

# Customer service starts with leaders

The benefits gained from even the world's best training in customer service skills can soon be negated in the workplace. **Gordon Tinline** looks at the vital role to be played by leadership

**T**he Civil Service, the Police Service, the National Health Service, the Public Servant – spot the connection? With all of the strategy, internal meetings and focus on financial performance it's easy to forget that the public sector exists to provide one thing – quality services to the public. Customer-facing and service delivery staff in government departments that deal directly with the public will be used to hearing about the importance of customer service and will have almost certainly participated in “skill-based” training to teach them how to deal with customers “effectively”. This is the traditional mechanism in public and private

sectors. However, while training is an important part of the mix, it's not the full story.

This month I want to talk about customer-focused leadership (CFL) which is the idea that skill-based approaches can only get you so far – that the climate created by leaders has a major influence on the behaviour of customer-facing staff and this, in turn, influences the experience of customers.

This concept features in work I have recently been doing with the Cabinet Office to implement a new learning framework designed to help improve service-user experience from the top down.

The concept of the “satisfaction mirror” has been around for some time. The idea is that when employees feel good about the work they are doing, this feeling is transmitted across the counter resulting in a better customer experience. Study after study has demonstrated that when employees are satisfied with their jobs and their work environments this is reflected in customers who report higher levels of satisfaction themselves (Bernhardt et al 2000).

The implication here is that even if a person has been on the world's best customer service skills course, the benefits will be negated if he/she has an unsupportive boss, works in a climate characterised by poor morale and is overloaded with work – and the customer pays the price. Customer service training is often designed to control the service interaction to ensure consistency and a reliable brand experience for the customer. However, if underlying job satisfaction and wellbeing are poor it becomes impossible to sustain customer-focused behaviours across the whole workforce on a daily basis.

This is where leadership comes in – because the leader can lay the foundations for good service delivery experiences by creating a climate where staff feel in control, are supported and where excellent customer service is part of the everyday language. When leaders understand what staff want from their work and connect this with what customers want, they are well on the way to creating the situation described by the satisfaction mirror.

The model I use when auditing wellbeing in the public sector highlights some of the key things that help staff to feel good at work:

- A sense of purpose
- Collaborative working relationships
- Balanced workload
- Control
- Well-managed change

The resources staff need to do their jobs.

Once a leader understands the need for these factors, he/she can be proactive about putting them in place – in the confidence that they will have a

positive knock-on effect for the customer.

Sometimes, it takes this customer-centred perspective for senior people to realise that, for example, giving staff more and more work to do may actually be to the detriment of the customer.

Another example of how levels of wellbeing and satisfaction can affect the customer experience is how staff behave in the face of difficult customers. Research shows that negative feedback is received less defensively and more constructively by those with high levels of psychological wellbeing (Derryberry and Read 1994). So, having a workforce that feels good increases the likelihood that customers feel properly listened to when they have a grievance or raise an issue.

On the other hand, when wellbeing and job satisfaction are low, difficult experiences are processed negatively and often deplete the coping resources of those involved. This, in turn, increases the risk of negative employee behaviour.

Another key aspect of CFL is sense of purpose, and leaders have a clear responsibility to ensure that their staff understand and value the goals of their work. When this is the case, employees are better equipped to make good decisions at the point of contact because the experience of meeting the customer's need reinforces their own sense of purpose. This interaction is at the heart of the satisfaction mirror concept – where positive behaviour from the service provider draws a positive customer reaction, which then creates a virtuous circle by reinforcing the employee's sense of job satisfaction.

Of course, most of the time it's not possible for leaders to be at the service interface. This highlights the importance of giving staff autonomy so that they feel in control and see themselves as capable of meeting most customer needs (Geralis and Terziovski 2003). This is the antidote to the kind of learned helplessness that can transmit to the customer as the “I can't help you, it's the system” response.

Too much is left to chance by betting all an organisation's customer service chips on sending staff for training in the hope that they come back and can, on a daily basis, play out what they learn. There are too many other variables in customer interactions. This means that using a CFL approach to create a sustainable customer service maximises chances of ensuring that customers have the best experience possible when using public services.

**For more about the CFL Learning Framework go to: [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/workforcematters/leadership/reform/learning\\_framework.asp](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/workforcematters/leadership/reform/learning_framework.asp)**



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