

# The Starbucks Experience:

## Leadership Tips eBook



**By Joseph A. Michelli**

## Make It Your Own

In my book, *The Starbucks Experience: 5 Principles for Turning Ordinary into Extraordinary*, I share key components on what has made Starbucks one of the growth stories of our time. This eBook samples and builds on components of **The Starbucks Experience** and is designed to stimulate thought about the business principles found in my McGraw-Hill book. I hope this eBook will allow you to benefit from wisdom garnered through the journey of a single coffee shop in Seattle, Washington which has turned it into a worldwide phenomenon.

Let's start with an example of my first Starbucks Experience Principle – “Make it Your Own.”

As a business leader you know the conflict. On the one hand, you want to control the actions of employees so that there is uniformity across your business. On the other hand, you want your employees to engage in their jobs – bringing their own uniqueness and creativity. Starbucks leadership has mastered a way to do both. Leadership has encouraged their employees to ‘make Starbucks their own,’ while providing exacting standards on operational issues with all the necessary operations manuals and documentation. One way they have done this is through a small pamphlet entitled The Green Apron Book.



As you may know, Starbucks coffee servers are known as baristas and most baristas wear green aprons. The green apron book easily fits into a barista's pocket and it serves to highlight ways that partners can merge the customer service objectives of leadership with the partner's own unique skills and personality. Starbucks achieves this balance by focusing on 5 ways of being.

Notice I said “5 ways of being” not “5 ways of doing”. When I think of “doing” customer service, I think of offering employees a customer service script.

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For example, if I were going to tell a new employee how to answer the phone at my office, I might say, “Always answer the phone like this - Hello, this is Joseph at The Michelli Experience. How may I help you?” But what do I really want from them -- to “do the script,” or to “be welcoming?”

Being welcoming is the first of 5 ways of “being” outlined in the green apron book. Starbucks doesn’t tell each employee how to “do welcoming” they simply emphasize that a welcoming greeting is an important aspect of giving a personal touch to the partner’s store and the customer’s experience.

This notion of defining how you want yourself and other “to be”, applies to home as well as work. I used to offer a list of behaviors that I did not want my children to do when we went visiting. Invariably – while my kids would not do the things I listed – they would often behave in a way not outlined by me but that was equally as bad. Subsequently, I learned that all I needed to say was “be good.” Trust me, they knew who they were “being” and all the behaviors that rolled into being a good guest.

So, that’s the starting point in our exploration of The Starbucks Experience Principle One – Make it Your Own.

Create ownership behaviors for employees by encouraging them “to be” not “to do” the things you expect of them. How about spending some time thinking about ways to communicate what you want employees to “be” at work? What variation on the green apron book might you devise? Of all the things you could want your people to be, what are the 5 most important characteristics?

Maybe Shakespeare was right... “To be or not to be, that is the question.” More appropriately for business leaders the saying might go, “Who do you want the people in your company to be or not to be?” That is the leadership question.



## Connect, Discover, Respond

Let's face it. Human beings are creatures of habit. It is those very habits that allow consumer researchers to determine what colors will get our attention, how to set-up store displays, and why customer loyalty cards are so popular.

I really began to appreciate our habit craving nature while having lunch at a restaurant near my office, where I routinely eat. I was sitting in my regular chair ordering my regular salad and regular entrée but I still felt unsettled because my regular server was not working. It's not like I had a relationship with my regular server. In fact, I don't know her name and she doesn't know mine. She has never engaged me in any conversation besides asking me for my order. She never even took the time to memorize my order although she has taken it at least 30 times and never once have I changed it. Yet, I initially felt unsettled that someone new was serving me.

My discomfort yielded fairly quickly when my new server asked me my name while offering me hers - Heather. She then made small talk, not awkwardly but out of a seemingly genuine interest in establishing rapport. Alright, asking how my week had been thus far wasn't particularly earthshaking but this was the first time I felt like a "person" in what I had previously thought of as "my restaurant." No longer was I just another hungry, regular, unimaginative patron. I was a human being with a life beyond my order.

Heather had already demonstrated the first component of a customer service concept Starbucks leadership refers to as "connect, discover, and respond." Heather made a human connection that my regular server never had attempted despite having 30 or so more opportunities. I never felt that Heather was manipulating me – or using a customer service technique on me to garner a larger gratuity, although she did end up getting one.

It was just that Heather seemed to realize that I could get food at any number of restaurants down the street but I could only have that connection with Heather, if she decided to give me such a chance. Lest you think I am turning this moment into something far more significant than it was, I certainly hope I am not. It was all so simple but starkly different than what I was used to at that restaurant. Better yet, Heather engaged in a process of discovery with me that helped her serve me better. She asked if I came to the restaurant often, what I had tried, what I liked there and what things I didn't like. I found myself in a conversation that took all of a minute, actually telling Heather how I hadn't even realized that I disliked the impersonal relationship I had with my regular server.

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Get this - I am confiding in an absolute stranger, Heather, about a relationship problem I am having with a regular server and I can't even tell Heather that server's name. As I look back on this, I am sure I sounded like I shouldn't be allowed to come out in public to eat. My point here is that because Heather connected with me, I was willing to discover things about my reaction to the business that I had not even been aware of. After listening to me, Heather said "I am new here but I will make sure that anytime I serve you Joseph - you will be remembered and that you won't feel so isolated in a business you often visit." OK, at this point, I think the room began to spin.

Heather had hit the trifecta. She had connected, discovered and responded to my needs with a customer service promise that she could control and in a way that was directly related to my previously unexplored needs.

So as not to make this example be all about me (ok you are probably thinking - too late), let's turn the table, so to speak, on you and your business. Do you and your staff connect, discover, and respond to customers? Or, do you keep just serving up the same thing everyday hoping that customer habits will keep driving them back to your business. Here are some action steps I would encourage you to consider so that customer loyalty is not left to chance.

1. Help your staff understand what it means to connect, discover and respond.
2. Take some time to discuss situations where they've felt service providers have connected with them, where their stated and unstated needs were discovered and initiative was taken to address those needs.
3. Define the parameters within which your staff can respond. At what level must they get approval in order to meet a customer's need? Clearly, Heather did not need that approval to respond with a commitment to remember me. If it had come down to offering me a complimentary entrée- given my stated angst about prior poor service- that may have required prior approval.

H. H. Williams once noted that "furious activity is no substitute for understanding." May your responsive action come from an understanding guided by making a connection and then discovering the needs of those you serve."



## 7 Cent Valve



Upon reading about my Starbucks Experience principle “Everything Matters”, the Orlando Sentinel playfully wrote, “Another of the book’s principles is ‘Everything Matters.’ OK, that narrows it down a bit. Then again, it’s coming from a company that opens new stores at a rate of five a day or one every five hours. So maybe there’s something to it.”

I think there is something to it (even though the Starbucks growth rate has slowed since my book was released). Maybe part of the Orlando Sentinel’s initial reaction to the “everything matters” principle is a result of societal trends where people look to do more with less, hoping that they can get away with it. It’s interesting how often I want to take a shortcut when delivering service... and how seldom I feel comfortable having a shortcut taken when it comes to the service I receive. Even more amazing is how often I try to do big new things, when what I really should do is look at doing small things well.

As hard as this may be to believe, Starbucks is what it is today largely thanks to a 7 cent valve. The next time you see a bag of roasted coffee beans, either in a Starbucks store or in a supermarket, look for a small plastic disc (usually its located under the Starbucks logo). This valve, which costs approximately 7 cents, allowed Starbucks to be more than a single city fad. As I share in my book, the Starbucks mission statement asserts that Starbucks partners will “apply the highest standards of excellence to the purchasing, roasting and fresh delivery of our coffees.”

Tom Walters, the communication coordinator of the original roasting plant in Kent Washington told me that, “since I started here in 1982, freshness is all Starbucks has done. We were selling specialty coffee back at a time when specialty coffee had a 1 percent market share. More people owned airplanes than espresso machines.” Tom continues that, “What defines coffee as fresh is that it actively gives off 3 to 20 times its volume in aromatic gas. It was expensive for us to keep those aromatic gases available until the coffee was brewed.”

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Therein, there came the innovation of the 7 cent valve, which allowed roasted coffee to be bagged in such a way that trapped gases in the bag while keeping oxygen out - since outside air would have made the coffee stale. With constant attention to improvements of the valve and other packing material, Starbucks coffee went from a freshness shelf life of at most seven days, to in excess of six weeks.

Rich Soderberg, senior vice president of manufacturing, advised me that “the journey from 7 days of freshness took Starbucks many years and numerous innovations. We had to sever relationships with suppliers who were unable to innovate in a way that delivered the freshness we demanded. Each step of the way we needed to know that we would be the freshest coffee in the market.”

I often lead strategic leadership retreats, where senior management gets together to generate a vision of grand plans for the future and while that type of activity is crucial in our innovation driven economy – so too is mastery of the little things involved in the quality of your existing services and products.

What about a meeting looking at execution on the details? What are the little improvements that you could make in the next week or month that will produce greater benefits for your teams or your customers?

William Foster once said that, “Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution.” Here’s to the 7 cent valve and you and your team having the intention, effort, direction and skillful execution of both the broader vision and the details of your work.





## Cracker Jack

Imagine I hand you a sealed cardboard box - say 5 inches tall 3 inches wide and 2 inches deep. The outer label of the box has bright color on it - mostly reds with some blues. When you open the box you find a 5 cent prize inside wrapped in red and white paper. Now further imagine, that I ask you if you would be willing to buy the product I handed you for - say 50 or 75 cents. Of course you would think - "No way. That's a complete rip off." Now imagine instead that I add 15 or 20 cents worth of caramelized popcorn in the box, insert the prize and charge you a dollar for the box. Would that work? While the price points may vary, the concept made Cracker Jack what it is today.



We all know that no one would buy Cracker Jack, if all they got in the box was a surprise. People buy it for the "delight" of the caramelized popcorn. They buy more of it for the "surprise" of the prize.

OK, it's time for Cracker Jack course 101. Sugary popcorn has a long history dating back to New England tribes of American Indians who grew a special strain of popping corn as far back as 800AD. Ultimately, these indigenous people started using heated maple syrup to preserve the corn. So, how does Cracker Jack come about from a product with such a long history? Like many great ideas, F.W. Rueckheim saw what was great in the world, packaged it and in conjunction with his brother introduced what later became known as Cracker Jack Caramel Coated Popcorn and Peanuts at the World's Columbian Exposition - Chicago's First World Fair.

Cracker Jacks were a hit and brought delight to its loyal customers. However, in 1912 the product got a huge boost when the phrase "A Prize in Every Box" was placed on the outside of the box and toys were inserted into every package. By now I am sure you are asking, "So is this vignette a crash course on Cracker Jack history?" Well, only to a degree. Cracker Jack, like a number of other companies and products I regularly talk about, reflects the principle "Surprise and Delight" as outlined in my **The Starbucks Experience** book.

Surprise without delight does not make for a successful business and delight without an occasional surprise may create the familiar for your customer but it can lead to too much predictability. My friend, Scott McKain, who has written a series of great business books like **All Business is Show Business**, notes that about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of customers say, that all things being equal, they would frequent a new business if their



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experience at the new business would be more fun. Now is that fair? You work hard to create a consistent quality product or experience for your customers (for the sake of this example, really good caramelized corn) and in order to keep the customer engaged in your business you have to keep re-inventing yourself to surprise the customer. Fair or not – the answer is yes.

Let's take a moment to look at your business. What are the elements of your product or service that have to be consistent for your customer (the essentials that customers come to look forward to that define what you regularly offer them)? Now, what little extras can you throw in occasionally (not every time or else they just become part of the ongoing delight) but unexpected unpredictable things (such as a free sample of a new product)? Take some time to think of little things (no cost or low cost), things or ways to unexpectedly connect with your customers. It's amazing how far a tiny surprise in a box, or in your business, can go.

Painter Andy Warhol, once said, "I like boring things." To some extent that is true for all of us. We just like to have the predictable stirred up a little to give the comfortable a twist. What twist are you offering your customers?

Cracker Jacks anyone?



## Quality Toilet Paper

They could save a small fortune if only Starbucks would buy single ply toilet paper .... But single ply toilet paper is not consistent with the Starbucks experience. In his book **Emotional Branding**, Mark Gobe notes: “Females (the primary target audience for all bathroom tissue advertising) are responsible for influencing or buying 80% of the products sold in America. That translates to over 3.2 trillion dollars in total buying power. And one would be hard pressed to find a woman who doesn’t become vocal upon having to use toilet paper that could double as gift bag wadding.” Mark continues that even with cost considerations in play, “Keepers of the Starbucks brand once decided against downgrading from two-ply to one-ply toilet paper. Why? - Because Starbucks promises a great coffee house experience. In order to do that, it takes more than a barista and a menu of coffee drinks that will make your head spin. It takes satisfaction at all touch-points.”



Let’s face it. We all know business leaders who develop the delusion that their company can “cut corners and no one will notice.” Whether an enterprise attempts to cover up faulty product quality, their actual product endangers the consumer, displays a willingness to spy on their managers, or a propensity to mislead investors regarding their profitability, the business pages are filled with scandals caused by people who believed that their shortcuts would not be detected.

Unless you are a traveling salesman selling snake oil from town to town (and even those businesses are vulnerable thanks to the internet), long-term business success requires integrity, transparency and the principle I alluded to earlier, namely “everything matters.” While strategic decisions often have to be made about staffing and the cost of delivering service, great leaders know that those decisions have trade-offs. For each cost cutting measure, there is an attendant risk that a shift in quality will be recognized by the customer.

I’m reminded of a story I used to share with students, in my role as a college professor. It emphasizes that cutting corners seldom turns out the way we ideally would hope. As the story goes, there once was a wealthy man who commissioned a builder to construct his mansion. The man gave the builder carte blanche to do whatever he wished in the construction of the home. Since the man exercised no oversight of the project, the builder charged top dollar while using inferior materials in the unseen areas of the home such as the studs and foundation. He then covered-up the shoddy material with impeccable finish items (trim, faucets etc). When the man came to take possession of his home the builder handed him the key. The man

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was astonished by the home's beauty and promptly said, "You have taken such care and pride in this construction that I can't possibly receive this key you keep it - the home is yours."

As you look at your business, where have you attempted to cut corners? Have you objectively assessed the impact of that adjustment, knowing that invariably the change will be noticed? Hopefully, you will look at quality issues in your life both at work and at home. You might wish to share this eBook with your team to assure that all adjustments in the customer experience are considered with the full awareness that they will be noticed.

Business guru, Peter Drucker, once said, "Quality in a product or service is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the customer gets out and is willing to pay for." If you don't believe "everything matters" when it comes to quality, check out the toilet paper the next time you are in Starbucks.



## Leave Your Mark

Starbucks' leadership – like managers and visionaries in other great businesses, realize that in the modern world people spend an incredible amount of time at work. Even when the staff is off the job, they are often thinking about work. They're thinking about what they need to get done the next day at work - or in a worst case scenario they're thinking about how they can avoid going to work.

So, how can leaders help their people feel a greater sense of significance when so much of their staff's lives are spent on the job, in their cubicles, or serving the business' bottom line?

At Starbucks, the powerful impact of individual effort is magnified in three approaches to giving – organizational philanthropy, socially responsible business practices, and encouraged volunteerism. While I will address the other two components of Starbucks approach to social responsibility in future eBooks – for now I will limit the conversation to encouraged volunteerism with an important latrine story thrown in for good measure.

Encouraged volunteerism or corporate volunteerism, as it is sometimes called, is nothing more than a business' realization that it does not exist in a vacuum. Put another way, great businesses can't exist solely to enrich themselves, the owners or other stockholders. If plundering for profits is the “be all/end all” for a business, it will ultimately implode from greed. Businesses like Starbucks understand that they are given an invisible license to operate in a community. Ultimately, that license is strengthened when the business truly reaches out to and enhances their community. By now you are probably saying, “Ok, that's all fine and good in a hypothetical sense, but how do you actually turn positive community intentions into action?” Let's take a very specific program that Starbucks provides to encourage their partners to get out of the stores and volunteer into the community. This program is entitled “Make Your Mark”

The Make your Mark program commits money from Starbucks to be given as a salary match when a Starbucks partner volunteers at an approved community agency. For the sake of discussion – I will wave my magic wand and poof you are a Starbucks partner. And I must say that green apron goes well with your eyes. Now you decide that you want to volunteer at your child's school, to read to students who are in need of additional assistance. Starbucks validates that the school is an

appropriate volunteer site and contributes your hourly salary, up to \$1000 for each hour you volunteer. Better yet, you and two friends (neither of the friends are Starbucks employees) decide to take a day and clean up a local park. The project gets the approval of Starbucks and a contribution of three times your hourly salary is offered to the parks and recreation district to magnify the time you and your friends spent in clean-up. WOW! Think about it. Your altruism is not tarnished by Starbucks paying you for your time (yuck that would not be volunteerism) but you are incentivized to get out and make your community better. The more you invest in your community, the more Starbucks amplifies your investment. But why would Starbucks want you to take your personal time and spend it volunteering in the community? Well, there is the obvious answer ---- it reflects well on the brand. But the less obvious benefits to you, the Starbucks partner, will be examined in detail in a future eBook.

For now I will just have to take you to the latrines of Darjeeling India. Honestly, I probably would not have shared this story but it is one of my SVP of Operations, Lynn's, favorites and I know my success is hugely dependent on keeping Lynn happy. Additionally, the latrines of Darjeeling show just how large a community Starbucks serves and helps us all to not only act locally but to think globally about service.

For Starbucks leaders, serving communities often takes them off the traditional path of *Fortune* 500 companies. Sandra Taylor, senior vice president of Corporate Social Responsibility, observes, "We have one effort with our Tazo® division that mobilizes volunteers through MercyCorps to support projects in 24 villages in Darjeeling, India, a tea farming area. One project is to improve water and sanitation by simply digging latrines. Through efforts thus far, the residents of the region have seen a ten percent reduction in water-borne diseases. That's huge for a coffee and tea company!"

Sandra goes on to explain that the Darjeeling project also offers vocational training to tea farming families. "One thing about tea farms is that there is only one child who gets to carry on the family business. So whether you're an owner or a worker, there are children who have no employment within tea, and in many cases, no employment at all. We are helping young men in the area learn skills like electronic equipment repair. One young man asked, 'Why would a coffee company care about us and what we do?' I think a better question would be, 'Why wouldn't we?' They are part of our community."

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Just how big is your “community?” How can you mobilize your people and some of the profits you have derived from the community to invest back into the people who have made you successful?





## The Memo

Who would have thought it would happen? The Chairman of the Board of Starbucks sent an email to his leadership team suggesting that “the Starbucks experience” is being watered down through a pattern of faulty business decisions - and of course, a media feeding frenzy ensued.

So, let’s jump on the same bandwagon and find the teachable lessons from a historically significant email sent by Starbucks visionary, Howard Schultz. It is not clear how Howard’s email got into the hands of the general public, as its audience was intended to be his senior leadership team. But for whatever reason, the email fell into the lap of Jim Romensko, founder of the Starbucks Gossip website. Once it was published online and verified as authentic, the popular media swept in.

As an overview, Howard Schultz identified several operational decisions made by Starbucks which served the demands of the brand’s rapid growth or transactional efficiency issues at the expense of its foundational values. Howard noted that these decisions were inconsistent with the core customer experience that made Starbucks great. In essence, efficiency factors trumped the customer sensory experience as well as the theater and romance of the Starbucks brand.

Reading from the memo, Howard wrote:

“Over the past ten years, in order to achieve the growth, development, and scale necessary to go from less than 1,000 stores to 13,000 stores and beyond, we have had to make a series of decisions that, in retrospect, have lead to the watering down of the Starbucks experience, and, what some might call the commoditization of our brand.

Many of these decisions were probably right at the time, and on their own merit would not have created the dilution of the experience; but in this case, the sum is much greater and, unfortunately, much more damaging than the individual pieces. For example, when we went to automatic espresso machines, we solved a major problem in terms of speed of service and efficiency. At the same time, we overlooked the fact that we would remove much of the romance and theatre that was in play with the use of the La Marzocca machines. This specific decision became even more damaging when the height of the machines, which are now in thousands of stores, blocked the visual sight line the customer previously had to watch the drink being made,

and for the intimate experience with the barista. This, coupled with the need for fresh roasted coffee in every North America city and every international market, moved us toward the decision and the need for flavor locked packaging. Again, the right decision at the right time, and once again I believe we overlooked the cause and the affect of flavor lock in our stores. We achieved fresh roasted bagged coffee, but at what cost? The loss of aroma -- perhaps the most powerful non-verbal signal we had in our stores; the loss of our people scooping fresh coffee from the bins and grinding it fresh in front of the customer, and once again stripping the store of tradition and our heritage? Then we moved to store design. Clearly we have had to streamline store design to gain efficiencies of scale and to make sure we had the ROI on sales to investment ratios that would satisfy the financial side of our business. However, one of the results has been stores that no longer have the soul of the past and reflect a chain of stores vs. the warm feeling of a neighborhood store. Some people even call our stores sterile, cookie cutter, no longer reflecting the passion our partners feel about our coffee. In fact, I am not sure people today even know we are roasting coffee. You certainly can't get the message from being in our stores. The merchandise, more art than science, is far removed from being the merchant that I believe we can be and certainly at a minimum should support the foundation of our coffee heritage. Some stores don't have coffee grinders, French presses from Bodum, or even coffee filters."

Howard's comments focused a business media discussion on whether Starbucks would be able to preserve market share of longtime customers and retain their core experience. As I have said repeatedly in interviews, I trust that Starbucks' long term visionaries like Howard will constantly challenge the company to stay true to its intimate core while meeting its profitability demands. What is more of interest to me is how all this applies to the rest of us.

Howard's remarks remind me that so many business decisions reduce themselves to a clash of values. Do we value wild growth or personal connections to our existing customers? Do we strive to attract new business or solidify our efforts with existing clients? Do we invest more in training or advertising? Do we offer health benefits or reinvest those monies into the business' infrastructure? Starbucks' challenges are not different than those we face, theirs are just on a larger scale than the ones most of make confront on a daily basis.

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Bringing it home, what traditional values of your business are you letting slip? What are the competing values that are nudging your traditions and core away? What can you and your team do to strike the difficult balance between tradition and progress?

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said, you can't step into the same river twice. Extrapolating that to business, how do we keep the river recognizable in the face of its changing flow?



## A Bold Cup of Leadership

Starbucks leadership did something virtually unheard of in modern day American business. They shut down operations to get service and quality right. For those of you, who live via the green and white Starbucks siren logo, fear not. The company's shutdown was for only three and ½ hours but nonetheless, it was a bold move that garnered much media attention. One evening, Starbucks closed all of its U.S. stores and held comprehensive training sessions that focused on two things.... the coffee and the coffeehouse experience.

Given that Starbucks, like all other businesses, thrive on product, passion and people... Starbucks attempted to re-infuse passion for product excellence and customer experience through their evening compulsory training session. If you had attended Starbucks' store closing training session, you would have seen a massive business attempting to operate as if it were a small company. Further, you would have observed complex operational processes reduced down to their most elemental level. Staff were trained or retrained on the look, smell, and even sounds involved in making a perfect espresso shot. The concept of producing an uplifting moment while serving coffee was emphasized through the 5 core "ways of being" identified by leadership, namely:



Be Welcoming, Be Involved, Be Genuine, Be Knowledgeable, Be Considerate

Moreover, you would have been reminded of the Starbucks experience; the emotional, sensory and stage elements that lift a cup of coffee into an extraordinary service environment. I applaud the CEO Howard Schultz' genius for passing on three and ½ hours of U.S. store income, to return to the core messages that led to the greatness of his company.

While media talked about the novelty of this approach, many critics saw it as nothing more than an effort to gain free publicity by a wounded corporate giant. If the critics are right, Starbucks will see continued slowdown. If Howard's intentions are as I suspect – you will see this as the beginning of a reemphasis on customer experience and a lessened preoccupation with the short-term stock prices.

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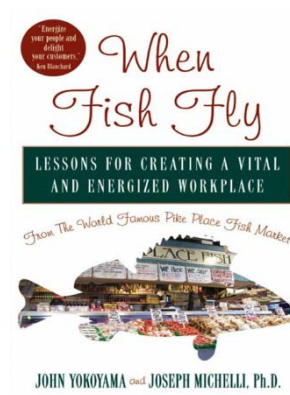
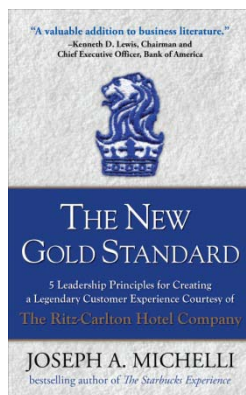
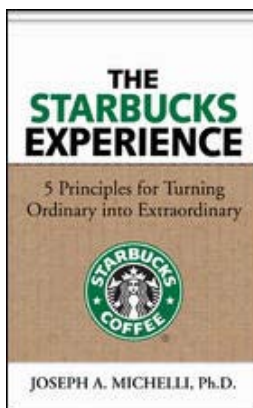
So, how far are you willing to go to make sure that your staff fully delivers on the core elements of your ultimate customer experience? Would you have had the courage of your convictions to shut down all income generating operations for a period of time, to go back to the basics in your staff training? Before you get to that point, what could you be doing right now to engage staff in a mini re-introduction of business basics that may be inconsistently present in your work place. As is my habit, I will continue to be involved with Starbucks leadership and continue to examine the decisions they make in order to bring the company back from an experiential decline.



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