Jared Dyreson

Professor Samuel Ortiz

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Just another day at Starbucks

It was my third week of working for Starbucks. I learned a very valuable lesson that day; when one is working with the public, one must be able to withstand society’s superiority complex. I was on custodial duties which we have ironically called Customer Support; you would assume it would involve supporting customers not picking up trash. Getting back to my story, it was midafternoon and a gentleman in his late fifties to early sixties enters through the front doors. My first impression was that he was the father of a friend of mine. My friend’s dad is a warm and friendly guy who makes people feel good.

With this thought in mind, I greeted him using the customary “Hi welcome to Starbucks, what can I get started for you today?” with a cheery chime. What broke my jubilant atmosphere was his voice; it had a New York air about it and the bitterness in his voice was as acrid as my first cup of coffee. Clearly this man’s resemblance to my friend’s father stops here at his appearance; this was the guest who gave me grief for pouring him a grande instead of a venti hot coffee two weeks prior. Let us take a note here; I have a tendency to not adapt to my surroundings very well. This will become a relevant bit about me when as this tale goes on.

Back to my story, the customer ordered a “Venti Pike Place with room for cream….and also two ounces of steamed milk.” Now let us keep in mind that this is my third week of employment...ever. So the man continued “I know that there is a policy that you charge me extra for anything over four ounces.” Now, there are two types of customers; there are people who know the ins and outs of Starbucks and others who do not. To be frank, the majority of the people who come in do not know this policy. For example when customers order a cafe beverage and they would like to have it “with” milk, the cashier must decide if “with” means more than four ounces and it affects the price by sixty cents. If the cashier asks their preference, most customers are confused and become impatient. Honestly it is usually a relief to see a customer who knows how to order properly and efficiently. But in the case of this gentleman, that knowledge gave him a sense of importance and the ability to be rude.

As I was pouring his coffee, I looked to my left to see if I could have any assistance from my coworkers to get this drink to the gentleman as soon as possible. Normally, each Starbuck’s location has two espresso machines that also have a milk steamer attached to them. To my dismay, I see that there is just one available, and my coworker is occupying it with someone else’s order. I tried to call out her name but the words would not come out. I could feel the disgruntled patron’s eyes boring a hole in the back of my head. I should have told the customer that it was going to take minute or two because of the current situation. In not doing so, I fueled his impatience.

Because I was flustered, I forgot what to do next. Over my left shoulder, I heard him pipe up “I am the only one in line, what’s taking so long?!!” I turned in time to see his hands go up in impatience. I asked my coworker if she could get two ounces of cream steamed and thankfully she heard me. There was a look of “Okay but why can’t you do it?” but thankfully she said “Alright” instead. You see, I am simply not good at steaming milk, as it does not come out creamy and I didn’t want to deal with this patron coming back. In my three weeks of Starbucks I have learned that being thrown in the deep end to learn how to swim is an effective method of employee training. It may not be the most graceful method but dammit it works...too well. I could have confronted my steaming inadequacies in this moment however I grabbed a coworker sized life vest instead.

I gave him the milk and hastily gave him a shallow apology. He replied with “It’s okay man, it’s just coffee” with a smirk on his face. I turn to my coworker and told her what just happened. “Oh yeah”, she remarked, “I normally talk back to him aggressively if he tries to start something.” I say something to the effect of “Wow okay.” while I continue to perfect the art of dishwashing. “How can I live like this, being too afraid to complete someone’s order?”, I ponder in my head. The interaction that happens between a customer and an employee is an easy script to follow; it happens to you everyday. “Well”, a voice in my head remarks with a mixture of cynicism and bluntness, “you do have a hard time accepting that other people are not having the same good day like you are having.” That hit me like a bag of bricks.

All my life my emotional state is dramatically affected other’s actions and emotions. Think of a pan on a stove. As the pan sits there, its temperature increases, ultimately coming into equilibrium with the heat of the flame. I am the pan and other people are the flame. I view it as a curse and a blessing; I know how people are feeling but with that, my emotions are their emotions. What I think I need to do is to keep my emotional self separate from other people in general; by not letting their day or emotions dictate how and what I am feeling. I want the sense of freedom that it brings. I have always felt shackled to others and in charge of my own emotional state.

This day at work was much more than just an irritable customer who was demanding; it has brought light to something about myself that I have intentionally steered clear of. Talking about this experience definitely brought me out of my comfort zone but was totally worth it. I am starting to develop a “coping strategy” for interactions like this. I no longer wish to have my day hijacked by someone else’s mood. My strategy goes as followed; taking a deep breath, focusing on how I was feeling before I encountered this person and letting this interaction cloud my judgement as it will make the situation worse.

Currently I am applying this coping strategy while making drinks. Since the store are a heavily trafficked area, our demand for drinks is quite high. This can be stressful at best and it can be difficult to get every drink out in a timely manner. While I feel confident most days, doubting myself is something of a household name in my thought process. To counteract this I have started to take deep breaths and go with what I think is right. It clears my head and I am able to efficiently pump out cafe drinks. I keep telling myself that these drinks follow a procedure similar to my customary greeting; follow the steps and I will be fine. Since then I have gotten fewer and fewer complaints from disgruntled patrons and more praise from my manager.

Surprisingly, I never knew that one small sour interaction with a customer could teach me so much about myself. It has catapulted me into the vast ocean of society while I tightly hold onto the lifebuoy; tethered to a formulaic script. My once immense fear of public speaking has now been reduced to rubble. This is something that I have been working with for quite sometime. I cannot express how happy I am to have that absolved; it feels so liberating. Starbucks has forced me to step outside my defined boundaries, sometimes forcefully and other times quite calmly. It truly has been the catalyst for the success of my growth and development in my life.