Key Practices of Leadership for Service in Hong Kong

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An improvement on this…

Background of the Project

- Not much is known about service leadership practices in Hong Kong workplaces, but we assumed their presence and sought to bring them out.

- We attempted to relate service leaders' perceptions about their own practices to the concepts that are being taught to undergraduate students at LU in Hong Kong under the Service Leadership Initiative.

Research Design

- Purposeful selection of 17 key informants, who were Hong Kong based middle to senior managers from diverse service sectors.

- They were all service leaders, previously known to members of the project team.

- Semi-structured, qualitative interviews

- Thematic analysis and identification of key practices

Preliminary Results

Four core practices/attributes have been identified, out of over 21 that were mentioned.

1. Entrepreneurial spirit and mindset: leading for service innovation

2. Distributed leadership

3. Building and sustaining productive relationships with customers as strategic partners

4. Caring and respectful disposition

Key Practice 1: Entrepreneurial spirit and mindset: leading for service innovation

- Embracing new approaches, taking risks, and being flexible and open-minded.

- A continuum ranging from radical through connective to incremental innovation.

Incremental	Connective	Radical

$$\longleftrightarrow$$

INNOVATION

'Therefore, I start at this point to think about how to reintegrate all online sales, online services plus selling of offline shops or some true services we have to do when offline, like face to face service, to become a new model. And this new model, we, "ABC Company" wish to do better in the future one or two years.'

- from an entrepreneur in the IT industry

'When you provide a professional service, being professional is not following what books says, as it's more like enforceability... the ability to do something beyond the codes and practice...this enables the company to have different skill sets to sell. Also, these skill sets are very unique making your company different from other companies...'

- from an engineer in a large company.

Key Practice 2: Distributed leadership

- Delegating tasks to others, based on the premise of mutual empowerment.

- Ranging from 'hands-off' empowerment within a flexible organization structure to 'hands-on' guidance within a more settled structure.

Hands-on   Hands-off

⟷

SETTLED   FLEXIBLE
STRUCTURE   STRUCTURE

'Our company also does not officially define who is # and who is what. Actually, we call all employees that 'Bro' and that 'Sis'. We don't have titles... Even when we went out and did business with XYZ (a large international company), the business cards did not have titles. They looked at our cards. Then, we ... told them, 'Oh. It's fine. I'm responsible for this case. I can arrange it.'

- from an entrepreneur in the food industry

'A lot of ideas ... (are)... not mine... it is the people from the floor (who) ... give it to me. ... for example, we have scan machines. How we continue to improve our scanners (comes from) the feedback from the people in the front. It is not from me. Because they do it day and night. They are in the best position they can give me the most precious advice...'

- from a senior manager in a logistics company

Key Practice 3: Building and sustaining productive relationships with customers as strategic partners

- Establishing and maintaining connections and dialogues with customers about their needs

- Building strategic partnerships with them

- Showing the commitment to diagnosing and meeting genuine needs while sometimes building *around and beyond* customers' ideas.

Understanding Customers & Establishing Needs

PARTNER SHIP

'It was the first time I met this customer but I already knew much information about her and understood her needs. Therefore, if she has any needs she will send me WhatsApp messages to reach me. We have this … actually I don't treat her only a customer. I treat her as a friend. We were like old friends when we first met…'

- from a senior manager in an insurance company

'After you get along with the students for a long time, you will naturally become able to talk with them. Also, you will pay effort. You will think that as a class teacher, it is unreasonable to fail to talk with the students. Then, over time, I can communicate with the students more effectively.'

- from a school principal

'I seldom give them cash rewards. Our team not only looks for money and advantages. We always have the mission to provide better service and help to the customers. We will be happy if the customers appreciate it.'

- from a senior manager in an insurance company

'As a principal, I will treat my role as more important as a leader rather an administrator. That means, I think in the direction of the school development, aligning the different expectations of colleagues, making it easier for them to achieve in their jobs and to be happy.'

- from a school principal

'How many things clients really need and how many of them don't really need to have something but just think it's good to have it. This is hard to clearly ask them about. Especially, clients will search for information through various means, like the internet... So you will have to think how to explain this to the client...'

- from a senior engineer in a construction company

'They ask you questions in the morning and need the answers in the afternoon.... Or sometimes they want the reply right away. To help the clients, instead of just asking the related parties, like hotels, the question that they would like to ask, we need to think about and ask some further related questions so that we can synthesize the entire picture to the clients.'

- from a senior manager in a travel agency

Key Practice 4: Caring and respectful disposition

- Caring deeply about the best interests of their followers, customers and end-beneficiaries.

- Heartfelt desire to meet the needs of those around them as an end in itself.

'Love is not just to use the mouth to say (it). You have to undertake. Yes.'

- from a school principal

'Thus, it's people… that are our biggest asset. I think it's so … We respect every customer. And (we) have a lot of trust (in them)…'

- from a senior manager in a logistics company

'When they bring their kids to the office, I hug the kids. Whoever brings their kids here and wants Miss X (i.e. the interviewee) to hug them, I hug them…'

- from a senior human resource manager

'I recommend them to be sincere and caring to people. It's not the caring on the finance. It's on the person. Then they may have enthusiasm at work, motivation to push themselves forward and to be mature. This is an important thing. The true caring is the prerequisite of progression. The true caring is more important than skills and fortune.'

- from a senior manager in an insurance company.

Concluding Remarks (1)

- While service leadership is multi-faceted, the four key practices identified in this study were amplified and seen as most important by the interviewees.

- The term 'service leadership' may not be a familiar term in the industry but this is being practiced implicitly and we believe we have discovered the perceived essence.

- Our main contribution is to bring out some practical examples and illustrations of service leadership, as explained by mature managers, and use our analysis to build a 'grounded' theory of target principles and practices that could be used to enhance the teaching and learning of service leadership.

Concluding Remarks (2)

- Question to think about: how should we make use of the findings to inform our teaching in Hong Kong Universities?

Thank you!
Q & A