

Introduction

I just wanted a quick bite to eat, so I stopped at a fast-food restaurant. Thought I'd go inside rather than do the drive-through. None of the people working the customer counter looked happy, but hey, I'd be in and out. When it was finally my turn to order, a truly bored employee gestured for me to speak.

“I'll have a cheeseburger and a medium drink, please.”

“Mmph plfs wpl chlef?” She mumbled, never making eye contact with me.

“I'm sorry, what was that?”

“Mmph plfs wpl chlef?” she mumbled again, a little louder this time, still no eye contact.

I was getting embarrassed. “I'm sorry, I'm not understanding you.”

“~~Do—you—want—fries—with—that?~~” this time with eye contact that clearly communicated that she thought I was a moron.

“Uh, no thanks.” I quietly answered, trying not to make her mad.

She put my burger and drink on a tray, pushed it toward me with no comment, and went on to the next customer. As I walked away I heard her ask the next customer, “Mmph plfs wpl chlef?”

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Scenarios like this one are all too common. The service provided by most companies is mediocre at best, atrocious at worst. How many times have you quietly (or not so quietly) fumed over slow, rude, inefficient, indifferent, or inept service? Chances are strong that you've suffered poor service many times—*this week*. But those few organizations that *consistently* provide excellent service, demonstrating that they truly care about their customers, are our heroes. They provide a safe haven from the usual storm of service aggravation. And they are very rare. The big question is—why are excellent service providers so rare?

Excellent service is rare because it takes real *commitment* to make excellence “business as usual.” The service concepts themselves are not complicated or difficult. The level of commitment required is the hard part. A service improvement initiative is similar to an exercise program. The beginning is exciting. You buy exercise equipment or join a health club, buy workout clothes, and read about exercise routines and healthy living. The first few workouts are invigorating and you feel good. Then, other things begin to take priority. You skip going to the gym or taking your run. Each time you skip a workout it becomes easier to skip the next one. Soon your running shoes are gathering dust in the closet or your gym membership lapses. Most people repeat this cycle over and over. Only those individuals who are *truly* committed to sustaining a healthy lifestyle are willing to put in the work of running when it's raining, working out when they are tired, or eating a healthy meal when a Big Mac is a 5-minute drive away. The same is true with creating a culture of service excellence. Many organizations begin a service initiative with banners, speeches, and rallies, only to allow the initiative to die a quick death when the real work begins. Most organizations don't truly commit to building a lasting service culture.

Our purpose in writing this book is to provide a *step-by-step guide* for planning, implementing, and perpetuating a service culture in your organization. Many of the customer service books out there spend much of the book explaining *why* customer service is important. Our assumption in writing this book is that you are

already convinced about the *whys*. What is needed are the *hows*. This book is a how-to manual for creating service excellence. The order of the chapters is important. Each element of the process described is important. The chapters will guide you through the process of gaining involvement and “buy-in” throughout the organization and will detail the systems that need to be put in place. Creating a service culture involves all functions and all levels of the organization.

One thing is certain: Creating a culture of service excellence is certainly *not* a matter of telling employees to “be nice to customers and smile.” Some employees (like the one in the opening story) just don’t care. These employees have no business being in the service industry. In many cases, however, employees are doing the best they can with the tools available to them. When company policies get in the way of service, customers and employees are often the victims of a “non-service” culture. The airline gate agent who can’t give you a straight answer regarding a delayed flight doesn’t have the *mechanisms* she needs in order to provide you with the information. Surely, most gate agents would *love* to be able to make you happy. Their jobs would be much more pleasant that way. Without the proper mechanisms, however, there is nothing the gate agent can do. Over time, she puts up an emotional barrier in order to protect her dignity. To the customer the gate agent appears indifferent. Nobody wins in such cases—not the customer, not the gate agent, and not the organization. World-class service providers, on the other hand, see excellent service as the responsibility of the entire organization, and they build a culture to ensure that world-class service is delivered.

Some businesspeople still think of customer service as fluff. For these managers, service is too soft to pay serious attention to. To them, customer service is simply smiling and making eye contact. Conversely, stellar service performers see focusing on the customer experience as a vital component of their success formula and incorporate it into everything they do. From the way employees interact with customers, to the user-friendliness of

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their processes, to the design of their facilities, these organizations make customer service excellence a priority. And they reap the benefits of doing so. Consider the following statistics:

- A study conducted by BIGResearch for the National Retail Federation and American Express found that 85 percent of consumers shop more often and spend more at retailers that offer higher levels of customer service. Eighty-two percent said they are likely to recommend retailers with superior customer service to friends and family.
- Eighty-seven percent of banking customers who experienced positive “moment of truth” experiences increased the value of products purchased or purchased new products altogether (McKinsey Quarterly, 2006 Number 1).
- In research conducted by the Journal of Marketing, an investment in a stock portfolio based on high scores as reported by the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) between 1997 and 2003, a volatile time in the market, the high customer satisfaction portfolio outperformed the Dow by 93 percent, the S&P 500 by 201 percent, and the NASDAQ by 335 percent.

This book is for those companies that want to be known for service excellence. It provides principles and techniques that will endure in the long run. Excellent service is not an add-on; it is imbedded in the way exceptional organizations deliver products and services—every time, with every customer. It is not a program that has a lot of hype in the beginning and then fades away. This is a process; it does have a beginning, but not an end.

A large multinational corporation, or a small, locally based organization can implement the approach presented in this book. The principles are the same; it’s just the scope that changes. If you run or are a part of a small company, the Service Improvement Team and subteams discussed in Chapter 3 may not be appropriate. The functions and activities discussed in the chapter, however, are appropriate. Focus on the principles and tools;

adapt the execution to your world. We have seen these concepts succeed in a small, 24-bed hospital as well as in corporations with thousands of employees.

When leaders of excellent companies are asked for the secret of success, one word shines through: commitment. Over and over in our consulting work, we've found that service improvement initiatives led by senior leaders who are relentless in their commitment to the initiative's success far outperform those led by senior leaders who pay lip service to the effort but aren't engaged in the actual work. The engaged senior leaders recognize the need for long-term commitment and know that, if their own commitment falters, the rest of the organization will follow suit.

Creating a culture of service excellence takes time. We live in a society, however, that wants change to happen immediately. We want results now! Lasting change doesn't work that way. As described previously, anyone who has successfully sustained an exercise program knows that you work, work, and work without seeing the physical benefits for quite a while. Then you notice that you're beginning to tone up and are getting stronger with more endurance. Later, other people start noticing your progress and ask how you did it so quickly. Right. If they only knew. With a service improvement effort, you need to do the upfront work before you see the results. You'll see some progress along the way, but the big results manifest themselves down the road. This delay is why most organizations begin and abandon one improvement program after another, similar to the reason why most people abandon one exercise program after another. Both are hard and take time. Those organizations that stick with it are the ones who become world-class.

Since this book is a how-to manual, read through it with a highlighter and pen available and mark those areas where you know your organization is struggling. We have tried to supply many tools to help you with the process, so you are not starting from scratch. As ideas that are applicable to your organization come to you, jot them down in the page borders. If you own or lead a small business or organization, we again caution you to not

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disregard certain concepts because they appear suited for only large companies. The ideas in this book apply to *any* organization—you may simply need to adapt the execution of the idea. Customizable copies of the forms and tools presented throughout *Unleashing Excellence* can be downloaded from www.UnleashingExcellence.com.

Pay attention to what other companies are doing to deliver excellent service. No matter the company or the industry, you can always learn from excellent performers. Pull together an influential team of people from your organization and discuss the strategies and tactics discussed in the book. Start to look at ways you can implement these ideas so that customer service becomes a key component of what your organization is known for.

Remember, though, that unless you are starting a new business, changing a culture takes 3 to 5 years. Don't be impatient; it will happen if you stick with it. Changing behaviors and current ways of doing things is rarely easy. And, while it takes time to form new habits, once these habits are in place, it becomes hard to remember how "we used to do it." Aristotle once said, "we are what we do repeatedly, therefore, excellence is not an act, but a habit." This book will help you to make excellent service a habit.