



December 2004 · Volume 86 · Number 11

COVER STORY

Customer Service: Back to Basics Is Better

by Doug Clark

"Not customer service again! We tried training, but it didn't work. Besides, we don't have the money for customer service programs in these tough times!"

Sound familiar?

Attention to customer service seems to ebb and flow with the economic cycle. We seem to pay attention to the issue when budgets are flush, but when financial times are tough, customer service initiatives are often among the first to go.

Working on customer service is actually more important in tough times than when revenues are flowing. These are the times when employees may be handling more than their usual workload, salaries and benefits are stagnant, and morale is difficult to maintain. This can translate into customer service problems and employee attitudes that are damaging to the organization's reputation.

How can you work on customer service during difficult economic times?

Although this author has worked with many organizations to set up customer service initiatives, you can do this without consulting services! (Did I really say that?) In the long run, the most successful programs are run by the organization without an overreliance on consultants. The "How to Start" section of this article will give you some suggestions on beginning and maintaining an in-house customer service initiative.

The message here is not new: Customer service is an impressive tool and model for cultural change in organizations seeking continuous quality improvement. Whatever tool you use for building a culture that values quality, however, you have to preach it, walk it, talk it, and stick with it. As managers, I think we have become too fickle in this regard. When the next management guru releases a book, we flock to that approach and leave behind some of the basics. The customer service initiative offered in this article is the result of years of work with public sector organizations. Through study, research, implementation, mistakes, and trial and error as a department head, city manager, and consultant to local governments, this author has found some basic concepts that actually work.

Programs based just on teaching employees to smile and be pleasant almost always end in failure. These skills are short-lived, if good employees are working in flawed systems.

Not Just Training, and Not a Fad

Most organizations approach customer service as purely a training issue. Although there are aspects of a customer service initiative that relate to specific skills, the issue is a much broader one than that. Customer service is a way of life and a part of the culture of successful organizations. Programs based just on teaching employees to smile and be pleasant almost always end in failure. These skills are short-lived, if good employees are working in flawed systems. Employees have learned that managers often skip from one new idea to the next, latching onto the latest flavor of the month. "Management by fad" has become a major problem. Staff members learn to outwait their managers, playing along with the new ideas knowing the bosses will move on to something new in a while. If they just wait long enough, they can go

back to business as usual.

We need to break this cycle. But because we have done so well in training employees to wait for a fad to pass, a customer service initiative process can take time to mature and take root. Before the culture will really change, all employees have to understand and truly accept that:

- The customer service initiative is not a fad.
- Managers and supervisors are serious about the issue and have developed a constancy of purpose regarding customer service.
- Top managers of the organization talk about customer service, talk again about customer service, and talk even more about customer service.
- There will be accountability for meeting customer service standards.
- Promotions will be based on technical skills as well as on a commitment to customers. Just having survived long enough is not a sufficient reason for an employee to get moved into the next level or position.
- Continued employment will be tied directly to positive customer service attitudes.
- The local government is serious about addressing roadblocks that get in the way of employees' providing good customer service.
- Managers understand that rewards, recognition, and celebrating success are integral parts of excellent employee relations, which lead to excellent internal and external customer service.

Many organizations and managers are looking for easy instructions and how-to manuals for improving customer service. Unfortunately, there is no "Customer Service in 10 Easy Lessons" cookie-cutter formula. Improving customer service is not a linear process with easy-to-follow instructions.

The most successful private sector organizations have established that employees cannot and will not give good external customer service unless they are receiving excellent internal customer service. If external expectations are raised without fixing internal systems, the effort will probably fail, the public will be disappointed, and the situation may get worse than when the organization started the Initiative. As a result, the approach described here advocates a process that starts with internal service and with listening closely to employee issues and concerns.

Sustaining the Initiative

No customer service trainer can wave a wand and ensure sustainable customer service improvement, no matter what claims are made. These changes have to be sustained from within the organization. For customer service to become a part of the organizational structure, several things have to take place in addition to acceptance of the principles listed previously.

The approach this author supports is broader than providing training in customer service or than presenting specific skill training. The objective is to develop a core of employees trained in the basics, so that the message will continue after the training is finished.

Most important, this approach establishes systems to reinforce and guide the customer service initiative and the philosophy of continuous quality improvement. Organizational committees, as well as internal department teams, are important in sustaining customer service improvement. They need to recognize the fundamental keys to sustainability.

Committees and internal teams should communicate expectations for supervisors and mid-managers, who are critical to improvements in customer service efforts. If front-line employees are to be empowered to make more decisions for the customer at the lowest level in the local government, then supervisors must support and provide help for them.

Consider reversing the organizational pyramid. Customer service initiatives can and probably should turn the pyramid upside down. Supervisors should be trained to focus on assisting their employees to do their jobs better, rather than on controlling subordinates and second-guessing their decisions.

Tolerance for mistakes and risk taking should rise. This does not suggest that front-line employees break laws or violate policies. In any organization, there are multiple ways of accomplishing customer needs. Employees need to be encouraged and empowered to find solutions. If an employee makes a decision that is not exactly what the supervisor would have chosen, this discrepancy needs to be addressed as a learning experience, not as an opportunity to impose a sentence. Developing a culture where employees feel comfortable in questioning rules, regulations, and procedures is a step forward. Laws and policies are not perfect. They do not fit every situation. Even when something does not make sense, employees cannot break local laws. Organizations can strive to develop a culture, however, where employees feel comfortable in bringing these anomalies to the attention of the appropriate people and in becoming customer advocates for common sense.

Some employees may hide behind rulebooks. They may use this approach for a variety of reasons. They might have experienced pain in the past for making "mistakes"; they may be looking for the easy way out, or they may just like being authoritarian. Anyone can learn a rulebook and quote from the commandments. But both management and front-line employees are paid to think, use common sense, and make reasonable judgments.

Recognizing the importance of front-line employees, who answer phones and greet the public at the counters, is crucial. These employees set the tone for all future contacts with a local government. If the public has a good experience with these employees, half the battle is won. These employees must be supported, trained, and valued. Unfortunately, these positions are often the lowest-paid, least desirable, and least esteemed positions in the organization.

The newest employee often ends up at the front counter and, after becoming proficient, cannot wait to move on to a higher-paying, better job. Providing an ongoing support or focus group for these employees is critical to keep in touch with the issues they are facing and to demonstrate a willingness to respond quickly with solutions to their problems. Some localities are recognizing the importance of these front-line employees and are enhancing their prestige and pay in order to attract and retain the best people for these critical "first impression" jobs.

Exceptional customer service does not just happen. All organizations, whether public or private, have to work on customer service all the time. It is not something that you fix and then ignore.

Top management, including the elected body, would do well to support these concepts. Even if supervisors and mid-managers adopt the concepts outlined, the project will not be sustainable unless employees see top managers and/or elected officials embrace these principles. Employees often mirror the behavior they see from top officials.

Employees will try to implement their newfound skills in making customer-friendly decisions because the vast majority of them want to help the public. This approach will quickly falter, however, if these keys to sustainability are not championed. Employees will quickly revert to safe behaviors like hiding behind rulebooks if they find themselves "beaten up" over attempts to make decisions that aid the customer.

If customer service is seen as hollow platitudes from managers and supervisors, the project will not be ongoing. If training is not provided to front-line employees, and if their roadblocks are not addressed, the chances of success are questionable.

How to Start?

Local governments and managers are often looking for easy instructions and how-to manuals for improving customer service. Unfortunately, there is no "Customer Service in 10 Easy Lessons" cookie-cutter formula. Improving customer service is not a linear process with easy-to-follow instructions. There are, however, basic concepts outlined in a plan that can be used as a reliable guide.

Each organization, department, or division may find that one of these concepts is the best starting point for the transformation process. One department, for example, may find that establishing a mission, values, and vision statement is a critical first step. Another entity may decide that its hiring practices need to be the first change. One of the first steps is to evaluate a work unit according to nine basic elements outlined later in this article.

What Must the Coordinating Committee Do?

Furthermore, successful organizations have found that an ongoing customer service initiative requires a coordinating committee. Employees who are appointed to this committee must be the stars of the organization. This is not a committee for employees who need remedial training on customer service. Appointees must be recognized in their work units as the most skilled in providing exemplary customer service.

The committee must also represent all levels of the organization. If the committee is just composed of top managers, credibility with front-line employees will be reduced.

Assignment to the committee should be for approximately two years, with half the committee rotating off every year. Longer appointments can be considered if warranted. The reasons for the rotation are to collect new ideas from new participants and to give employees a rest from this specific responsibility. The committee becomes the central point for customer service in the division, department, or organization. It should be emphasized that committee members do not undertake all of the work. An individual member may take responsibility for a particular work effort, but the expectation is that ad hoc groups will be formed to work with the committee member.

If a work unit decides that hiring practices need to be reviewed, for example, a committee member might take on this project. An ad hoc committee might be formed with a representative from the human resources department, several supervisors in the work unit, a front-line employee, and/or others interested in the subject. And this group might work on solutions that the committee member could take back to the full committee for discussion and action.

The Basic Elements of Customer Service

If customer service is seen as hollow platitudes from managers and supervisors, the project will not be sustainable. If training is not provided to front-line employees, and if their roadblocks are not addressed, the chances of success are questionable.

From my experience, these are the nine fundamentals of customer service:

- Mission and value statements. Have these been developed? If so, who participated? How are they being used and communicated? Is customer service an integral part of the mission?
- Assimilation. Has the customer service culture been spread to every nook and cranny of the local government? How can it be integrated into other systems? Are forms, procedures, laws, and policies tested on customers and users first? Is the customer thought about when new ideas are being generated? Have the mission and value statements been assimilated into the culture?
- Hiring practices. Are the right people being hired in the first place? Does the system provide for ways for applicants to opt out of the system if they do not fit the customer service ethic desired by the local government? Are job flyers oriented to the pay and benefits or to the qualitative requirements of the job and the locality? Are interviews structured with "real" customer service questions, scenarios, role-plays, and the like? Are mission and value statements being considered in developing job specifications, job announcements, and similar tools?
- Feedback. How do you know if your customer service is good, bad, or indifferent? How do your employees know if their performance meets your expectations on customer service? Have you developed multiple mechanisms by which employees, customers, and citizens

can give feedback? Is feedback seen as a search for the guilty or as a way of reinforcing positives and correcting glitches in systems? Are suggestions viewed as opportunities, or are they received defensively?

- Standards. If employees are to be held accountable for customer service performance, have they been told what the standards are? Have standards been established that are specific enough to be measured? Have employees had a chance to provide input on these standards?
- Training. Are employees given regular opportunities to be trained on subjects that will enhance their customer service skills? Is there a training standard and program requiring a minimum number of hours for employees?
- Winning attitudes. Are problems viewed as opportunities to gain more loyal clients/citizens through remarkable service and responsiveness or as just another burden? Is "playing" and humor allowed in the workplace? Are employees "there" with customers, minute by minute, or are they distracted, bothered, and annoyed? Are customers an interruption or an opportunity?
- Support. Does the culture support risk taking, encourage decisions that are customer-friendly, and accept questioning of the impacts of laws, procedures, and rules? Are employees equipped with the best technology? Can an employee make a mistake without triggering the Inquisition? Are there family-friendly benefits and an acknowledgment that employees have lives away from the workplace? Do supervisors support front-line employees' being sent to training, or are they always seen as too busy to be let off for classes?
- Celebration and recognition. When there is success, is it celebrated? Are employees recognized for their efforts? Are simple "atta-boys" and "atta-girls" part of the culture? Are there both monetary and nonmonetary reward systems?

Maintaining the Effort

Providing service to customers is the basic reason for the existence of public entities. So, why is it necessary to work on the issue at all? Of course, public employees are supposed to provide good service. That's what they are paid to do.

It is not that simple, however. Exceptional customer service does not just happen. All organizations, whether public or private, have to work on customer service all the time. It is not something that you fix and then ignore. Establishing a culture of customer service in your organization does not end with this initiative. It is an ongoing effort and a fundamental part of a continuous quality process. I would be interested to know if you do try out the basics described here and find them useful. PM

Doug Clark is president of DKC Associates, Escondido, California (dkclark@dkclark.com), and is a former city manager of Escondido.
