Be a Service Warrior

Cultivate a spirit of generosity and extraordinary.

by Chip R. Bell

Warrior lessons started as soon as I exited the Army helicopter that had flown me to a remote part of Vietnam. I entered the only tent at the field command post for the infantry unit to which I had been assigned. At the far end of the tent stood a noticeably serious Army captain. I snapped to attention and saluted. “At ease, lieutenant,” he said with the confidence of a general.

I had been told about Captain Jack Hamilton before I deployed to the field. “There’s not a more seasoned commander than Happy Jack,” the battalion officer told me. “He has several medals for bravery under enemy fire. You’ll find there’s no slacking in Alpha Company.”

“Welcome to the 82nd Airborne,” CPT Hamilton said, flashing a contagious smile. Some of the butterflies in my stomach began to calm down. “Your days of being a soldier are over, son. In this outfit you are expected to be a warrior. Ordinary soldiers do their assigned duty; warriors give their absolute best. Now, go see Sgt. Short. He’ll get you squared away.” I left his tent knowing I had much to learn about being a warrior.

Service without spirit can come in many forms. It can be emotional indifference, the “it’s just a job” attitude of the night nurse, the sleep-walking movement of the janitor, or the wooden sound in the operator’s voice. It is service with all the life-form removed.

We live in a time of spirit larceny. Layoffs have robbed colleagues of colleagues, leaving those who remain feeling rather hollow. And, the hustle for razor thin margins has put short term profits at center stage and long term relationships in the cheap seats. As organizations are put in a profit-at-all-cost vise, what can be squeezed out is the positive spirit of those who provide service. It is an important time for service warriors.

Real warriors fight in the same dire situations as any other soldier. But, warriors take command and, through their sheer zeal to excel, turn lemons into champagne. They live every moment from the adage, “give to the world the best that you have and the best will come back to you.”

They have exercised every “victim” molecule from their body in order to enter all challenges with a fervent belief in a very positive outcome. They take the fight to the enemy; they don’t hunker down and hope difficulty will pass.

Service is not about performing assigned duties—it is making a light come on inside a customer. It is not about what you supply; it is about what you nurture in another. Elevators give service; people promote spirit. And, service without spirit is as memorable as an ATM or an automatic car wash.

Generosity Wins Over Obligation

Warriors will tell you that the rush of the challenge drowns out the fear of bodily harm. Contrary to what you see in movies starring Bruce Willis or Sylvester Stallone, real warriors do not get a thrill out of hurting people. Rather, they are the military version of Olympic athletes. And, the survival benefits of the best—bringing more to their role than is required.

“A cash and carry customer brought a small rug in to clean,” reports Ellen Amirkhan of Dallas-based Oriental Rug Cleaning. “All the parking spaces were taken, so she parked on the sidewalk; when she came out she had gotten a parking ticket. She came in and told us and we wrote her a check for the ticket. When the rug was ready, we delivered it to her and did not charge her for the cleaning! We have a customer for life.”

A generosity attitude captivates customers. It attracts them because it conveys the unconditional positive regard that characterizes relationships at their best. Customers like the way they feel when dealing with generous service providers. They believe they are the recipients of a sincere desire to serve, not just a ploy for payback. They enjoy relationships laced with substance and value far more than encounters that are functional, but rather hollow.

Extra Wins Over Ordinary

I learned from my warrior tutelage that “slacking” had an elevated meaning to Captain Hamilton. In the soldier world, slacking meant falling short on your assigned tasks. But to a man who never made a “C” on anything in his life, slacking meant anything short of the best you could deliver.

Service warriors know ordinary service leaves customers only satisfied. Seventy-five percent of customers who leave an organization to go with a competitor say they were satisfied with the one they abandoned. Being a service warrior means delivering a service experience that is remarkable—one that makes customers remark positively to others.

Chanaka Demel was working the front desk at the Toronto Airport Holiday Inn when two men arrived to register late one evening. They were angry the airline had lost their luggage. Both had interviews early the next morning and did not have the proper clothes. Realizing the men were about his size, Chanaka signaled another clerk to fill in while he went home to secure two business suits, shirts, and all the accessories for the two guests. They returned to the hotel late the next afternoon after a successful day of interviews in Chanaka’s clothes. “He’s a miracle worker,” they told the general manager. “We’ll tell everyone to only stay at this hotel.”

Extra telegraphis affirmation

William James, the famed psychologist, wrote: “The deepest craving of human nature is the need to be valued.” Extra says to customers, “You are worth it.”

Colonel Hamilton retired from the Army in 1992 and then spent several years developing senior leaders in the Croatian Army. “Once you become a warrior,” he told me, “you can never go back to being an ordinary soldier.” Be a service warrior for a while. Like Jack Hamilton, you’ll never again settle for service that is “just ordinary.”

Chip R. Bell is a senior partner with the Chip Bell Group in Dallas. His newest book (with John R. Patterson) is Take Their Breath Away. Visit www.taketheirbreathaway.com.

ACTION: Provide spirit and generosity.