

A Slice of Reality: Front-Line Experience

You're probably familiar with the TV programme 'Back To The Floor': the managing director of a well known company spends a day with front line staff seeing what it's really like 'out there' then scuttles back to a meeting with the senior team, a humbler and wiser executive. The senior team listen intently, as if to a traveller returning home with tales of a distant land. Occasionally you get the impression that the shop floor is not so much a foreign land as another planet entirely. Much earnest nodding and scribbling of notes then ensues round the table as the MD describes how the workers are actually impeded from doing their jobs by some of the company's policies and procedures. The programme invariably ends with the MD resolving to do it again soon and suggesting that it might be a good idea if other members of the team did likewise.

The reason that 'Back To The Floor' exists at all is that this is an unusual scenario – at least in the UK. Top management earn their wads of cash by doing management type things and it's not good use of their time, according to the conventional wisdom, for them to be getting under the feet of front line staff.

One company begs to differ. Pret A Manger is a sandwich-and-coffee chain which featured in the business pages recently when McDonalds brought a big share. I've bought a lot of coffee-and-sandwiches from Pret over the last few years and I've always been impressed by the quality of the product and the service. I knew the company was founded by two men who claimed to have a passionate commitment to quality and I also thought I knew what happens when small companies start to grow: the personal influence of the founders, and hence the passion within the company, gets diluted. But this didn't seem to happen with Pret. As each new shop opened the sandwiches were just as good and the service just as impressive. A key moment came last year when I lost the stylus from my palmtop computer. I thought I had left it in a Pret so I went back. The guy in the shop looked around where I had been sitting, asked other team members. No luck. "Tell you what", he said, "I'll go through the waste bin in the kitchen to see if it got thrown out with your sandwich packaging – it'll only take ten minutes". In my view this is going beyond the call of duty, particularly as I'd probably left the thing on the train anyway, and it was at this point that I decided to find out more about this company.

I rang the Head of Human Resources, Bruce Robertson: "I'm a customer, I've been really impressed by Pret's service and I'd like to come and talk to you about how you do it". No problem. When I meet Bruce he strikes me as a pragmatist in that there is a complete absence of management-speak in what he says. He also says it all very quickly – this is something that I notice after talking to other Pret people: they speak and do things at pace (apparently the McDonalds visitors were struck by this when they spent time with Pret while the deal was being done).

Bruce tells me that the company has a carefully designed team-based reward system which enables a whole team to earn a bonus if their mystery shopper is impressed. Bruce sees his role as enabling staff to perform well and in Pret this seems to mean getting out of their way: "We don't train staff in customer care – we give them some basic principles such as asking them to greet each customer individually – but we don't spell out for them what to say. We don't want to be like other companies where they are very prescriptive and squash the initiative and personality of their people". He cites a few examples of high street names where they do take a more prescriptive

approach to customer service and, thinking about my experiences in those shops, I take his point.

The Head Office/Shop Floor Relationship

This is all good stuff but what really makes me sit up is when Bruce starts to talk about Pret's 'buddy' system. The 'buddy' system means that each shop is paired with a manager at Head Office (or Palace St, as Bruce prefers to call it – "we don't like the idea of a head office, we're just another Pret site"). The Palace St buddy acts as a listening ear and an advocate for the shop, particularly for issues around their relationship with the head office. But the role goes beyond this: every three months each buddy spends a day working in a shop. "Does everyone do this, even the Chief Exec.?" I ask, expecting a response along the lines of "Well, he's actually a bit too busy but he does try to visit shops whenever he can", but what I actually get is "Oh yes, Andrew (the Chief Executive), Julian and Sinclair (the founders), everyone – we all go and work in a shop for a day every three months". I find this intriguing, haven't they got important strategic things to be doing? Bruce explains: "we recognise that it's not Palace St that brings in the money – we don't generate any income for the company; whether Pret thrives or not is down to the shop staff and we're very keen that we don't do anything that will get in the way of them doing a good job. The idea behind us spending a day in the shops is that it keeps us in touch with what it's like for the staff and helps us make sure that our policies and procedures stay in tune with that reality". There's a big assumption here, namely that staff actually want to do a good job, but I make a mental note to come back to it later.

The next Pret manager I meet is Amanda Mundy. Her title: 'Shops Project Manager' means nothing to me, so I ask her about it. "The role is essentially to be 'Guardian of The Culture', but I don't like that term" she says. "My job is to act as a conduit for everything that goes out from Palace St to the shops". I ask Amanda about the buddy system. "It's important that we really understand what it's like to be working in a kitchen making sandwiches at 6.30 am - it's really there to stop us imposing daft ideas on the shops". For example? "We used to sell a five layer sandwich; a great sandwich, very popular with customers, but we found that our people weren't making many of them because it was so tricky to put together, so we withdrew it". I wonder, out loud, why they hadn't simply told the shop staff to try harder, after all it was a product that was in demand. "Basically, we believe that the vast majority of people want to do a good job, and the role of managers is to create an environment where they can do their best then get out of their way. We know that our staff are committed and work incredibly hard so when they said that they found that five layer sandwich really tricky to make, we took them seriously and that's partly because we all know what it's like to be out there making sandwiches under time pressure at 6.30 in the morning". She tells me of another example where staff found that sandwiches which required cheese to be sliced were taking too long to make so the company moved to buying sliced cheese, but didn't pass on the cost to the customer.

The Staff Perspective

I'm starting to wonder if Pret isn't some kind of nirvana for slackers so I arrange a visit to one of the shops. Guy is the manager of the High Street Kensington shop. Like Bruce and Amanda, he gives off an impression of no-nonsense pragmatism. I float my hypothesis that Pret might be a soft and fluffy place to work. "Pret is tough but fair", responds Guy, "I negotiate demanding performance targets for the shop with my area manager and then my bonus depends on meeting those targets". What about Bruce's and Amanda's claims that management really listen to the staff? Guy nods, "Pret is famous for its U-turns. If we find something that management has

introduced isn't working we will tell them – they always listen and if we have a good case they will withdraw it. They're always changing their minds, and I think that's a good thing – it means they're responsive. Where I worked before they would simply say 'this is how it is going to be: get on with it' A few months ago they changed the way our performance bonuses were calculated and when some of us lost out as a result, managers were very quick to put their hands up and admit they had cocked up". Guy is clearly a happy man and I'm wondering if this isn't too good to be true, so I press him on the downsides of working for Pret. "There used to be more internal promotion. It's good to get fresh ideas in from outside but I think the company is becoming inconsistent in terms of the messages it gives people about their career paths and what sometimes happens in practice." Anything else? "Well, you don't hear as much laughter in the Head Office now and there are some people there who don't have that Pret 'passion', which didn't used to be a problem when we were smaller".

The next person I talk to in the High Street Kensington shop is Awa. She's worked there for two years and is one of the front line staff that the management are so keen to support. I ask her what it's like working for Pret. "It's like a big family – we socialise a lot together, get to know people from other shops. You tend to get nice people working for Pret". Again, I ask her about her perceptions of management, curious as to whether what Guy, Amanda and Bruce described tallies with her experience. "I've worked for ten managers at Pret and most have been really nice. I had one boss here who didn't give me a bonus that I deserved and I felt he was discriminating against me so I talked to my buddy at Palace St and he sorted it out for me." So the head office really do listen to staff and act on what they hear? "Oh yes, I know that if I'm not happy I can go and talk to an Operations Manager and if I'm not happy there I will go and talk to Julian". Julian is one of Pret's founders. Again, I ask her about the downsides. "Well, when you are working in a big shop sometimes your training and development gets overlooked, but it's getting better now that we have one person responsible for training. Staff shortages can be a problem when people leave and we have to train up their replacements. You get the odd rude customer".

I'm noticing two things about these conversations. Firstly, it feels as though the people I talk to are being honest with me – they're quite comfortable talking about the company's faults; secondly, I can see why the service you get in the shops is so good - Pret does seem to be doing a lot right. But I'm still reflecting on Amanda's belief that "the vast majority of people want to do a good job". From my experience as a consumer, quite a lot of people don't particularly want to do a good job – they want to do a different job or, sometimes, no job at all. I point this out to Amanda. "We place a lot of emphasis on recruiting people who share Pret's values – we call it 'passion' and that's a word you hear a lot in Pret. Basically, people either get it or they don't – you either really mean it when you say 'the guys in the shops are the most important people' or you don't".

Pret pay a lot of attention to ensuring that they recruit people who 'get it'. Prospective employees (and this includes managers) spend a day in one of the shops as part of the selection process and at the end of the day the shop team discuss whether they would be happy to have that person as a co-worker. As Amanda says "we want to see who really walks the talk". One thing that is notable about the people in the shops is their diversity. Bruce tells me that 75% of staff are from mainland Europe – typically young people who are travelling around and need to earn money while they stay in London. "It's a real multicultural melting pot. We tend to get people who are independent and have a lot of initiative and who are curious about other people and other cultures. It makes for a good atmosphere in

the shops, though it's something that happened by accident rather than design". I test out this view of diversity as a good thing with Guy. "I think the main thing is not to get too many people from one nationality in a shop. But I don't think you need a very varied group to have a good atmosphere – the shops in Scotland or Leeds tend to have local workers but they still have a great team spirit."

I ask what happens when a manager joins the company – what sort of development programme do they get? Bruce tells me that up to operations manager level everyone starts their management training by spending two weeks working in one of the shops. They have to graduate from team member to team leader before they move into their management role. "Again, it's about making sure that managers really understand how the shops work, so they can support the staff."

Once more, I'm getting that "this all sounds too good to be true, there must be a downside" feeling. I share this with Amanda. "Oh God, we're not perfect. Are we too trusting? Maybe. We've overpromoted people in the past, expected too much of them and thought that encouragement and belief would enable them to do it and it hasn't worked out. We're also working on getting better at not relying on gut feeling when recruiting and promoting". Anything else? "Well, we're a very driven organisation, and we used to be a bit 'gung-ho'".

I reflect on my question when I started getting curious about Pret: "how can a growing company maintain the commitment and enthusiasm of its founders?" What are the founders like? Amanda tells me that "Julian, Sinclair & Andrew Rolfe are straightforward, they always really listen and when they ask you a question they really want to know the answer. They make it easy for you to say what you think". I confess that my image of founders is of tanned people sitting on a yacht in the middle of the Mediterranean keeping in touch by satellite phone, content to let their top team get on with running the business. Amanda puts me right – "Sinclair is over in New York setting up our first shop there and Julian spends four days out of each week in the office. He's very into solving the day to day problems – a few months ago he spent ages designing a better crumb catcher for our fridges."

Conclusions

- ◇ Pret seem to illustrate the difference between simply having a mission statement or a list of espoused values and taking serious steps to put them into practice. Instead of paying lip service to the mantra "our people are our greatest asset", Pret managers act as though they really believe it – gaining regular exposure to the shop floor is viewed as a development priority.
- ◇ Many organisations could benefit from following this philosophy – not just the private sector. Imagine the impact on public services if ministers and senior civil servants actually got out from Whitehall on a regular basis and spent a day working alongside some of the people who actually provide the service.
- ◇ This "back to the floor" approach entails more than the carefully managed visits that politicians, board members and mandarins make occasionally to "see for themselves what's going on". The lesson from Pret seems to be that you can't really understand the experience of staff in the front line unless you go out and experience it for yourself – no amount of focus groups or staff communications fora can substitute for personal experience. You may think that listening carefully to people will give you that understanding, but it doesn't because no matter how carefully you listen you will still have your filters operating. The filters which say

“it probably is tough out there, but not as bad as they make out” and “if they could see the big picture, they’d understand why we need them to fill in these forms” and “I did a job like this twenty years ago – I know what it’s like”. Real understanding and real learning in this context can only come from hands-on experience.

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