

Standards for Service Quality: Is There A Place for Them in the Parks Canada System?

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Abstract

Service quality is an important theme in operating guidelines of many park agencies today. Although service quality is dynamic, an inherent symbiosis exists between park agencies and their visitors—agencies meet visitor needs and visitors support the agencies' existence. This symbiosis is gaining prominence in the Parks Canada system. As the new management agency structure comes into operation, visitor numbers play an augmented role in determining operating budgets for the system (including individual parks and historic sites). This relationship with the visitor is the key to evaluating a park/site's service quality performance. Although much research has explored visitors' perceptions of service quality, little has been done to understand service quality control from the agency's perspective. One option for an agency's quality control is to implement quality management standards into its operating system. This study 'in-progress' focuses on the examination of issues associated with potential implementation of the ISO 9004 quality management standards into Canada's National Parks and National Historic Sites. It is consistent with the Federal Government's drive to introduce service standards into its operations and initiatives related to quality product and service delivery. ISO 9004 standards are generic guidelines for service quality management and are adaptable to both the public and private sectors. The goal of ISO 9004 is to meet client needs at low cost to the organization. Interviews at two Ontario case study sites (Point Pelee National Park and Woodside National Historic Site) explore staff perceptions of opportunities and barriers associated with potential implementation of ISO standards into the Parks Canada system. As the involvement and commitment of every member of an organization are instrumental to implementation, interview participants are selected from all levels of the organization. The findings of this study will describe the feasibility—based on staff perceptions—of implementing the ISO standards into the Parks Canada system.

Introduction

Fiscal restraint and organizational change are now dominant forces in Canada's public sector and several issues that merit consideration have arisen due to these forces. Some of these issues for Parks Canada as a public sector agency include: a need to increase public education and consultation; a need to improve information transfer within and between the protection agencies (national parks and historic sites) and local communities; a need for more effective use of available resources for ecological protection; and, a need for gap analysis in a variety of contexts, both social and ecological. These issues provide a context in which to consider the implementation of management standards in the setting of protected areas.

Parks Canada as a Service Provider

Parks Canada is often thought of as the national organization for the protection of Canada's natural and cultural resources, and its role in the social side of the public sector is often overlooked or forgotten. But consideration of the Parks Canada objectives for National Parks and National Historic Sites demonstrates that, in fact, a dual mandate exists.

The Parks Canada objectives for National Parks are to:

- 1) protect for all time representative natural areas of Canadian significance in a system of national parks; and,
- 2) encourage public understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of this natural heritage so as to leave it unimpaired for future generations (Canadian Heritage—Parks Canada, 1998).

The Parks Canada objectives for National Historic Sites are to:

- 1) foster knowledge and appreciation of Canada's past through a national program of historical commemoration;
- 2) ensure the commemorative integrity of national historic sites administered by Parks Canada by protecting and presenting them for the benefit, education and enjoyment of this and future generations, in a manner that respects the significant and irreplaceable legacy represented by these places and their associated resources; and,
- 3) encourage and support the protection and presentation by others of places of national historic significance that are not administered by Parks Canada (Canadian Heritage—Parks Canada, 1998).

These two sets of objectives imply that the dual mandate for Canada's natural and cultural heritage is protection and education. In both parks and historic sites, Parks Canada is providing a service to the public by protecting significant areas for generations to come and by educating the public in order to foster understanding and enduring appreciation for the goals of protection.

As such, National Park and National Historic Site managers should be concerned with allocating their resources in a way that both preserves ecological or cultural integrity and provides a positive and educational experience for park visitors (Hammitt, Bixler and Noe, 1996). In order that these resources are used effectively (and not wasted), it is important that these managers ensure that a quality 'service' is provided – both in terms of protection and education. For National Parks and National Historic Sites, this 'service' is often provided to the visitor, thus making high-quality visitor services an important element of the park and historic site system.

Now that Parks Canada has become an operating agency under Bill C-29, visitors will play a more important role in determining operating budgets for the system as well as for individual parks and historic sites. Many parks and historic sites will depend on visitors, through service charges and entrance fees, to support their operating budgets. This means that an increase in visitation could constitute an increase in income and therefore a need for the park or historic site to maintain a suitable level of visitation in order to maintain an acceptable operating budget. A visitor that has had a positive experience at a park or historic site is more likely to return than one who has not. This notion reinforces the importance for the park or historic site to provide a high-quality visitor experience.

Importance of Service Quality in the Parks Canada Setting

The provision of quality visitor experiences is often measured by levels of visitor satisfaction (Vaske, Donnelly and Williamson, 1991). In this era of fiscal restraint park agencies are often one of the first victims of public sector budget cuts. Yet in spite of ever-shrinking operating budgets, park agencies are expected to maintain, if not improve the quality of their sites and visitor services, including everything from clean washrooms to park and historic site interpretation. Typically, this is to be accomplished by virtue of increased efficiency of all remaining staff at the parks and historic sites, but is expected without any staff consultation or reward structure. This lack of employee involvement or incentive is often the key element in the breakdown of quality service (Barber, 1989) and the breakdown of quality service and low morale inevitably leads to visitor dissatisfaction and reduced visitor numbers. Not only do dissatisfied visitors often not return to the site, they also share their negative experiences with other potential visitors (Barber, 1989). This chain of events could be disastrous for a park or historic site that relies on visitor expenditures for its operating budget.

Service quality then, is an important issue for all park agency managers to consider. Unfortunately, service quality is also abstract and difficult to define, as visitors will have different definitions of service quality based on their personal experiences at this and other parks and historic sites. Visitors will also have varying expectations of quality and different standards against which they judge the quality of the service they receive. Park and historic site managers typically do not have a context in which to evaluate these varying visitor experiences and often do not have a mechanism to provide adequate feedback about visitor experiences to the policy decision-makers. This makes quality control and evaluation of service quality extremely difficult for the park and historic site managers.

Although an important part of the system, visitors are not the only element to consider. Park and historic site managers are responsible for effectively administering all available resources, not only those rated most highly by the visitor, and must manage those resources while simultaneously considering the local community, ecological integrity, and long-term resource planning issues. Experience-based, visitor satisfaction measures are not solely enough to help park and historic site managers make these decisions effectively without first having a context in which to consider them.

In the case of parks, importance-performance (I-P) analysis has been used as a descriptive tool and context to help park managers identify the importance of management issues and areas in which resource efforts need to be most concentrated (Hammit et al., 1996; Martilla and James, 1977). I-P analysis has also been used to evaluate the importance of park or recreation programs and services (as perceived by the client) in relation to the performance of managers in the provision of these programs and services. The I-P technique has been found useful for: a) the identification of which program or service features were important for producing participant satisfaction; b) documentation of the relevant importance of each program attribute compared to other attributes identified; and, c) documentation of the agency's performance relative to each attribute (Hammit et al., 1996).

Despite this and much other work done in several areas around service quality

issues, service quality within the public sector is still not well-understood and the importance of distinguishing between public and private sector services when operationalizing service quality has been widely noted (Crompton, MacKay and Fesenmaier, 1991; Wisniewski and Donnelly, 1996; Wright, 1997; Wright, Duray and Goodale, 1992). Three features used to distinguish public from private sector service are the absence of a profit motive, the presence of multiple constituencies, and the notion of equity (Crompton et al., 1991). More specifically, public services are less dominated by financial objectives, and if they produce revenue or raise funds, it is as a means to an end, not an end in itself.

The public sector also frequently has multiple constituencies to satisfy, including, but not limited to, the users, the public, special interest groups, the agency's personnel, and politicians. These groups are often the foundation for identifying service quality priorities, but priorities between groups are not always convergent. This may lead to conflict and dissatisfaction in one or more of the service organization's constituencies. Furthermore, unlike in private sector services, in the public sector, the idea of service quality often includes notions of accessibility, equity, and respect for the client as an individual (Milakovich, 1998). Despite these differences with the private sector, public sector agencies must still compete with other agencies (both public and private) for clients. For example, park and historic site visitors have many choices of where to spend their leisure time and dollars, so parks and historic sites must be able to compete for visitors against other agencies that carefully consider service quality.

According to Milakovich (1998: 47), despite the goal of many public service agencies to improve service quality, they also "still lack the capacity to simultaneously increase productivity, reduce costs, and motivate public employees to provide service to all customers in a timely, polite, efficient, and cost-effective manner". This is especially true in times of budget cutbacks and fiscal restraint. However, as previously stated, some public agencies such as Parks Canada now have new financial objectives that include raising a substantial amount of operational budgets from service charges and fees. In such an environment, service quality will play an important part of an agency's ability to collect the appropriate level of fees in order to sustain their operating budget.

The Role of Standards in Service Quality

Park and recreation researchers often attempt to provide a service quality evaluation context through measurement scales in visitor surveys. One of the first and most often employed scales is the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988). There are five dimensions of service quality identified in the SERVQUAL instrument—tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. It was noted that this instrument needed to be supported with further research based on different samples in different settings (Crompton et al., 1991; Wright et al., 1992). This could be interpreted to mean that the ultimate goal of further refining this instrument was to create a standard measurement scale against which findings could be evaluated. This emphasizes the potential importance of standards for the provision of quality services in the park and historic site settings.

Standardization is a mechanism used to create a context in which findings from a variety of settings and contexts can be compared and evaluated. This could be extremely beneficial in a park agency such as Parks Canada that manages a large number of unique parks under a single administrative umbrella. Standardization of general service quality goals could provide a context in which each individual park would have the flexibility to manage its own resources in a manner best suited to the site while simultaneously adhering to the overall objectives and guidelines of the park agency.

The ISO 9004 Model

The ISO 9000 series of standards is one current service quality initiative that is concerned with building on what an organization already has in place and not with totally re-examining the organization itself. In other words, it requires new skills, not a new way of thinking (Wright, 1997). This is, of course, with the assumption that the organization has service quality goals in place.

The ISO designation of quality standards (ISO 9000, 9001, 9002, and 9003) was originally designed in 1987 by the International Organization for Standardization in Sweden to facilitate international trade by ensuring product and service quality through the standardization of products, processes, procedures and other characteristics of services (Puri, 1992). The standards were revised in 1992, and again in 1997, and will continue to be revised and updated every five years. The ISO series of standards were initially adopted by the European community, and have now spread to act as global benchmarks of quality in production systems, environmental integrity, and service delivery in over 51 countries.

The ISO 9004 series of standards, on the other hand, act as generic guidelines for quality management and service quality system elements (Puri, 1992). This generalizability makes the series well suited to a variety of applications and settings, both in the public and private sectors. The goal of these guidelines is to meet client needs at low cost to the organization via a quality system that addresses efficiency and effectiveness. "ISO 9004 emphasizes management responsibility for quality policy, quality objectives, and the quality system, without limiting the flexibility for the internal structure of the quality system" (Plettenberg, 1994: 1112) and includes motivation, preventive measures, quality cost considerations, maintenance, qualification of personnel, and quality of marketing.

The ISO 9004 quality standards are based on the following assumptions:

- a) an organization's enduring level of quality is dependent on that organization's commitment to its quality objectives on all levels;
- b) quality objectives have been created to ensure that both client and organizational needs are understood and met;
- c) failure to meet quality objectives can result in adverse effects on the client, the organization, and society in general; and,
- d) continual review and improvement of the established system based on client feedback around their perceptions of the service provided is essential (International Standard ISO 9004-2: 1991).

The potential benefits of successfully implementing the ISO series of quality standards include, but are not limited to, improved efficiency, operating cost reduction,

improved service performance and client satisfaction, and an increased market share (Plettenberg, 1994; Puri, 1992). For National Parks and National Historic Sites these benefits could be translated to mean more effective and efficient use of available or limited resources, improved service performance and therefore improved visitor satisfaction and increased income, an increased ability to meet the dynamic needs of the agency, the park or historic site, and the visitor, and improved communication between the agency and the public.

Based on the benefits cited in the literature, the ISO standards seem to be an effective and efficient tool for an organization to ensure quality service. This is due to their generic and straightforward nature, but this nature is also the reason that the guidelines can be difficult to implement. The guidelines do not tell an organization what needs to be done to achieve service quality, but rather provide the means for the organization to determine what needs to be done based on its own objectives and current methods (Stanley, 1998). "In essence, a company [organization] is to say what it does and then do what it says, document it and prove it" (Stanley 1998: 215).

Several issues must be explored prior to the implementation of a quality system using the guidelines offered in the ISO 9004 series of standards. The feasibility of implementation must be addressed, the organizational culture must be considered, with front-line staff as well as management at all levels being consulted, and the degree of organizational resistance to change should be evaluated (Puri 1992).

Examination of Issues

These issues provide the context for a study currently underway by Candance Nykiforuk and Paul Eagles at the University of Waterloo. The focus of the study is on the examination and assessment of issues associated with the feasibility of implementing the ISO 9004 series of quality management standards into Canada's National Park and National Historic Site settings. This study is in keeping with the Federal Government's drive to introduce service standards into its operations and its related initiatives in the field of quality product and service delivery (D. Butler, personal communication, October 27, 1998).

The feasibility of implementing the ISO standards into the Parks Canada agency as a whole (i.e. representation of both natural and cultural heritage) will be assessed based on two case study sites: Point Pelee National Park, Ontario and Woodside National Historic Site, Ontario. Interviews have been undertaken with several Parks Canada staff members at each site. The interviews are concerned with staff perceptions of the opportunities and barriers associated with implementing standards for service quality at their park or historic site and in the agency overall.

Interviews are being done with staff from all levels of the organization, in so far as it is possible, because one of the basic principles underlying the implementation of ISO 9004 standards into any service setting is the involvement and commitment of every member of that service organization. Although interviewing every member of the organization is beyond the scope of this study, it is still important that each level of the organization be represented by at least one interviewee. Therefore, the

focus of this investigation is on both staff and management personnel at each site, including front line staff, middle level managers, and upper level management. Involvement of front line staff is important because they typically have the most direct contact with park visitors and/or are involved in the day-to-day activities of maintaining the park operations. Front line staff persons are those persons working in the visitor interpretation service, the warden service, or general works (maintenance). Middle managers, or site superintendents, must also be included because of their supervisory connection to the front line staff as well as client relations. Upper-level managers, or national office staff, are involved because of their role as decision-makers in relation to their distance from front line staff and visitors.

Conclusion

In the ever-changing climate of service provision in the public sector, it is important to consider measures that can be taken to ensure that the quality of that service is not compromised, for the benefit of the agency and the client. For Parks Canada, this means that measures must be taken in order to maintain visitor satisfaction, and by extension, visitor numbers and operating budgets. Standardization of service quality management, as represented by the ISO 9004 model of standards, is one current initiative that could result in many potential benefits for the organization. This model could be used to meet Parks Canada's dual mandate of protection and education, while at the same time providing the flexibility needed to meet the needs of individual parks and historic sites as well as visitors and other public constituencies. The results of this study will address the issues concerned with the feasibility of implementing the ISO 9004 standards for service quality in Canada's National Parks and Historic Sites.

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