



By Sonia Graham

Does Your Customer Service Grant Permission?

Your customers and employees hold the key to customer service excellence. Too often, these stakeholders who know the most about the customer service experience never share the ideas and insight that could lead to more efficient processes, a better work environment and delighted customers. Business leaders and managers often recoil defensively and argue against this statement when Maximum Business Advantage proposes this issue as justification for a major shift to the status quo. After all, the leaders and managers are already spending so much of their day directing front-line employees to follow the best possible customer service and business practices, and who possibly knows their business better than the leader who built it? Top-down customer service directives are not the only answer, and maybe not the best answer.

Have you given your front line employees and your customers permission to share ideas and insight?

At Maximum Business Advantage, we are confident that the true customer service experts are the current participants in the customer service experience: the front line employees and the customers. Front line employees have their finger on the customer pulse daily, and the customer is uniquely qualified to report their perspective of the business and the customer experience.

Tapping into this source of intelligence requires several steps

but can pay dividends. As a leader, you must be prepared with a system to accept, analyze and adopt (as appropriate) the feedback gained by granting permission to employees and customers to provide feedback. Maximum Business Advantage can help you design and implement systems to gather, analyze and act on feedback across your organization.

Feedback acceptance is the first step. A system of genuinely requesting feedback from employees and customers will demonstrate that permission to provide feedback is granted. Accepting feedback is not a simple feat. It requires setting your ego aside and understanding that there is a distinct line between business opportunity and personal criticism. For the most part, feedback will not be directed to you as a person, but to your business. Reframe personal criticism as a business opportunity (if possible), keep an open mind and objectively move on to the second step.

Second is feedback analysis. Not every idea should be implemented – some feedback will be contrary to the thriving survival of the business. If inappropriate ideas are received from employees, an opportunity to ensure and reinforce alignment of the organization's mission, vision and goals has presented itself. Without challenge or attack against the employee, persuade them to see how the inappropriate idea is not feasible, or how it does not fit into the business. Qualify the best ideas against a broader audience of front line employees and customers if possible and appropriate. The same potential benefit may be gained with a less disruptive innovation, or significant

additional benefit may be gained with marginal additional effort.

Third is adoption, or adaptation, of the idea. Change management is a difficult task for most people, and leaders are people, too. We humans like predictability; we like things to stay the same. But to move forward and continue to grow, we must embrace change, and implement feedback-inspired improvement! Implementation of good ideas is critical to building trust that the original request for feedback is sincere. The idea's author will embrace its implementation, but coworkers may not. Leaders must be proponents of change, and must champion implemented ideas. When the idea fails in practice despite good theory, leaders must embrace the knowledge gained through failure, and must protect the idea's author from negative peer pressure. Encourage everyone to go back to the drawing board to try again.

Gathering good feedback requires granting permission to the stakeholders positioned to offer the best ideas with the best focus on customer experience improvement. Repeating the process requires strong leadership and support of positive change. The result will be a culture of improvement, and an ever-improving customer experience will create and defend a differentiator between your organization and competitors.

But move quickly; your competitors might be reading this, too!

Any cultural change requires a great deal of time, attention and energy, and the experience and focus that Maximum Business Advantage offers can get your organization to its goal more quickly compared with a do-it-yourself effort.

The second step, feedback analysis, involves more detail than we can discuss here. To provide this additional valuable information to you, Maximum Business Advantage will discuss feedback analysis in the new issue of the *Service Excellence Newsletter*. The feedback process can be used to great advantage in aligning the entire organization with its mission, vision, goals and values, and you might be losing a lot of advantages and customers if this simple concept is missed. Please sign up for the *Service Excellence Newsletter* at ServiceDeliveryExcellence.com, call Maximum Business Advantage at 602-254-2688, or email us at EVW@Graham-MBA.com.



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