

Lessons for Leadership

Strategic Positioning for Service Success

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Customers are lamenting the lack of service. Whether in the financial industry, telecommunications or retail, a customer somewhere is talking about egregious acts committed by someone in your organization. Whether you are in the north, south, east or west, a customer remembers the last unpleasant interaction with your employee. Why is that? Well the reasons are multiple and many point to the lack of service leadership.

The notion, the very idea, of service leadership, is uncommon in many organizations. Service is one of those lesser priorities relegated to middle management, not worthy of the time and attention of the executive ranks. And, many organizations fail to see the connection between service and the bottom-line.

Leaders have several responsibilities in connecting service to the business model. There are three activities that facilitate this connection. The first is the simple and yet the most difficult. Model the behaviors that you, as a leader, seek. This means being responsive, innovative and collaborative in your leadership style. It also requires that leaders give serious consideration to how they treat internal customers. When leaders model excellence, staff have built-in, easily accessible role models.

The second activity focuses on organizational improvement. Leaders are responsible for creating opportunities for innovation. This means the organizational environment will be characterized by experimentation and solution-generation. Latitude for trial and error, successes and failures, produces a climate for creativity. That creativity leads to limitless improvements in service planning and delivery.

The third of the leadership activities that have the potential for transforming service operations is strategic planning. Just as organizations conduct strategic planning to increase shareholder value, leaders must get them in the habit of conducting strategic planning to enhance customer value. This type of comprehensive planning ensures that sufficient resources are allocated for service enhancements, management and staff development and technological improvements. It also forces the entire leadership team to zero-in on service strategies.

If these are the three activities that facilitate the connection between service and core business functions, what gets in the way? Why are so many leaders seemingly incapable of making that connection strong? Operational activities get in the way. The weighty volume of pressures facing leaders contributes to a culture of hurry, haste and reaction. Bureaucratic impositions created by cumbersome organizational structures also impede a leader's ability to link service to other crucial business functions. Because of the never-ending demands, leaders may shirk the strategic service responsibilities and push it further down in the organization. They give these responsibilities to middle managers who do not have the power to really transform the organization into one where service is a core component of the culture. There

needs to be a profound shift to a culture where customers really do come first. It requires leadership to give people both the opportunity and the means to say yes.

The Misses

There are two broad categories of issues that get in the way. The Misses are the mis-steps, the misfires and the mistakes that impede the implementation of service strategies.

There are three Misses: misalignment, miscommunication and misdirection. Misalignment is evident in organizations that have not figured out how to link service with every operational activity conducted. These organizations view service departments as the stepchildren on the organizational chart.

Misalignment is evident when organizations reward individual performance but espouse the importance of teamwork and collaboration. This very apparent lack of alignment sends mixed messages throughout the organization. Where employees may be inclined to collaborate, they know the behavior that gets rewarded gets repeated. So, if they are rewarded for competition over collaboration, that is the model that will govern their activities.

Another sign of misalignment is the perpetuation of systems and processes designed for the comfort of the service provider, not the customer. Often habitual service operations contradict organizational propaganda. Organizations have lofty statements about how much they value customers, but then when you look at the processes they use, the processes are cumbersome and not conducive to customer satisfaction.

A friend had to get a permit from our county so that she could add a porch onto her home. Our county disseminates the typical "we give good service because we care" propaganda. It took four, lengthy, frustrating visits, complete with misinformation and incorrect directions from county employees, for her to actually get the permit. Customers, internal and external, expect every aspect of the

operation to be congruent with whatever public relations messages sent.

The proliferation of electronic communication has certainly introduced far more opportunities for messages to get mixed, misinterpreted and simply botched. Evidence of miscommunication is everywhere in most organizations. Many projects begin taking one shape, based on the interpretation of the project team, only to make major midcourse corrections because the manager has different expectations. Because of haste and hurry, these expectations were generally never clearly explained. cursory, quick

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explanations take the place of thoughtful, thorough communication. How many conversations have you been a part of where one or both parties has an obviously different understanding of even the most basic concepts and intentions? This occurs because, while we have become technologically more sophisticated, skilled and savvy, there has been a definite, discernable, decline in interpersonal abilities. The ability to clearly convey messages appears to be a dying art. Over-reliance on impersonal tools makes it more difficult for people, at all levels in the organization, to communicate well with each other.

Just as service providers and service leaders get frustrated by miscommunication, so do customers. Businesses all over the country get countless complaints about automated phone systems. People want to interact with people, preferably people who can answer their questions and resolve their issues. While the boom in

online shopping has created mega-growth industries, there is a trend towards finding ways to enhance online experiences with a human touch. Many online retailers are offering opportunities for customers to have interaction with people, not just technology.

Misdirection happens when organizations, whether in the private or public sector lack clear direction for service efforts. While well-intentioned, many organizations lack comprehensive, strategic plans for enhancing service and a clear philosophy and mission relative to service. This lack of direction results in scattered activities without either measurable or verifiable objectives. Misdirection also results in uncoordinated functions. Staff and managers spend a lot of time and energy on action, whether it is planned and purposeful or not. Many organizations pride themselves on having crisis cultures where people expend energy without clear purpose, direction or intent.

The In's and Out's

As if the Misses are not enough for leaders to deal with, they are also faced with the In's and Out's. Now, these are not the typical In's and Out's, these are the special breed of organizational activities that hamper the revival of great service.

The first of the In's is inadequate input. When leaders fail to gather data from staff and customers they are, in essence, relying on their own instincts and information. Without the very valuable input from staff and customers, it is far more difficult to position the organization for service success. Staff have valuable input that should be considered when making decisions about products and services. Customers bring a special perspective in that they are the end-users who matter most in the service equation. Leaders have to be skilled at gathering these perspectives on a regular basis. This requires listening and synthesizing information gained from people outside of the executive suite.

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The next of the infamous In's is infighting. When departments, divisions and individuals do not work well together, the customer suffers. Infighting is covert in many organizations. It is evident in delays in processing requests because they came from a department that is not on the 'highly-favored' list. Infighting can be more overt. Anyone who has been in the work world for more than a month has surely witnessed obvious infighting between even the most senior folk. These disagreements are usually based on power and control, rather than the substantive work of the organization. I once worked in a consulting firm and was disgusted to see how the senior vice presidents vied for control by manipulating people and data so that their divisions came out on top. This competition went beyond the healthy, success-focused type, to the damaging divisiveness that actually obliterates collaboration.

If the In's are destructive, the Out's are damning. The Out's are the activities that keep organizations driving while staring in their rearview mirrors. The first of the two Out's is the reliance on outdated measures. Many organizations are hampered by past successes and failures. They rest on their laurels or bemoan failed attempts at improvement. Rather than positioning the organization

to move forward, they opt to use outdated measurements to inform organizational improvement. Rather than remaining current with measurement activities, leaders keep recycling old data. It is appalling how infrequently some organizations measure the perceptions of internal and external customers. The business environment is changing at a lightning pace, hence it is imperative that leaders gather and utilize the most current data to inform all customer-related activities. This applies whether fashioning strategies for the front-line, devising motivators for call centers or developing a coordinated customer satisfaction strategy for the entire enterprise.

The first of the Out's, the outdated measures, actually breeds the second, out of touch leadership. Leaders often become insulated. There is an old expression that the powerful and the beautiful never get honest information. Probably some truth to that...Information is filtered and re-filtered before it gets to the most senior levels of leadership. Leaders are well-served by incorporating methods for creating dialogue with many different people. The more information that leaders gather from the more diverse sources, the better-informed their decisions regarding service.

Moving the Obstacles

If the Misses and the In's and Out's are the problems that hinder effective leadership in a service environment, how do service leaders get beyond them? Begin with strategic planning. Service, like any other business initiative, requires thoughtful planning. Sporadic, loosely connected efforts without clear intentions reduce the organization's likelihood of having success with service. It is far better to create a well-defined, comprehensive strategy that links service to the core business of the enterprise. Link service goals with bottom-line business objectives.

Be sure that service is integrated into all organizational systems. This means that each person, whether on the front-line or behind the scenes, will understand that service is a core component of organizational survival. As such, it is part of each and every job in the organization. More important, leaders are responsible for modeling the service standards that they seek in the enterprise. Leaders are also responsible for developing reward systems that recognize superior service to internal and external customers. This enables the organization to develop a service-culture with clear reinforcements and rewards.

Remember that policies, procedures and practices need to be flexible enough to be functional. This requires leaders to develop a listening ear so they are attuned to the needs of customers and able to create the innovations that meet those needs. Be sure all systems are designed with the customer in mind. The best way to develop those kinds of flexible systems is to create a culture where service providers throughout the organization have the power to say "yes" to customer requests. While this may sound simplistic, a "back to the basics" approach, it is, in fact, what is required. This shift to becoming a customer - focused organization requires a return to the core competencies of effective service leadership. Those competencies are strategic planning, paired with attentive listening. These activities enable leaders to direct energy and attention towards customer satisfaction. ■

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