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Service Collaboration and Conflict Management

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If there is one skill that customer service professionals need, it is the ability to manage conflict well. This skill will take the individual and the organization farther than a great smile and a catchy slogan. It is what helps to facilitate smooth internal collaboration. It is what creates legions of satisfied customers.

If this skill is so valuable, why is it so elusive?

With all of the work facing today's customer service manager, few devote sufficient time to this area of skill development. If they do, it is through cursory training rather than in-depth study and application. Another reason conflict management skills are elusive is that many managers themselves do not possess this competency. It is easier to pretend the customer is always right and simply give them what they want, than to develop the competencies required to move to a higher level of customer satisfaction.

There are numerous benefits from mastering conflict management skills. According to Dr. Cathie T. Siders, psychologist and executive coach specializing in conflict management, when these skills are taught throughout the organization, they inspire more confidence from the customer. Customers feel less need for third-party intervention when the front-line service person can ably handle their problems and concerns. Successful use of conflict management strategies also instills confidence in staff and management. When people know they have the ability to make sound decisions and the competence to resolve problems, it is natural that they feel sure of themselves.

Foundations

Assuming we agree that customer service skills include conflict management, what are the foundations of these enhanced interpersonal relationships? The first brick in the foundation is the **desire to build partnerships** with internal and external customers. Let's face it, without customers, the enterprise will go the way of the dinosaur. These partnerships are built on trust, communication, knowledge and mutual understanding. They develop into stronger relationships when mutual interests become the hallmark of the interactions.

The second brick is a **clear understanding of types of conflict**. Dr. Siders points out that today's managers encounter compound, complex conflicts involving multiple factors and people. Most of these conflicts involve some degree of ambiguity and may take time to resolve. There are many different types of conflicts that arise in companies, especially in those seeking to maximize customer satisfaction and build internal cooperation. Some are based on values, such as when there are incompatible belief systems, either between individuals or within the organization. Other conflicts are structural, and these patterns of dispute emerge when resources are limited. When there is too little or too much time, the enterprise's constraints are cumbersome or highly bureaucratic. Limited physical resources also can cause structural conflicts.

Another type of conflict is based on interest. These conflicts are caused by competition over perceived and/or actual incompatible needs. They emerge over substantive (rewards and physical resources), procedural and psychological (trust, fairness, respect) issues. The fourth type of conflict is related to data, its uses and interpretations. These problems arise when people do not have adequate information, are misinformed or disagree over priorities. They may have differing interpretations or have competing methods for assessing the data. In either case, the conflicts that emerge are real and can raise the level of contention throughout the company. Data conflicts can be caused by poor communication between the people experiencing the conflict or in the larger organization. They can also emerge when data collection and/or assessment methodology are incompatible.

As we continue to lay the foundation, the third brick is an appreciation of the different approaches to conflict resolution. There is **cooperative problem solving** where parties meet to resolve an issue. There is no competition over methods of resolution. This occurs when service practitioners ask customers for input in resolving problems. A great example of this happened at one of our local state surplus office furniture stores. I purchased a library table that needed refinishing. Not only were they two months behind schedule in completing the refinishing, they did not do a satisfactory job. When I spoke with the manager his first question was, "What will it take to make you happy and keep you as a customer?" Whether he knew it or not, he was modeling cooperative problem solving. This approach enables customers to have a voice in the resolution of issues, thereby enabling them to own the solutions.

The next approach is negotiation, which is probably the most common dispute resolution process. Negotiation may be more common between colleagues and co-workers than with customers. Participants educate each other about their needs and interests, exchange resources and make commitments to resolve problems.

The third approach to conflict resolution is formal third party facilitated dispute resolution. We see this all of the time. Anytime you hear a customer say, "Get a manager!" they are asking for third party facilitation. This method helps information flow between the customer and the service provider. The third party provides direction in reaching satisfactory resolution.

Practical Applications

Applying conflict management strategies is easier said than done. Customer hostility, the pressure of time, high call volume and inadequate resources all compound to create an often untenable environment for service practitioners. However, sound application is not an impossible dream. Consider these techniques when working to develop conflict management competencies in your organization.

- **Model** equitable, skillful conflict management strategies. Show staff how it should be done by polishing up your own skills and using those skills regularly.
- **Encourage** and enable staff to say "Yes!" Flexible interpretation of policies and procedures allows staff to meet customer needs without escalating problems to the management level.
- **Review** a variety of conflict management competencies with staff. Use brown-bags and formal and informal training to bolster skill development in this area
- **Create** a culture that focuses on resolution. It is relatively simple to identify problems. The skill comes in identifying strategies for resolution. Encourage service providers, at all levels, to think about practical strategies for solving common and not so common problems.
- **Reward** staff for appropriate conflict management. Behavior that gets rewarded gets repeated.

Dr. Siders cautions that patience is essential. Mastering conflict management requires time, trial and error. It is worth the effort because these skills can help move your organization up a notch in your customer's eyes. It also helps - build better internal relations within the enterprise.

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