

# People

management

DEVELOPMENT



CLASS ACT: DELEGATE  
MIC STONER AND ACTOR  
MARCIA TUCKER TAKE  
CENTRE STAGE

Customer complaints about staff behaviour have decreased since South West Trains introduced a role-play course to help employees deal with all types of passengers

REPORT: MARIANNE SMEDLEY PHOTOGRAPHS: SAM KESTEVEN

# Training platform



Are MBAs well cracked?

**WITH A NETWORK STRETCHING FROM GREATER LONDON'S** commuter belt to the Cornish countryside, South West Trains (SWT) staff must deal with a range of passengers – from the irate City worker whose train has been delayed to the confused tourist who can't decipher the timetable.

For the angry or bemused traveller, helpful staff make all the difference. But the way employees handle situations is equally integral to the company's success, according to HR director Beverley Shears. Privatisation means operators no longer own either the tracks or trains, so customer care provides the main opportunity to stay competitive.

"The focus of our business and customer service has to be the people who work here," says Shears. "If there's a signal failure tomorrow, I can't do anything about it; another company has to sort it out. But I can influence whether one of our customers says: 'I know there was a signal failure yesterday. It was awful and I was late for work, but I have to tell you that the guard on the train was superb.'"

Four years ago, SWT teamed up with training provider Dynamic Solutions to teach its 3,800 staff how to tailor behaviour to suit each customer. The result was Quantum Leap, a three-day role-play course.

Courses are held at the Centre Stage training facility in a formerly disused building at Basingstoke station. One room has been converted into a mock station, complete with a ticket office, railway platform and seating booth.

Each course begins with the actor playing an employee and a delegate portraying a particular type of customer, for example a nervous passenger unused to rail travel. The trainer periodically stops the action to discuss the actor's responses, picking up on body language, tone of voice and facial expression. This helps delegates recognise and question their own responses.

Delegates then become amateur psychologists, using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to identify their personality types. Tracy Meachin-Adams, managing director of Dynamic Solutions, says that if staff understand themselves as well as other people, they can provide customers with the right service: "The easy part is delivering good service to the people you like," she says. "The real test is whether you can deliver when things are difficult."

Next, delegates learn to identify other people's natures. The actor, this time in the passenger role, acts out four versions of a simple scenario, each time demonstrating a different personality type. A delegate takes the employee role, while the other participants suggest how they could improve their response and the actor gives feedback.

Debate plays a large part in the course – a new experience for many employees. "A lot of our staff have never had an opportunity at school or through training to debate, because any sort of challenge was seen as negative," says Shears. "So to get people to start saying 'I don't agree and this is why I don't agree' is an achievement in itself."

Finally, delegates divide into two teams and give each other a scenario – based on an event they have experienced – to test their new skills. With previous scenarios



ON TRACK: BEVERLEY SHEARS (LEFT) WITH TRACY MEACHIN-ADAMS

including everything from how to prevent a distraught dog-owner from climbing on to the track to rescue their pet, to how to cope when a passenger produces a weapon in a deserted carriage, Meachin-Adams says this is often a "challenging and emotionally charged day".

Afterwards, the trainer completes a feedback form that can be used to highlight exceptional candidates. This has resulted in people being promoted for demonstrating previously unnoticed qualities. "Platform staff and guards have been promoted to management level. Ticket-office staff have even become drivers," says Meachin-Adams.


One such example is Samir Baras, who joined as a revenue inspector six years ago and is now SWT's station manager at Waterloo. Baras still uses the skills he learnt on the course, although he no longer has a front-line role: "As a manager you have to remember your staff are your customers as well."

Mic Stoner, a travel safe officer, thinks the acting element is especially helpful: "It's easier to understand what you see in front of you. You can have something in black and white and take it home, but you won't learn it."

Shears agrees: "Experiential learning is much more powerful than traditional 'chalk and talk' training methods."

Although part of a wider cultural change at SWT, the course has had a positive effect on both customer and staff satisfaction levels. Managing director Andrew Haines says the company has seen a return on its investment in many ways, despite experiencing a period of great upheaval and poor infrastructure performance. "There has been a significant reduction in complaints about staff behaviour and more examples of exceptional service," he says.

Sickness absence levels have also fallen, from an average of 12 days per person to 9.4 days, saving £1.3 million, while staff retention has risen to 94.4 per cent.

Shears adds: "Our strategy was to ensure employees felt valued. I don't care if empirical research hasn't proved it yet – I know if you treat people well and they feel good about their job, they will treat the customer well too." 

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**FURTHER INFORMATION**

Beverley Shears, South West Trains' HR director, will be speaking at the CIPD's annual conference in Harrogate on 27-29 October. For details, contact the institute on 020 8263 3434 or visit [www.cipd.co.uk/annualconf-ex](http://www.cipd.co.uk/annualconf-ex)