

UNCIVIL SERVICE RULES – OK?

What do the following have in common: immigration, labour, government personnel, the local municipality and pretty much the entire service workforce? Yep, you guessed it. Their commonality is a public perception of being the black holes of customer service. The conjure up is not one that makes most people warm and fuzzy and their incivility is so ingrained that it's pretty hard to work out why they came to be called the civil service in the first place. Consequently, hardly anyone thinks of them as the epitome of people people at the government. But is this an inherent and inherited problem that cannot be fixed or is it just our prejudice and perception, not they are?

In my experience it's reality. Case in point: Last Sunday I made the reprehensible mistake of arriving at Tlokweng border post with about my person. Accompanied by two international tourists on their first visit to Botswana, we were all scolded for this heinous crime of travelling if not penniless, then at least penless. Four surly immigration officials with nothing better to do and certainly not using their government-issue writing implements at that time, (we were the only people in the arrival hall) point blank refused to help us. We had to go to get a pen from someone else. Who? The hall was empty apart from us, remember. My guests looked at me in disbelief, shocked at the attitude and treatment meted out to overseas guests.

Now I am not sure which training course these employees had attended that instructed them that under no circumstances were they to help the customer, especially when it was easily within their power to do so. In this instance the customers in question were tourists bringing in US\$ to spend in the country, going up to Kasane and generally adding value to the tourist industry. But these uncivil civil servants just didn't get it. I was furious and did give them a piece of my mind by telling them that I was ashamed to invite these guests to the country and verbalising that I remember why I usually avoid this entry point into the country (I try to use Ramotswa where consistently the service is much better). My evident disdain was discounted, even derided with much Setswana banter, presumably to ensure that the foreigners couldn't understand what was being said about them and abundant 'eishes' between the culprits. No one likes hearing complaints, but it appeared that this gang of customer abusers had developed a reflex shrug, saying, "You can't please all the people all the time so why bother with the three of us. I was left wondering if they actually ever pleased anyone? It was, all in all, a shocking experience and an embarrassment to Botswana.

You have no doubt heard countless stories like this numerous times. Sadly shoddy immigration service has existed for as long as I have lived in Botswana. I have witnessed innumerable cases where visitors, whether they were delivering goods, coming to do business or just visiting friends, have been belittled just because they didn't know the system. It's a preposterous notion but you almost think that the powers-that-be go out of their way to put unsuitable, naturally antisocial people in positions which require good judgement, sensitivity, a desire to assist and a propensity for service. Common sense tells me this cannot be the case but it does highlight the need to place the right people in these front-of-house positions if we have any hope of getting the right results in our business. If we are to make strides with call centres, tourism, financial services (check them out they are ALL about service) - a major paradigm shift is required.

I recognise that despite having invested billions, governments around the world, and Botswana is no exception, are still struggling to meet citizens' growing expectations for better customer service. But when the government is the main employer there is need to get it right because the general culture of workers within a country will influence the overall work ethic so getting it right or even just better at grass roots is paramount.

Anyway enough moaning and let me put on my thinking cap here. Why is the service so lousy anyway? Is it because of the sheer volumes of people government employees have to deal with? No, you have to count that out because retail shops are no different. Or that the work is repetitive? No - ditto retail shops. Is it because they know they have a captive clientele? Well, maybe that's part of it. Or more pertinently that they know full well there will be no consequences to their poor performance. Overall I think it comes down to the fact that customer service is still not high enough on the priority list and for that I can only fault leadership. Chances are the gang of four defending their employer's pens were all once rookies who started by wanting to please their boss and peers.

And that the entrenched culture of indifference and slackness from management down drove the employees to emulate the rudeness. That in fact the climate of anti service is not only tolerated but encouraged, one way or another. It is the responsibility of management to either solve or eliminate problems but when they're the underlying cause there's little chance of that. They're the symptoms, not the cure.

If service delivery is not happening then it's because there is no-one higher up breathing down necks, championing the cause and making sure that staff know quality customer service is a requirement, not an option, an economic necessity, not an unheard-of luxury.

Maybe as customers we are also partly to blame. When was the last time that you complained to a government official? It did cross my mind, but you know what - I was so disgusted by the lack of service and sick and tired from travelling that I just wanted to get the hell out of there. Besides I could see no one in charge and certainly no signage indicating where to go if in need of help (guess that queue would be too hectic to manage anyway). Then again, if there aren't even any pens to help the customers fill in the compulsory forms and half the time not even any of those within easy reach, why would there be any other help available, let alone signage showing the chain of command?

So maybe we get what we deserve and if that's the case we won't get the call centres, financial services providers or anyone else to encourage corporates to do business here unless we wake up and ensure customer service is Numero Uno on the national to-do list. And government could set an example - they could start by letting their staff know that the pen may be mightier than the sword but they're not supposed to fighting the customer in the first place!

