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The Ordinary Heroes of the Taj

by Rohit Deshpandé and Anjali Raina

Comments (19)



On November 26, 2008, Harish Manwani, chairman, and Nitin Paranjpe, CEO, of Hindustan Unilever hosted a dinner at the Taj Mahal Palace hotel in Mumbai (Taj Mumbai, for short). Unilever’s directors, senior executives, and their spouses were

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bidding farewell to Patrick Cescau, the CEO, and welcoming Paul Polman, the CEO-elect. About 35 Taj Mumbai employees, led by a 24-year-old banquet manager, Mallika Jagad, were assigned to manage the event in a second-floor banquet room.

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Around 9:30, as they served the main course, they heard what they thought were fireworks at a nearby wedding. In reality, these were the first gunshots from terrorists who were storming the Taj.

The staff quickly realized something was wrong. Jagad had the doors locked and the lights turned off. She asked everyone to lie down quietly under tables and refrain from using cell phones. She insisted that husbands and wives separate to reduce the risk to families. The group stayed there all night, listening to the terrorists rampaging through the hotel, hurling grenades, firing automatic weapons, and tearing the place apart. The Taj staff kept calm, according to the guests, and constantly went around offering water and asking people if they needed anything else. Early the next morning, a fire started in the hallway outside, forcing the group to try to climb out the windows. A fire crew spotted them and, with its ladders, helped the trapped people escape quickly. The staff evacuated the guests first, and no casualties resulted. "It was my responsibility....I may have been the youngest person in the room, but I was still doing my job," Jagad later told one of us.

Elsewhere in the hotel, the upscale Japanese restaurant Wasabi by Morimoto was busy at 9:30 PM. A warning call from a hotel operator alerted the staff that terrorists had entered the building and were heading toward the restaurant. Forty-eight-year-old Thomas Varghese, the senior waiter at Wasabi, immediately instructed his 50-odd guests to crouch under tables, and he directed employees to form a human cordon around them. Four hours later, security men asked Varghese if he could get the guests out of the hotel. He decided to use a spiral staircase near the restaurant to evacuate the customers first and then the hotel staff. The 30-year Taj veteran insisted that he would be the last man to leave, but he never did get out. The terrorists gunned him down as he reached the bottom of the staircase.

When Karambir Singh Kang, the Taj Mumbai's general manager, heard about the attacks, he immediately left the conference he was attending at another Taj property. He took charge at the Taj Mumbai the moment he arrived, supervising the evacuation of guests and coordinating the efforts of firefighters amid the chaos. His wife and two young children were in a sixth-floor suite, where the general manager traditionally lives. Kang thought they would be safe, but when he realized that the terrorists were on the upper floors, he tried to get to his family. It was impossible. By midnight the sixth floor was in flames, and there was no hope of anyone's surviving. Kang led the rescue efforts until noon the next day. Only then did he call his parents to tell them that the terrorists had killed his wife and children. His father, a retired general, told him, "Son, do your duty. Do not desert your post." Kang replied, "If it [the hotel] goes down, I will be the last man out."

Three years ago, when armed terrorists attacked a dozen locations in Mumbai—including two luxury hotels, a hospital, the railway station, a restaurant, and a Jewish center—they killed as many as 159 people, both Indians and foreigners, and gravely wounded more than 200. The assault, **known as 26/11**, scarred the nation's psyche by exposing the country's vulnerability to terrorism, although India is no stranger to it. The Taj Mumbai's **burning domes and spires**, which stayed ablaze for two days and three nights, will forever symbolize the tragic events of 26/11.

During the onslaught on the Taj Mumbai, 31 people died and 28 were hurt, but the hotel received only praise the day after. Its guests were overwhelmed by employees' dedication to duty, their desire to protect guests without regard to personal safety, and their quick thinking. Restaurant and banquet staff rushed people to safe locations such as kitchens and basements. Telephone operators stayed at their posts, alerting guests to lock doors and not step out. Kitchen staff formed human shields to protect guests during evacuation attempts. As many as 11 Taj Mumbai employees—a third of the hotel's casualties—laid down their lives while helping between 1,200 and 1,500 guests escape.

At some level, that isn't surprising. One of the world's top hotels, the Taj Mumbai is ranked number 20 by *Condé Nast Traveler* in the overseas business hotel category. The hotel is known for the



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highest levels of quality, its ability to go many extra miles to delight customers, and its staff of highly trained employees, some of whom have worked there for decades. It is a well-oiled machine, where every employee knows his or her job, has encyclopedic knowledge about regular guests, and is comfortable taking orders.

Even so, the Taj Mumbai's employees gave customer service a whole new meaning during the terrorist strike. What created that extreme customer-centric culture of employee after employee staying back to rescue guests when they could have saved themselves? What can other organizations do to emulate that level of service, both in times of crisis and in periods of normalcy? Can companies scale up and perpetuate extreme customer centrality?

Our studies show that the Taj employees' actions weren't prescribed in manuals; no official policies or procedures existed for an event such as 26/11. Some contextual factors could have had a bearing, such as India's ancient culture of hospitality; the values of the House of Tata, which owns the Taj Group; and the Taj Mumbai's historical roots in the patriotic movement for a free India. The story, probably apocryphal, goes that in the 1890s, when security men denied J.N. Tata entry into the Royal Navy Yacht Club, pointing to a board that apparently said "No Entry for Indians and Dogs," he vowed to set up a hotel the likes of which the British had never seen. The Taj opened its doors in 1903.

Still, something unique happened on 26/11. We believe that the unusual hiring, training, and incentive systems of the Taj Group—which operates 108 hotels in 12 countries—have combined to create an organizational culture in which employees are willing to do almost anything for guests. This extraordinary customer centrality helped, in a moment of crisis, to turn its employees into a band of ordinary heroes. To be sure, no single factor can explain the employees' valor. Designing an organization for extreme customer centrality requires several dimensions, the most critical of which we describe in this article.

The Taj Approach to HR

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Rohit Deshpandé is the Sebastian S. Kresge Professor of Marketing and the faculty chair of the Global Colloquium for Participant-Centered Learning at Harvard Business School. **Anjali Raina** is the executive director of the HBS India Research Center in Mumbai.

COMMENTS

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Sangram Acharya

I am very glad to know that the taj employed are very helpful and they show there braveness on time when the terrious attack on taj many lost there family but they they never left the guest in trouble and help them as they can do without thinking there own life

10/15/2012 11:16 AM

Like Reply



Ram Neupane

well, with due respects to ordinary heroes of the Taj i.e. employee, this is an example of brutality of today's' business. whether they are employee or customers, all have their own life, family, society and something in this globe, thus giving priority to customers is simply making their employee scapegoats. as per this case, what I learnt is today's businesses are ready to sacrifice their employee so as to collect customers and making profits. Therefore, i think, we should give same level of priority to customers as well as employee in this sorts of extraordinary situations.

05/12/2012 12:41 AM 1 Like

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**Nitin_singhai**

Its not companies who are asking their employees to put customer before their own priority. Employees always have choice...but its the culture Tata's they have developed, motivation, rewards and recognition which employees recieve, employees understanding of business continuity and customer centricity by way of which they are earning and feeding their family lives helps them taking decision what is more important at that point of time.

07/13/2012 03:19 AM in reply to Ram Neupane 1 Like

[Like](#) [Reply](#)**Puneet**

It feels proud to see that a Great Indian conglomerate like Tata is today's leading examples of how this company not just write words like Customer Service in their communications but rather live it as each day and make this culture is a way of life.

12/16/2011 07:51 PM 4 Likes

[Like](#) [Reply](#)**Ajay Joshi**

The case study like this are all the more important in the country like India t present. This is because, there is urgent need of organisational loyalty and sense of service, in particular, in public service sector where self-centred behavior is guiding all actions.

This case study gives many applied and successful ideas, which can be replicated in government sector to get more motivated employees, who can behave as ideal pubic servants.

12/12/2011 07:04 AM 3 Likes

[Like](#) [Reply](#)**K.Ramachandran**

Quote:

"To be sure, no single factor can explain the employees' valor . "

My comments:

In my opinion , involving people is much more important . If that is done it makes a strong foundation for the values and culture and later it becomes the tradition . The ownership comes automatically , as the employees are so much involved in their job by putting their heart and soul. No scope for errors which makes them to take develop self developmental efforts and creative thinking and go all out in the customer satisfaction without fear or favour . The presence of mind and out of box thinking will come only in an organisation where it is appreciated and believes in empowerment of its people at operational level without interference . Purely rule based set up will kill the creativity and provide room for subjectivity . The only motto in every body's mind is zero tolerance particularly in the areas of customer safety and satisfaction . This comes naturally and is practiced by the design like the family tradition . The member just pick up the age old custom & culture is followed as foot steps giving importance to the established values . It can not be achieved by the scheduled trainings or by introducing any attractive incentive scheme . It should be within and people must enjoy people and that is pre condition for selection. The perceived notion of the employees at Taj are heart felt and most of them are definitely influenced...

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12/10/2011 01:15 PM 3 Likes

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Sanity-monger

Although I find this story inspirational, I also find it and the reactions in these comments disturbing. There is more than one way to view the extraordinary sacrifice of Taj's employees and what might have motivated them. We read that Tata recruits in the hinterland in order to gain employees more willing to toady to the pampered clientele, due both to their cultural background as well as their financial desperation. Was it their training or these other factors that caused them to conclude, in those days of crisis, that the lives of the guests had greater value than their own? Either way, it is not a morally justifiable goal of an organization to encourage such a level of self-sacrifice. Had the Taj somehow been in any way responsible for the dire situation, or if we were talking about persons in public safety roles such as security personnel, then I think a willingness to

put one's life on the line would be justified.
But for ordinary workers dealing with an extraordinary situation not of their or their employer's making, such sacrifice speaks to an organizational malady rather than a situation to be lauded. The inability of the writer or (based on these comments) the readers of a publication like HBR to discern this perversion is yet further evidence of the degree to which modern business paradigms have gone off the rails. It is to such perversions (among other things) that movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall...

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12/10/2011 08:58 AM 4 Likes

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Ushagowri

I tried to understand what you wrote in your response but just couldn't.
You mean they hoped to come out alive and then go and remind their guests how well they protected them and therefore could you please tip me?
All this as terrorists were firing indiscriminately? That for me is quick thinking...of how to make an extra buck even as you know you may never come out of the mayhem alive
What about the manager?
What about Ratan Tata standing outside the hotel and being there almost all the time?
What about how they nurtured all the employees after the carnage?
In a world filled with pessimism, distrust and selfishness, I saw that day, great sacrifices being made. It was one moment when I was absolutely proud of my country and my countrymen-ordinary people rallying to do whatever they could do for others and that for me is leadership.

01/25/2012 10:58 AM in reply to Sanity-monger 7 Likes

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Shrihari Udupa

Times of crisis reveal the character of an organisation, this is a reflection of the values lived on a day to day basis by the leaders. if there is a dichotomy between the words and action, the employees see it through, they would leave the organisation and the so called leadership in lurch when the

need is acute. The level of dedication displayed could not be achieved by lectures, it has come by leaders living the values and reflecting them in every action. Hats off to the culture and values at Tata..the brand speaks it all!

Shrihari Udupa

12/10/2011 03:39 AM 3 Likes

Like Reply



Sabina3520

really very inspiring !! an extraordinary story of courage and great hospitality

12/06/2011 11:43 PM 1 Like

Like Reply



Shrikanth Koppal

"This extraordinary customer centricity helped, in a moment of crisis, to turn its employees into a band of ordinary heroes."I think it should be extraordinary in place of ordinary.Anyways, its an amazing piece. This incident is very close to my heart and I am glad that more and more people will be able to learn something important out of it.

11/29/2011 05:17 PM 3 Likes

Like Reply



Kalsang

Ethics in action!

Thanks for this wonderful article. Excellent hiring methods - true heroes are in semi-rural areas. I am proud to say Tibetan born in India. Thanks

11/28/2011 08:20 PM 4 Likes

Like Reply



Ashok Davidson

Taj - The crowing glory of Hospitality: The word hospitality derives from the Latin hospes, which is formed from hostis, which originally meant "to have power." The meaning of "host" can be literally

read as "lord of strangers." - Wikipedia

11/28/2011 12:03 AM 1 Like

Like Reply



Dr. Suchitra Shetty

Amazing!!!commitment par excellence....Taj,an all time inspiration set....

11/27/2011 12:42 PM 1 Like

Like Reply



Paresh Masade

wonderful to know how culture of an organization can be built... a perfect example of leadership on ground...

11/27/2011 09:24 AM 1 Like

Like Reply



Suresh Kochattil

An amazing story of Ordinary men and women at Taj Mumbai who did their job despite being in the line of fire. I am proud to have been a part of the Taj group. They walk their talk. Suresh Kochattil

11/27/2011 04:47 AM 1 Like

Like Reply



satish

No words coming out. Hatsoff..

11/27/2011 03:43 AM 1 Like

Like Reply



Jagadeesh1

Very inspiring,dedication and selfless service risking life.

Dr.A.Jagadeesh Nellore(AP),India

E-mail: anumakonda.jagadeesh@gmail.com

11/20/2011 12:26 PM 1 Like

Like Reply



Partham Mishra

It's so heart-warming as well as inspiring to understand how far an organisation goes to salvage its core assets i.e. customers' experience , safety , pleasure and there is a well concerted effort by Taj Group with the values and principles laid down by TATAs an erudite ,informed erstwhile business house of India which created legacy more about its values than the profit. Here I can cite a very interesting example of same devotion and dedication to salvage its core assets of business i.e. coal and its mining people in coal companies in India when there disaster strikes in any coal mine. I am not sure how far Prof Deshpande knows about the coal mines in India specially which belongs to eastern peninsula where there are hundreds of old , hazardous mines some of which more prone to accident than others. Our coal people works and wins those fossil fuel with simply cavalry, valour and terrific combination of wit and alertness sans any high level , well orchestrated training or teaching (some technical training hardly leverage that charisma to work against so many odds). But the real leadership, teamwork and extreme dedication been seen when there disaster strikes or accidents occurs in any mine, the whole organisation just get knit so closely irrespective of post and position, jump into the rescue and salvage work right from general manager to the general majdoor and who keep their life at stake so many times to save every single life trapped...

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11/17/2011 09:37 PM 3 Likes

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