



dance floor. We had to talk to her! Worse yet, sometimes we were matched up with a Mary Miller or a Ruby Wilson, and we had to treat them exactly the way we would treat girls whom we weren't embarrassed to be seen with!

Mama was successful because she made our task of becoming civilized fun. If we got a bit rowdy, she wasn't above taking a firm hand to any kid in the class, and we all knew she was the boss. She was able to motivate us; to direct us; to set us on a course that we never knew existed before.

It is easy to conclude that being impolite or cruel is genetic, and that the disease manifests itself in its worst form during the sixth grade. Mama knew the cure, and those of us who took the cure went on to hold civilized jobs in society--security directors, collections managers, museum consultants. There are even a few curators among us. Well, maybe not curators! But those who never took the cure grew up to become museum security guards, destined to offend the rest of us who frequent America's cultural institutions.

Could it be that the cure is only effective at one critical time in one's life: the 6th grade? Or is it just possible that if Mama's methods were followed, later in life, we could tame the most offensive boors, making them at least marginally suitable for museum security work? I think maybe it is possible. Can we teach basic manners, concern, and communication skills to them? Can we motivate them to actually be nice, if only during public hours; to be in tune with our concept of civility? Heaven

forbid, do you think it might be possible, short of a full brain and body transplant, to actually make them capable of promoting the image of our noble institution?

Mama had a problem that we as museum administrators don't have. She couldn't pre-screen the kids. If Ruby, who was one of the most belligerent humans ever placed upon this Earth, wanted to try to learn social graces as well as the fox trot, Mama was obliged to let her try and to help her along. Troublemakers, bullies, and wiseguys all made the Wednesday night trip to the firemen's social hall for her classes. Like security guards, who work because they like to eat and show disdain for our economic system in their every human interaction, these pre-teens attended because it was the thing to do. All she could do with the rowdies was to strong-arm them into submission. "You can lead an alligator to water," she would say, "but you can't make him share it without a fight.

Of course, we in the museum field don't really have to hire the alligator to begin with. We can hopefully start with a better pool of people simply by pre-screening our employees and paying a decent wage. OK, you've got me. I forgot about the "non-profit" wage thing. Maybe we do have to start with some dregs and mold them into a viable force of public relations professionals ready to handle any situation with diplomacy and tact.

Mama learned that every kid had a different personality. My friend, Fred, had a personality just like Ruby's, always ready to kick up a fuss. So Mama would often rig the dance



partner assignments so that Fred and Ruby got stuck with each other. Mama knew that if she put Fred with Judy Gentry, the closest thing we had to a "class chick" in the 6th grade, Judy would be offended real quickly. So when I go looking for my security guards for a museum, I look for polite people to begin with, knowing that I will still have a long way to go in the manners department before I'll have guards that I won't mind inflicting on the polite society that frequents the museum. When I find I've accidentally hired a "Fred" among my guard force, I either change him, get rid of him, or use him where his skills are most needed--on the loading dock for instance. Mama knew that every person has his/her own personality and each is more suited to a specific job, school subject, or dance partner. I know that to be successful on the dock working with the truckers you had better be tough yourself. So I find my toughest guy or gal and put him/her there.

But how do I get the other guards to act civilized enough to work in the gallery? Museums have only one loading dock. Mama knew that she just couldn't tell all those tough kids to be "polite." They didn't have the slightest idea what that word meant. It would be like telling them to do the fox trot. If you've only ever seen breakdancing, or the other dances they do on music videos, you have no frame of reference. To some, telling them to be polite meant not cussing too loudly when they found themselves matched up in the slow dance portion of the class with one of the less than gorgeous girls. Mother knew that most of these kids didn't know what it

meant to be polite. It is the same with guards. They don't often know what being polite is, they don't know why it is important, and they don't know what problems occur when they fail to serve the PR needs of the museum.

When I hired several hundred guards for the major Vatican Collection exhibition, I asked the newly assembled group of recruits how many of them had ever been in a museum before. To my surprise, all but one young woman raised a hand. Unfortunately, closer scrutiny revealed that most had visited a science museum in third grade, while others had entered the museum for the first time to use the rest room during a major festival held across the street. So much for hiring a cultured group. When asked if any of them knew anything about the Vatican Art Collection, a rather large number asked, "What's Vatican?" I knew right there that we were in deep trouble and that my task was not going to be easy.

Guards often come to the museum for the first time to apply for a job on the security force or with the catering service. If you want them to act like cultured people, you must show them how cultured people act. Like the students who didn't know what being polite meant, guards often lack a frame of reference as to what is expected of them. Our first task is to give them that frame of reference.

I once asked a prominent museum restaurant director how he trained his waiters and waitresses to be so polite and "continental." After all, we both started out with the same pool of applicants. In fact, I usually got the



good ones! He replied, "I take them to dinner at the finest places, of course." Every so often he and his entire staff go in small groups to the best restaurants to learn how waiters and waitresses in fine restaurants act. I remember my mother (and my father who came along to help keep order) turning on their best behavior for these classes. Not only was I expected to wear nice "party" clothes, they wore theirs, too. Everything they did served as an example of how one functions among polite society. It seems that we were being shown the way, and that's what we must do for our new guards. We must tell them or show them what happens in a museum, why it happens, and how they are supposed to react to every possible situation.

I remember Bobby. He got all tongue tied when he had to face an uncertain social situation with a girl. He'd open his mouth and out would come dribble. Bobby was the greatest source of misinformation alive. Nothing went right for him. I've known guards like that, haven't you? When he was through with his dance partner, it is safe to say that she was NOT impressed. I've had guards who didn't impress the public. Now, Bobby didn't do all that badly when he was dancing with one girl named Mary Kay. She wasn't all that articulate herself, so Bobby could somehow comfortably communicate with her. But when he got up against Beverly, the class "brain," Bobby fell apart. I knew a guard like that, too. He was a good guy, and he was pretty smart, but he was no match for the "Beverlys" who came in to the museum and wanted to know why they couldn't bring in a briefcase or a

shopping bag. Our "Bobby" just couldn't get explanations out of his mouth correctly either. By the time he was done trying, he was frustrated, the visitor was confused, and both were angry at each other.

Mama helped Bobby by teaching him a brief "line" he could use in every situation. She taught him just enough to get by, knowing he would never have to make it as Secretary of State, that he only had to handle himself in a few basic social situations. So when I found I was getting complaints from visitors over a controversial parcel control policy that our "Bobby" had to recite again and again in a day's time while guarding the museum's front door, I simply printed an explanation for the controversial policy, on letterhead, and had it signed by the director. All I had to do was train the guard to reach for a copy of the memo and say with a smile, "I'm sorry. Read this. It will explain." He finally mastered the "canned" sentence and eventually learned to maintain an adequate inventory of the memos at the guard post. We are now working on his smile! He's getting old and will retire soon, but I'm hopeful that we will be successful in this task before he leaves.

Sometimes we give our guards too much responsibility. We expect them, when dealing with an unreasonable visitor, to spar intellectually with museum visitors in too many situations. We expect them not only to be polite, but also to be fully capable of arguing a case that would make Clarence Darrow cringe. It has been my experience that most public relations complaints against guards and visitor



services employees come when the guard either fails to explain why a particular rule is being enforced, or when he incorrectly explains why it is being enforced. Most of the other complaints come from the guard either not doing anything to help a visitor, or doing it incorrectly or in an impolite manner. The final group of complaints are unavoidable. Some people will complain about anything, especially when someone tells them they aren't allowed to do something they want to do, (i.e.: carrying a steamer trunk all too often are charged with the responsibility of saying "no" to our visitors for a variety of things, they take the most heat from this group of visitors no matter how polite or reasonable the guards may be.

The most significant player in the public relations game in a museum is the guard. In some cases, the functional equivalent, the visitor services employee, serves the bill. It only stands to reason that the greatest risk for negative PR would come from one of these people. They are among the first museum representatives a visitor sees upon entering. They interact constantly throughout the visit if only psychologically, and are the last museum employee the visitors sees upon leaving.

Mama felt that in any social situation there were several things that played an important role for sixth graders who were "growing" socially. Appearance was one of them. The idea that if you dress like a lady or a gentleman, you'll act like a lady or a gentleman is an example of that. If you hire a guard with a safety pin through

his nose and purple hair, he can be as polite and accurate as can be in his interaction with the public, but it is unlikely that he will be well received by most museum visitors. I once had a guard working for me who had a severe scar on his face, which he suffered in Vietnam. He was a gem of a man who would give a visitor the shirt off his back. If a visitor got a chance to interact with him for more than a few minutes, it soon became apparent that he was an exceptional person. But in the type of brief, "sum'em up and leave" situations that exist between guards and museum visitors, people saw his scar, not his performance. It didn't take long to see that this was the visitor's problem, not the guard's, but it does prove that appearance is important in the playing the PR game.

Just as Mama would make us wear our Sunday finest, I dressed my guards in "soft" uniforms: blazers and ties with the "collegiate" look, rather than the hard police-style uniform that enhances the tough-guy image of the force. I did this because at the museums I've worked in, PR was important. We had city police nearby to be the bad guys, and guards were expected to assist visitors more often than enforce laws.

We conveyed the image that our guards are social and intellectual "equals" to the museum visitors. "Collegiate," indeed. If it's true that the clothes make the man, our polyester guards were at least "upwardly mobile middle class," on their way, so to speak, to the status of the "museum visitor's equal." Many were students. We tend to forgive students for many of their transgressions. Our society



accepts them, and visitors prone to complaint often don't bother. They just assume that the guard is like their own teenager and "will grow out of it." We also hired a lot of retired individuals. Visitors respect the older retiree who takes a second career in the museum after a life as a homemaker or semi-professional. We Americans are also quite forgiving of senior citizens and can "take more" from them.

Not surprising, we received most of our complaints about guards who were "in between." The typical subject of a complaint was the 30 year-old "under achiever" or the 35-year-old man or woman who was working at his/her full potential as a \$5.25 per hour security guard. These guards had achieved an impressive Tuesday and Wednesday as days off and had earned polyester uniforms. They are not perceived as equals by the typical museum visitor, and visitors have difficulty taking instructions from them. They lack the true authority, the social status, intellect, or the perceived ambition to be considered "worthy" of giving instruction to someone of the "standing" of the typical museum visitor. Visitors also have trouble relating to this age and socioeconomic group.

Besides promoting courtesy, Mama promoted restraint. For an hour and a half each Wednesday night, we could not run and we could not yell. We could not do anything without demonstrating restraint. It is the same for guards. Your training program must teach restraint, and your guards must learn the technique, if they are to properly fill the PR role. If they dare to

become annoyed, be impolite, or overreact, a complaint will surely follow.

Mama also felt that if we were to be successful, we had to show "interest." We had to actually "talk" to our dance partner. We had to smile. We had to appear to be interested. It's like having your boss over for dinner. You have to make him think you really enjoy his company. Too often, guards interact with the public as though they are doing the public a favor. "I'm here because I have to be," their body language says.

Mother used to have a variety of ways to motivate us, to at least pretend we were having a good time. Fear was one. No one wanted Betty Keller to call his/her mother and say that he/she was a hopeless dreg. Flunking out of this program was like flunking gym or health class. It was possible, but the stigma would follow you forever! Another motivator was the reward of doing a good job. Actually, we did enjoy getting the opportunity, once in awhile, to be matched up with that "special" little girl. Sort of a promotion from rude Ruby to perky Gwen or sexy Joanne! Guards have to know that if they are to be allowed to continue to work in the museum, to progress through the pay reward program, to achieve Saturday and Sunday as their days off, they must appear to be interested in what they are doing.

Not all of Mother's "kids" moved on to the social register. The ones who did, seemed to have something that the other's lacked. When I think about



the difference, I see the same difference between successful guards and unsuccessful guards when it comes to public contact. Mother recognized that to be successful in life, kids had to have character. They had to have a good overall appearance that included good grooming. They had to have good deportment. They needed basic knowledge of what they were doing and of people in general. They needed restraint. They needed to appear to have an education equal to that of the person they were dealing with. Just as a sixth grade boy doesn't have as much success dealing with a ninth grade girl, neither does a clod have success dealing with a Ph.D. in a public contact situation. Of course, Mama also recognized that "personality" is important in any successful human interaction.

In training guards, it is important that they be taught how to say "No" with a smile. They must be able to use discretion and common sense without compromising the security of the facility. They must be taught never to be unnecessarily argumentative. If the person they are dealing with wants to argue, let him/her argue with a supervisor who is probably more experienced in such matters. Guards must guard and leave debating to the boss.

I remember one fellow in that sixth grade class who could charm the gold out of your teeth. Bill, who sells insurance today when he's not on his yacht or driving his sports car, had a natural knack in dealing with both the sixth grade girls AND their mothers. We were all so envious of him.

Recently, I saw Bill at a class reunion and realized his technique. I walked in on him as he tried to sell some insurance to a former classmate. If the "victim" said, "I don't have the money," Bill would say, "No problem." No matter what the "victim" said, Bill would counter with "No problem." Bill just told people what they wanted to hear, then did as he pleased. Bill always came out ahead!

I recently visited a museum where Bill's "clone" was at the main entrance door. A visitor was arguing the parcel restrictions with him. "I can't check this bag in your coatroom," the woman replied, "it contains my money!" "No problem," the guard replied. "I'll give you a small bag you can use to carry your personal items, while your oversized bag is safely in our custody." No matter what the woman said, the guard countered with, "No problem, we'll take care of you." The guard made everyone feel like he really cared, like he had everything under control. He acted as though he'd been through this a thousand times before and knew exactly what to do. He agreed with everything, and took the wind right out of the sails of anyone wanting to enter into a debate.

When Mama wanted to teach us how to handle situations, she set up role playing exercises, and so should you with your guards. Your training should condition them in dealing with all types of problems and all types of people. Think about your museum's unique situation. What types of problems cause most of your complaints? Set up situations so your guard encounters the problem in the classroom, rather than the gallery, for



the first time. Then give him a repertoire of correct answers he can pull out of his hat as needed.

When you analyze your public relations problems and failures, you'll find a number of them occur because the visitor dislikes the policy, not just the way the policy was enforced. Don't let your guard take the heat for your policies. Teach him when and how to be sympathetic. "Yes, I agree that this parcel rule is inconvenient. It bothers me to have to check my parcel, too, or to inconvenience you like this. It's too bad that our world is the way it is. I remember a day when it wasn't necessary to provide such tight security in a lovely place like a museum, but unfortunately those days are over." Who can disagree? In all probability, your guard will find the visitor aggressively agreeing with him on this point and leaving with a feeling of support from his new friend, the guard.

Explain to your guards that some of the most frequent complaints against guards come when the guard argues with a visitor. Others come when a guard doesn't know a reason for a policy or can't tell a visitor where he can get an explanation, such as from his supervisor. Other complaints come when the visitor feels that the guard doesn't care. Many complaints occur when the visitor thinks that the guard is indiscriminately making up a rule. Still others occur when a guard is unwilling or afraid to call a supervisor to deal with the problem. If guards are able to counter these few situations, the number of complaints will be reduced.

On the matter of the intervening supervisor, there are two things you must do. First, you must assure, in policy and in practice, that an intervening supervisor will never overrule a guard's decision in a manner that makes the guard "lose face." And second, you must train your guards to understand that there are times when the supervisor may have to overrule the decision of the guard. In these situations, the guard must accept the decision with the attitude that it's "all in a day's work." Mama used to say "Know when to hold'em, know when to fold'em, know when to walk away, and know when to run." (Well, maybe she didn't say that). But a guard must enforce the rules, and a supervisor must sometimes know when to relax them. The two roles are not incompatible. It isn't personal when a supervisor overrules a guard. It is often a business necessity and guards must understand that this is, indeed, a business.

Mama knew that she couldn't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but she did come pretty close. Her contribution to society was great, even considering she helped Bill gain the charm he needed to be the leading con man he is today. I'll bet that if I followed Mama's formula for civilizing 6th-graders, I'd be ahead of the game in whipping my security and visitor services employees into shape for the very difficult task they face. Now if I can only find a formula to civilize the curators when they deal with the guards...



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