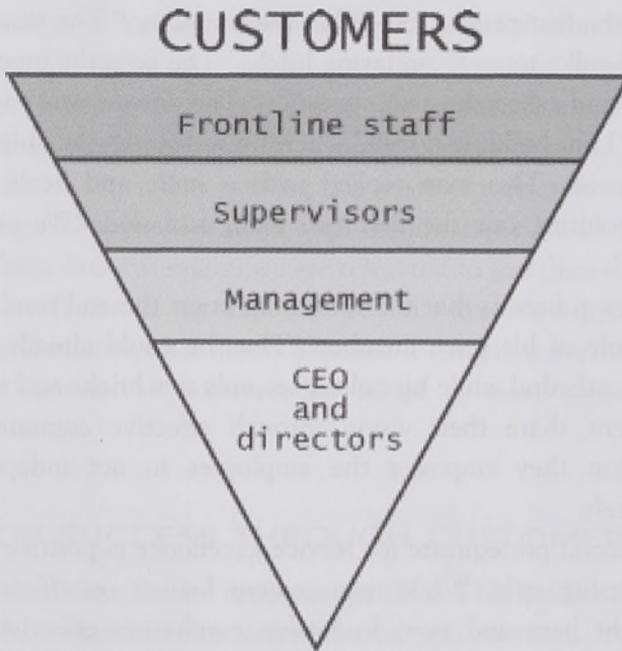
clear and concise vision shared by all employees. Often we see attractively framed vision, mission and values statements in reception areas of organisations. Recently I was very encouraged to see these in the government ministries of Uganda, South Africa and others in Africa. Understanding and commitment to the common vision motivates employees and management towards teamwork as well as supreme achievement. Here is a simple but revealing anecdote. A passerby came across three people working on a project, but they were 20 metres apart. He asked the first person: 'Sir, What are you doing?' The man answered in a dull and sulky tone: 'I am laying bricks.' The passerby proceeded to the next man and asked the same question. The answer was an uninterested but firm: 'I am building a wall.' Then he walked to the third person and asked likewise. This man replied with a smile and lively voice, using gestures pointing out the first two men, and said: 'We are building a cathedral!'

The lesson here is that the third man knew the end result of his effort and the role of his team members. Thus he could already envisage the complete cathedral while his colleagues only saw bricks and mortar. When management share their vision through effective communication and participation they empower the employees to act independently but appropriately.

The second prerequisite for service excellence is positive management and leadership style. While management focuses on efficiency or doing things right here and now, leadership emphasises effectiveness, that is doing the right things at the right time. Thus leadership promotes change in behaviour more than management. Leadership empowers every employee by delegating application of established principles and philosophy of the firm. Another example from McDonald's will help to clarify. The lowest-level employee is trained to minister to customer needs at any time. If a service attendant, commonly termed 'crew person', is unable to give you your order within 45 to 60 seconds he or she must explain it upfront. If a customer complains that the food does not meet the

standards of, say, being hot and fresh, the same employee is empowered to correct this to make the customer happy immediately.

It is important to remember that good leadership starts right at the top of the pyramid with the chairman of the board and permeates the hierarchy downwards to the frontline supervisor. This philosophy of management as service leaders and frontline staff as service heroes can be depicted by the concept of the inverted organisation chart below.



This organogram has several benefits over the traditional one of an upright pyramid. These are:

- *It encourages two-way communication between customers and front-line staff.*
- *Frontliners are empowered to be real service heroes.*
- *The CEO (euphemistically called 'chief empowerment officer') exists to create an enabling environment for all staff to serve the customer well.*

- *It really makes the customer a king in the business.*
- *Top management commitment to service excellence is assured.*

Third, staff are the alpha and omega of service excellence. When willing, they are living advertisements for company products, but when scorned they can be crippling saboteurs. A simple tried-and-tested theory is that satisfied and happy staff will transfer their satisfaction directly to the customer. The same theory applies in reverse to a disgruntled employee. It is more of an uphill battle to win a single new customer than to retain existing ones. However, for a company to keep abreast of inflationary trends in Africa, it must increase its sales by at least 20% per annum. No wonder that the mortality rate of organisations is considerable in this part of the world.

High employee productivity and commitment to customers begins with sowing the right seed. This means if you recruit people with either the right skills or the potential for a good fit you are well onto the winning formula. Then follows training targeted at developing specific skills, which must have the ultimate effect of enhancing service. Skills development is the best insurance for organisational success and against bankruptcy. In Africa training also carries a special extra component of bridging the cultural gap between eurocentric and afrocentric business approaches. The two are not mutually exclusive and realistic training should close the gap by creating greater understanding of either side. The most critical training is that which inculcates basic skills of the trade, followed by broader social and behavioural skills at higher levels.

The concept of internal and external customers should be discussed at this juncture. Every organisation serves two types of customer, namely internal and external. The former are all employees of the firm in so far as they relate to one another. Each department must view other departments and employees as its customers and treat them as such. More so, management must view their subordinates as their customers whose needs must be taken seriously.

'External customers' refers to the public who buy services and products from the organisation. In common parlance this is the only category viewed as customers. This is an erroneous myopic view of the dynamic nature of customer service. Market leaders insist that: 'Every position in an organisation must serve the external customer directly, or an internal customer who in turn serves the external one. If it does neither, it must be eliminated because it is superfluous.'

Close on the heels of optimal staffing is the phenomenon of reward and punishment. There is abundant evidence in various theories of motivation that human beings respond to stimuli in the appropriate context. Reward comes in many forms, including indirect reward such as public compliment, personal recognition, and direct reward in cash. The corollary is to punish behaviour that negates service excellence. The punishment must be directly linked to the failure both in terms of timing and relevance.

The next principle is to live up to the moments of truth. Each frontline employee in contact with a customer represents both his or her organisation and his or her supervisors. Each time that one gets in contact directly or otherwise with a customer that is a moment of truth. You have only 30 seconds to impress the customer, which will last a long time. Key behaviours to help meet this challenge include dispensing only high-quality service and products. It also woos customers when they see evidence of commitment to and passion for the product being offered. Indeed all this is possible through dedicated hard work at every stage. It should be remembered that the road to quality service is long and has no end. Accordingly, it is painfully true that laziness and apathy never yield customer satisfaction.

The last principle is commitment to stopping the rot on the African continent. Every economically active person should be mindful of the existence and demands of the global village. Advancements in technology and management science bring the five continents together daily. Increasingly, we witness major transcontinental investments such as large USA companies re-investing in South Africa and leading South African firms listing on the New York, London, and other major world stock exchanges.

The net result is that competition intensifies, performance demands are heightened, and the sole competitive edge becomes the finite attention to customer needs. This necessitates a real commitment to African and ultimately global enhancement. There is no doubt that a private sector of any size has the responsibility and wherewithal to create and uphold the dream of the African renewal.

## THE TOTAL APPROACH

If one is seeking a service revolution, where does one start? Success will require an integrated, sustained and total approach. Our discussion of masters of service excellence endeavoured to reveal the critical success factors. To complement this winning formula, let us conclude with five key managerial actions which lead to a comprehensive service package.

## TOP MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT

Success through service is neither accidental nor a fluke of fortunate happenstances. It has to be well planned to include all the resources within and at the disposal of the organisation. Customer service initiatives are much more than training events. They are a well-coordinated process rather than a stop-start series of events provoked by temporary need.

Training is one component in a total organisational approach to the pursuit of service excellence. Employees taking part in that training are greatly motivated by seeing that 'top people' are fully committed to the initiative and it is much more than 'flavour of the month' fallacy. The service philosophy must be marketed internally with great emphasis before attempting to transform the external customers. To this end it is crucial to have all managers committed to a service initiative. The values underlying the programme need to be defined, communicated and modelled by the top team. This will often involve changes in the organisational structure to provide the frontliners with much greater authority to make decisions

involving the customer. Such empowerment not only motivates the employee but it gives the customer a feeling of being valued by a responsible organisation.

Nothing infuriates a customer so much as being referred through a chain of people to get a problem solved. The first person should be ready and able to solve it, for this is the moment of truth when the customer meets the human face of the organisation.

Unless all the managers are committed, this can appear a threat to their authority, causing them to undermine the effort. Line managers should be key players whose task is to lead, market and model the service programme. If they are not given this role, they most likely become progress blockers and saboteurs. In the extreme of top management commitment to the 'McDonald's way' of customer service, Ray Kroc, the founder of the organisation, would personally pick up paper in the parking lot of a McDonald's restaurant. Every person goes through a five-step training course, which was developed and standardised within the world-wide corporation to instill skills of serving customers from general worker to restaurant manager. That transforms the system from selling hamburgers to dispensing customer service.

## COMPANY VISION OWNERSHIP

Service training must be seen as flowing from the firm's vision or mission. Knowing where the firm sees its future, knowing its aspirations, its values, ambitions and targets allows staff to see the purpose of and rationale for a quality service initiative. Vision is that intangible and cognitive future state of affairs which motivates employees to action. It gives the direction where you are going and should be like a mirage – within sight but just out of reach. The major purposes of a company vision in relation to customer service are:

- *It shows visible evidence of the company's priorities and commitment.*
- *It lights the flame to spur staff to action.*

- *It serves as the clarion call which gathers the troops and concentrates on the task at hand.*
- *It represents the destination of the journey to the promised land.*
- *It sets the benchmark for judging the company.*
- *It inspires and provokes the corporate mind.*

Thus vision is the rallying cry which mobilises people and supplies impetus to make them believe that 'we can do it', and they will.

Let us bring the concept closer to reality by recalling some of the famous visions of this century. In 1960 President of the USA, John F Kennedy, envisioned that 'We will put a man on the moon within a decade'. This inspired the whole nation and mobilised enormous funds to fulfil that vision, which in fact occurred before the deadline.

In 1964, Martin Luther King Jnr inspired the civil rights movement in USA with his vision of 'I have a dream . . . That one day all races shall live together in harmony'. His dream shaped the minds of Americans towards human rights and continues to do so as well as influencing many nations around the globe.

Again in 1964, at the Rivonia Trial, Nelson Mandela, later to become the first black president of South Africa, cast a vision which has influenced the history of the country ever since. Faced with the real possibility of a death sentence for alleged treason he said: 'All my lifetime I have devoted myself to the struggle of the African People . . . I have cherished the ideal of a free and democratic society . . . It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. Also, for which I am prepared to die' (Mandela 1900). This vision mobilised public opinion at home and abroad, and kept the freedom torch alight for nearly three decades while he was incarcerated in prison. It kept him and national hope alive awaiting the promised land.

These are the practical benefits of a vision in a family, community, company or nation. Companies with clear visions incorporating customer care have a distinctly better chance of achieving service excellence than those which fly by the seats of their pants.

## CUSTOMER SERVICE RESEARCH

According to Jan Carlzon (1987), the legendary turnaround chief executive of Scandanavian Airline Systems, it has been proved that when employees are well trained in customer service they develop heightened sensitivity about customers. They can easily and confidently answer these crucial questions. 'Who are our customers? What do they want or expect from me?' These questions are fundamental to the pursuit of service excellence. The most successful organisations are in constant dialogue with their customers, in an effort to learn about their needs and interests. Success can only come from regular provision of what customers want, in the form they want it, at the time and place where they want it. This requires keeping in touch with customer opinions. There are several such customer outreach programmes. First and foremost they start with employee satisfaction evaluation. A simple employee opinion survey regarding service circumstances, reward levels, work conditions and relationships in service situations always yields useful information.

The next step is to undertake periodic customer satisfaction surveys at least once per annum but preferably more regularly. Some surveys are done on each moment of truth by asking a customer to complete a service questionnaire at the conclusion of the service transaction. Most hotels ask guests to complete a questionnaire when checking out. However, such cases of genuine customer care are few and far between.

## ALL-ENCOMPASSING TRAINING

Successful businesses identify employees as internal customers and the public as external customers. This concept seeks to promote the attitudes and skills which underpin excellence in customer service. It needs also to establish that the quality of service to external customers begins with the quality of service that people or departments provide to one another in-house. How can a department treat external customers well if it ill-treats

its own workers? The answer is that it is most probable that it will extend the same rough treatment to outsiders, causing them not to come back again. This observation goes a long way towards ensuring that the quality of service associated with an organisation is only as good as the internal customer service rendered to one another by its employees. The most pertinent training adds practical skills of handling customers and meeting their needs. It starts with a certain level of functional literacy to enable the incumbent to read and write basic communication standards. Then follows systematic simple modular training which relates to the practical work undertaken by the person. Team exercises consolidate learned skills more effectively than individual effort. There should be standard methods of evaluating the success of the training, leading to identifiable rewards to reinforce the learning.

Most of all, skills training can only flourish in an environment conducive to the use of the learned skills. For this to happen, management must have undergone similar and more advanced training. Their behaviour should change to supporting what is advocated by the training. All training must have one single objective, that of enhancing customer service. To this end managers and frontliners must learn from their mistakes as well as complaints of bad service. That is the essence of a learning organisation which continually keeps ahead of the rate of change.

## **FOLLOW-THROUGH PROCESS**

The act of generating the energy and skills which will promote customer service excellence produces a need to harness, manage and channel what the training produces. A key feature of any initiative needs to be the strategies and systems for ensuring follow-through. Unless the products of the training can be applied, rewarded, reviewed and monitored, then its full potential may not be realised. This activity rests on the axiom which says 'trust but verify' every action to check negative impact. (The next section seeks to attune our minds to the crucial role of internationalisation

of our continent to access the skills and economic means to enhance customer service in different situations.)

## AFRICAN GLOBALISATION AND SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Multinational or transnational corporations are the most prevalent method of foreign direct investment and propagation of business practices. It is not coincidence that the dominant corporations in Africa originate from the former colonial powers of Europe such as Britain, Germany, Portugal, Spain and Italy. USA and Canada are new arrivals and together with Japan have become the biggest origin of multinational businesses because of their economic domination of the world. But is the spread of foreign business around the world as bad as political colonisation? Is it another form of colonisation? What benefits, if any, accrue to the host country of the multinational business?

First, foreign investment through the establishment of business subsidiaries by TNCs (transnational corporations) is an integral part of globalisation which cannot be stopped. It should not be perceived in the same way as political domination because it is fundamentally driven by a process completely separate from the political machinery of its home country. In most Western countries, business is completely different from politics and therefore free to chart its own destiny and relationships around the world. Of course a business firm will not wantonly disregard the foreign policy of its home government and invest in a country politically hostile to its own nation. I urge my fellow Africans to view foreign investment as an apolitical relationship and not a reincarnation of colonisation.

Having said that, I believe that transnational corporations should invest through partnerships with local businesses and individuals of the host country. Good examples are oil companies which operate through a network of local distributors, Coca-Cola and McDonald's, which empower local franchisees and transfer ownership to them through business

partnership. Indeed 100 per cent ownership of the business enterprise by a foreign corporation smacks of total dominance and exploitative intentions.

Third, if foreign investment is handled well and honestly, several benefits accrue to both parties. The host country stands to gain in the long term in a number of ways. In the first instance, the employment creation capacity of TNCs offers much-needed jobs to local citizens, and in most cases specific skills development programmes are mounted to induct the new entrants into the new business culture. In some cases (such as McDonald's) the training is so elaborate and structured that it is linked directly to the career progression of an individual from the lowest level to restaurant manager and beyond. The fact that such high potential staff are sent to the Hamburger University in Chicago means their mental horizons are broadened with a new international service standard yardstick. Coca-Cola similarly upgrades its operations through training at its headquarters in Atlanta and so do many other TNCs such as IBM, Shell, BP, Standard Chartered Bank, Barclays Bank, Microsoft and Toyota.

In addition to exposing local business to international service standards, TNCs also help to expose it to the international fray of corporate governance scrutiny. This inevitably improves professionalism in corporate management, which leads to organisational stability. Although remote, the existence of TNCs adds to the economic stability of a country as they create wealth, which boosts the local gross domestic product. Higher GDP results in higher per capita income which, all being equal, assists in creating political stability.

Therefore, while TNCs benefit from the profits reaped in return for their investment and they find sanctuary for some of their personnel who may not have a place in their home country; they play a constructive role in the process of internationalising Africa. Thus TNCs are real players in the quest for service excellence.

# Chapter 3

## The customer service concept in the political arena

What is the common thread that cuts across all the continents regarding politics? Cast your mind around the world and think of some past and present heads of state: Ronald Reagan of USA, Queen Elizabeth II of Britain, Fidel Castro of Cuba, Helmut Kohl of Germany, Kim Il Sung of North Korea, Boris Yeltsin of Russia, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya, Sam Nujoma of Namibia, Milton Obote of Uganda and King Sobhuza II of Swaziland. Look at their age profile and tenure of office. It is amazing that of all highly paid employment, politics is the only occupation where there is no formal contract of employment which enforces retirement at the conventional age of 60 or 65. I have respectfully omitted Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Quett Masire of Botswana and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania as elder statesmen of Africa. Each had the wisdom to know when to exit active politics, although it was for different reasons. In other words, they were sufficiently sensitive to the needs of their followers as their customers to know when they had ceased to satisfy them.

Nelson Mandela had to take up the presidency of the new South Africa at the age of 75 because of his incarceration by previous Afrikaner regimes. However, he made it clear at the outset that he was racing against time and would retire after one term of office. Anyone who is familiar with the humility of this wonderful man would probably conclude that he would not have particularly wanted to become president any way, but was compelled by love for his country and people to conclude his life struggle by establishing the foundation for justice, equality, human dignity, prosperity and peace in South Africa. I have met many African heads of state and am familiar with the aura of demi-godness that they create around them.

Nelson Mandela is the opposite of this as a national leader and this sets contrasting lessons in customer orientation in politics.

Is it not a contradiction in philosophy in the same society that the convention seems to be that a chief executive of a large corporation is expected to retire at 60 years because he is tired, but a politician is allowed to run a whole country and influence world affairs when he or she is well past retirement age? Are these double standards a deliberate oversight by the various societies? It also appears that a tendency to stay too long at the helm prevails in the poorer nations of the world, which brings the spotlight onto Africa. Why does this phenomenon prevail? Is it not lack of customer orientation on the part of political leaders?

## PRESIDING OVER SUBJECTS OR FOLLOWERS?

To place this discussion into its correct perspective, let us exclude the monarchy system of leadership such as is practised in the United Kingdom, Swaziland and Lesotho. In these systems the term 'subjects' may still be acceptable although contemporary politics in Swaziland and Lesotho are now challenging that subservient status of the populace. In the non-monarchy system of government do the political leaders see the population as their subjects or followers? The answer is predominantly the former, much to our amazement. If it were the opposite, politicians would not see themselves as being above the constituent electorate which voted them into power to the extent of becoming dictators and squashing any criticism while causing economic and social degradation.

There are several examples on our continent such as that involving the president of Namibia, Sam Nujoma. When the country gained its political independence, a constitution was written providing for a maximum of two presidential terms of office. It was hailed as the most progressive national constitution in a continent of lifelong rulers. However, when Nujoma's second term of office was coming to an end, he started manoeuvres to have the constitution amended to scrap the limiting clause. The grounds

adduced by his cronies for such abrogation of constitutional integrity were that 'he was the only leader of such ability and distinction that he is loved and respected by all people'. Is this not a ridiculous overassertion in a society of millions of people of different talents? Obviously, the explanation lies in the fact that 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. He started off as a good selfless revolutionary leader who is now turning into a dictator because he has tested unbridled power and liked it. The revolution has lost its way and the masses who were his comrades and elevated him to power are now 'subjects' who can no longer influence his behaviour. This holier-than-thou illusion pervades the entire African continent except in a few isolated cases. Because of such stark realities one can confidently conclude that in the main African politicians do not view their electorate as their customers but as a means to an end, that being their ascension to power. This goes against the grain of the customer orientation philosophy discussed in earlier chapters. The above story comes as no surprise to those who know the historical friendship between Sam Nujoma and Robert Mugabe, who has been president of Zimbabwe since 1980. Birds of a feather flock together, so the wise profess.

## THE ZIMBABWE BOOMERANG EFFECT

Since the tumultuous developments of early 2000 in Zimbabwe are current at the time of writing, they warrant close scrutiny against the philosophy of service excellence. The brief background is that the Zanu PF Party, under Robert Mugabe, has been ruling the country since April 1980, when the minority Rhodesia Front under Ian Smith lost power in a watershed majority parliamentary election. Like every nation that gained its independence from colonial rule, Zimbabweans celebrated the dawn of a new era of democracy, economic prosperity, international citizenship and higher quality of life in every respect. The first five years were quite close to this dream, but thereafter the gulf between reality and the promised land became increasingly visible. A spirit of societal despair prevailed until

early 1999 when a working-class-driven political party emerged as the Movement for Democratic Change. Nine months later it contested the general election in June 2000 and won 48% of the parliamentary seats. This was an unprecedented show of dissension from the 'liberation ideology' of not breaking ranks. Why did these millions of people suddenly change their loyalty base? It was simply because they had watched their quality of life deteriorate rapidly because of the political supremacy of the Zanu PF leadership which relegated them to the level of puppets with no say in their own destiny. Society was no longer receiving the service it deserved from politicians and public servants. Corruption and nepotism took over from pragmatic public policy dispensation.

The first act of supplanting customer service by Mugabe and Zanu PF was to create an environment of a de facto one-party state to dictate the political process. This robbed the citizenry of the freedom of choice and created similar monopolistic malaise to lack of competition in the business market. The second act of service sabotage was the manipulation of the constitution by a handful of political bigots, which gave credence to a political hegemony in which loyalty and not competence were rewarded. Naturally this isolated the masses who were not connected to the hierarchy. Again, such practice flies in the face of any principle of customer service, particularly the age-old 'the customer is king'. The third flagrant breach of service excellence principles by Robert Mugabe and Zanu PF was to regiment society and try to resuscitate the pre-1980 racial division as emotional blackmail to win the election. This gave rise to the violence and total breakdown of the rule of law that entailed private farm invasions and deaths of innocent people.

All these sentiments were aptly expressed by the *Financial Gazette* of Zimbabwe on 29 June 2000. Under the bold heading 'A travesty of justice' the paper said:

*That Zimbabwe's just-ended watershed general election would be a farce was predictable. Predictable because conditions for a free and fair ballot*

*never existed and because the governing Zanu PF party would not allow democracy to triumph in a country it holds up as its fiefdom . . . Just when the nation had united in a rare show of force to bring about powerful change and end the people's suffering of two decades, the ruling party responded by brutalising them in the futile hope of postponing the inevitable – its demise . . . Again this was ignored in a mirror of high-handedness and arrogance that have come to symbolise the only enduring legacy of this government. For all the outward calm that pervades Zimbabwe, there is seething anger in the population that the country, once a beacon of hope in blighted Africa, has been allowed to crumble this way.*

This is a powerful summary of how citizens can enforce their right to good service as customers to the leadership. They could not get the desired level of service and joined hands across racial and ethnic lines to vote for change – not necessarily a political dogma – but change that serves their interests as well as those of posterity. This has to be a classic case study in the modern African political history of change.

## **AFRICAN TRADITION VS POLITICS OF DEMOCRACY**

Let us examine the causality and possible cultural origin of these dictatorial tendencies. Historically the tribal chief was an unchallenged benevolent dictator whose power base was ascribed by tradition. His every behaviour was regulated by societal norms and the value system which he observed religiously. There was an inherent sense of morality, transparency and benevolence in the leader which pre-empted any exploitative tendencies. It was accepted that the chief was above his subjects but never out of reach and what he had he shared with them in times of need. Owing to these virtues there were no political coups in African society and leaders were dedicated to serving their subjects as their customers. There was relative equality within the social ranking in the society. The only wars were either inter-tribal skirmishes or family feuds over inheritance, which

were few and far between. This calmness and serenity seems gone for ever. Perhaps present-day leaders have become highly individualistic at the expense of serving their customers. Why?

## POWER VS SERVICE

The answer lies in the phenomenon of the politics of scarcity. Africa was the last continent to develop in terms of modern standards, which resulted in a limitation of resources to satisfy its burgeoning population. Consequently politicians take advantage of their positions of leadership to enrich themselves. This is borne out by the proliferation of prosecutions of political leaders for embezzlement of funds or misappropriation of public property in their charge.

I remember a politician in Zimbabwe who successfully campaigned for a parliamentary seat by handing out blankets to the poor rural constituency. Unbeknown to the grateful recipients, the blankets were a consignment donated by Western Europeans to the poor which he had intercepted using his political standing. The community were so gullible, being a product of the African tradition of not challenging a leader but entrusting him with their own wellbeing instead. Unscrupulous politicians deliberately take advantage of the traditional belief of their electorate in the precept of one tribe, one chief.

Many of us witness every day the disturbing spectacle of 20-vehicle and motorcycle entourages, including bullet-proof armoured vehicles, escorting our political leaders. The already jam-packed city streets are virtually closed to the public at peak periods for one person to go to a political rally. What breeds this godlike feeling of supremacy? One can be sure that it is not because of respect or concern for the populace, but brazen arrogance. Why is it that in all African societies, although almost all of them are plagued with poverty and protracted revolutionary fighting, politicians and their close kindred always live in comparative luxury? The answer is simply that, unlike the chiefs of yesteryear who were selfless and kept close to

their folk, today's leaders are obsessed with power and social distinction. As a result, coup d'etats are the order of the day as disaffected citizens feel compelled to change the order, but find that all possible avenues of normal change are deliberately blocked.

In Zimbabwe a bitter war was waged for decades against the foreign colonial power. By virtue of historical rural upbringing, the closest thing to the heart of an African is land. Likewise, the political leaders fired up the revolution by promising the return of the land to the destitute masses. In response, schoolchildren and adults went to war and won after more than a decade. Every one of them expected the payback to materialise soon after peace returned with political change. Instead, the senior politicians grabbed repossessed land for themselves. The landless masses were left out in the cold as the political elite parcelled out large tracts of land for themselves and their followers. The few hundreds of peasants who were resettled were not equipped with basic intensive farming skills, which resulted in poor productivity and sporadic famine in a country of historically abundant food supplies. This has enlarged the gap between the haves and the have-nots, leading to major tensions across the entire society. The national constitution has also been amended many times in the 20 years of independence to entrench dictatorial tendencies in the political leadership.

We are continually bombarded with news of unethical conduct by political leaders of all colours and races in our region. In South Africa a prominent member of the ruling party bought thousands of party membership cards to inflate her list of voter support at the national conference. In the same vein, another local leader of the official opposition Democratic party was also involved in scandal for inflating party membership with people who were deceased, had resigned or had moved. This was a white party official of a predominantly white political party, which shows that public impropriety is not limited to blacks.

In Zambia, just before their last presidential elections at the turn of the twentieth century, the president tried to steamroller legislation through

the judiciary and parliamentary system to declare former president Kenneth Kaunda a non-citizen. This was a blatant attempt to nullify Kaunda's candidacy as a challenger for the presidential seat. Such revelations of poor transparency and accountability unfortunately tarnish the image of the African political scenario.

However, there is a silver lining in the seemingly sad cloud of bad governance. Success stories in some African countries counter the image of coups in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and the Democratic Republic of Congo as well as dictatorship and genocide in Ethiopia, Sudan, Rwanda and Angola, among others.

The events of smooth political leadership which occurred in South Africa, Botswana, Tanzania and many decades ago in Gambia are worthy of the utmost African pride. Nelson Mandela began to groom Thabo Mbeki as his successor within a year of becoming the first president of a democratic South Africa. The handover was so smooth that it perpetuated social stability, economic growth and international confidence in the country. A year earlier Sir Ketumile Masire had handed over the presidency of Botswana to Festus Mogae under a similar planned succession. The example had been set by the late Julius Nyerere in the mid-1980s when he relinquished the presidency of Tanzania to Hasan Mwinyi. What do these three African statesmen have in common?

They were all invited by other nations and international bodies to be facilitators in conflict resolution and economic development. The late Nyerere was the founder chair of the South-South Commission and mediator in the Burundi conflict in equatorial Africa. After Nyerere's death in 1999 Nelson Mandela was invited to take up the role. He had already played an active role between Israel and Palestine and had the distinction of breaking the log-jam between Libya and the United Nations over the Lockerbie bombing in Scotland. Ketumile Masire has also been invited by the various rebel groups to act as peace broker in the Democratic Republic of Congo. These three leaders displayed service

excellence in their countries by selflessly delivering better quality of life to the rank and file. They lived up to the true humility and honesty of the traditional African leader of the past.

## WHAT THE HUMBLE CUSTOMERS EXPECT

One of the fundamental principles of customer service excellence is a display of inherent respect for the customer. This leads to honest and dignified treatment of any individual or group with the potential of being a customer to yourself. After all, money in the cash register shows no colour, gender or racial distinction. It is still the cherished dream of millions of Africans across the continent that one day they will have politicians who will treat them like customers in every respect. These are the customers who eagerly and humbly expect service excellence from their political leaders. Imagine how refreshing it would be to have a national leader who genuinely and publicly announces that: 'I am answerable to the people of this country, and I am not above them. I will serve them first before myself and my relatives.'

A utopian world of service excellence would provide a society which offers a similar starting point in life for all citizens; a concerned cadre of selfless politicians and national leaders who promote community progress; leaders who respect the people and tell them the truth at all times to enable appropriate decision making; and leaders who do not erect artificial social barriers in front of their electorate in order to live in a world of plenty amidst abject poverty. Thus, even politicians must live by the key behaviours of customer service.

The typical African is amenable to authority by virtue of traditional socialisation. He does not wantonly challenge leadership, but instead tends to accept authority unquestioningly. In contrast, most leaders do not reciprocate the trust and respect placed on them, but exploit them as a weakness in their customers.

## A MODEL POLITICAL SERVICE LEADER

Political leadership is very much a thankless job, as one cannot satisfy the diverse needs of all people all the time. The concept of the majority is the guiding principle, which gives some comfort of mind. Political leadership also brings risk to the incumbent and sometimes his or her families. This is borne out by many cases of assassinations, either by rivals from outside or rebel elements from within the same fraternity. The paradox is that in monetary terms a political career is not the most rewarding in any society. Even the American dream of unlimited opportunities could not make the president's remuneration equal to that of the chief executive officer or chairman of a private sector corporation. This anomaly is even more glaring in the relatively poor nations of Africa, where the economies simply cannot afford inflated compensation packages.

So why do people go to great lengths to run for political office against the backdrop of such restricted rewards? No wonder that one never sees a queue of bright young professionals applying for political jobs, for they have more attractive avenues to exploit. However, the motivation to enter the political arena is manifold. Reasons include genuine commitment to serving the community, a desire to change the status quo positively; the lack of lucrative economic opportunities elsewhere; an abundance of entry-level possibilities; and a deep-seated need for power. Consequently, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that because the top brains of society shun politics, the less committed fill the political positions almost by default. This leads to wide-spread substandard service to powerless customers. One has yet to devise a formula for attracting and nurturing young talent in the political field which would eventually upgrade the level of professionalism and service leadership in the African context.

Although the primary focus of this book is the organisational context, the broader national and international playground of leadership impacts continuously on the performance of the former. Politicians provide a

broader context in which organisations must conduct their task. The economy, international trading and taxation laws, social change, violence and the quality of education all impact on the ability of organisations to compete internationally.

Consequently the quality of political leadership is a vital ingredient of national growth. In a research exercise in 1993, *Time* magazine established that an enormous gap existed between supply of and demand for political leadership, which created bigger and more pervasive problems than ineffectual organisational leadership. It was concluded the vast majority of world leaders have been ill prepared for their roles and have not been trained for leading in a new world with new changes. Under such circumstances of dearth of skills it is not surprising that the world is aflame with wars, internal civil strife within nations and ethnic purges. Africa has claimed its place in the centrestage of these gross human rights violations.

## WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

The acid test of effective leadership is not what you do but the way that you do it. First, leadership is defined in the eyes of the followers and not the leader's own perception. Second, effective leadership entails empowering the followers to develop into leaders in their own right. It is in this aspect of promoting a self-sustaining growth capacity in followers that most African political leaders fall down.

## THE VIRTUES OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Political constituents like to see their leaders personally and no substitute will do. In addition to visibility, political leaders should be guided by an even tighter set of ethics than a business manager. The following profile of a political leader should suffice as a guide:

First, there is a need for professional tenets to guide the leader's behaviour in his or her dealings with the electorate. Servant leadership

hails from the philosophy that in order to lead, one must first serve. Listening to people, serving real needs, empowering the populace, developing communities, thinking globally, acting ethically and affirming individual dignity and worth, these are the hallmarks of political leadership in the twenty-first century.

Second, a political leader must be an accomplished manager of people and problem-solving processes. Leadership is the essential ingredient in successful human endeavour at every level of local, national and international life. Unless leaders equip themselves adequately for their role, they are not only shooting themselves in the foot, but also their organisations in the heart.

Third is the internally generated achievement need. A leader must predominantly be achievement driven and tireless in order to cultivate sustainable energy to pursue sometimes elusive goals. Complementary characteristics are internal satisfaction and emotional equilibrium. An undue level of desperation induces a leader to vacillate between the ends of the psychological pendulum, resulting in erratic decision making. Furthermore, a leader must be sufficiently thick-skinned to absorb propaganda effects and public criticism even where it is not warranted.

Fourth is the phenomenon of leaders' accountability to their constituents. They must always be cognisant of the mandate given by their electorate and should never overstep it by devious means. In the same vein is the crucial quality of transparency of leadership processes and actions. Leaders also need to be held accountable for developing and communicating a clear and concise goal for the future. Simultaneously, the leader must take cognisance of the reality of restraining forces, which inhibit the realisation of that cardinal goal.

Fifth is the concept of leadership courage. Leaders need to have the courage to see the existing situation as it really is and to encourage feedback on the progress of their strategies and the personal impact on their followers. In this respect bad news is better than no news. This means that leaders should consciously encourage devil's advocates who have an

honest but different view. The temptation of many leaders is to surround themselves with sycophants who always tell the leader what he wants to hear. This is a common trait in African society where it is aggravated by the cultural indoctrination that the leader is incorruptable, all-knowing and omnipotent. Appraisal of the leader's performance is interpreted as undermining his authority. Therefore, there is ample merit in consultative and participative leadership.

Sixth comes the need to be 'with the people' at the coalface. This is the most effective way of picking up problems and communicating the leadership vision. The paradox is that most leaders do not want to get their hands dirty but they expect to win. Leaders simply commit professional suicide if they are not visible and accessible. This is more than simply boasting that 'I have an open door policy', which in most cases people are too scared to use. A model leader is a genuine people-lover, an integrationist and a reconciler of diverse views. Too many political leaders in Africa unashamedly use divisive tactics to promote political factionalism, which often results in bloodshed and anarchy.

In seventh place is the folly of leaders' self-defeating paradigms of the world and people in general. These are often manifested in negative attitudes and stereotypes towards people such as women and those subjected to historical discrimination. Very often these worldviews are not tested or analysed. As a result, the majority of political parties in Africa are based on ethnic, tribal racial or colour classification. This is a recipe for failure from the outset.

Eighth is a call on leaders to take a stand and be consistent in their actions. Organisational trust is not necessarily generated by telling people what they want to hear, but by consistency and congruence in word and deed, including an unequivocal statement of action and intent that people learn to rely on. Until leaders, whether in the political or business arena, are willing to pay the price for change themselves, they cannot expect others to do so. Once again let us remember the virtues of servant

leadership that accrue to those leaders who are constantly learning and thus always outpace the speed of change around them.

## SALVATION THROUGH THE AFRICAN RENAISSANCE

It is not all doom and gloom. The much-talked about African Renaissance is not merely political claptrap, but a real paradigm shift. The philosophy dates back to the early 1960s when statesmen such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana preached pan-Africanism; Julius Nyerere of Tanzania advocated the spirit of Ujamaa to symbolise togetherness; Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya orchestrated Uhuru to symbolise freedom across the nations and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia waved his symbolic white handkerchief, spreading the culture of humanism, manifesting mutual helpfulness and respect.

Some of these leaders and their successors have made great efforts to uphold service-oriented governance in their countries. Several introduced leadership or moral codes to guide the public conduct of political and public leaders. The rationale was to encourage leaders to observe the rule of law and lead by example in their interaction with the public. Whilst these initiatives were laudable, they were mostly defeated by the mentality of entitlement which pushes leaders to grab money-making opportunities before lesser people can get them.

However, a silver lining is still manifested in many service-oriented activities aimed at upgrading the quality of life of the citizens. Although these are mostly motivated by a mentality of villagism and tribalism among politicians, the end result can be perceived as good service by expectant customers. Here are a few enlightening historical observations.

Most African societies have been mobilised into mass political parties which seek to devolve power to the grass roots. This followed revolutionary success over colonial political systems, which tipped the power balance from elitist to mass politics. In a sense this has bridged the chasm between traditional communalism and the present parliamentary

dispensation. It has heightened a sense of worth and access to service in the mind of the common person. Those countries that have been able to grow genuine mass leadership are reaping the rewards through societal satisfaction and peace. Uganda in Equatorial East Africa is highly symbolic of this successful transformation from one of the worst dictatorships on this continent.

The mentality of villagism creates a parochial approach to service on the part of politicians. To this end it is commonplace to see social and infrastructural development projects taking place firstly and mostly in the home areas of influential political leaders. This includes the construction of roads, dams, irrigation schemes, schools and hospitals. While this could be seen as irregular behaviour by the leaders, the end justifies the means. They marshal much-needed resources for their own home areas, although neglecting those constituencies not strongly represented.

Some national constitutions provide for the office of an ombudsman or public protector. This is a clear attempt to enable the electorate to seek redress for wrongdoing by public officers. In the main, these arbitrators are accountable only to Parliament to enable them to service the entire society unfettered.

Another gesture of political customer service borrows from the caring nature of the traditional chief. Africa is increasingly susceptible to climatic upheavals, which cause famine because of drought or floods. In response to these national disasters some political leaders have come to the aid of the needy by organising handouts of food, seed and agricultural inputs for the following season. In a distant fashion one can say this is a modernisation of the role played by the chief in the past to protect his subjects from any mishap.

However, there are interesting paradoxes that emanate from this political approach and impact negatively on ultimate service excellence by politicians. The election system is foreign to Afrocentric cultures because it implicitly forces people to make a negative choice against their own kin. An African is inherently a consensus-driven individual. Elections tend to

create internal psychological dissonance as they sometimes imply breaking ranks with family and friends. Some unscrupulous politicians take advantage of this cultural trait by exacerbating individual uncertainty. Here are some illustrations of recent occurrences.

In the 1950s and 1960s the continent was on fire through civil uprisings to overthrow colonial regimes. The Mau Mau uprising in Kenya and resistance marches in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique and many other countries were all motivated by the fight against a common enemy. When this enemy was removed, political rivalry became violent, leading to factional killings among the rank and file as well as the leaders. This was caused by a culture of intolerance of dissension. Political differences were exploited by leaders as the cause of enmity. It was often most successfully based on tribal lines as an African needs no persuasion that one tribe must have only one chief.

The other intriguing political manifestation is the rejection of election results by the general electorate or political leaders. A plethora of reasons can be given, including not being free and fair, intimidation and rigging of votes. Often this forms the bedrock of civil uprisings or even a coup d'état by revolutionary soldiers or civilians. If one looks at the fundamental causes, one finds that customer service has been short-circuited by the political leaders. They have wedged political intolerance among the masses by denying them the right to decide whether the product or results meet their needs or not. Furthermore, the electorate have been presented with a fait accompli and not a choice. The end result is that customer service has been compromised blatantly, with decision making being removed from the grass roots. The new wave of democracy seeks to reinforce among politicians this sensitivity to serving the ultimate customer.

But one can rightly conclude that the fundamentals for service excellence in the African context exist in the culture. For example, the noble phenomenon of political reconciliation between former white oppressors and the indigenous black populations is an African creation. This has been implemented by political leaders in Zimbabwe, Mozambique,

Namibia, South Africa, Uganda and many others with notable success. Sometimes these gestures of nationhood have been misconstrued as a weakness of the African who has conceded all to the former oppressor without the whites giving up much in return. This is an endless debate but what is more important is that the unique capacity for forgiveness inherent in the African people which makes reconciliation possible. Thus, it is possible for African politicians to deliver customer satisfaction.

## SERVICE EXCELLENCE THROUGH POLITICAL DEMOCRACY

Switzerland is indisputably one of the most politically stable, economically advanced and progressive countries of the world. It is also the least politically regimented society of our time with no prominent government and head of state. As a nation, it is merely a constellation of cantons or localities which operate in unison and harmony under democratic governance. The population enjoy an acclaimed high standard of living. Historically the world admired its political neutrality sufficiently to vote it the safest place to store financial and gold surpluses, including some of the spoils of the Nazi German war. It can therefore be safely concluded that political democracy creates an enabling environment in which service delivery to the citizens at political level, customers at business level and member states at international level becomes possible to its optimum.