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The Come Back Effect THE SUMMARY

Baker Books 2018

Authors' Note

We believe the ten big ideas in this book will help you create an environment where guests will feel compelled to come back. When we talk about a “guest,” we’re primarily referring to a first-time visitor to your church. The way you treat the “guest” shouldn’t be that much different depending on whether it’s their first or fiftieth time. These principles can be applied to first-timers, volunteers, or even lifelong members of your organization. Whether they attend your church, shop with your business, or attend your small group, applying these principles to the way you deal with guests can give you the come back effect. Your organization can become the type that’s reaching new guests and creating that sticking point where they ultimately return and find their home.

1. Focus on Feeling as Much as Function

Churches love to talk about serving. It’s a huge idea that Jesus epitomized. It encapsulates the concepts of humility, compassion, and going the extra mile. Serving is so action-oriented. When you hear “serving,” it’s all about doing something. Unfortunately, churches have used the term so much that we never really hear about hospitality. We don’t ever talk about the *feeling*. Serving is about doing more and completing tasks. What happens when serving actually hurts someone’s experience?

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The quintessential story of Jesus' servant heart was when he washed his disciples' feet. We love to tell that story because that's service at its finest. Imagine a church that instituted foot washing in their services for first-time guests. The service element would be strong! People would talk about that church, but every single guest who visited the church would feel uncomfortable. How awkward would it be to visit a place for the first time and have a complete stranger wash your feet with bunions, fungus, and all? The church would be serving their guests, but it wouldn't be hospitable about it. No matter how over-the-top your service, if it doesn't connect with the emotions of the guest, it isn't hospitality.

Hospitality should change the way we perform our tasks. Serving is task oriented; hospitality is feeling oriented. Simply performing tasks is not enough to compel a guest to come back. Tasks are important but it's the intangible feelings we transmit that turn them into moments of hospitality.

People will be feeling something when they arrive at your church. If they're a first-time visitor, they may be feeling stress, nervousness, or confusion. Excellence in hospitality means replacing those existing negative feelings with positive ones. Great hospitality is shielding the guest from negative experiences by throwing ourselves in front of the situation like a bodyguard takes a bullet for the person they're protecting.

As a church we want to remove any of the negative emotions that might get in the way of ministry. We aren't trying to manipulate some happy feelings in the hopes someone will come back to our church. We're trying to care enough for our guests to replace their negative emotions so that real ministry can happen.

Begin by deciding proactively how you want your guests to feel and what you want them to *not* feel. Then look for ways to create environments that will help them experience what it is you want them to experience. You might also ask yourself how you want your team members to feel as they serve, and work on finding ways to create that experience for them. Life is so hurried. It's so hectic. Imagine how your guests would feel if your church was the least-hurried moment of their week. That alone might be enough to compel them to return. Hospitality is the first step in creating the come back effect by connecting feeling and function.

2. Create a Culture, Not a Job Title

Culture is the identity of a people group. It's who they are. This identity encompasses their art, food, entertainment, traditions, and so on. When you add all those things together, you get a group's culture. When something is part of the culture, it is phrased in terms of "who we are" not "what we do."

Your ministry has a culture, but it's not necessarily going to be what you hope. Your culture is how your people, including employees, members and volunteers *actually* behave. Hospitality can't be a job title. It isn't something that happens just one or two hours each week. You have to be intentional about creating a culture of hospitality in your church. It's not just the team's job to provide hospitality to new guests. Instead, it needs to be a cultural element of your church which means a shared value and a ministry-wide reflexive response.

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If you're a leader in your organization, you can influence culture through many things. You can make policies, bring in new employees who model proper behavior, set a vision or mission statement, and improve the physical environments of the organization. Those are all good, and they should be part of your leadership, but ultimately, the most effective way to influence culture is through leadership, trust, and treating team members with empathy. A strong hospitality culture comes from the top down. It isn't enough to tell your team to treat guests with empathy. You must model it for them. Hospitality is not just how the volunteer treats the guest; it starts with how leadership treats the staff and how the staff treats volunteers.

When hospitality is valued from the top down, there are many benefits to the ministry or business. A healthy culture can have the power to attract more talent to your organization. It can deepen engagement and motivation by your team, and increase retention of volunteers and team members. It can raise team satisfaction and performance levels. A hospitality culture can permeate the whole organization and become the culture. A culture of hospitality will even bleed into your team members' everyday lives.

For many ministries, the come back effect is more of an aspirational value than a present value. They would like to create a compelling environment that makes second and third time visits the norm, but they aren't willing to devote the resources necessary to make it happen. The only way an aspirational value becomes a present value is when money backs it up. Hospitality isn't really part of the culture until money and resources are devoted to it.

Examine your church. Do you see proof of the come back effect in your church? What about in the various ministries? What can you do to create a culture of hospitality that compels guests to come back and experience more?

3. Know the Guest

Creating the come back effect starts with knowing more about the guest than just census data. You should know the values, attitudes, and interests of your guests. Of course, you can get some valuable insights from demographic information. Different ages and different genders tend to behave certain ways. The same is true for those who are affluent or those who are impoverished. But if we want to take our hospitality to the next level, we need to know more. We need what the service industry has labeled *psychographic information*.

Psychographics are measurements dealing with someone's psychological state. These are things like personality, values, attitudes, interests, and lifestyles. While demographics might be able to tell you that your congregation is filled with affluent white couples in their forties, you can't rely on believing all wealthy white couples in their forties think and act the same way. For instance, wealthy oil tycoons in Texas think and behave quite differently from wealthy actors in Hollywood or wealthy playboys in Miami or wealthy estate owners in Maine. While money might be a unifying factor for these four groups, lumping them all in the same category would yield some interesting results. When you don't know your guest inside and out, you risk faux pas when dealing with them.

In your community, some people will relate better to your pastor, church, or ministry than other people will. Having a target audience is simply acknowledging that and helping you reach those people. When you intentionally understand

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the *who* and let that inform the *why*, you inevitably create a more remarkable and targeted experience of hospitality. Begin to collect data. Create a profile of your target guest and find ways to ask questions about their experience. You can get to know your guest better by asking your team members and your guests: (a) "What went right?" (b) "What went wrong?" (c) "What was expected but missing?" (d) "What was confusing?"

Knowing about your guests generally allows individuals to be anonymous when they wish, while still making their experience feel personal. Respond to your guests, but don't be invasive. When you do get feedback, look for volume, patterns, and impact. If 90 percent of your guests say the same thing consistently, there's a good chance you need to do something about it. But one or two negative stories from your guests shouldn't cause you to change everything you do as a ministry. Don't make knee-jerk reactions; instead look for overall trends to indicate what changes you should make. Also, fifty-two small changes over the course of a year are more manageable for your team than two or three big changes.

Know the guest, and the guest will want to know you. Remember that how you feel about a guest coming in will be reflected in how they feel about you going out. When you know the guest and they feel it, they'll feel valued. You'll get the come back effect. But more than that, it is a step toward them knowing Jesus all because you took the time to get to know them.

4. Be Fully Present

In the come back effect, being *fully present* is about being aware of both yourself *and* the guest. Great personal hospitality requires being fully present with nothing distracting you from fully engaging with the guest. It's laying aside yourself and giving the guest your everything.

When you make the intentional choice to be fully present, you are declaring what you value. A parent understands this concept. When a big football game or *Dancing with the Stars* is on the television and his or her child is begging for attention they have a choice. The parent can try to focus on both the child's antics and the broadcast, or turn off the television and become fully present in that moment with the child. When we are fully present, when we choose to relate with the guest, we create a great experience. The intentional human interaction turns a potentially impersonal process into moments when the guest feels valued and heard.

There are four fields of operation where we have the opportunity to be fully present:

- *Spiritual* (acknowledging what God is doing in that role)
- *Mental* (understanding what the guest is really asking or looking for)
- *Physical* (using welcoming body language and a friendly smile)
- *Emotional* (expressing genuine empathy and support).

Excellent hospitality in ministry requires relating with the guest in each of those arenas. Being present in some of these, but not the others, will make for a breakdown in the come back effect.

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Here are six practical ways you can be fully present or train your volunteers to be fully present:

Watch your body language. Head position? Eye contact? Smiling? Arms folded or open? Hands in pockets? Gesturing properly? Feet angled toward guest? Standing too close? Too far away?

Intermittently repeat back what you are hearing them say. Helps you verify that you're hearing a guest's concern or question accurately. Assures your guest that you are listening to them.

Be emotionally intelligent. Match your words and actions to each setting. Casual or formal? Fast paced or slow moving? Quick answer or longer conversation?

Understand your role in the big picture. Guests don't know what your responsibilities are when they encounter you, but when they experience what you do for them, it is important.

Personalize the experience. Pay attention to the guest by involving them, responding to them, empathizing with what they're feeling. Don't treat every guest the same way. Look for their individuality and customize the guest experience for them.

Accomplish your tasks early. You shouldn't be *working* when a guest arrives. If you're sorting through bulletins as a guest arrives with a question, you won't be able to be fully present for them. When you're unhurried, you will be undistracted and can focus all your spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional attention on the guest. When we do what we do best, then God does what he can do best.

5. Think Scene by Scene

Churches and businesses like to think in terms of functions. Who will pass the offering buckets? Who will help people find seats? Who will keep our parking lot from becoming too chaotic? So we look for teams to fill those roles. Guests don't think in terms of tasks or roles; they think in terms of scenes and barriers to where they want to go. Their process looks something like this:

Scene 1: The Drive to the Church

Scene 2: Finding a Parking Spot

Scene 3: Walking to the Front Doors

Scene 4: Navigating the Lobby

Scene 5: Dropping Off the Children

Scene 6: Entering the Worship Center and Finding a Seat

Scene 7: Picking Up the Children

Scene 8: Finding the Car

Scene 9: Escaping the Parking Lot without Sitting in Traffic

Scene 10: The Drive to a Restaurant

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Along the way, each new scene they encounter will either be a place of healing or a place of hostility. There will be inconveniences and stress points. Those along the path will either become allies, obstacles, or enemies. For them, attending your church service is an adventure story akin to *The Lord of the Rings* especially if it's their first time. They're on a journey, much like Frodo with his ring. Will they find Mordor—a place of dangers and stress? Will they find Rivendell—a place of healing? Will you be an Orc—someone adding stress and anxiety to the situation? Or will you be a Sam—someone easing their burden? One of your most important jobs in hospitality is to remove the stress, the inconvenience, and the barriers. Your guest is the hero in the story of their visit; your role is the ally.

The primary barriers your guests will experience are based on the physical location and arrangement of your building, your own organizational structure and procedures, and your guest's assumptions about what they will experience. Breaking down the scenes in your guest's experience helps you see where there are gaps in their visit. This will help you identify moments of decision and conflict in each scene and get prepared.

Do what you can to make the experience of a guest's visit safe and predictable. A guest's experience should feel seamless, not departmental and choppy. Make the handoff between your ministry's roles feel like one big experience instead of many small ones. Hospitality is a process, but you shouldn't make your guest *feel* processed. When it doesn't negatively affect the guest's comfort level, find ways to add moments of surprise and delight.

6. Recover Quickly

Even in the midst of serving people well, things can go wrong. People get their feelings hurt or we fail to meet their expectations. It's up to us to make things right. The come back effect is about recovering and recovering quickly.

Why do we focus on recovering quickly? Is it to make the guest feel better? Yes, but that's a by-product. For Christ followers, recovery is about demonstrating the kindness of God. In our ministries, we lead people into a growing relationship with God. Elevating the dignity of the guest helps people see the kindness of God through our actions and ultimately leads them back to him. It's the kindness of God that leads people to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Our kindness is the extension of God's kindness.

If you're simply trying to make the guest feel good, you're providing customer service. The church is called to more than that. Jesus' grace shouldn't become an excuse to be lazy when it comes to showing love to our guests. Instead, it should be our inspiration to do even more.

Things happen. There will be times when you unintentionally ruin an experience for a guest. Acknowledge that it will happen and prepare for it. You aren't perfect and the guest isn't perfect either, but you can only control the first part. You can't control the guest.

Knowing that breakdowns in hospitality will occur, give your team training and tools to help make things right when something does go wrong.

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When something goes wrong for a guest, listen to their feelings first. Deal with the emotions, then deal logically with the situation. You can't fix the guest. They are the focal point, not the problem. You can only do your best to fix other things in order to recover. Follow these seven steps (in this order) to make things right:

Listen. Let them get it all out. If you short-circuit the complaint, you leave the emotions inside them. Fully hear them out before you continue. Let your listening ear be a healing touch to the emotions inside them.

Review. Repeat back to them what they've said. Voice their concerns in your own words. Don't patronize them; seek to truly understand.

Empathize. Listen first, then feel. You don't have a right to craft a response until the guest is done airing their grievance. Then, empathize before you respond. In their shoes, you'd feel the same way. Sometimes empathy is all the guest wants. Knowing they are affirmed in what they feel goes a long way.

Apologize. Take responsibility, even if you don't feel responsible. Even if someone else caused the problem or even if you feel the guest is unjustified in their emotions, apologize. (Don't shift the blame back to them: "I'm sorry you got offended by this.")

Resolve. Often, restitution isn't perfect. Some offenses can't be undone. One empowering thing is to offer guests options for restitution: "We want to make this right. We could do _____ or _____. Which would you prefer?" (Of course, this means volunteers need to be armed with any options that are on the table.)

Follow Up. It's important to care in the moment, but if you want to take it to the next level, care after the fact. Follow up with the guest by giving them a call or finding them after the service.

Discuss. Turn this recovery into a learning opportunity. Write down what happened and then review it with your team in a meeting or an email. This will help you refine your process and prepare for future times when this sort of recovery might be necessary again.

If the guest becomes irrational because of the situation, there's a good chance there will be no clean resolution. In these cases, all you can do is humble yourself, listen, and avoid becoming defensive.

7. Observe Details, Because Everything Communicates

Small details in your ministry communicate big things to your guests. Everything tells a story even if it's a story contrary to what you're hoping to tell. What does the flow of your service communicate to the guest? What does your team communicate? What does your building or room decor communicate?

Here are a few things that might be talking to your guest: The volume of the ambient music in the room (raucous party or funeral). The colors you paint the walls (serenity, anger, passive, excitement). Tissues sitting in front of the stage (lots of crying or allergy season). The doors to the Sunday School rooms (closed or big windows offering visibility for child safety and worker accountability). Smells in the room (old food, paint, mildew).

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Being intentional with small details requires planning those small details ahead of time. The side benefit of planning ahead is that you often get a higher level of excellence for your ministry without paying a premium price. When you aren't intentional and you don't plan ahead, you'll often choose the cheapest option instead of the best option (the best is not always the most expensive either).

Don't force other people into your way of doing things. Approach your systems from your guest's perspective, even if it means more inconvenience for you and your team. If you're creating a hurdle for the guest because it's more convenient for you, you won't like the results of what that says about you. Examine your guest experience from the perspective of all five senses:

Sight. The paint. The flooring. The carpets. The windows. The clutter. The cleanliness. Do guests feel they're in a comfortable place that makes sense to them? Do they feel everything's taken care of for them?

Sound. Does the volume of the music in the lobby or auditorium match the level and the energy of the room?

Smell. Does your restroom smell like a public stadium restroom? Does the auditorium have a pleasant smell? Do the greeters have fresh breath?

Touch. Bulletins feel like cheap copy paper? Inexpensive fabric on the chairs? Welcoming handshakes? Appropriate hugs?

Taste. Generic refreshments? Sam's Club half-and-half containers? Discount communion wafers?

Are the things that influence your guest's senses communicating "we value excellence," or "we take shortcuts"? As you're planning the details of your ministry, think through the ways you can communicate something more memorable through your guest's five senses. When we pay attention to these small details, we ultimately communicate to our guests that we value them. We communicate that we will take good care of them. That allows them to listen to the next communications from the emcee, group leader, worship team, pastor, and ultimately, the Holy Spirit speaking individually to each person.

8. Reject "Just Okay"

Excellence is doing the best you can, all the time, even when you think no one will notice. This means creating excellence for the guest during the first impression, the final impression, and every interaction in between.

Many of the people visiting your church are getting their first glimpse of Jesus. Will that first glimpse be of excellence or of mediocrity? Certainly "just okay" doesn't cut it if we are Christ's representatives. That's why it's so important to embrace excellence all the time. It's far more important than customer service; it's how we love others. Excellently.

There are five main areas in which it's tempting to settle for "just okay" for both you and your team. These are when we think people won't see or notice; when something routine just has to get done; when you don't feel a burden for it; when it feels low priority or the stakes are low; and finally, when you get lazy and are willing to settle.

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You want to create a culture that is relentlessly focused on continual improvement. The standard of excellence tomorrow should not be the same level it was yesterday. If you're doing some things because you've always done them that way, it means you haven't been improving in those areas. An atmosphere of continuing excellence requires a "no sacred cows" approach where everything in your ministry is up for discussion and improvement. Three questions will help you find areas where you can improve:

What's worth starting? Should you implement a new process or find new tools to help you achieve excellence in the come back effect?

What's worth fixing? Is there a process that needs a tweak or a total reorganization to make it work the way it was meant to?

What's worth ending? There are some things that you should stop doing if they aren't pushing your ministry toward excellence.

"Just okay" seems harmless, but it is a virus that will infect your whole ministry if you leave it unchecked. Excellence is not easy. It's inconvenient. But it's worth the effort to demonstrate the love of God to those he has entrusted to our care.

9. Choice Values over Policies

Values, principles, or priorities are far more valuable than policies, because they evoke responses from team members that you can't manufacture. Values are the ideas, behaviors, and truths we embrace as being the filter through which we make decisions in our organization. Values tell our team members what matters most. When you establish a set of values for your team, you are declaring the important elements of what you believe so you can do what matters. *This is why we do what we do.*

The power in values-driven ministry is that it makes decisions easy for volunteers and staff members. When a situation or question arises, the team member doesn't have to scroll through a list of policies in their mind or refer to a manual. They can simply reflect back on your organization's values and see whether or not an action aligns with them. "We value having fun in this organization, so how should I respond to this situation in a way that reinforces that value yet doesn't make the guest feel uncomfortable?"

At Buckhead Church, the guest services team has these four values: (1) show care, (2) have fun, (3) remain flexible, and (4) deliver wow.

Policy-driven organizations have to make new rules each time a new situation arises. Values-driven organizations, on the other hand, can help steer volunteers without having to create a fifty-page manual filled with policies for every potential situation.

Your real values won't necessarily match your written values. Real values are the things you praise and the things you discipline. Values are different from behaviors. But a great statement of supporting behaviors can help cast the vision for your values.

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Behaviors might include guidelines like “Anticipate and fulfill needs,” “Acknowledge each person,” “Give a warm greeting and good-bye,” “Provide quick service recovery,” “Keep interactions upbeat and positive,” “Do little things really well.”

Here are ten great ways to integrate your values into your organization:

- Live them.
- Teach them.
- Acknowledge them when you see them in team members.
- Identify creative and memorable ways to communicate them.
- Invite people onto the team who already live out the values.
- Create ways for team members to participate in a value.
- Talk with leaders about what happens when values don’t go well.
- Attach behaviors to each value.
- Give and receive feedback through the filter of the values.
- Encourage team members with incremental steps on how they can better align with values.

10. Reach for Significance

You’ll notice in this book we never once mentioned the topic of teamwork, even though teamwork is vitally important. Through the collective effort of a team you can achieve something far bigger than what you could accomplish on your own.

The key to a strong team is each member understanding their own significance both as an individual and in their role. It’s one of the main things everyone wants, but unfortunately, many people fail to feel that level of significance as an employee or volunteer. However, when a team feels significant, that becomes the tipping point toward taking the teamwork dynamic to the next level.

All-star syndrome plagues many churches and ministries. It’s important to give people responsibilities and let each member contribute what they’re best suited to offer. When you’ve done that, it’s a great start, but just because you’ve brought people on board and spread the load doesn’t mean you’ve perfected the team dynamic.

Often, ministries tend to focus on need instead of significance. They *need* someone to watch the kids. They *need* a Sunday school leader or parking lot attendant. There’s a missing piece in the ministry machine and frankly, it doesn’t matter who fills it. This can lead a volunteer or team member to feel more like a cog in the wheel than a valued team member. There’s not significance in being an easily replaced machine part.

Feeling significant is often the thing that turns an unmotivated worker into the most motivated person on the team. In any job someone performs—whether volunteer or paid—they want to feel like their work is important and they’re bringing something unique and valuable to the job. They want to feel like they’re excellent in their job, that they are the right person for their role, and that their leaders and their co-workers value their effort. When a team member feels that, they feel like they’re part of a team that’s doing something worthwhile. Thus they’re happy to function in their given role.

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Volunteering for a church shouldn't create a sense of obligation or guilt. Imagine if churches saw volunteerism as an opportunity to help their volunteers understand personal significance. Churches would see the volunteer's role as less important than their growth. The evolution of significance in each team member should look like this: as a volunteer joins the team, they should realize first and foremost they're important in their role. If they don't realize that, they won't feel significant at all. Next, though, they should start feeling like they're significant even apart from their work. They matter to the ministry even if they don't perform their role. Finally, the ultimate significance comes from realizing they simply matter to God, to the ministry, and to the leadership.

Ultimately, our significance comes from God. On our good days and on our bad days, we still have value in his sight. We can't afford to find our value in others' opinions of us. You have value, right now, regardless of what you may feel. Start seeing that significance and you can start making your team feel significant. The come back effect starts with you.