

Accountable Leadership:

A silhouette of a person performing a handstand on a high bar against a blue sky background. The person is upside down, with one leg extended upwards and the other bent. The bar is a thick vertical pole. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

Raising the Bar on Service Management

by Joanne L. Smikle

Leading service departments—call centers, service centers, technical support departments or any other aspect of the enterprise that is devoted to customer care—can be a daunting, thankless job. In addition to customer concerns, employee issues can be endless, with pressure from senior management to do more, faster, with fewer resources. Ugh! Service leadership is no small feat. Be that as it may, each and every person in this critical role has the ability to raise the bar on how he or she manages people and resources.

Consider this, a loaf of bread that stays in the ideal climate (whether refrigerated or in the bread box) will still get stale if you don't eat it. Just by virtue of the fact that it's just sitting around, it will get stale. The same is true of you. If you haven't given serious consideration to how you manage, why you chose particular processes, and how your department and each employee's role in the department fits with the company's strategic intent, you too, may be getting a little stale and moldy.

This article addresses three components of accountable service leadership. Those factors are:

- ▶ **Leadership Support**—do you have their backs?
- ▶ **Process Revitalization**—do you reinvent processes based on evolving customer demands?
- ▶ **Role Clarity**—does everyone know what they are supposed to do and why?

The underlying hypothesis of this article is that you, the leader, must hold yourself accountable not just for your own performance, but also for the performance of your staff. One of the ways to heighten your awareness to that critical accountability is by ensuring that you are providing the necessary support. Your staff want to know that you are their ally. You are responsible for communicating that special allegiance on a consistent basis. Holding yourself accountable also means that you will be on a constant quest for best practices that inform best processes. Your intellectual curiosity should lead you on a search for processes that make sense, are efficient, and support your customer satisfaction goals. The final element of your professional accountability is providing role clarity for your staff. They need to know how, what they do plugs into the entire corporate equation. They also need to understand how vital the entire department is to the success of the company.

Leadership Support

I'll begin with the first factor, *Leadership Support*. When you initially read this you may have thought that this type of support comes from the most senior management down. Actually, this type of support comes from you, the manager. It is demonstrated when you work like Trojan to get people the resources that they need, when you navigate organizational politics so that your staff is buffered, and when you apply consistently high standards to each and every employee. This means that you monitor the halos and pitch-forks you have subconsciously attached to your staff.

Leadership Support can be tricky when it comes to mediating or resolving difficult customer issues. Many a frontline employee grumbles about how their manager always bends the rules that they try so hard to enforce. They perceive their leader as unsupportive, unconcerned, and occasionally wimpy. You can get around that by clearly communicating why you have bent the rules, giving staff latitude to make reasonable exceptions, and using really tough customer encounters as teaching moments for the entire staff.

Here's an example of *Leadership Support* in action. Many, many years ago, I was a front desk clerk at a busy tourist hotel. Our primary responsibility was not checking people into their rooms, but making sure that guests had a great stay. On one occasion, a guest loudly questioned the 18 percent room service surcharge added to his bill. I managed to, as politely and as patiently as a nineteen year old college student making ten cents above minimum wage could, tell the guest that he had signed for the meal and apparently enjoyed it. I even showed him a copy of his signed receipt. Well, none of this helped and he continued raising a fuss until I called the manager who very calmly told the guest that the entire meal would be complimentary. Of course, I was none too happy; after all, I was playing by the rules—you munch, you pay.

Here's where *Leadership Support* came in. Instead of my manager just blowing me off and saying he had to do it to shut the guest up, he took the time to explain why he did what he did. He explained that our primary responsibility was creating a memorable, positive experience for every guest. He then explained that on occasion that meant comping a meal, a drink or even a room. His goal in explaining this to me was to raise my level for awareness and to let me know he wasn't sabotaging my efforts. He then let me and the rest of the front desk staff know that we could make those kinds of customer satisfaction decisions without involving him as long as the cost was under \$150. In addition to making a goofy nineteen year old feel like a hospitality professional, it also helped our entire workgroup focus on customer satisfaction.

Process Revitalization

Moving on to the next topic, let's look at *Process Revitalization*. Do your processes make sense considering your customer demands, staffing constraints, resources and goals? Are your processes antiquated? Do they make sense in terms of reaching and exceeding service goals? When overly complex, redundant, convoluted processes

reign, customer satisfaction is diminished. It is diminished because employees are too busy jumping through hoops to deliver customer satisfaction. They have less time and energy for creating relationships that guarantee referrals, repeat business and a respectable reputation.

There are any number of ways to evaluate processes. You can query customers. You can examine best practices in your industry. You can also query the employees who have to use those processes repeatedly. Customer queries and best practice inventories are relatively standard practices. Let's explore why and how we query the people that use the processes.

Opis Management Resources LLC. is a Florida based enterprise that manages several long-term care facilities. By the very nature of their business, they are charged with the highest level of customer care, commitment and concern. In fact, their mission is to "provide respectful, dignified care to elders." All of that said, the company is in the midst of a comprehensive organizational development initiative that focuses on service. Senior leadership has decided that service is what "can and will" distinguish them from others in their industry.

Rather than assuming that they knew what the folks on the frontline needed and wanted, senior management took a different approach. They asked an external consultant to conduct a climate survey and then a series of focus groups. One of the results of the focus groups was the fact that staff in the various centers held the perception that there were too many meetings. Who hasn't heard that before? In this particular case the sentiment was that meeting time could be better spent on care, relationship building, and other activities that ultimately impact customer satisfaction. Instead of taking a jaded, smug attitude, senior managers reviewed the required meetings; some were mandated simply by the nature of the elder care business, others were not. They then decided that one meeting was, in fact, not required. Talk about a move that makes people stand up and take notice! Anytime that leaders ask, listen, and then implement everyone takes notice. An internal process assessment such as this will yield valuable data. It will also raise your esteem in the eyes of the people who make customer satisfaction happen on a daily basis.

Role Clarity

Role Clarity can be a tough one in an era where we wear so many different hats. Challenging as it may be, it is still necessary. Each and every employee needs to know why they are where they are and exactly what is expected of

them. This means taking the time to clarify each of the following with individual employees or groups of employees who perform the same job:

- ▶ Where does your department fit into the larger organizational structure?
- ▶ Who are your internal customers?
- ▶ What services do you provide to them?
- ▶ Exactly what does the job entail?
- ▶ What are some of "the other duties as assigned?"
- ▶ Who are your external customers?
(Provide a prototype.)
- ▶ What services do you provide to them?
- ▶ What are their expectations from people in that position?
- ▶ What are the expectations and requirements of the position?

Making the time to help people understand why they do what they and how it fits into a larger organizational context helps push staff beyond the "not my job" mentality. It also instills a sense of pride and connectedness to the larger organization. This type of role clarity also helps staff understand how vital their function is within the context of the entire company. Be sure that your Human Resources Department assists you in developing *Role Clarity* by including components of your specific criteria in the screening process. They should also provide specific information on roles and responsibilities throughout new employee orientation.

Summary

The three components addressed in this article have to be consistently used to raise the bar on service management. Your success is determined not just by how many calls you handle, how many customers you interact with, or how well you handle cantankerous staff. Instead, your success is determined by how customers, both internal and external, interpret practices, processes and policies. Holding yourself accountable for people and processes makes you a more valuable leader. Invest the time in reflection to figure out where and how you can create substantive, sustainable improvements in your leadership so that you can really raise your personal bar.



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