

The Service Value Gap

OUR MISSION:

EMPOWERING
EXCELLENCE

VALUES: INTEGRITY, INNOVATION, PEOPLE FIRST

*How COVID Crippled
Our Service Muscle
– and How Some
Organisations Are
Rebuilding*

ESSAY 2 OF 14

BREAKING THE DIGITAL DOOM LOOP

The Gap Between Values and Corridors

There is a particular kind of dishonesty that flourishes in modern organisations — not the wilful kind, but the structural kind. It is the gap between what is printed in the mission statement and what is lived in the corridor.

The values are real on the page: empathy, trust, collaboration, putting people first. The corridors tell a different story. Tired staff give robotic answers. Digital journeys feel like obstacle courses. Internal teams operate in silos that would make their stated values laugh.

That gap — between values declared and behaviours practised — is the **service value gap**. It is the structural condition that makes a whitened sepulchre possible. And in the years since COVID-19 disrupted the practice of work, that gap has widened in most organisations from a fissure into a canyon.

⚠️ By 2025, teams were functionally equipped to serve customers but no longer emotionally equipped to do so in a market that, paradoxically, had become more demanding than ever.



What COVID Took, Quietly

Pandemics do their visible damage in the early months. The slower, more consequential damage is what they hollow out over years. For service culture in particular, COVID was a slow-burn extraction – and four interconnected losses are now visible in almost every industry.



Mentoring Stopped

New hires no longer observed exceptional service in practice. The informal apprenticeship – the way experienced staff used to pass on the small, unwritten cues for reading a customer – simply did not survive the shift to remote and hybrid work. The handoff broke quietly, with no one in particular to blame.



Institutional Memory Walked Out

Across hospitality, retail, healthcare, and financial services, skilled service professionals exited their industries in numbers. They took with them not only their experience but the embedded knowledge of what *good* looked like – the kind of knowledge that does not transfer through manuals.



Survival Metrics Dominated

Leaders focused on keeping the lights on: occupancy rates, throughput targets, compliance, cost containment. Emotional intelligence and relationship-building skills did not stop mattering. They stopped being measured. What does not get measured does not get developed.



Connection Infrastructure Collapsed

The coffee-machine conversations, the post-meeting debriefs, the casual check-ins – all the informal feedback loops that kept tone and empathy calibrated across teams – evaporated. Hybrid work has many strengths. Maintaining the calibration of soft skills is not among them.

Why the Digital Band-Aid Made It Worse



The Logic

Faced with depleted service capabilities, leaders reached for technological solutions. Contactless check-ins. Self-service portals. More sophisticated chatbots. Automated response systems.

The logic was sound on the surface: efficiency gains, reduced reliance on human interaction, exactly what stretched organisations needed.

What Was Missed

Automation cannot replace the feeling of being genuinely cared for. When staff feel unsupported, unrecognised, or unclear about their role in creating meaningful customer experiences, customers register that disconnect — regardless of how sophisticated the surrounding technology may be.

The technology magnified what the organisation already was. What the organisation already was, by 2023, was depleted.

- ⊗ The fundamental issue was never operational efficiency. It was the loss of emotional connection — between colleagues first, and then between staff and customers.

What Deliberate Rebuilding Looks Like

Some organisations recognised the loss early and responded with intent. Their methods are instructive.

Singapore Airlines


Never stopped investing in *anticipatory service* – the capacity of frontline staff to read and respond to unspoken customer needs. Their internal *FUS3ION* programme treats internal colleagues as customers, recognising that external service quality is a function of internal service quality.

John Lewis Partnership

Facing enormous pressure on margins, they expanded – rather than cut – their coaching programmes. The 2025 ranking as the UK's top retailer for customer service did not come from technology. It came from sustained investment in the cultural framework, *Partnership Principles*, that makes every employee a stakeholder in customer outcomes.

Monzo

Built a digital-first bank around the proposition that technology and care are not in tension. Their customer service team operates with radical transparency – customers can see what is happening with their queries – and staff are empowered to resolve problems without multiple approval layers.

 Closer to home, the Customer Service Institute of Australia has recognised organisations including HCF Health Insurance and Aveo Group for taking the harder path of rebuilding service fundamentals rather than layering more technology over the gap.

The Recovery, Operationalised

There is no shortcut to rebuilding service muscle, but the leaders who are doing it well share three commitments. None of them are expensive. All of them are difficult to sustain.

Re-Immersion in Customer Reality

Senior leaders experience their own service delivery firsthand, regularly. Not to catch staff doing things wrong, but to understand where the current experience creates friction or disconnection.

Quarterly mystery-customer sessions, walked through without identification or special treatment, are the discipline. Leaders who skip this almost always misjudge what is wrong.

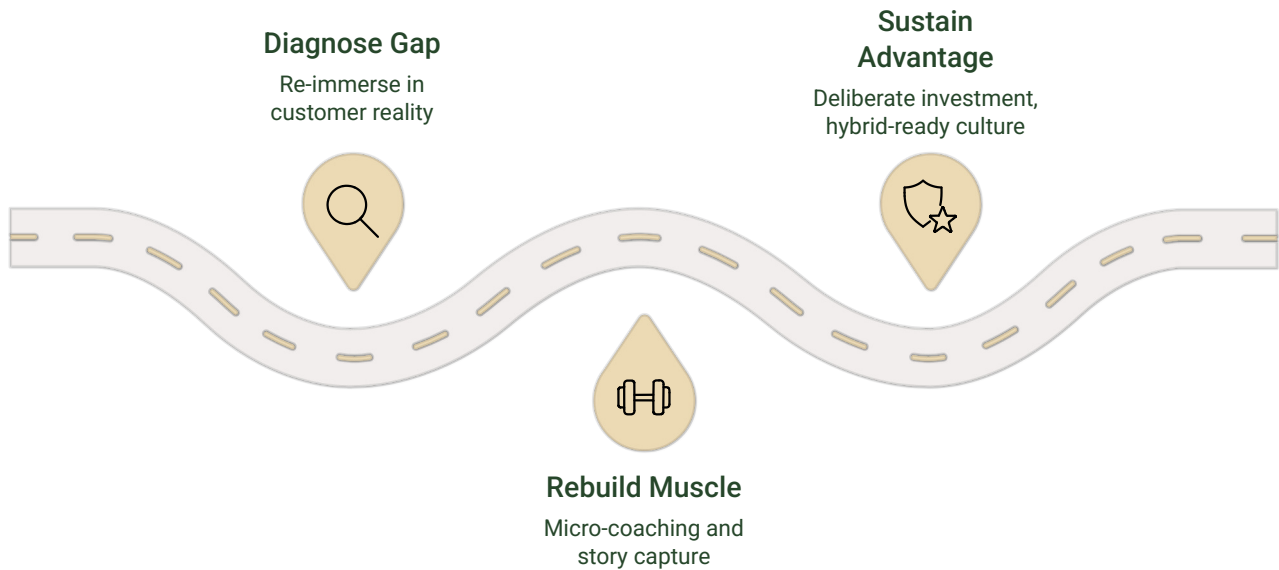
Micro-Coaching Over Macro-Training

Rather than expensive, infrequent training events, the most effective recovery programmes focus on brief, regular coaching moments. A fifteen-minute peer session on a single behaviour – active listening, recovery from a service failure, holding empathy under pressure – proves more durable than a day-long workshop that staff struggle to remember a fortnight later.

Story Capture and Retelling

Every organisation has examples of exceptional service happening daily; they are simply not captured or celebrated. Creating a simple discipline for collecting and circulating these stories is cheaper than any external training programme and more powerful – because stories carry both the technical *how* and the emotional *why* of service excellence.

The Rebuilding Journey



This path is not linear in practice – it requires sustained leadership commitment at each stage, and the temptation to shortcut Stage 2 with technology is the most common point of failure.

What This Is Really About

This is not a return to pre-pandemic service levels. Customer expectations have evolved past that point and will not retreat.

Nor is it a romantic call back to "high-touch" service. It is the harder, more clear-eyed work of building a service culture capable of operating in a hybrid world, deploying technology effectively, and creating real competitive distinction.

What It Is Not

A nostalgic return to pre-pandemic norms. A rejection of technology. A preference for "high-touch" over digital efficiency. An argument that automation has no place in service delivery.

What It Is

The deliberate rebuilding of the emotional infrastructure that makes digital transformation worth having. The recognition that technology amplifies whatever culture exists beneath it – depleted or strong.

The Leadership Choice

Not whether to rebuild. Whether to do so now, deliberately, while the gap is still possible to close – or to wait until customers and staff have made their own quieter decisions about whether to stay.

The Operating System Beneath Everything



The organisations that emerge strongest will be those that recognised the value gap early and invested deliberately in closing it.



Experience Your Own Service

Walk your customer journey without identification. Feel what your customers feel. Note where emotional connection breaks down, not just where the process fails.



Invest in Micro-Coaching

Replace infrequent large-format training with brief, regular coaching moments embedded in the daily rhythm of work. Frequency beats intensity every time.



Capture What Good Looks Like

Build a simple discipline for collecting and circulating stories of exceptional service. Stories carry both the technical how and the emotional why. No external programme can replicate that.

Building robust service culture is not a soft preference. It is the operating system on which every other business capability runs.

Take This Further

This essay belongs to *Breaking the Digital Doom Loop*, a fourteen-essay examination of why digital transformation so often fails to deliver – and what to do about it.

Essay 3: Internal Customers First – the hidden weak link that undermines digital transformation, and why your external customer experience will never exceed your internal service quality.

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