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Employee Engagement And Interpersonal Communication Training To Improve Consumer Service For Baristas Composure In Medan City

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Abstract: This activity aims to improve competitiveness and service quality through employee engagement and interpersonal communication training for Composure baristas in Medan City. The study employs a qualitative research method with an observational approach conducted over six weeks, comprising two weeks of pre-training observation, four weeks of training implementation (five structured sessions), and two weeks of post-training observation, involving ten barista informants. The training program included three main strategies: presentations on the importance of employee engagement and interpersonal communication, service role-plays and simulations, and evaluation of simulation results. The activity results reveal four main themes. First, the initial level of barista employee engagement and interpersonal communication fell into the low to moderate category before the training. Second, the training program successfully increased

Abstrak: Kegiatan ini bertujuan untuk meningkatkan daya saing dan kualitas pelayanan melalui pelatihan employee engagement dan komunikasi interpersonal bagi barista Composure di Kota Medan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan observasi yang dilaksanakan selama enam minggu, meliputi dua minggu observasi pra-pelatihan, empat minggu pelaksanaan pelatihan (lima sesi terstruktur), dan dua minggu observasi pascapelatihan, dengan melibatkan sepuluh barista sebagai informan. Program pelatihan mencakup tiga strategi utama: pemaparan pentingnya employee engagement dan komunikasi interpersonal, roleplay dan simulasi pelayanan, serta evaluasi hasil simulasi. Hasil kegiatan menemukan empat tema utama: (1) kondisi awal employee engagement dan komunikasi

barista awareness and motivation regarding the importance of emotional involvement at work. Third, barista interpersonal communication skills showed significant development after the training, especially in empathy and active listening. Fourth, customer service quality improved as reflected by changes in barista behavior when interacting with customers. This study concludes that integrated training focusing on engagement and communication is a relevant and effective intervention to improve service quality in the coffee shop industry.

Keywords: Employee Engagement; Interpersonal Communication; Coffee Shop; MSME.

interpersonal barista berada pada kategori rendah hingga sedang sebelum pelatihan; (2) program pelatihan berhasil meningkatkan kesadaran dan motivasi barista terhadap pentingnya keterlibatan emosional dalam pekerjaan; (3) keterampilan komunikasi interpersonal barista mengalami perkembangan yang signifikan pascapelatihan, terutama pada aspek empati dan mendengarkan aktif; serta (4) kualitas pelayanan konsumen meningkat yang tercermin dari perubahan perilaku barista dalam berinteraksi dengan pelanggan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pelatihan terintegrasi yang berfokus pada engagement dan komunikasi merupakan intervensi yang relevan dan efektif bagi peningkatan kualitas pelayanan dalam industri kedai kopi.

Kata Kunci: Employee Engagement; Komunikasi Interpersonal; Kedai Kopi; UMKM.

A. Introduction

The global and domestic coffee industry has undergone remarkable transformation over the past two decades. The third wave coffee phenomenon has changed the way consumers perceive and enjoy coffee no longer merely as a beverage to ward off drowsiness, but as a rich sensory and social experience (Tucker, 2017). In Indonesia, this shift has manifested in the massive growth of the premium and specialty coffee shop segment, reaching various segments of society.

According to data from the Indonesian Coffee Exporters and Industry Association (AEKI) in 2023, domestic coffee consumption has increased by an average of 8.22%

per year. This growth has occurred not only at the large industrial scale, but also in the local coffee shop segment, which has proliferated across major cities, including Medan.

Medan, as the capital of North Sumatra Province, is one of the largest culinary and beverage business centers outside Java. Medan's residents are known for their strong tradition and culture of coffee drinking, making competition in the city's coffee shop industry particularly intense. In this competitive context, customer service quality has become one of the key differentiating factors that determine the success of a coffee shop business.

Composure is a local coffee shop operating in Medan that has successfully built a positive reputation among its loyal customers. However, like any other business, Composure faces challenges in maintaining service quality consistency, particularly regarding the performance and engagement of its human resources namely the baristas who serve as the frontline of customer interaction.

Employee engagement refers to an employee's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral commitment to their work and to the organization where they work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Employees with high levels of engagement tend to show better productivity, deliver quality service, and have higher retention rates. Conversely, low engagement levels can negatively affect work motivation, service quality, and the company's image. Anitha (2014) demonstrated that the main determinants of employee engagement have a significant effect on overall employee performance.

In addition to employee engagement, interpersonal communication is a critical element in the interaction between baristas and customers. DeVito (2016) defines interpersonal communication as a process of message exchange between two mutually influencing parties, encompassing both verbal and nonverbal aspects. In a service context, a barista's ability to communicate effectively, empathetically, and responsively makes a major contribution to customer perceptions of service quality. Hargie (2011)

asserts that interpersonal communication skills are competencies that can be learned and improved through structured training.

Previous research has examined the relationship between employee engagement and service quality across various industry contexts. Bakker et al (2012) found that employees with high engagement levels tend to exhibit proactive behavior, including in the contexts of communication and social interaction. Meanwhile, Luthans et al (2015) showed that psychological interventions through training can enhance employees' psychological capital, which in turn drives improvements in engagement. In the service industry specifically, Parasuraman et al (1988), through the SERVQUAL model, identified that the dimensions of responsiveness and empathy closely related to interpersonal communication are the primary determinants of customer perceptions of service quality.

Nevertheless, there is a significant gap in the literature: research that specifically examines the effectiveness of integrated employee engagement and interpersonal communication training in the context of the coffee shop industry in Indonesia, particularly in Medan, remains very limited. Most existing studies focus on large-scale hospitality industries Zeithaml et al (2018) or the manufacturing sector (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), and thus fail to capture the specific dynamics of the local MSME-scale coffee shop industry, which has different operational characteristics and resources.

Initial observations conducted at Composure Medan indicated that some baristas still exhibited limitations in employee engagement and interpersonal communication, including: (1) a lack of initiative in greeting and serving customers, (2) limited ability to handle customer complaints assertively, (3) low levels of enthusiasm in performing their duties, and (4) limited active listening skills in interactions with customers. These conditions imply a decline in customer satisfaction and potentially impede the growth of Composure's business.

Based on this background and the gaps in the literature, this study aims to: (1) identify the initial condition of employee engagement and interpersonal communication among Composure Medan baristas prior to the training intervention; (2) implement an integrated employee engagement and interpersonal communication training program; and (3) analyze behavioral changes and improvements in consumer service quality following the implementation of the training program.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of employee engagement and interpersonal communication among Composure Medan baristas in the context of a training program. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to explore the dynamics of behavioral change and the subjective perspectives of the baristas, which cannot be adequately captured through a purely quantitative approach (Creswell, 2014)

The study was conducted over six weeks, comprising: two weeks of pre-training observation (baseline), four weeks of training program implementation (five structured sessions), and two weeks of post-training observation. The research informants consisted of ten Composure Medan baristas selected purposively based on the following criteria: (1) had worked for at least three months, (2) were active employees, and (3) were willing to participate in all stages of the program.

The training program was designed and implemented through three main strategies. First, presentations on the importance of employee engagement and interpersonal communication to all baristas. Second, role-plays and service simulations covering four scenarios: (a) a barista serving a coffee-enthusiast customer, (b) a barista serving a customer unfamiliar with coffee, (c) a barista managing a rush-hour situation, and (d) a barista handling a customer complaint. Third, evaluation of the results of the role-plays and simulations.

Data were collected through three techniques: (1) participatory observation during pre- and post-training using structured observation sheets; (2) in-depth interviews with all informants at both the pre- and post-training stages; and (3) documentation in the form of field notes and recordings of training sessions. Data analysis employed a thematic analysis approach following the procedures of Miles et al. (2014), encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Initial conditions: Barista Employee Engagement and Interpersonal Communication Pre-Training

Based on the results of the pre-training observation conducted over two weeks, the researchers identified a fairly varied initial condition among the ten barista informants. In general, the initial conditions could be categorized into three dominant behavioral patterns.

The first pattern, found in 4 out of 10 informants, was mechanical and reactive service behavior. Baristas in this group responded to customer inquiries only minimally, showed no initiative in offering recommendations, and tended to have flat facial expressions. Field observations noted minimal meaningful eye contact and generally closed body language. This condition reflects low levels of the vigor and dedication dimensions within Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) engagement framework.

The second pattern, found in 3 other informants, was inconsistent service behavior. At certain times (particularly when not busy), baristas in this group displayed fairly good interactions. However, during peak hours, the quality of their communication and engagement declined significantly, indicating an engagement level that remained dependent on situational conditions.

The third pattern, found in 3 informants, was relatively good and consistent service behavior. These baristas showed higher initiative, more natural smiles, and

better communication skills compared to their peers. However, even within this group, limitations remained in the areas of complaint handling and verbal empathy.

Pre-training interviews revealed two key themes explaining these conditions. The first theme was low work motivation; most informants perceived the barista role as temporary employment rather than a career they wished to develop. Informant 1 stated: "Honestly, I work here because I need the income for now. I haven't thought about becoming a barista permanently." This perception contributed to low levels of dedication within Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) engagement concept.

The second theme was a lack of understanding about the importance of communication in service delivery. Most informants believed that a barista's primary task was to make good coffee, while communication was viewed as a secondary concern. Informant 2 stated: "The most important thing is that our coffee is good. Customers will definitely come back if the coffee is great." This view is consistent with findings by (Kusumawati et al., 2021), who found that frontline employees in Indonesia's local food and beverage industry often lack an adequate understanding of the role of communication in building customer loyalty.

2. Dynamics of Training Program Implementation

The training program, comprising 5 sessions over 4 weeks, covered theoretical material, group discussions, simulations, and role-plays. Observations during the training process revealed several interesting findings regarding the dynamics of the learning experience.

In the early sessions (session 1), most participants displayed a tendency toward passivity and low enthusiasm. Several informants admitted that the training sessions felt more like a "lecture" than practical development. However, enthusiasm began to increase in the second session, which focused on active listening techniques, where participants were asked to simulate conversations with difficult customers.

A significant turning point occurred in the third session, which focused on empathy and emotional intelligence. This session used a reflective approach in which participants were asked to share their experiences as customers who had once felt dissatisfied with a service. This approach successfully built a strong emotional connection between participants and the training material. Informant 3 stated: "When we were asked to share our own experience as a disappointed customer, that's when I really felt what our customers might be going through." This supports (Kolb, 1984) argument regarding the effectiveness of experiential learning in shifting perspectives and behavior.

In the final sessions (sessions 4 and 5), which focused on simulations and excellent service practice, participant involvement and engagement reached their peak. Role-plays with realistic scenarios encouraged participants to internalize the skills they had learned more deeply.

3. Post-Training Behavioral Changes: Observational Findings

Post-training observations conducted over two weeks revealed fairly significant changes in the behavior of all ten barista informants. The main findings were organized according to four key observed aspects.

The first aspect was customer greeting behavior. Before training, only 3 out of 10 baristas consistently greeted customers with genuine smiles and verbal greetings. After training, 8 out of 10 baristas demonstrated warmer and more consistent greeting behavior, accompanied by meaningful eye contact. This change was most pronounced among baristas who had previously exhibited mechanical behavioral patterns.

The second aspect was the ability to listen and understand customer needs. Post-training observations noted a noticeable improvement in active listening behavior: baristas more frequently paraphrased orders to confirm understanding (e.g., "*So you'd like an unsweetened hot Americano, large size, is that right?*"), asked relevant clarifying questions, and displayed nonverbal responses confirming their attentiveness.

The third aspect was handling complaint situations and special requests. This was the area that showed the most significant improvement. Before training, most baristas displayed clear discomfort when dealing with complaining customers, often adopting a defensive stance or deferring the situation to a supervisor. After training, observations recorded a marked improvement in the ability of baristas to handle complaint situations with a calm, empathetic, and solution-oriented demeanor.

The fourth aspect was initiative and work enthusiasm. Changes in this aspect varied among informants: 7 out of 10 informants showed clear improvements in initiative (e.g., *offering recommendations without being asked, paying attention to customers who appeared confused*), while the remaining 3 showed more moderate changes, indicating that shifts in the vigor dimension require more time and sustained systemic support.

4. Informant Perspectives on the Impact of Training

Post-training interviews revealed a rich array of perspectives on the experiences and impacts of the training as felt by the baristas. Three key themes emerged from the thematic analysis.

The first theme was a shift in perspective regarding the meaning of the barista profession. The majority of informants reported a change in how they viewed the barista profession after participating in the training. Informant 2 stated: *"Before, I thought being a barista was just about making coffee. Now I understand that we are the first to make an impression on customers. That is a great responsibility."* This shift in perspective reflects an improvement in the dedication dimension of and Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) engagement concept.

The second theme was an awareness of the influence of attitude on customer experience. Informant 1 shared: *"I just realized that our mood is contagious to customers. When we are enthusiastic and friendly, customers also feel more comfortable."* This awareness reflects the development of emotional intelligence and an

understanding of mutual influence in interpersonal communication, as articulated by DeVito (2016).

The third theme was increased confidence in communication. Several informants who previously admitted to feeling awkward when interacting with unfamiliar customers reported a greater sense of confidence after training. Informant 3 stated: *"Before, if there was a customer who seemed strict or critical, I'd get nervous right away. Now I'm better able to handle it calmly."* This improvement in confidence is consistent with Hargie (2011) findings on the positive effects of communication skills training on employee self-efficacy.

5. The Relationship Between Engagement, Communication, and Service Quality

The findings of this study consistently support the theoretical proposition that employee engagement and interpersonal communication have a mutually reinforcing relationship in the context of service quality. Baristas who experienced improvements in engagement (particularly in the dedication and vigor dimensions) also tended to show greater improvement in their interpersonal communication skills. This is consistent with research by Bakker and Demerouti, (2017), who found that engaged employees are more likely to exhibit proactive behavior, including in the contexts of communication and social interaction.

The observed improvements in service quality, particularly in the responsiveness and empathy dimensions of the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988), represent the concrete manifestation of changes in both of these aspects. These findings reinforce the argument by Zeithaml et al (2018) that in the service industry, service quality is fundamentally the quality of human interaction, which is largely determined by the psychological condition and social skills of frontline employees. Bakker and Demerouti (2017) further explain this mechanism through Job Demands-Resources (JD-

R) theory, in which the enhancement of personal resources through training contributes to improved work engagement, which in turn drives positive work behavior.

6. Implications of Findings for Human Resource Management in the Coffee Shop Industry

In practical terms, the findings of this study have significant implications for human resource management in the coffee shop industry. First, baristas' perceptions of their profession as temporary work need to be strategically addressed by management through clear career development programs, adequate reward systems, and an organizational culture that values the barista profession as a dignified career with genuine prospects.

Second, training that employs reflective and experiential approaches has proven more effective than purely didactic training. This implication is relevant for training program designers in the service industry, encouraging them to place greater emphasis on simulation, role-play, and reflection components in their program designs.

Third, the consistent application of post-training skills requires systemic support from the organization. Supervisors and management need to actively serve as role models and providers of constructive feedback to support the transfer of learning into real work contexts. This is consistent with recommendations by Luthans et al (2015) regarding the importance of organizational support in sustaining the impact of psychological training interventions.

D. Conclusion

This study concludes that an integrated training program combining the dimensions of employee engagement and interpersonal communication with a reflective, experience-based approach constitutes a relevant and effective intervention for improving the consumer service quality of Composure Medan baristas. The four main themes identified (initially low to moderate conditions, increased awareness and motivation, development of communication skills, and improved service behavior)

consistently demonstrate that the training intervention was capable of driving meaningful changes among the baristas.

These findings affirm that investing in the psychological and communication development of frontline employees is a crucial strategy for achieving competitive advantage in the coffee shop business during an increasingly competitive era. For future research, the use of a mixed methods research design with the addition of quantitative instruments is recommended to measure the impact of training in a more measurable way, and to extend the scope of research to various local coffee shops in Medan to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

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