

A Culture of Hospitality – July 27, 2014



by **David Green**

When I was in the movie theater business I helped lead training sessions for theater managers. With others who facilitated this training, I visited a lot of different theaters as well as businesses that dealt heavily with the public: hotels, restaurants, theme parks, and convention centers. We even scoped out some churches. We surveyed customers and pored over the results.

This was in the mid 1980s, and we came to the conclusion that movie theaters – on the whole – really stank. Sometimes literally. A few theaters were doing well; they were always packed with patrons. While others – showing the exact same movies – were mostly empty.

Obviously, the difference between the crowded theaters and the not-so-crowded theaters had very little to do with the movies being shown.

It had almost everything to do with the overall experience of going to a movie. How it felt. And the strongest indicator of feeling good about going to a movie was hospitality. If hospitality was lacking, the experience was poor. If hospitality was in abundance, the experience was great. It wasn't exactly rocket science.

And so, we built our training around the idea that we were really not in the movie business after all. We were in the hospitality business. The business of making people feel good.

And with that new mindset in place, everything changed. It informed every management decision. It had to do with ensuring that everything was clean and spotless, all the way from the parking lot, to the restrooms, to the auditoriums. It had to do with how our employees appeared and how they interacted with guests. We even started making better popcorn.

We couldn't control the quality or the content of a movie, but we could control everything else in the experience of people coming to watch it. Our whole attitude, our mission, our corporate culture, was to treat every single person who did us the favor of showing up, like an honored guest. To treat them as we would want to be treated.

My experience in the theater – or the hospitality – business was a great education in human nature; specifically, why people make certain choices.

For instance, if we want a cup of coffee, and there's a coffee shop nearby, why might we travel right past that coffee shop and instead, get coffee at a place farther down the road? Assuming the quality of the coffee in both places is the same, why take that longer trip?

Why, if we're buying a book online, do we purchase that book from one particular website and not another one whose price for that book is the same, or lower?

Why do we choose a restaurant, or an airline, or take yoga lessons from one instructor but not another?

We might come up with plenty of rational reasons: I like that website's return policy. That airline has more direct flights. That yoga instructor doesn't make me sweat so much. That's why; it's a practical matter.

True, some of the choices we make are based on what's most practical or cost-effective or is the superior product or service.

But if we're honest, we know we make many – if not most – of our decisions based on how we feel. Stockbrokers know that even experienced investors often buy and sell stocks less on hard evidence and more on a feeling; a gut instinct.

There's nothing inherently wrong about making choices based on our feelings. You and I are bundles of feelings, and if we made every choice purely on objective reasoning, we would be robots instead of humans.

How we feel about a place or a thing or another person is a huge part of how we decide. Rather than try to diminish or deny that, we might as well embrace the fact that our feelings matter and need to be taken seriously.

So, one of the ongoing challenges for anyone who runs a business – or really, any organization – in focusing on the actual product or service you provide, is to not neglect how people feel about the experience of it.

Sometimes that's hard to figure because our feelings are rather subjective. At the same time, we know that having a culture of hospitality consistently results in positive feelings and outcomes for everyone.

Hospitality is deeply rooted in religious traditions. Or, we could just as easily say, hospitality has been such a strong social norm across time and cultures, it was adopted as a religious concept.

Abraham is revered by Muslims, Jews, and Christians as the common ancestor of those religions. As a character trait, hospitality was the thing Abraham did so well it sealed his covenant relationship with God. Abraham's over-the-top hospitality toward complete strangers demonstrated he was living according to God's expectations for human conduct.

But the stories of Abraham's hospitality had very practical roots in the culture of the ancient near east. It was the unwritten social code of that harsh landscape that hospitality was absolutely necessary for survival. Many people were nomads in the desert, and it was understood that the hospitality you offered a stranger wandering through the wilderness seeking food and shelter, was simply the right and practical thing to do. It was your duty to help and protect them, because you never knew when you might be the one who lost your way and needed help.

This code went so far that if the one seeking help belonged to a tribe that was your sworn enemy, if they requested your help, you were bound to offer hospitality until they were able to continue on their way. You treated the stranger in your midst as you wished to be treated.

So, from even the most ancient times, we know hospitality undergirds human relationships: on an intimate level, and on a larger, cultural scale. It makes practical sense, and it reflects the spiritual and philosophical concept that we are all interconnected. It's an expression of our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Because hospitality is so basic, when we encounter a lack of hospitality that's why it's odd and why we feel uncomfortable. But we do, even in settings where we'd imagine just the opposite would be true. Churches are a perfect example.

We've all visited or even been members of congregations where you walk in, and you're regarded as something of a bother. If you're new, you're expected to magically know what to do and where everything is. There are groups of insiders clustered together, and you're an outsider.

At its worst, you sit down in a worship service, and rather than hearing hospitality being expressed, you hear words that sound exclusive rather than inclusive: doctrines that define people as good or bad; the accepted or the enemy. Rather than unconditional welcoming and hope, you hear that certain conditions must be met for you to be valued, and anyone who might question their beliefs are the objects of fear and loathing.

Why is that kind of inhospitality so common? I wish I knew for sure, but I've learned one of the downsides of human nature – especially when people gather in groups – is the tendency to create distinctions. Lines of demarcation as a way of validating the superiority of a certain belief. But that kind of behavior in religious organizations flies in the face of true hospitality. Hospitality has no preconditions. In a culture of hospitality, no one is a stranger; everyone belongs. Everyone is valued for who they are.

Even so, maintaining and enhancing a culture of hospitality takes persistent, intentional effort. It's a whole lot easier to be exclusive and inhospitable. Being inclusive and hospitable means we have to work at it.

But we do work at it, because it's so dearly needed. You and I represent – we embody – a beloved community that is rare. I'm aware of no other place in this area, where people who have such a variety of backgrounds, and a range of beliefs, and who have felt unwelcome elsewhere, can gather and enjoy learning, sharing, caring, and serving. Where you can be authentic about who you are. Where it's safe. And supportive. And fun.

I'm convinced that's why we're growing. But hospitality is not a technique or a gimmick to help us grow. Growth is not the goal of hospitality. It's a natural manifestation of hospitality.

When it's part of our DNA, it demonstrates our values and principles: to others, and to one another. And that's very important. Hospitality is not something that's just geared toward how we treat people who visit here. It's part and parcel of how we relate to one another.

For hospitality to become so deeply ingrained in all we do, there are a few key things we need to wear around like our favorite set of clothes.

We must see ourselves through the five senses of a stranger. How does someone who has little or no awareness of what we're about, experience us? How do they feel? This can be a challenge, because the more familiar we are with the Fellowship, the less we notice little things that add up to a hospitable experience...or not.

So, we have to think of hospitality in big ways and small, and be intentional about consistently evaluating everything. One way to envision this is to begin at the outside edges of how someone might encounter us, and then move inward.

For many folks, starting at the outer edge would mean either you or me inviting them to visit the Fellowship. An invitation is a strong act of hospitality; you're saying, "I want to share this great experience with you. Please be my guest."

For a lot of others, their first encounter might be our website. The website represents who we are, what we do, what we value, and what's going on. So, we pay attention to how easy our website is to navigate, that it looks great, that you can quickly find what you're looking for, and be able to learn a lot about us before you ever visit. Increasingly, our website is our front door. And Martha Baird does a great job with that.

Moving in closer, what does someone experience when they arrive here for a service...since Sunday is when most people first drop by. That's why we pay attention to how neat and clean our property is on the outside. Tad Clay and his crew mow and trim just about every week, and Deb Winters oversees the care of plants and landscaped areas next to the building.

Coming in, how are you greeted – both in person and how you encounter our interior space? Are you offered coffee or a muffin? Does the coffee taste great? Do the people greeting you and handing you a bulletin – and everyone else – treat you like an old friend they're thrilled to see? Are you regarded as a visitor who may or may not be invited, or do you feel like guest and everyone really wants you to be here?

Does our interior look like we take pride in our space? Is it obvious where the nursery is located if you have young children? Where are the restrooms and are they spotless and well stocked?

When you come into this room, is it clean and comfortable? Do you have the sense of being at home among people who are really happy to be here? What are you witnessing in the ways that everyone interacts with each other? What's the vibe? During the service is everything laid out clearly in the bulletin – does it make sense? Have the folks around you introduced themselves and thanked you for being here? How do you feel?

We might not be able to guess how anyone experiences one of our services – it might not be their cup of tea from a religious standpoint – they may think the sermon is a total bore.

But one of the primary goals of any service is to make darn sure everyone knows we are glad they are here, they are valued, and everyone is loved and accepted. And the service itself is thoughtfully prepared and done, because we highly value everyone's time and effort to be here. What we do and say matters, but how we do all of that, matters just as well.

And after a service, how are you treated? Are you engaged in conversation? Do people want to learn more about you? Are you invited to other events or to be back again next Sunday? And again, whether you're a first-time guest or a long-time member, how does your experience make you feel?

Hospitality means we see who we are and what we do through a lens of that feeling: does this word, action, practice, setting, décor, music, policy...embody hospitality? If it doesn't, then what can I do to make it more hospitable? And that means each one of us takes on hospitality as a personal responsibility: we own it. It's not the task of some committee or group. It's everyone's job.

And although hospitality is something we're all responsible for, we do have specific people – on Sundays at least – who play particular roles as greeters. They're part of the Membership Committee. Marilyn Van Petten chairs that committee and she'd love to have you take a turn as a greeter. It's fun.

I believe we're already one of the most hospitable bunch of folks around. It feels great to be here. But I also know we're compelled by the values and principles that guide us, to never stop looking through that lens of hospitality. And I want your help. Let me know how we can do better.

Be the eyes and ears and hands and hearts that strive to welcome, and affirm, and embrace, and celebrate. What we have to offer to one another, and to so many others who would find a home here, is truly remarkable. It's worth sharing. It's a culture that feels good, because it is very good.

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