

Give Your Power Away or Push Your Customers Away!



**—By Janelle Barlow, Ph.D.
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In the heart of Zagreb, Croatia, amidst the charm of cobblestone streets and the echoes of rich history, lies the exquisite Opera Hotel. A place where luxury meets old-world allure; it was here that a seemingly ordinary checkout experience left an indelible mark on my perspective about business success — or the lack of it.

As I stood in the lobby, preparing to leave the Opera Hotel early in the morning, I couldn't help but marvel at the seamless blend of classic elegance and modern comfort that surrounded me. The concierge had been the epitome of professionalism throughout my stay, ensuring every detail was immaculately attended to. However, during my final moments, a simple customer exchange would encapsulate the essence of unempowered service and a powerful insight into the business world.



Then I witnessed a dapper young businessman from the UK angrily walk away from the front desk clerk and bitterly announce to the group he was traveling with that he would not return to the hotel on his next trip to Zagreb.

He had unsuccessfully tried to resolve a minor dispute about his bill. It was a situation regarding a charge for an item taken from the minibar. The traveler did not take anything from the in-room bar and did not want to pay for it. It was early morning, and only the front desk clerk was on duty. "No, you can't talk with the manager," the clerk reported. "He's not here and won't be here until 8:00 a.m. You can come back at that time."

The customer was clearly on his way to the airport, so returning was not a genuine option. The customer continued to protest, and the well-meaning desk clerk finally blurted out, "I can't do anything. Only my manager can remove such a charge, and he's not here." He didn't offer to talk with the manager himself, saying that if the manager agreed—which, he mostly likely would do so they would remove the charge from the bill.

The clerk finished with the kind of statement that made me wonder about the customer service training offered to staff at the Opera Hotel. He sheepishly said, "Thank you for staying with us. I hope you had a nice stay."

When managers do not allow their staff to make this type of decision, they emasculate their team. Staff are put in the uncomfortable position of saying to customers, "I'm not capable of making such a decision. My boss doesn't trust me to make the right one. Your consumption of this candy bar is so important to our hotel that only the GM can decide it." That's the reality of the situation.

Such an unspoken message hardly inspires confidence in the hotel. It also feels grossly unfair to customers.

The simplicity of the concierge's farewell held a valuable lesson – success isn't merely about numbers on a balance sheet or meeting quarterly targets. It's about crafting an experience, about leaving an impression that lingers long after the transaction is complete. It's the sincere desire to create something meaningful in hospitality or any other business endeavor.

As I stepped out of the Opera Hotel and back onto the streets of Zagreb, I couldn't help but reflect on the resonance between that checkout encounter and the world of business strategy. In a world that often emphasizes bottom lines and strategic maneuvers, it's easy to overlook the significance of human connection and infuse every interaction with a touch of artistry and genuine care, especially when the customer is complaining and dissatisfied.

So, whether you're a startup founder, a corporate executive, or a creative entrepreneur, remember the concierge's wisdom from the Opera Hotel. As you compose your business strategies and pursue your goals, infuse them with the spirit of an opera – where every note, every moment, and every interaction is combined to create something extraordinary. Because in the grand production of business success, it's not just the final act that matters but the harmonious score that leads you there.

