



## Towards Service Excellence

The recent reports that Singapore organisations are providing ‘less than sparkling service’ must be a source of some concern to a country that prides itself on its service standards. It must be of even greater concern to the Government which has poured vast amounts of money into service provision over the past few years. Yet Singapore is home to many world-class organisations delivering excellent service. Four of these include, for example, Singapore Airlines (SIA), the National Library Board (NLB), Singapore Zoo and even the Singapore Police Force (SPF). Data from my ongoing international service reputation study, which began in 2000 sponsored by the Institute of Customer Service in the UK, shows that SIA, year on year, is the top rated international organisation for excellent service. NLB has a world-leading reputation for its innovative approaches to service design and world-beating service provision. Singapore Zoo is a leading world zoo renowned for its top-rated Night Safari, its approach to animal display and conservation and public education. Even SPF provides outstanding service. In global benchmarking studies SPF comes out top. Compared to the police forces in many other countries it provides a proactive and caring approach. Singapore residents who are used to their neighbourhood police stations should try the ‘service’ in the UK where many neighbourhood stations have been closed and those that are open operate very limited hours. If you are lucky enough to get inside a station to report a crime for example, the public areas often resemble cells with bare walls and bars - you feel like you are the criminal. Members of the public also have to suffer less than sympathetic service. One person recently reporting that some hoodlums were smashing up equipment in a children’s play park not a hundred yards from the police station, was met with the following reply “well at least they are not on the streets”. That was the extent of police’s action and interest.

So how come Singapore finds itself in 7<sup>th</sup> place, alongside Denmark – not a country renowned for its provision of outstanding service - in the Customer Satisfaction Index, and below other countries like South Korea, Hong Kong and the UK. Several reasons have been reported over the last few days in the various media, including the global downturn and increasing customer expectations. There are two other, and more important, reasons, both of which can be dealt with. First, my experience in over 20 years of coming to and working in Singapore (and comparing it to other many countries) is that Singaporeans are particularly hard on themselves. I am often taken out to sample the wonderful food found in Singapore. As a self confessed ‘foodie’ this is always a delight, yet frequently at the end of a meal when I express my admiration for the quality of food, my local colleagues manage, without exception, to find some fault, too much salt, fish not fresh enough ... SMU’s Satisfaction Index this year was based on questioning of just over 30,000 residents and 4,000 tourists. I suspect that the ratings given by the tourists would greatly exceed that given by the ‘hard-on-themselves’ locals. A comparison analysis might provide some support for this view, however one would need to be careful since the services used by tourists are not always those used by residents on a day-to-day basis.



The second reason is that the service training to date in Singapore has very much focused on the front-line (Go the Extra Mile for Service -GEMS) and the Government has, quite rightly, pumped money into improving the service delivered by the front line staff. However this has only solved part the problem. The other areas more critical to the delivery of excellent service are the quality of management and the organisation's systems, procedures and policies. Without great service leadership, good and easy to use systems and customer-focused policies, no amount of effort put into front-line training will be enough to deliver great service. Indeed training front-line staff without having good leadership and service-focused systems could even make service worse as front-line staff, encouraged to deliver great service, will become frustrated as their efforts are thwarted, or at least made difficult, by the organisation's systems, procedures and policies. This issue has now been recognised by the Government and its latest GEMS Phase II is becoming focused on service leadership and culture. In support of this the WDA has recently stepped up its support through SPUR for managers taking the Graduate Diploma in Service Leadership at SIM (in conjunction with Warwick Business School – a leading international school specialising in service leadership and research) to the tune of 90% of their fees.

By 'educating' the population to recognise the high levels of service that are provided in Singapore and by training organisations' managers to ensure their leadership, culture and systems are aligned to excellent service, Singapore will soon rise to its deserved position in the Customer Satisfaction Index.

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The Diploma in Service Leadership is run through a unique partnership between Warwick Business School, Singapore Workforce Agency (WDA) and SIM.

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