

**International Conference on
“Service Leadership Education in Service Economies”**

Abstract for Day 2

Key Practices of Leadership for Service in Hong Kong

Robin S. Snell¹, Maureen Y.L. Chan¹, and Tracy X.P. Zou²

¹ *Lingnan University*

² *The University of Hong Kong*

We conducted semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 17 Hong Kong based middle to senior managers from diverse service sectors. Based on their explanations and illustrations, we identified four practices that were common to many of the service leaders as key means for helping their respective organizations to maintain competitiveness while benefiting customers and end-beneficiaries. The practices were: entrepreneurial spirit and mindset, distributed leadership, building and sustaining productive relationships with customers as strategic partners, and a caring and respectful disposition.

Entrepreneurial spirit and mindset: leading for service innovation

This practice involved embracing new approaches, taking risks, and being flexible and open-minded. It was directed toward service innovation along a continuum ranging from radical through connective to incremental innovation. Radical, ‘breakthrough’ or ‘frontier’ innovation involved reconfiguration of the firm’s business model; connective innovation entailed the creation of novel service items to address needs that were newly-articulated by existing customers; while incremental innovation involved improvising upon existing service items to meet service recipient needs.

Distributed leadership

This practice involved delegating tasks to others for the purpose of mutual empowerment, in a manner that could range from ‘hands-off’ empowerment within a flexible organization structure to ‘hands-on’ guidance within a more settled structure. An example of ‘hands-off’ empowerment was the adoption by all members of one organization of a system of using business cards with no job titles, representing a flat and flexible organization with no hierarchy, and with members being trusted to develop their own areas of expertise and responsibility in response to customer needs. ‘Hands-on’ guidance involved conveying basic principles to followers and nurturing them, through mentoring or coaching, to become independent solvers of the problems or needs of their service recipients, and was a step toward ‘hands-off’ empowerment.

Building and sustaining productive relationships with customers as strategic partners

This practice involved establishing and maintaining dialogue about customer needs, in contexts where customers were holding high expectations but did not necessarily have accurate insight into actual needs or workable solutions. In cases where customers knew what they wanted and needed, strategic partnership required the service leader to be proactive in seeking comments and feedback for service improvement, to listen well, and to be highly responsive in following up to meet their needs and promote their interests. In cases where customers were unsure about their needs, or were demanding inappropriate solutions, service leaders were careful to show that they were committed to meeting genuine needs while building around their ideas.

Caring and respectful disposition

Service leaders cared deeply about the best interests of their followers, customers and end-beneficiaries. They expressed heartfelt desire to meet the needs of those around them as an end in itself. All of them were highly passionate about their work and enjoyed most of it even if they were sometimes in demanding situations. Some also expressed a desire to contribute to wider social causes. This practice appears to underpin the other ones.

Contribution

In identifying and providing illustrative case examples of four service leadership practices, we go beyond existing leadership theories in showing how service leadership meets the needs of external customers and end-beneficiaries.

(Words: 513)