

# Soft Skills at Work: Good service starts with good treatment of staff

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital  
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A recent study conducted at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research found that "Americans have noticed changes in people's kindness and helpfulness" over the last 30 years.

There are several reasons for this finding, according to institute study researcher Sara Konrath, including the recent rise of social media possibly causing people to tune out to the problems of others.

This is a rather disturbing trend. Fortunately, there are several companies in Anne Arundel County that believe it is essential for their employees to demonstrate kindness and helpfulness.

I experienced this for myself when I stopped in the Metro Silver Diner in the Annapolis Towne Centre at Parole several months ago.

My friend, Marilyn, and I decided to meet there. I was greeted warmly when walking in the door and an employee showed me the menu on the wall, explained how to order food, and then took me to the "cafe" area where I could sit until my friend arrived.

"Would you like anything while you wait? Maybe some water or coffee?" I was asked.

Soon Marilyn walked in and we ordered our meals. After enjoying delicious gluten-free blueberry pancakes, there was food left that both of us wanted to take home. Self-service containers are placed on the back wall, but a very helpful employee came over and said, "Let me get some for you."

Throughout our stay, I observed what appeared to be a sense of community at the diner. I asked general manager Simon Wu how they achieved that.

"We treat employees as family members," Simon said. "That's how we should start. How you treat employees will be how they treat guests."

From the first time I ate there, this seemed to be a different kind of diner. Simon called it the "next generation diner" because it has a selection of "updated American favorites" and healthy selections. It also combines a diner with the cafe concept.

"We are a pioneer for our type of restaurant," he said. "American diners can also serve healthy food."

While I enjoy eating there, it has been the service that I've noticed. Carl Charapp, the kitchen manager at the diner, talked about kindness and helpfulness as part of the Metro Silver Diner mantra.

"We pride ourselves on cleanliness and service," he said. "Everyone gets greeted."

But it goes beyond just being greeted when you arrive. Carl gave me a dramatic example of how their assistance was greatly appreciated by a family visiting the diner.

"A man with Down syndrome came in," Carl relayed. "He ate too fast and started to choke. We saw that and helped him.

"Everyone came over. We got a letter back from his mother who said she never had an experience like this. 'No one has helped us before,' she said. 'We really appreciate all the help.' "

The mother said they would be back.

"It was a feel-good letter," Carl said.

It is not unusual for regulars to come in and get a wave from Carl. For children, there is the Metro Family Night every Wednesday from 5 to 8 p.m. A clown, face painting, balloons or arts and crafts are available to entertain them.

The president of the company visits often as well, according to Simon.

"Everyone is so close together," he said. "It's different than working in a large company."

Kindness and helpfulness are certainly evident at the Metro Silver Diner. They understand that demonstrating those soft skills is key to being successful.

It may start with how they view the people who come to the restaurant. Simon stated they don't think of them as customers.

"Treat them as you would treat friends at your house," he said.

That is really good advice.

## CONNECT! Coalition

National Blue Ribbon School and CONNECT! partner Southern High School has one more achievement of which to be proud with the opening of its Career and College Center last month.

An inviting "Starbucks" cafe atmosphere will attract students to utilize resources that prepare them for college and the work world.

Marilyn Harmon, the school's Signature Programs facilitator, observed that while high school students are achieving academically more than any previous generation, one area that is underemphasized leaves teens with an "Achilles heel."

"That is learning the soft skills," she said. "Teens often are unaware of the social courtesies and organizational expectations that create success. Showing up on time to work, being a team player, and offering to help others can take a person a long way up a ladder."

Marilyn hopes that one of the focuses of the center will be skills development to be successful in the public arena to complement their academic and civic achievements.

"The work of CONNECT! is important to help teens learn successful workplace values, expectations and skills," she said. "Teens are eager to learn these keys to success."

I would add that demonstrating those skills and values can benefit everyone in the workplace, and everywhere.

Marcia Hall, founder and principal of Reputation COUNTS, is a job readiness skills and business networking trainer, and author of "Jumpstart Your Job: 12 Simple Ways to Shift Your Career into High Gear." She is a member of the CONNECT! Coalition, a project of the Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corporation dedicated to stressing the connection of soft skills to workplace success, and can be reached at [marcia@reputationcounts.com](mailto:marcia@reputationcounts.com).

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