

THE CAN-LAH SPIRIT: SAYING YES FROM THE HEART

A unique Singaporean phrase, 'Can-Lah', champions a 'can-do' attitude in hospitality. This empowers staff to go the extra mile for guests. Leaders can build this culture through empowerment and clear expectations. This approach benefits both employees and customers. It transforms service from transactional to delightful. The 'Can-Lah' spirit drives innovation and resilience.



In preparation for delivering the “Chief Delighting Officer” course for the top 85 leaders of Accor’s Fairmont and Swissotel hotels in Singapore, I embarked on a unique learning journey of the culture.

I was invited to a half-day internal workshop called “Can-Lah,” a brilliant program masterminded by the then Managing Director, Marcus Hanna (now Head of Hotels, Hospitality & Leisure at Mulpha International).

Empowerment case studies in service tend to feature Ritz-Carlton or Disney. Marcus Hanna’s Can-Lah program belongs in the same league. It has been hiding in plain sight in Singapore for years.

Regretfully this tradition did not continue with his successor, however Marcus takes his wisdom to empower others to delight with him everywhere he leads.

In luxury hospitality, where exceeding guest expectations sets the standard, the “Can-Lah” spirit carries real power. This Singaporean phrase carries weight. It embodies a “can-do” attitude and a willingness to go the extra mile, ensuring guests feel truly delighted. “Can-Lah” empowers team members to make guest needs their top priority, with SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) serving as a floor rather than a ceiling. The principle has limits. Illegal, immoral, disrespectful, or unreasonable demands would still require a firm yet graceful “no.”

For everything else, the “Can-Lah” spirit encourages creative problem-solving and a focus on consistently meeting or exceeding expectations. It’s about saying “yes” from the heart.

Unsure about a request? “Can-Lah” encourages escalation. Let the guest know you’re their champion. Check with your manager to find a creative solution that makes the guest feel supported.

A cheeseburger in an Italian restaurant? Saying yes to off-menu guest requests

Picture this. You’re craving a juicy cheeseburger at Prego, their renowned Italian restaurant. The dish sits outside the menu, and the “Can-Lah” spirit kicks in. The server embraces the challenge with a smile. “Certainly, sir!” they might say. “We specialise in Italian cuisine here, and cravings hit differently sometimes. Let me bring you the room service menu (or one of the other hotel outlets), and we’ll gladly place your order. It may take a touch longer to arrive. In the meantime, perhaps you’d enjoy one of our phenomenal antipasti selections?”

Turning “no” into “magnificent”: A rooftop wedding proposal in Singapore

A standout tale from that day illustrated “Can-Lah” in action, gracefully navigating a decline due to safety protocols. A gentleman envisioned his proposal to his fiancée to marry him on the 73rd floor of the Swissotel, dreaming of the beautiful Singapore skyline as the backdrop. The reply was both warm and ingenious: “Sir, to craft an unforgettable moment for your special occasion we’ve arranged a secluded space on the 72nd floor, offering a splendid view of Marina Bay, with the champagne courtesy of the house. Regrettably, the rooftop and helipad must remain unoccupied for safety reasons.”

Missed opportunities for “Can-Lah”: When SOPs override customer service culture

Having lived the “Can-Lah” spirit firsthand, I notice quickly when it’s missing. During a recent stay at a luxurious 5-star hotel in Manila, I encountered rigid situations. While working in the club lounge, I craved a specific dish from the main restaurant. The initial response was “I am so sorry, Sir, we are not allowed to do this here,”

followed by a suggestion to relocate downstairs. The empty lounge and readily available staff of three made this approach feel strange. After all, I will pay for it.

Similarly, a post-breakfast request for simple French toast from the à la carte menu after 12 pm faced initial resistance. Considering the chef was likely still operational, the request to crack two eggs seemed reasonable. In both instances, while the requests were eventually fulfilled after escalation, the “We will do it for you, but this is the last time” disclaimer left a negative impression. These interactions revealed a service culture anchored to SOPs, where going an inch felt like a stretch, let alone the extra mile. A simple phone call from the lounge or a bit of flexibility could have significantly enhanced these encounters.

Before my departure, I enquired about a 30-minute massage due to limited time. Despite having a willing and available therapist, the receptionist said, “I am sorry, we have a one-hour minimum” policy. After a call to his manager, he said, “We can accommodate it this time, but you still have to pay for a full hour.” His comment further reinforced the transactional feel.

While my stay was nice, these transactional experiences focused on SOPs left a bitter taste. A valued guest would have left ready to praise the staff and hotel on TripAdvisor. I left ready to do neither.


How to build a Can-Lah service culture: Five steps for hospitality leaders


The experiences in Manila say less about the front-line staff, who usually love to delight guests and thrive on happy connections and compliments, and more to a rigid, transactional service culture within the establishment.


This is the EX/CX gap in action. When the employee experience runs on rigid SOPs and low decision authority, the customer experience inherits the same constraints. Frontline staff serve guests through whatever culture leadership has built for them.


When the F&B Director expressed his disappointment that the team did not showcase the value of “Malasakit,” a Filipino concept embodying empathy, concern, and taking action to address the needs of others, I immediately recalled the “Can Lah” program.


Adopting the “Can-Lah” ethos does not happen by itself:

 **Start at the top:** The initiative must live in daily behaviour, championed and demonstrated by leadership. It should pulse through the organisation’s veins. From day one to daily huddles, expectations should be crystal clear, supported by the full weight of resources committed to the cause.

 **Psychological safety:** Weave a tapestry of open and agile dialogue, where frontliners can comfortably voice their worries and receive prompt feedback, knitting a loop that closes with clarity on action taken and rules reshaped, ensuring they’re equipped to craft even more delightful experiences.


 **Empowerment:** Grant them decision-making authority within reasonable boundaries and a rapid escalation process when needed.


 **Engaging training:** Make learning a journey that turns employees into “Can Lah” champions. Craft engaging content that blends interactive sessions with real-life success stories and even humorous tales of overcoming challenges to ensure the concept sticks.

 **Recognition and reward:** Highlight successes in everyday acts that delight customers to reinforce positive behaviors and motivate others. Celebrate progress by acknowledging improvement and effort, not just perfect outcomes.

Why Can-Lah works: Business benefits of employee empowerment

In the process of crafting “First Time Leadership,” with my co-writer Daniel Lee, a narrative emerged from our interviews with 220 top leaders, revealing a poignant insight, particularly among female leaders, who comprised over half of our conversations. A recurring theme was the self-imposed barrier of waiting for perfection before stepping into leadership roles. This resonated deeply with one leader’s story in which, despite being ready years earlier, she hesitated to step forward. The interim leader’s failure, contrasted with her peers’ encouragement, eventually propelled her to seize the role, underscoring a crucial lesson of the need to “Can Lah”. Leadership isn’t about personal perfection; no one can be 100% ready before taking a challenge.

 Saying “yes” to new experiences can lead to unexpected growth and positive outcomes. This aligns with the “Can-Lah” spirit of embracing possibilities and going beyond limitations. Release your fears and dare to seize opportunities.

 **Problem-Solving Creativity:** The “Can Lah” mentality goes well past saying “yes.” It pushes us to find creative solutions to problems. It encourages resourcefulness and ingenuity in overcoming challenges. Move past existing rules, SOPs, or structures. Explore ways through obstacles to reach the goal.

🚀 **Empowerment and Initiative:** A “Can Lah” culture empowers team members to take ownership and make decisions. It fosters a spirit of initiative and encourages individuals to take calculated risks. Empowerment gives employees a sense of autonomy. Feeling a sense of control over their work leads to higher levels of ownership, motivation, and engagement.

🚀 **Customer-Focused Innovation:** While hospitality emphasizes guest delight, “Can Lah” can apply to any customer-centric industry. It means looking beyond the standard offering and finding ways to exceed customer expectations and create innovative solutions.

🚀 **Adaptability and Resilience:** The world is constantly changing. “Can Lah” encourages flexibility and the ability to adapt to new situations and challenges. It’s about finding ways to move forward, even when faced with setbacks, to create a better offering that will keep you ahead of the competition.

🚀 **Empowering Cross-Functional Collaboration:** “Can-Lah” encourages and fuels a spirit of helping each other to find solutions together across silos to delight the customers.

When you have to draw the line, you’d better start with a “YES!”

Even when “no” is the answer, delivering it with a touch of positivity can turn a grumble into a nod of acceptance. Consider Ching Liran, former Head of Client Services at BNP Paribas Securities Services. She navigated unreasonable client demands with the finesse of a cat walking a tightrope. Fair and respectful, she honored valid compensation requests while holding the line when clients tried to charge their own blunders to the company. Her clients adored her even when the answer wasn’t the one they’d hoped to hear. BNP gave her the authority to make those judgment calls. Strong CX outcomes like hers rest on a strong EX foundation. Skill alone cannot rescue a service interaction when the employee has no room to maneuver. It’s like the quote (often dubiously) attributed to Winston Churchill: “She could tell you to go to hell in such a way that you would look forward to the trip.”

What “Yes Man” gets right and misses

Jim Carrey’s “Yes Man” follows Carl, a perpetually negative man who decides to turn his life around by saying “yes” to every opportunity that comes his way. This newfound openness leads him to a whirlwind of hilarious situations, forcing him to confront fears, discover hidden talents, and ultimately find a more fulfilling life.

The movie’s lighthearted take on “yes” skips past the importance of healthy boundaries, realistic expectations, and prioritizing opportunities. The “Can-Lah” spirit holds these lessons alongside its adventurous heart.

That balance is where Employee Experience and Customer Experience converge. An empowered team member, trusted to read the moment, makes a guest feel like a person rather than a transaction. Build that culture, and Can-Lah follows on its own.



About the author: Avi Liran, CSP, is a Singapore-based keynote speaker on the convergence of Employee Experience and Customer Experience. Through his Delivering Delight practice, he has worked with leaders in 29 countries.
