

Leadership and customer service - is there a link?

Derek Williams is a customer service expert from the UK. In this, his third article for The Malta Times, Derek looks at the importance of leadership in business.



It's your first day in a new job.

This is the job that you really wanted. The one that you saw advertised and immediately knew was for you. The one that you spent hours crafting an application letter for. The one that required you to beat all the other applicants at interview. The one where you anxiously awaited the postman to see if you'd been successful.

New suit. Clean shirt and your favorite tie. Shoes freshly polished. Hair cut just the way your Mum would like it.

You're keen. You arrive early. You greet each new person with a warm smile. Trying hard to build rapport without seeming to be over confident. You go out of your way for customers. There's a spring in your step and a friendly ring to your voice.

Now look around. No matter what job you're in and no matter how long you've been there. Does everyone around you have the energy and enthusiasm of new starters? Or has their energy and enthusiasm dwindled? Are they still there because they love what they do or are they simply there because they haven't been able to escape yet?

Is there a link between leadership, customer service and business success? Absolutely! Research by the Strategic Planning Institute found that businesses which gave good service grew twice as fast as those with poor service. And, in all my years of researching customer service, I've yet to find a business with weak leadership giving great service.

So what are the qualities that I've observed?

Leaders need to have a vision of what they want to achieve. How will anyone ever sign up to a cause if there is no cause to sign up to?

The vision needs to be communicated. Let everyone share in it. Let them see what is in it for them by becoming a follower.

Great leaders have passion. The strength and the energy to work against the odds to achieve their vision.

Great leaders delegate and empower. That doesn't mean that they simply dump on their people. But they create structure, they allocate responsibility, they help to create systems, they provide support and training and resources. And they empower their people to make decisions. This is part of what makes people feel significant.

There's respect. Great leaders sometimes have to take tough decisions but there's always respect for their people. They treat their employees as customers - internal customers.

More communication. How are we doing? What are we doing? What new is happening? Successful business leaders are masters at keeping their people informed. Notice boards are up to date and informative. Key performance indicators are understood and displayed. Targets are set and success is celebrated. This is how leaders create a sense of community.

People are motivated to do what's important. If you believe that customer service is important to your business what are you doing to motivate your people to deliver great service? Bonuses based purely on profits are not the answer.

Great leaders stick to principles. In my previous article I told the story of Pret A Manger and what great service they give their customers. I once wrote to their Chief Executive, Julian Metcalfe, and asked if I could spend time in his business researching what they do and how they do it. I promised that I was only looking to report a positive view and that Julian would have the final say on anything that I wanted to publish.

The next day, Julian called me up to thank me for my interest but explained that he would decline my offer. He went on to explain that he is incredibly proud of his people and what they achieve but he could not collaborate on any project that might be seen to praise his business. Julian told me of an old Chinese proverb - "The higher that the monkey climbs the tree the more that you can see of it's backside". I understood what he meant and admired his principle.

Great leaders walk the walk and talk the talk.

There's a famous story about a group of visitors to Disney. They were walking in the Magic Kingdom when they saw a grey haired man walk out of his way to pick up a piece of litter. One of the group approached the man and asked, "How many custodians are there here?" The man replied, "45,000". The guest was surprised at so many.

The next day the group attended a Traditions meeting and the same grey haired man was there. His name was Michael Eisner, Chairman and CEO of Disney.

And great leaders keep the energy going.

I have been fortunate enough to spend some time at Richer Sounds. Richer Sounds is a hi-fi store that has been in the Guinness Book of Records six years running for the highest retail sales per square foot of any retail business anywhere in the world.

Throughout my day at Richer Sounds, members of the Team were regularly checking their performance against target. They kept reminding each other about hitting target and getting together for a drink at the end of the week. There was a buzz and the Team was loving it.

How would I sum up leadership in one sentence? It's simply creating a Team of people with the skills and experience of older employees but the energy and enthusiasm of new employees. If you're the boss, does this describe the people who work in your business?

Customer Service Is Everybody's Job

by Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE

Everyone in your organization must know how vitally important customer service is in your business. Good customer service starts with good training of your employees. Here are a few suggestions to help your organization keep your customers beaming and eager to come back for more.

1. Sell your company to your employees.

If you have brochures explaining your products or services, make sure everybody in your organization reads them. Print them in as many languages as necessary to ensure that everyone gets the message.

If you have a mission statement or company philosophy, post it everywhere. Be creative in communicating what's expected. Consider audio or video tapes depicting your mission or cartoon strips or photo series illustrating how employees share in achieving the company's mission. Then be sure that you really live your mission statement. Lip service only will produce cynical and hostile employees.

2. Recognize effort.

Regularly salute employees who have gone the extra mile in serving your customers. Write up the incident for your company newsletter. If you have no newsletter, post the report in a special place of honor along with a photo of the employee.

3. Trade places.

Why not give your executive and administrative staff an opportunity for hands-on experience with customer service? Every few weeks have each of them spend a day working on the front lines serving your customers.

4. Talk to the front-line troops.

Hold regular meetings for employees who have the most contact with your customers and ask them, "What questions do our customers ask most often about our product or service?" "What complaint do you hear most often?" "What do customers find most beneficial about our product or service?"

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Creative Customer Service - How Far Will You Go to Wow a Customer?

by Mary Sandro

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A large part of customer service success is creating a seamless experience. Customer needs are anticipated; systems are in place; employees are trained. The company runs like a well-oiled machine. But what happens when the unexpected happens? Customers have an “unusual” request or they simply don’t know the rules of the system? The unexpected, I suggest, provides the opportunity to stretch the system, improve the system, or even forget the system and Wow a customer.

I arrived late at a hotel in Cambridge, MA the night before an 8 am training, dressed for the cold weather in brown boots and heavy trousers. When I got to my room I unpacked my lovely, gray suit only to discover that I had left my black heels at home. I looked down at my feet and had to admit the brown boots were not even an option.

I went to the concierge for help. It was after 10 pm. Nothing was open. All of the shops in the area opened at 9 am, no help again. I was desperate. I pressed the concierge, “There’s nothing that can be done?” Silence. I put on my best pathetic gaze and repeated, “Nothing...?”

The concierge contemplated further then asked, “What size are you?” Full of hope I blurted out my shoe size for all to hear. The concierge stepped out from behind the desk, pointed to the black heels on her feet and asked, “Will these work?” I could have kissed her. She gave me the shoes right off of her feet!

After conducting a program in Fort Smith, AR, I wanted to have a nice dinner. The hotel there recommended an Italian restaurant, but neglected to mention that they take reservations only. I arrived early at the restaurant, about 5:30 pm, and requested a table for one, non-smoking.

The first question in response was, “Reservation?” I said, “No.” The second question was, “Do you have a date joining you?” I said, “Don’t rub it in.” The gentleman behind the desk was well humored and friendly and explained the reservation situation. I confessed I didn’t know and was from out of state.

He attempted to accommodate me in the schedule. The non-smoking section was full so he asked one of his servers about the smoking habits of the guests in the smoking section, “What about the Jones’?” The server said, “They smoke like chimneys. She wouldn’t be comfortable there.” “What about the Smith’s?” “They’re chain smokers too.”

The gentleman disappeared for a few minutes and upon returning produced a table for one in the non-smoking section. I was reading the menu when a server seated a table of five. They started to pull out cigarettes. I gasped quietly. The server quickly reappeared and said, “I’m sorry. This is the non-smoking section. Follow me.” This happened two more times with different servers. The gentleman had rearranged the entire floor plan of the restaurant to accommodate me!

For companies with excellent systems in place, the next frontier in customer service is Wow, handling the unexpected creatively. I have observed that companies and professionals practicing creative customer service successfully have two things in common.

The first commonality is that they care. Management cares. Employees care. Everyone cares a great deal about people. They like to help people solve problems. In fact, not helping people would be like kicking a puppy. The concierge at the hotel cared about my shoe predicament and personally decided to go above and beyond. How much does your company care? How much do you care?

The second commonality is that employees have authority. Even when people care, if their hands are tied they can't help. In addition, employees who aren't especially "caring" might be motivated to be creative for customers simply because it feels good to exercise their authority. The gentleman managing the restaurant that night cared and had the authority to accommodate a guest who didn't know the reservation rules. Do you have enough authority to be creative?

With all of the advances in technology, doing a good job isn't good enough to separate from the pack. The prize will go to the one creating new frontiers. How far will you go to Wow a customer?