

Providing Professional Internal Customer Service

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Internal customer service is a crucial element for any organization. Employees must focused on delivering timely, effective, quality products (e.g. reports and materials) and services (e.g. payroll, human resources, medical care and food service) to employees in other departments, otherwise, service to external customers can suffer. The latter impacts the organization's reputation and bottom line, which ultimately affects the organization's ability to hire, train, and provide income and benefits to its employees.

If you ask most employees and their supervisors if they believe they deliver effective internal customer service, they will likely say "Yes" but then qualify their answer with "But we can do better." They are probably right in both cases. Most employees make an effort to be professional, project a positive image and to address the needs and wants of their internal customers. The challenge is that their organization's systems, policies and procedures often stand in their way. Let me explain.

In many organizations, people are hired into various internal positions (e.g. human resources, marketing, sales, facilities, cafeteria, accounting, or security) but are not trained in effective customer service skills. In fact, the phrase *customer service* is likely not used in the context of providing products and services to others in the organization. New employees often go through orientation training and then have a peer assigned to show them the ropes, give a tour of the building and explain job responsibilities; however, this often occurs in a low key or informal manner. There is often no consistency in the training of new employees. There may be a checklist used of things that someone has to cover with the new employee, but no focused training on products, services organizational values, and other important information. Many new hire training programs do not use a scripted lesson plan or a formalized training session to emphasize internal customer service. As a result, employees do not learn the impact of their actions related to organizational success. New employees often receive the opinions of their peers and learn shortcuts to policies and procedures. They are then placed in front of their customers without the proper tools to represent themselves, their department and the organization effectively from a service perspective.

Another shortcoming is that there is no incentive or reward for employees to provide quality service in many organizations. If an employee comes to work, does what they are told and does not have any performance issues, they get a good performance evaluation and likely a modest salary increase. Internal customer satisfaction is typically not measured and workers are not held accountable for their success rates in that area. Unless a customer complains or compliments an employee, their supervisor typically assumes that everything is being done well and provides positive feedback on their performance review. Tagged onto this issue is the fact that most supervisors receive no training on how to effectively coach and counsel their employees so there is little opportunity for ongoing dialogue, feedback and mentoring throughout any given performance period. In short, the organization does not have systems to monitor how service is being delivered. Instead, people are rewarded and promoted based on tasks

that they accomplish rather than the overall quality of job that they perform and the level of service that they deliver.

So what is the answer? Quite simply, a thorough review of policies, procedures and systems currently in place related to employee performance in the area of internal customer service should take place. This includes doing a needs assessment by asking for customer feedback on a regular basis related to how service might be improved. In addition, working to create an environment in which internal service is a key initiative should become a priority. All of this could start by forming an interdepartmental team made up of representatives from all departments and a representative from human resources and the training department. These people could brainstorm what currently works and what needs to improve related to internal service. Customer satisfaction feedback could be gathered through a written survey coupled with focus groups of 8-10 customers and hosted by human resources and/or an external customer service consultant. In order to determine service levels being provided by employees, a 360-degree performance appraisal system in which performance feedback is obtained from the employee, their supervisor, peers and customers could be used. Based on the results, supervisors could reward or coach as appropriate.

Many other strategies can help improve the quality of an organization's internal service. You can start by examining the ones I have mentioned and use them as a basis for more initiatives.

Bob Lucas B.S., M.A., M.A, CPLP is an internationally-known author and learning and performance professional. He has written and contributed to thirty-one books and compilations. He regularly conducts creative training, train-the-trainer, customer service, interpersonal communication and management and supervisory skills workshops. Bob can be reached at blucas@robertwlucas.com or through his website www.robertwlucas.com. Follow his blog at www.robertwlucas.com/wordpress and like him at www.facebook.com/robertwlucasenterprises