

**Service excellence**

## How can an OR be like the Ritz-Carlton?

**W**hat do a Ritz-Carlton hotel and a hospital or ambulatory surgery center have in common? At first glance, you might say very little. After all, the glamor and glitz of a Ritz-Carlton hotel seem miles away from the plain and functional OR. But dig a little deeper and you'll uncover lessons you can apply in any service setting—including ORs.

People choose to stay in a Ritz-Carlton, and nonemergency patients have some choice as to what hospital they go to, says Diana Oreck, vice president, Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center. "We want customers for life, and hospitals are looking for referrals," she says in comparing the 2 businesses. In the past 2 years, 65% of the leadership center's business has come from health care organizations.

One organization taking the Ritz-Carlton way to heart is Valley View Hospital (VVH) in Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

"We can learn a lot from hotels such as the Ritz-Carlton," says Deb Wiepking, RN, MSN, chief clinical officer. "We can do much better than we have by creating an experience that is better." Wiepking has attended programs at the Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center and worked with Oreck to develop a service program, called Destination Summit, at the 78-bed hospital, which has 720 employees.

Oreck believes "the best service comes from a human connection." Here are some ways to make that connection.

### Create the Wow factor

"When customers ask for service and you deliver it, you're just meeting their expectations," says Oreck. Instead, aim for giving patients a "Wow!" experience. To achieve a Wow experience, people need to stay "in the moment," or, as Ritz-Carlton puts it, "Radar On, Antenna Up." In essence, staff are so attuned to patients and families that they can anticipate what's needed, even without a verbal request.

"It doesn't cost anything to stay in the moment," notes Oreck. "You can make someone's day."

Wiepking says, "We get patients what they need to get well, not what we think they need."

She tells the story of a young man, 'Jeff,' from out of town who was in an auto accident and underwent minor surgery. Jeff's parents were flying in to see him, so he wanted to remain at the hospital after discharge. The staff found a place where Jeff could stay and served him lunch. Another staff member picked up the parents at the airport and brought them to the hospital, where they were reunited with their son.

Ritz-Carlton principles work in larger organizations, too.

At Bon Secours, a 4-hospital health system in Richmond, Virginia, Wow stories are shared in newsletters and posted on bulletin boards on units such as the OR, says Kathy Santini, RN, BS, MBA, vice president of surgical services.

One method of gathering these stories is the service excellence card given to patients undergoing surgery. The cards have the system's values around the edge and list the names of those who cared for the patient. Many patients have called or emailed to single out a person who created a Wow experience.

Health care staff may say they are too busy to worry about creating a Wow experience; it's hard enough to get the work done in an era of short staffing. But Oreck points out that every industry runs into the "busy factor."

"If you have the spirit to serve, you can overcome that," she says. For example,

**The Mission of Bon Secours**

To provide compassionate, quality healthcare services to those in need, including the poor and dying, for the purpose of alleviating human suffering and bringing people to wholeness in the midst of pain and loss.

**Vision**

Bon Secours in Central Virginia will be a top tier health care system in the Mid-Atlantic, recognized for its high quality medical staffs, clinical program strength, outstanding service to the community, and as the region's employer of choice.

**The Three Steps of Service**

1. A warm and sincere greeting. Use the person's name.
2. Anticipation and fulfillment of each person's needs.
3. Seamless service for every person, every time.

**Affirmations**

We, the employees of Bon Secours Richmond, affirm every member of our team.

We are on holy ground, called to serve as partners in ministry.

We are instruments of compassion, healing, and liberation.

We serve with respect, attention, and responsiveness.

At the heart of Bon Secours, we make room for miracles!

*Bon Secours's credo card keeps the hospital's mission out-front.*

whether you are understaffed or not, you still need to verify the surgical site. Why not do so in a positive manner?

Ritz-Carlton uses role playing and acting to educate staff and keep them at the top of their game.

"Sometimes when you feel bad, you just have to fake it," says Oreck. "We have zero tolerance for poor presentation to customers."

**Instill the spirit to serve**

Instilling the spirit to serve begins with talent management—getting the right people in the right jobs.

"We screen all of our employees to identify what strengths and talents the person has," says Wiepking. "We focus on people's strengths, not weaknesses."

VVH uses the same tool as the Ritz-Carlton: Talent Plus ([www.talentplus.com](http://www.talentplus.com)). For example, the inpatient OR is probably not a good match for a person who loves a lot of patient interaction. On the other hand, a person who embraces change would likely do well. The hospital's system seems to be working—it currently has no openings in the OR.

At Ritz-Carlton, no employee starts work before a 2-day orientation. Oreck cautions against making the short general orientation that all hospital employees attend a "data dump" by letting statistics and policies dominate the sessions.

"Orientation is about the emotional takeaways," she says. "New people are validating whether they've made the right choice."

Senior leadership teaches the classes, which sends a powerful message to employees. At the start, managers thank the employees for choosing to work at Ritz-Carlton. The company pays attention to details, including learning orientees' favorite snack on the first day and having those snacks available the next day.

When employees return 3 weeks later for a third day of orientation, they are asked about their experience with their learning coach, who is with them for the first month. Employees provide feedback on their enculturation into the company, helping to fine-tune processes.

Employees also return 1 year after hire, when they are "psychologically rehired," as Oreck puts it. She says employees receive their 1-year anniversary pin, hear an update on the company, and reenergize the Ritz-Carlton culture and philosophy.

**Empower employees, but be specific**

Ritz-Carlton employees live by tenets such as, "I own and resolve the problem," says Oreck. "It's the mindset, I hear it; I own it." The organization allows employees to spend up

to \$2,000 per day per guest to “make it right.” Oreck emphasizes that money is the last resort to solve a problem. “Don’t substitute money for dialogue,” she says. Wiepking says VVH staff may spend up to \$500. Specific guidelines help determine how the money is spent. “You can’t make empowerment too vague,” Oreck says.

She acknowledges that senior management must be willing to take risks and know that mistakes will be made, especially at first. “If the manager tells the person she went overboard, it shuts the person down.”

Wiepking says staff go out of their way to make a nice environment for patients and family. The day surgery area has private rooms with bathrooms, and families can stay with patients. In some cases, family members are allowed in the postanesthesia care unit. Families hook pagers on their belts so they can eat lunch instead of being tied to the waiting room. Patients can enjoy the soothing touch of a massage before surgery, listen to music, and view art hanging in rooms and in hallways.

“Hospitals are scary places,” says Wiepking. “We try to make it more homelike.”

### **Start at the top**

Leadership at every level is key for customer service success.

“All of us model the right behavior,” says Wiepking. “I wouldn’t ask someone to do something I wouldn’t do myself.”

When a visitor asks for directions, the employee, whether it’s the CEO or a staff member, escorts him or her to the destination.

At Ritz-Carlton, top leadership attend the daily line-up call. This is a 15-minute meeting held 3 times a day, 365 days per year. On 2 of the days, Wow stories are shared to motivate staff. Each day, one aspect of culture is reviewed, says Oreck, so the mission and credo are reviewed regularly, not just when something goes wrong.

Bon Secours reshaped daily meetings into 10-minute “huddles,” which any coworker can lead. Although information, such as the status of the surgery schedule, is part of that meeting, it’s more than a simple report. Each day the manager reads a value statement, and employees comment on how they model it in their department. Themes change on a weekly basis. “Did-you-know” questions are used to disseminate health system news. In the OR, meetings are held 3 to 4 times per day to accommodate all shifts.

Oreck says it’s important to paint the picture of the strategic plan to all employees. “Every single manager must paint the picture for everyone in their department as to how they affect the strategic plan,” she says. This includes employees at all levels, from house-keeping to nursing to accounting.

“Get the pride factor going,” she adds. “Middle management needs to break the strategic plan and the mission into language the staff can understand and make an emotional connection to.”

Language that resonates with the staff at VVH includes Ritz-Carlton’s 3 steps of service, says Wiepking. VVH has adapted the steps to read:

- a warm and engaging reception
- collaborative, personalized service
- supportive, informed departure.

The customer’s name is used at each stage.

Oreck recommends that leaders pay attention to “the systems behind the smile.” She notes that constant nonmedical crises inhibit the staff from giving great service.

“Start with attention to detail, add care and connection, and get rid of flawed processes,” says Oreck. “It doesn’t matter if it’s a bank, a hotel, or a hospital.”

### **Serve your employees**

Don’t forget your internal customers—your employees—when providing customer service.

“We focus on work-life balance for employees,” says Wiepking. “We try to make it easier for them to come to work and decrease their stressors.”

VVH offers services such as the ability to drop off and pick up dry cleaning at work, a coffee shop that carries Starbucks coffee, oil changes for the car, an ATM, cooking classes, day care, and excellent benefits. Employees can even take prepared meals from the

cafeteria to eat at home.

"We want employees to get out of bed loving to come to work," says Santini.

Bon Secours recently held an "Olympics" to celebrate the implementation of the huddles and to let employees know they are appreciated. Employees, including the CEO, played games and ate hot dogs and hamburgers hot off the grill.

Wiepking says the hospital also honors departments on an annual basis. "We try to surprise them. It might be a refrigerator for the lounge, a special lunch, or something else they want."

### **Never rest on your laurels**

Oreck recommends never becoming complacent.

"It's the little things we do that make a difference," says Wiepking. "Giving someone a warm washcloth, putting art on the wall, not having visiting hours. These mean something to patients."

Santini emphasizes the need to measure patient, employee, and physician satisfaction to evaluate the effectiveness of service interventions. Bon Secours is already an award-winning health system, and Santini credits Ritz-Carlton with helping the organization to continue raising the bar for excellent patient care.

"It's like the whipped cream on a piece of pie," she says. "It keeps moving us even further along in meeting our mission." ❖

—Cynthia Saver, RN, MS

*Cynthia Saver is a freelance writer in Columbia, Maryland.*

## **About the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company**

- Ritz Carlton won the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 1992 and 1999.
- The company employs 32,000 "ladies and gentlemen," as they are called, in 70 hotels in 23 countries. The company's motto, "We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen," exemplifies the concept of anticipatory service that has become a hallmark of the company.
- The Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center offers classes such as Developing a Dynamic Employee Orientation and Back to Basics: Ritz-Carlton Style, as well as an Executive Education Certificate Series in partnership with New York University. The center also customizes programs. Information and course outlines are at <http://corporate.ritzcarlton.com/en/LeadershipCenter/Default.htm>.