

The Law of the Operating System

Who, or What

“What looks like a people problem is almost always a place problem.”

Return, for a moment, to the resort, because there is one incident from its decline that I have not yet told you, and it says more about how organisations behave than any model could on its own. I have never found a better way to show what an operating system is than to watch one fail a single couple on a single evening.

A couple arrived to celebrate their twentieth wedding anniversary. On the first morning the wife mentioned it to the housekeeper, the way guests do, in passing, while apologising for the state of the beach towels. The housekeeper, one of the workshop’s true believers, wrote it down on the back of a laundry slip and handed it to her supervisor: anniversary Thursday, villa 14, he proposed on a beach, she loves frangipani. It was exactly the kind of noticing the training had asked for.

The note never arrived anywhere. On Thursday evening the couple sat down to an ordinary dinner at an ordinary table, and when the wife mentioned the occasion to their waiter, he found himself improvising with a tea light borrowed from the bar and a hastily comped dessert while the restaurant heaved around him. The guests were gracious about it. Their review was not: it

described a resort that “couldn’t be bothered,” and it named the restaurant.

By Monday morning, the guests’ review was on the restaurant manager’s desk with a question attached: what happened here? He began with the waiter who had served the table. The hurried gesture became a service failure to explain; the dessert, given away without a duty manager’s signature, became a breach he could document. Both went into the waiter’s file, and the waiter was written up.

The enquiry ended before anyone asked why he had been left to discover the anniversary at the table, with a full dining room around him and only minutes to make it matter.

Sit with that for a moment. Of the dozen people who touched this failure, the organisation disciplined the only one who had actually improvised a recovery. The housekeeper who noticed was never told her note had died in transit. The supervisor who received it had no system to put it into and thirty rooms to inspect before noon. The restaurant manager had no channel through which guest intelligence could reach his briefing sheet. The leadership team had built none of these connections, and then held a shift-level employee accountable for their absence.

*People do not deliver service in isolation. They
deliver service within systems.*

The Two Questions

When service breaks down, organisations reach for one question before any other: who made the mistake? It is a satisfying question, because it produces a name, a conversation, a note in a file and a feeling that something has been done. I build everything on the

other question, the one we carried out of the opening chapter: what in the system made the mistake possible?

Individual accountability matters, and nothing I say here argues otherwise; but the failures that keep coming back are almost never the story of a careless individual. They are the story of conditions: some designed without thought, some tolerated for years, some reinforced by accident. Every organisation produces the behaviours its conditions make most likely. Whether anyone intended them is a separate question, and usually a painful one.

Notice, too, why the first question wins so often. “Who” comes with a name, a meeting and a deadline; “what” comes with a walk through the building and no obvious place to stop. When the review is on your desk and the room is full, the name is the only one of the two that can be dealt with before lunch. The restaurant manager was not careless for taking it; he was doing what the place made easiest. The rest of this chapter is about making the other question just as easy to reach for, because until it is, nobody will.

Walking Upstream

The anniversary looks like a single dropped ball. Walk upstream from it, though, and you find a staircase, and every step of it is something the resort had built or failed to build.

At the top is what the guests felt: a resort that could not be bothered. One step down is what people did: a note was handed over, a note was set aside, a candle was improvised, a write-up was issued. A step below that is what the place gave them to work with: no channel for guest intelligence, no time for a supervisor to stop, no authority for a waiter to spend. Below that again is what leadership paid attention to, which was the four-minute target and the occupancy sheet, and not the connections between departments. And at the bottom, holding everything up, is what the resort believed without ever saying it: that noticing was a personal virtue some staff happened to have, and not work the organisation had to make room for.

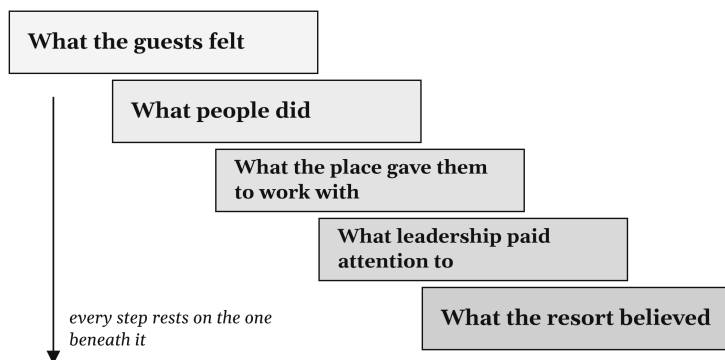


FIGURE 2

The usual move is to change the top of the staircase by pushing on the step just below it, with more training, more standards and more discipline for waiters. It never holds, because the steps below are still where they were. My work runs the other way, beginning at the bottom, with what the place believes and what its leaders attend to; once those change, the behaviour follows without being pushed. We will give this staircase its proper name when we reach the chapter on human potential, and use it in every chapter after that. For now, keep the picture (Figure 2): what people feel sits on what people do, which sits on what the place provides, which sits on what its leaders watch, which sits on what everyone believes without saying.

Four Questions About Any Person in the Story

Stand next to any one person in the anniversary story and four questions will explain most of what they did. We will ask them again and again in the chapters ahead, so it is worth learning them here, beside the people who first taught them to me.

What do they believe matters here? People act on what they believe is important, and those beliefs come from purpose, from leaders, from past experience and from the stories a place tells

about itself. The housekeeper believed noticing mattered, because the workshop had convinced her. Her supervisor, five years further into the organisation, believed something more accurate: that notes went nowhere and inspections were what got measured. Both were acting faithfully on their beliefs; the organisation had simply issued them different ones.

What does the place give them room to do? Behaviour is shaped by layout, technology, policy, decision authority and, above all, time. The supervisor was not callous; she had thirty rooms to inspect and no field in any system where “frangipani” could live. Nobody can consistently give personal attention inside an operation that leaves no time for conversation and no vessel for what conversation yields. Every condition either makes the wanted behaviour easier or taxes it, and people feel the tax.

What gets noticed? People repeat what is recognised and abandon what is ignored, and recognition is much broader than a bonus: it lives in what a leader’s eyes go to, in what peers say, in who gets promoted and in the stories that get retold. The resort’s message after the incident could not have been clearer. The person who improvised a recovery was disciplined, and the systems that caused the failure were not discussed. The staff noticed what got noticed, and that got reinforced.

Can they do it? People need the confidence and skill to act, and skill means more than technique: it means judgement, awareness and the ability to read a table. The waiter, interestingly, had all of it. His improvised recovery was skilful, and capability was the one thing the resort’s training had strengthened, which is why training alone changed so little. Training builds capability, experience deepens it and coaching keeps it alive; none of the three can outrun belief, environment and reinforcement pulling the other way.

Belief, room, recognition, capability. Almost every behaviour you will ever want to change is short of at least one of them, and the first three are almost always the ones missing.

The Floor Above

There is one more step to the staircase, and it sits above the leadership team, not below it. Ask why the leaders had never built the missing connections, and the answer is that they were living inside an experience of their own.

The owners had spent three seasons pressing the general manager about the slipping scores, and he was managing anxiously, in short cycles, reacting to numbers. His department heads absorbed that anxiety and passed it down as target pressure, and the front line inherited it as a working atmosphere in which the safest course was to keep your head down and your check-in times short. Nobody in that chain was unkind. Each of them was passing on what they were receiving, and by Wednesday of a hard week most leaders have done the same.

Service organisations tend to look only at the guest's experience. By experience I mean the lasting impression a person is left with by every interaction, decision, environment and relationship they have with an organisation; we will look at that word properly in the chapter on perception. For now the point is this: every experience a customer has was preceded by one an employee had, and every experience an employee has was preceded by one their leader had. The loop runs all the way round (Figure 3): leaders shape what employees feel, employees shape what customers feel, customers shape the results, the results shape the next round of leadership decisions, and those decisions land once again on employees. At the resort the loop had become a downward spiral: pressure produced caution, caution produced flat service, flat service produced worse numbers, and worse numbers produced more pressure. Every organisation is already turning inside this loop, whatever it sells. In a bank the pressure arrives as a quarterly target and reaches the customer as a teller who no longer has time to explain; in a hospital it arrives as a bed count and reaches the patient as a nurse who cannot sit down; in a public office it arrives as an audit and reaches the citizen as a counter where nobody is willing to

decide. The uniforms change and the loop does not. The only question, in any of these buildings, is whether anyone is turning it on purpose.

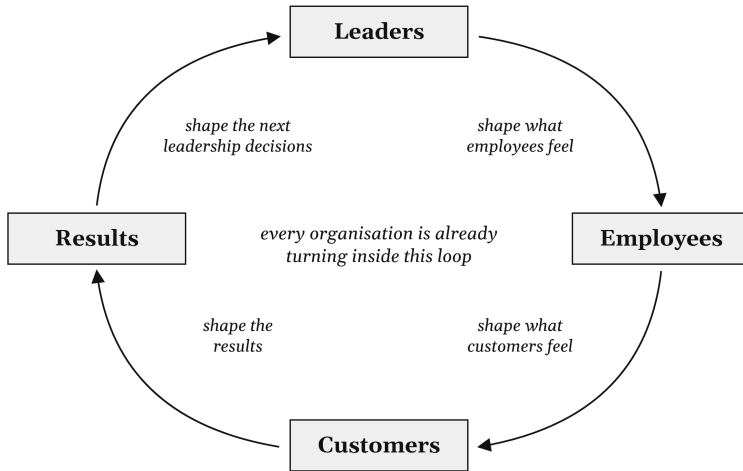


FIGURE 3

A Standard, or a Lottery

None of this is offered so that leaders can excuse poor performance as the system's fault. It is offered because exceptional service should not depend on chance encounters with exceptional employees, and at most organisations that is exactly what it depends on. Guests of the resort who happened to meet the right housekeeper on the right morning had a wonderful stay, and guests who did not, did not. That is not a service standard. That is a lottery.

Predictability is what you have when the place produces the wanted behaviour across different people, departments, locations and days. The aim is not to remove individuality; nobody wants a resort staffed by recordings. The aim is enough clarity and alignment that people can bring their own personality to a moment and still be recognisably part of the same house. Consistency and

authenticity were never opposites. People should never sound scripted. They should feel aligned.

The Law of the Operating System

I have drawn twenty-six laws from this work. From here on, each chapter closes with one of them, until the closing pages gather all twenty-six in one place. You will have noticed that the law is named at the head of the chapter and stated only at its end, and that is deliberate: a law announced before the story is a claim you are asked to accept, while a law that arrives after it is a conclusion you have already reached. Here is the first, and it holds everything we have seen so far:

LAW 1 • THE LAW OF THE OPERATING SYSTEM

*Every organisation produces the behaviour its
conditions make easiest.*

The resort's intentions were impeccable. Its mission statement promised "cherished memories," and its core values were framed on the wall outside the staff canteen. Yet every day, a housekeeper could walk right past those frames to hand over a note that had no process, no owner and nowhere to go. Good intentions do not drive execution. Mission statements do not create customer experiences, manuals do not build culture, and printed paper on a wall has never once changed human behaviour. James Clear made the personal version of this point when he wrote that we do not rise to the level of our goals but fall to the level of our systems. The organisational version is harder to live with, because the system was built by someone else and inherited by everyone, and it is the version I have watched play out in every building I have worked in. Only an operating system turns intention into what happens, day after day,

shift after shift, whether or not anyone is watching. Excellence, in the end, is not an aspiration. It is a design decision.

The habit I have been teaching in this chapter is the one I rely on most: seeing past the person to the place that produced what they did. A traditional review of the anniversary asks why the waiter failed. Standing in the same restaurant, I ask about everyone else, as I hope you will learn to. What did the supervisor believe about that note, and who taught her to believe it? What was supposed to carry guest intelligence from a villa to a dining room, and does anything of the kind exist? What has leadership shown people it notices, and what has it shown them it forgives? What about the staffing, the timing and the authority made the failure likely, and what capability is missing, as opposed to present and unsupported? And underneath all of it, what does this place assume about whose job it is to notice? That one shift of vision is most of what I do.

Organisations are quick to hold a person responsible and slow to hold a system responsible, because a person can be spoken to and a system has to be understood. The resort spoke to its waiter. The write-up took ten minutes, and the conditions that produced the failure, a belief about whose work noticing was, a supervisor with thirty rooms and no vessel for a note, an incentive scheme that paid for upselling and nothing else, remained exactly as they were, ready for the next couple and the next anniversary. The four questions and the floor above are offered as a map, because a leader who can trace a failure upstream can change the conditions that make the next one rational, and a leader who cannot will keep buying candles. Those conditions, repeated shift after shift, become something larger than any single incident. The next chapter turns to that larger thing: culture, and the architecture that quietly builds it.

A FINAL THOUGHT

*Think of the last person your organisation
blamed. What was the system asking of
them at the moment they failed?*