



Customer Focus: Are You the Problem or Solution?
Do any of the following stories sound familiar?
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Whether its employee or customer satisfaction, or product and service quality issues, do you really know what's happening in your organization? What are you currently doing, or being directed to do, that doesn't make sense and makes you feel like you are going around in circles? And yet, these are things you find yourself doing repeatedly. Do you have control to stop them, to raise questions? Are you the source of the problem?

When we talk about quality we often hear "What are you talking about. That has been around for years. Quality is no longer a value added it's an expectation." I must be living on a different planet, because on the one I live, there is still most certainly room for improvement. There is still an opportunity for quality to create differentiation. See if any of the following examples sound familiar to you. If so, were you the receiver or the instigator?

Have you flown lately? Were you made to feel like you were an important customer as you squeezed into the tiny seat with your knees in your chest and then realized that even though you brought your laptop, expensive and small as it is, unless you were a contortionist you weren't going to be able to use it on this trip? On the upside, you would be getting pretzels.

Having arrived at 11 p.m. one evening in a strange city while on vacation a thousand miles from home, I waited with other passengers at the carousel to pick up my luggage. I was spending a night in the city and at 6 a.m. the next morning travelling to my final destination. I was waiting for my luggage to appear on the carousel and was struck by mixed feelings as parts, and I do mean parts, of my luggage appeared around the corner. My luggage had evidently irritated some mechanical monster that had, so provoked, attacked it, ripping the zipper and handle off and covering it in grease. On the other hand, I was relieved to find that my other piece of luggage was not attacked, or at least that's what I hoped, since it was AWOL.

I approached the friendly customer service desk, my beacon of hope. I could relax.

"Hello," I said, beaming. "I'm so happy you are open so late. I thought everyone might be gone, and I need help."

I picked up my luggage and showed it to her with my best puppy-dog look.

"My suitcase has been ripped open," I explained to her in a rush. "I drive out of the city tomorrow morning at 6 a.m. Can you help, please? Perhaps I can get some tape to wrap around the case to keep my clothes in temporarily, but could I also get a voucher so I can buy a new case tomorrow or at my next stop? Oh, and my other bag is missing."

Already, at this early stage, I had a sinking feeling when she seemed unmoved by my predicament and was not making eye contact.

Sorry, we are closing down for the night," she said brusquely.

“Ah, excuse me, but what about my missing luggage.”

“Well, ok, give me your baggage claim number.” Tappity tap on the keys. I hoped she wasn’t just checking her email.

“Hmmm. I’m not locating it sir. Why don’t I give you a tracking number and you can phone in and check on its progress.”

“Wait a moment,” I say, calm and collected, so far. “If the tracking number doesn’t tell *you* where it’s at, then what use will it be to me?”

She seemed to ponder that for about a millisecond. “Well, it’s the best I can do, and as for your damaged luggage, sir, please bring it back tomorrow to this desk and my manager will inspect it and provide you with some voucher for compensation, if appropriate.”

“If appropriate!” I look at her, amazed. You may be sensing at this point that I’m losing my calm demeanor. “You can see the case; I didn’t check it in that way you know! Plus if FedEx can track a package for me every step of the way how come you can’t you find my suitcase?”

“Sir, that’s how we do things.”

I hung around a while and a maintenance guy finally found my suitcase, which, it turns out had been misplaced. I got tape from him to wrap up my case and made my merry way to my hotel, never to use that airline again and promoting heavily to anyone that would listen to do the same.

You all have stories like this right? Doesn’t this person realize that this is putting their own job at risk by losing my business? One also has to wonder about the morale of this person and if anyone in management even cares about it.

How do you do things at your company? Are you retaining customers and securing your job? Do you ever listen to your own automated answering service? How does your customer service center answer the phone?

Talking with a senior-level executive about quality management and world-class performance, I brought up the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence.

“Oh yes that was an ‘80s thing,” he said knowingly. “But it takes too long to get the bottom-line results. We prefer Six Sigma or lean. Those are fast to implement and provide quick impacts on the bottom-line.”

“Oh,” I said. “So you are using Six Sigma and lean here. Great, what results have you had?”

“Well, no, we don’t actually use them.”

Luckily the uncomfortable silence was short lived and we moved on to another topic.

While discussing quality with another senior executive it became obvious that he was actually, totally unaware of what quality actually was. He summed up quality at his large engineering company by saying, “Our quality control driver is our owner and president. He is the one that keeps an eye on what we do and on our product.”

It was one of those strange quotes, like “Short-term profits are all we need for long-term sustainability.”

Have you ever brought up the issue of business improvement, only to get the response: “We are the best. We do X and Y?” It’s amazing how many perfect organizations there are out there.

A team was formed to address an upcoming meeting with a client to discuss how they would explain to the client why so many units of the product were failing and how this was to be resolved. Half way through the planning meeting it became clear to the new member of the team that the conversation was really about explaining away the issue, since the problem was being caused by a key component in the product that they didn’t want to replace or change.

In your experience have you heard some of the things raised in this chapter? Have you actually said some of these things

yourself? While these are funny, stupid, and frustrating, they also erode job satisfaction, respect, leadership, and commitment.

Reflect on how you are treating those you work with or those that work for you. A real leader treats people with respect and provides mentoring at many levels. Leaders also have a broad view of issues. They have the ability not to get lost in the micro detail, they see how issues connect and recognize that customer satisfaction, improving the functioning of the organization, and a focus on employees are key issues in driving business excellence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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