

Designing Experiential Services with an Improvisational Stance

Lessons from the Ritz-Carlton



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Improvisation belongs not only in the realm of music, dance or theatre. In times of uncertainty and ambiguity, being able to agilely anticipate change is critical. In this article, the author explores two experiential service design lessons to learn from a luxury hotel that is in the business of designing memorable experiences.

Hotels traditionally focus on efficiencies and high-quality operations. However, in complex working environments full of diverse users, ambiguity and continuous change, an improvisational orientation among staff is key to designing fluid, meaningful and effective connections between staff and guests⁴. The Ritz-Carlton has changed its value proposition: instead of thinking of itself solely as a hotel company, it has transitioned to a focus on designing and delivering memorable and meaningful experiences for guests. A shift has occurred in the organisation, one where structured systems are now used in fluid ways to empower employees to act more independently and creatively. This shift was made possible because of a strategic system redesign in The Ritz-Carlton organisation that affected its internal culture and processes for delivery of services. Based on a qualitative research study with The Ritz-Carlton

organisation, this article shares two lessons for service enterprises that can be transformative when systems are designed to allow for a balance between structure and flow: 1) design elastic structures and 2) optimise uncertainty.

It is first important to provide some insight on improvisation. Improvisation is a transformative way of being and knowing, a way of making sense of events that emerge unexpectedly²³⁵. It is an open-ended and ongoing process and can deliver continually reconstructed designed services. Jazz improvisation provides an ideal view of the balance between structure and flow when designing experiential services, that are delivered in environments where a client's needs cannot be predicted in a linear fashion. Many studies have turned to jazz improvisation as a methodological lens to understand organisational functions, interactions and operations².

In this case, the improvisational lens is a methodology for exploring how experiential services are designed in ways that optimise for uncertainty. Historically, The Ritz-Carlton has prided itself on delivering reliable operational performance that produced consistently high quality service. In contrast, jazz musicians pride themselves on producing something recognisably part of a genre that comes out differently each time⁵. The improvisational lens connects what have traditionally been polar opposites in hotel service delivery – efficient reliability versus creative customisation – by justifying broader limits in the design of experiential services.

The first experiential service design lesson from The Ritz-Carlton is that elastic structures facilitate improvisational activity to advance meaningful connections between consumers and providers (Figure 1). Elastic structures refer to the expand-and-contract quality that adaptive, improvisational structures elicit according to the situation at hand. The ‘12 Service Values’ that replaced the lengthier and more proscriptive ‘20 Basics’ is an example of an elastic structure at The

Ritz-Carlton. The 20 Basics had degenerated into a dense list of rules that did not inspire creativity. For example, Service Value Number 2: “I am always responsive to the expressed and unexpressed wishes and needs of our guests” encapsulated about five of the former 20 Basics. In fact, front-line staff that I interviewed acknowledged that the 20 Basics were more of a drawback, because their lengthiness and detail had become cumbersome.

Such an internal change was a direct response to two major shifts in the luxury hotel market: competitor hotels were offering a more contemporary aesthetic and the luxury customer no longer fitted a narrow gender and ethnic profile. The Ritz-Carlton staff essentially began acting as artists and designers, anticipating the needs of guests in creative and inspired ways. Today, when they anticipate guests’ needs well and each staff member improvises solutions, the organisation flows in a dynamic rhythm.

Another example of an elastic structure is The Ritz-Carlton’s principle of ‘lateral service’. Lateral service means that staff members pitch in to do whatever is necessary to get a job done on the



Figure 1: Elastic structures – a component of the improvisational stance

operations level, as well as to deliver an experience on the more emotionally charged customer engagement level, whether the staff member is a house-keeper, a bartender or a general manager. Lateral service is an example of a loose boundary, a platform that, when viewed through the improvisational lens, elicits improvisational behaviour that helps staff to design experiential services. The way experiential services are designed at The Ritz-Carlton requires staff to transcend boundaries between departments, hotel properties or even regions, so that a guest's basic expectations are exceeded. Because lateral service requires teamwork, every staff member has the full authority to use their own discretion creatively: they are encouraged to break out of traditional department-based teams. This was explained to me quite well by Sergio, a plumber in the engineering department who regularly calls upon his skills of observation and empathy to deliver an optimal experience. An elastic structure such as The Ritz-Carlton's 12 Service Values empowers staff and makes them interact with guests in a way that stretches the boundaries of their stated job description to meet their job's purpose, which is to deliver 'wow experiences'. As Sergio stated,

“This is the kind of service we give to the guest, to make sure the guest is coming [sic] back. And then they say, ‘Oh! You are an engineer!?’ Someone from engineering brought me a bottle of wine!’ That is the key. The key is, we resolve the problem. We make sure the guest is satisfied with the resolution we give to the toilet repair, or to a light bulb that went out, or to a

problem with the phone or a problem with the air conditioning. This is the key to our success. The management gives you the power to ask, to engage the guest... and to go beyond.”

An elastic structure such as lateral service equips staff with design tools to embrace the ambiguity of an unknown situation, empower them to accept their vulnerability of not necessarily being the expert in a given service area and, then, determine the effective balance of structure and flow to deliver the most meaningful outcome for the guest.

To this end, The Ritz-Carlton invests a great deal of research, time and money to select and develop staff who adeptly distinguish between when structure is liberating and when structure obstructs a more fluid process.

The second lesson is that using an improvisational lens helps staff to identify structures that optimise ambiguous situations. Ambiguity is a necessary catalyst for thinking dynamically and enhancing innovative behaviour: it is a means to meaning-making and, as such, it can be useful in a service context. Meaning-making is influencing how others understand, frame and make sense of established or new practices and behaviours. The improvisational lens reveals that meaning-making occurs because of the structure and because of the flow: both are necessary. For example, there were interdependencies between a staff member's training in a functional skill, his observation and his intuition when a Ritz-Carlton bellman, Adam, described his Herculean efforts to deliver tuxedo shoes to a

guest on a late Saturday afternoon, when all nearby retailers had closed. He used the structures of his rigorous training, his network among clothing store managers and his emotional intelligence to execute what The Ritz-Carlton calls the ‘art of anticipation’ to deliver a ‘wow experience’. Adam’s observational acumen was sharpened by his intuitive ability, which was, in turn, enhanced by his observational skills.

The Ritz-Carlton motto (We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen) is an example of a meaning-making structure, one that optimises for uncertainty and ambiguity. The idea that a maid thinks as highly of herself as of a high net-worth hotel guest sets up a feedback loop where employees extend to guests what they themselves have experienced. The creation of wow experiences are expected to be as meaningful for the employees as the resulting wow experiences are for the guests. As one room attendant, Mark, explained, he was able to deliver the wow experience of driving an hour while off-duty to fetch a suit the guest had left behind at a different hotel, because he would want someone to do the same for him. He was able to summon empathy for this guest because he thought as highly of himself. This delivery of service ended up in The

Ritz-Carlton’s documented collection of wow stories, and Mark received the high honour of a five-star employee of the year award. It is significant that his work was recognised publicly throughout the organisation, serving as a motivator for other staff to initiate innovative solutions. The motto is



an equaliser: it optimises uncertainty because it exemplifies that the staff are serviced by the same principles they are expected to deliver to guests.

In conclusion, the greater lesson for service organisations is that the improvisational lens is a design tool for planning, coordinating, and implementing experiential service design. The improvisational lens is also a model for experiential service design that can be applied across different service sectors, potentially leading to a cross-fertilisation of concepts and strategies. Other service firms can extrapolate the larger lessons about meta-design (staff members designing the design process), from the hospitality sector to their own organisations. Utilising the improvisational lens would affect recruitment, as it would become more desirable to hire those who are not only operationally effective, but who also can develop the intangible design tools of empathy, intuition and the art of anticipation. An acknowledgment of meta-design among staff would promote more self-organising and adaptive work environments. For example, if the design tools used by The Ritz-Carlton (e.g., embracing ambiguity, lateral service and an empowering motto) were adopted by other organisations, the traditional focus on operations might be transformed to more holistic design tools for staff with more meaningful outcomes for clients. Such an improvisational design orientation would require 1) new strategies for selecting, training, and managing, and 2) environments of trust where staff are encouraged to be experimental and innovative. ●

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