

# The Spirit of Ron Kaufman

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CAREER  
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“You’ve got to remind yourself the moment you wake up. Service is really about taking care of other human beings.”

There are 78 clips of Ron Kaufman on YouTube, so for a dose of this energetic and dynamic speaker, just click away. Mr. Kaufman's bountiful, spirited vigor would put even the most restless youth to shame. He is brash, loud and has no qualms expressing his opinions if something does not sit well with him. Describing himself as a “botak ang moh” (read: bald, white man), do not confuse his sense of humor with frivolity. Make no mistake, Ron Kaufman is no charlatan. And if you are not familiar with his name, shame on you. Singapore has to thank him for teaching her a thing or two about service excellence.

Mr. Kaufman has stayed in Singapore since 1990, and was brought here to imbue service excellence into our ‘kiasu’ (Hokkien for ‘fear of losing out’) culture. Then, the government was setting up the Service Quality Centre, even before service became a buzzword. He was picked to be project manager of the curriculum development team, and then progressed to coaching trainers. In 1993, he started Ron Kaufman Pte Ltd to manage his speaking engagements and to publish his educational books, videos and newsletter. Currently, he has two series of best-selling books titled *UP! Your Service* and *Lift Me UP!*

This unstoppable educator also conceptualized *UP! Your Service*, which provides a comprehensive program that is now deployed in many large organizations and government agencies around the globe.

**You were a Frisbee tournament organiser, so how and when did your foray into management training begin?**

When I was in high school and college I was physically too small to play in the major competitive sports. But the Frisbee team in high school allowed me to play. I started the Brown University Ultimate Frisbee team. I became captain of the team and then the coach. And then when I went to Europe to study, I started organizing international festivals, clinics and family play days. That was when I got involved in events for larger groups.

In the late 1980s, I was attending a conference for the National Speakers Association. I met someone there who asked if I could design a workshop for American Express. It was a sales conference and it had to be active, so I used all my Frisbee props and ideas. And they loved it. So I started organizing conferences.

I would hire people to run workshops or to give speeches. 90 percent of them were terrible. It was death by boredom. People were falling asleep because they hadn't designed the event to be participatory and that was my expertise: adult participation. When I came to Singapore in 1990, Singapore Airlines and the government were building the Service Quality Centre. And that's when I started developing expertise in service.

**What were some of the challenges you faced in the initial stages of your career development, having moved from the sports arena into the corporate world?**

In Singapore especially, the structure of evaluating training programs and hiring trainers has become so systematized that there is not much spontaneity here. When you boil it down so rigidly in that form, then a course may not have much vibrancy to it anymore. And that's a problem with customer service training, because providing superior service requires excellent service skills *and* a generous, upbeat spirit.

**How was your experience acclimatizing to Singapore?**

It was quite easy for me. When I came here I immediately started living with and working with Singaporeans. I never did the traditional expat posting, no

**RON KAUFMAN**  
Author and Founder  
*UP! Your Service*



expat package nor was I living in the expat community. I was never part of that. I ate out at hawker stalls every night and I got to meet Singaporeans.

People always ask how do I get Singaporeans to participate? Singaporeans tend to sit back and think, "I don't want to raise my hand." The way to get people to participate is through good design and by structuring and designing the sequence of participation. This design skill is really a core competency, and it shows now with the results our clients are achieving with UP! Your Service.

### **How big is your company right now?**

UP! Your Service has an HQ staff and a growing global network of partners and associates around the world. We have clients in Singapore, India, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, London, Holland, Indonesia, Finland, Thailand and China.

### **How did you develop your workshops and courseware? What are they based on?**

Many years of experience with what works, and what doesn't, in building superior service cultures! The curriculum challenge at the very beginning was to build a suite of courseware and culture building activities that could be applied to any organisation. I was looking to design a curriculum that makes sense for all industries. I conceptualized the whole project over quite a few years. I wanted to package all this accumulated knowledge so that people could easily understand it, enjoy working with it, and then vigorously apply what they learn to serve others.

When I wrote the first book, *UP! Your Service*, the biggest challenge I had was sequencing the content. It took 18 months to plan the book, and the writing took six months. When I planned the design of UP! Your Service, the challenge was even greater as we wanted to cascade the leadership role to Certified Course Leaders inside our client organizations. The College curriculum took three years to build, and we are improving it every day.

### **Your training sessions are power-packed and run on a high energy level. How do you keep up the dynamic momentum? Reveal your secret.**

The real key is I love what I do. And when you meet anybody who loves what they do, they will naturally have a strong sense of energy to keep doing what they're doing.

### **What would you describe as the greatest advantage and disadvantage of your career?**

I've become such a celebrity in the area of service in Singapore, I cannot walk down the road without people recognizing me. It's flattering and I always enjoy meeting people who have read my books or enjoyed an UP! Your Service program, but it's hard to relax in public. The great advantage in the earlier part of my career as a speaker and as an author was having the greatest flexibility. If I wanted to take a week off, I could take a week off. But not today, as UP! Your Service is a growing phase, moving out into the world and serving the planet.

### **How do you keep your business sustainable, which is especially challenging in the training industry?**

Our business model is for us to certify people who work in their organizations as Certified Course Leaders and for them to lead courses. I provide the high focus and high energy teaching on video, while the Certified Course Leaders facilitate the discussions and exercises with their colleagues. We already have Certified Course Leaders all over the world. My objective is not to build a company with hundreds of trainers, but to enable thousands of Certified Course Leaders inside our client organizations.

### **What career would you have pursued if not for what you're doing now?**

If I had not been a corporate trainer, I would have gotten into academic education, still an educator. I love when people are inspired to learn, improve and grow.

### **Who would you credit as your mentor, someone you look up to as a source of inspiration?**

My grandmother taught kindergarten for 40 years in New York City, and my father says I'm her protégé. I remember when I was little, I found a notebook once which had my grandma's lesson plans in it and that inspired me. It still does when I think about her today.

### **Is there a life mantra that you ascribe to?**

My personal mantra is to inspire people to learn, improve and grow. That is my personal mission. Our company mission is "Uplifting the Spirit of Service Worldwide". It could be spirit of service at home, in the community, at work or with your neighbors. So if you want to receive, don't focus on getting. Focus on giving. When you expand what you give, you will naturally increase what you get.

### **What would you describe as your personal strength and weakness?**

I have a couple of fortes. I have a very discerning mind. So I make a good consultant. This doesn't make me necessarily easy to live with though, because I'll find something about everything that could be improved. In terms of weakness, I don't really do well with tracking all the details, especially with record keeping. So I am very grateful for the team that is forming to bring UP! Your Service to the world.

### **What are some tips you have for those who seek career successes in the service industry?**

You've got to remind yourself the moment you wake up, service is really about taking care of other human beings. It is not about the invoice, it is not about the product, it is not about the policy or the shipping. As long as you keep that in mind, everything else is just form. Remember, what goes around, comes around – but you are the one who needs to start it.