

# It's none of my business, but ...

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In this series of Supermarket & Retailer's articles, we share stories of what some organisations and managers have done to motivate and inspire their teams. We give you practical ideas of what you can do to create the most amazing, customer-driven company in the world.

**W**e were recently at one of our favourite restaurants, where the food was always great, the parking safe, the toilets clean, the service attentive, and the prices reasonable. We've visited regularly for at least twenty years.

In particular, we had a great relationship with the manager because nothing was too much trouble for him. He was happy to change things on the menu for us. He always made sure that the 'doggy bag' was well presented and had a little extra something. He never once forgot to do something personal to make us feel right at home.

And then suddenly, one day, he wasn't there anymore. We understood that he had 'resigned', though even the people who worked sadly told us he didn't have to go. We missed our 'friend' and the special way in which



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he treated us. The restaurant was still nice, and they had even put in a new fountain, and upgraded the kiddie's facilities.

But over time, we noticed some subtle changes that we just couldn't put our finger on. Were the employees just a tiny little bit less passionate and enthusiastic than before? Had something small been changed in the recipes that made the food appear to be just slightly less tasty, and in smaller portions? And hadn't the drinks prices just suddenly shot up?

And then one day I abruptly knew: We were sitting outside on the terrace having a great time when I heard a disturbed shuffling, and we saw the head chef physically bullying one of the kitchen staff. The staff member had run out of the back door with the chef chasing him, and when he couldn't escape further, the chef caught up and whacked him across the head. He knew it was wrong because he glanced at us, then dragged the employee back into the kitchen



where, in exaggerated whispering verging on shouting, the man was given an instant disciplinary speech. The one thing I heard very clearly was a threat: "Go to the cops. Come, I'll even call them for you."

My wife went pale with shock, literally dropped her knife and fork, and the kids went silent. Twenty minutes later we were gone, grateful that our boys hadn't actually seen anything. As we drove away we vowed that this was the last time we'd ever go there.

Now I know that businesses have to occasionally discipline people who have somehow screwed up. I fully understand the pressure in a restaurant kitchen on a busy day. But there are two things that were totally unacceptable for me as a customer.

First, of course, is that I cannot, in any way, condone any act of violence. We live in a world where aggression, cruelty and brutality are rife, and when our leaders think that violence is a valid choice, it makes things much, much worse. I can tell you that one effect of this event was felt seconds later when we noticed all the staff at the restaurant responding very negatively to customers.

However, at a different level, customers don't care about your problems when you are running a business. They don't care that staff have messed up and made mistakes. They don't care that your suppliers let you down. They are not



interested that Eskom cut off your electricity leading to a breakdown in your operations. They are indifferent to the fact that your hard-drive just crashed. If the banks' credit card machines are overwhelmed, they don't care.

Customers also don't care about how difficult it is to run your business today – especially with lockdowns and seemingly endless laws and regulations that govern how you can operate. They're upset that you blame the union for your woes, or that recruiting decent qualified staff has become such a headache. They don't want to hear about how 'the Chinese' have undercut your margins, or threaten to put you out of business. They couldn't be bothered that your landlord is completely inflexible about installing a generator.

Contrast this story with the example of the BA pilots who, when the 'plane was delayed by poor baggage handling, went out and physically loaded suitcases into the hold themselves. Or the owner/manager of a Nandos that started frying chips using gas and pots of oil because there was yet another power failure. (They tasted awesome!) Or the photocopier technician who left his family waiting at home while he came to sort out a problem with our machine at the office.

In short, whatever crisis it is you have to deal with is your problem. The only real question for them is: "Can you help me or not? Because if you can't, I'll just go somewhere else."

They've got their own problems, and don't want to be burdened with yours. They're not interested.

I know this sounds awfully cruel, but, as Tom Peters has so eloquently put it ...

“ We live today in the age of the never-satisfied customer. ”

We need our customers more than they need us. And when we start sharing our problems with them, they start losing confidence in our business. "Oh boy," they think to themselves, "I better not come back, or I might be adversely affected by this."

Customers want us to help them in a manner which is confident, certain, flawless, seamless and smooth. They want you to show them the right



way, to take the leadership, to be the example, and to build their confidence that you really do know what you are doing. When they come to your business, it needs to be a little haven of peace and quiet, an oasis in the desert of despair and disappointment that they daily experience in their lives.

And, of course, they don't want to share in any part of the difficulties that you experience. And you can't do that while you're screaming at – and beating up – staff while customers are watching. **SR**

“ Whatever crisis it is you have to deal with is your problem. Because if you can't, your customers will just go somewhere else. ”



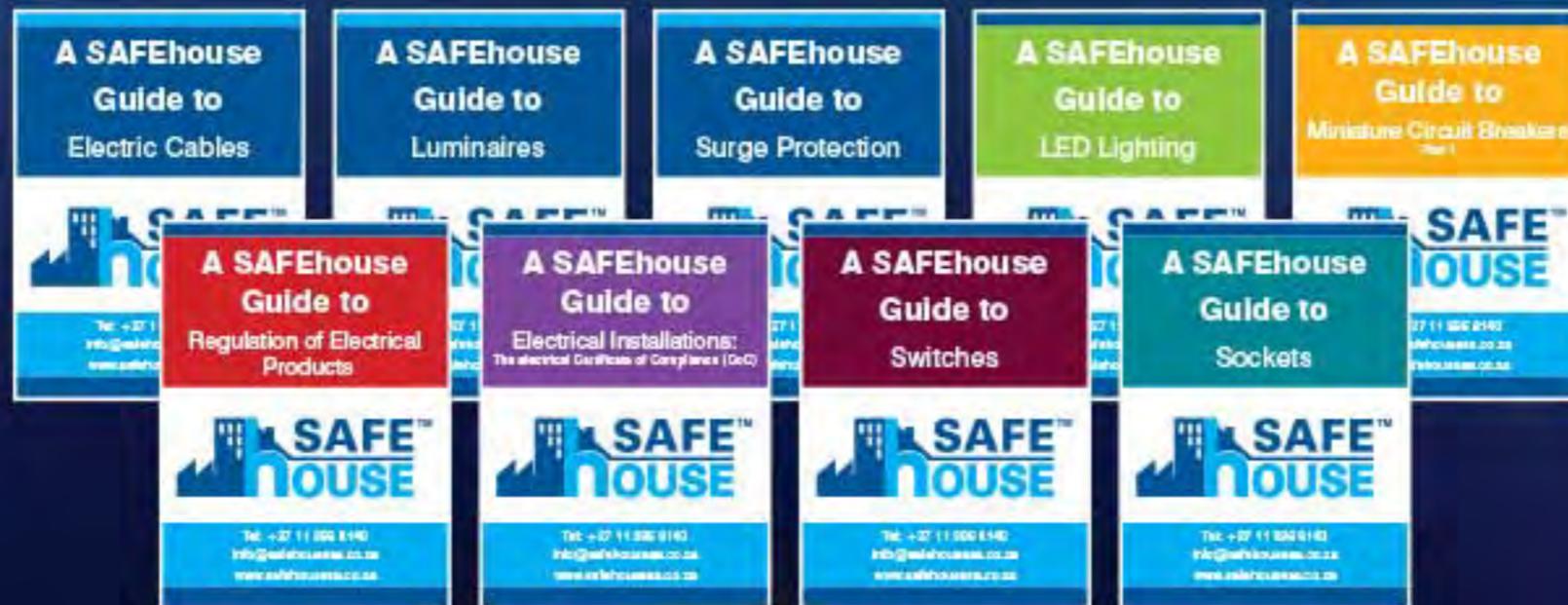
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