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INFLUENCE WITH EASE®



When the Cat's Away

Getting better frontline decisions - without you

By Jeff Mowatt

As a manager, you may assume that the guidance you give to your employees while you're *on-site*, will translate into them making better decisions when you're away. Unfortunately, the reverse may be true. Sometimes a manager's advice on customer care ends-up making bad service even worse. For example, a supervisor reprimands a teller for being too slow. In response, the teller starts being abrupt with customers. A store owner tells an employee that he is not up-selling enough, so he attempts to up-sell all the time - even when there is a long waiting line. Not good. Not for customers, employees, or profits.

The solution is not to avoid correcting employees; instead, it's to augment your feedback with another tool. If you're not using it yet, consider using *prioritized service standards*. Here's how it works.

Faster isn't always better

Imagine that you're a manager in a multinational oil company in charge of the help-desk call centre. The twenty employees who report to you are responsible for taking calls from co-workers all over the world with computer problems. Your department receives about five thousand calls a month. Your objective is to improve both your employees' customer service and their morale—on a limited budget. Incidentally, this is an actual case example based on one of my clients who asked me to assist in training their help-desk employees.

If the manager tried to boost productivity and customer satisfaction by pushing employees to work faster, the results would likely have been a mess. You'd have employees who felt like they were being rushed and customers who felt the service was abrupt. Mistakes would

Setting your standards

Let's say that your management team has established these five corporate values or standards: quality, courtesy, efficiency, innovation, and safety. You then take these standards and interpret them for each department. When we applied this strategy to the oil company help-desk, here's the ranking we determined:

1. *Quality*. In the case of the call centre, the 'quality' of the service is measured by the percentage of calls where the customer's problem is solved over the phone on the first call. It's why the department exists, so it's number one.

2. *Courtesy*. This relates to the customers' perception of the way they are being treated by call-centre employees.

3. *Efficiency*. This is where we measure call volume—how many calls the employee handles.

4. *Innovation*. This relates to ideas that help-desk employees generate to help reduce the overall number of calls.

5. *Safety*. In the case of a help-desk for a call centre, where co-workers are phoning with questions about using a computer, there is little physical danger involved. That's why it's listed last in the call-center's five values.

The shift in decision making

The next step is to train the help-desk staff on each of the five standards and their priority. Once this is done, the employees are held accountable for upholding them. For example, since quality comes before efficiency, they know that it's OK to take more time with a customer to fix the problem right the first time. In terms of courtesy, we equipped them with *Influence with Ease®* skills on how to handle upset callers who are having computer problems. Efficiency is still important, so they know they can't

In other words these service standards help to clarify the priorities upon which decisions are based. Without these standards, employees may focus on the last thing they were criticized for; regardless of whether it makes sense in a particular situation. The bonus is that these same standards can be applied to the company's other departments by simply adjusting the priority.

Adapting with Ease

Let's move from the help-desk of this oil company to the retail service stations. Gas stations have the same service standards as the help-desk, but gas station employees would interpret or prioritize the corporate values differently. For service stations you end up with the same standards; but the priority is now: 1. Safety 2. Courtesy 3. Efficiency 4. Quality 5. Innovation

By having prioritized service standards for their department, gas station employees have a clearer idea of what's expected of them. Since safety is ranked higher than courtesy, kiosk cashiers know that it's OK to not turn on the gasoline pumps for a customer who's smoking near the fuel tank, even though the customer may not like it. Of course, since courtesy is the second priority, employees need to be equipped with communication tools that we provide on how to break bad news, without losing the customer.

Bottom line - supervisors can do less leaning over the shoulders of frontline workers. Prioritizing your service standards will make employees less stressed and customers more satisfied. As for managers - who knows - maybe for once the *cat* will have a chance to play.

*This article is based on the critically acclaimed book, **Becoming a Service Icon in 90 Minutes a Month** by business*