Defining Your Customer Service Culture
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Organizations go to great lengths to differentiate themselves from one another, usually at much expense. In reality, it is often their service culture that has one of the biggest impacts on customers and helps a customer decide whether or not to do business with the organization.

What is a service culture in an organization?

The answer to this question is that it culture is different for each organization. No two organizations operate in the same manner, have the same focus, or provide management that accomplishes the same results. Among other things, a culture includes values, beliefs, norms, rituals, and practices of a group or organization. Any policy, procedure, action, or inaction on the part of an organization, and its employees contribute to the service culture. Most importantly, each employee plays a key role in communicating the culture to its customers. This may include such things as personal appearance, the way employees interact with customers, and service provider's knowledge, skill and attitude level. Culture also encompasses an organization's products and services, and the physical appearance of the organization's facility, equipment, or any other aspect of the organization with which the customer comes into contact.

Service culture is comprised of many facets with each impacting customers and helping to determine the success or failure of customer service initiatives. Too often, organizations over-promise and under-deliver because their cultural and internal systems (infrastructure) do not have the ability to support customer service initiatives. For example, assume that the management of an organization has their marketing department develop a slick piece of literature describing all the benefits of a new product or service provided by a new corporate partner organization. They then establish a special 800 number for responses, but fail to hire additional staff or adequately train current employees to handle the customer calls. The project is likely doomed to fail.

The Role of Service Philosophy and Mission

Generally, an organization's approach to business, or philosophy, is driven from the top of the organization. Upper management, including members of the board of directors, when appropriate, set the vision or tone and direction of the organization. Without a clearly planned and communicated vision, the service ethic ends at the highest levels. This is often a stumbling block where many organizations falter due to indecision or dissension at upper echelons.

Leadership, real and perceived, is crucial to customer service success. Members of upper management in successful organizations make themselves clearly visible to frontline employees and are in tune with customer needs and expectations.

When members of management stay locked away in the boardroom or are perceived as spending their time in their office or on the golf course, employee devotion to good service is tested. As the old adage goes "action speaks louder than words." While it is wonderful when organizations go to the trouble of developing and hanging a nicely framed formal mission or philosophy statement on a wall, if it is not a functional way of life for employees, it serves little purpose.

Employee Roles and Expectations

There are many additional tasks and responsibilities assigned to frontline customer service providers. Depending on the job description for a position and size and type of the organization and industry involved, these roles and expectations may be similar from one organization to another, yet performed in a variety of different ways. Such roles and expectations are normally included in a job description and ultimately in performance goals that are established when an employee is hired. These roles and expectations are subsequently updated as necessary during tenure on the job. In the case of performance goals, an employee is typically measured against the measures established with/for them during a performance period and the employee is subsequently either rewarded or not, depending on their performance results and organizational policy.

The key to successfully using a job description which outlines expectations and roles for each position is that they must be periodically examined and realistically updated to include actual responsibilities. This is because jobs often change rapidly in today's changing business environment and new task assignments are given verbally but not committed to writing. It is hard for employees to be measured against goals and expectations if there is no consistency. Also, when a new employee must be hired, those involved in the hiring process (e.g. supervisors and Human Resources personnel) need a realistic picture of typical responsibilities.

Creating the Best Possible Service Culture

Two of the keys to building a successful organization through a positive service culture are an organization's employees and its management philosophy.

Employees

To deliver effective customer service, an organization needs to seriously commit to and invest in its frontline staff. This means paying attention to the following factors:

- Recruit and hire the best possible applicants;
- Pay a competitive or above competitive rate;
- Create a work environment that helps motivate employees;
- Provide adequate training and tools for them to do their job;

- Empower employees to make decisions commensurate with their experience, education and position level;
- Provide state of the art equipment and support to employees;
- Supervise and coach for success.

Management

For supervisors and management to be effective in supporting a positive service culture, they must:

Be knowledgeable of the organization and its products and services, and of the industry, as well as, of the competition;
Have good communication skills;
Treat each employee fairly and with respect;
Allow employees to take responsibility and to exercise limited decision-making related to their job and customers;
Provide frequent and ongoing coaching and support to employees (praise as well as constructive feedback);
Act as an employee advocate.

Conclusion

There are so many things that can influence a customer's decision use an organization's products and services that managers do not have control over. Culture is not one of those things. By being proactive and applying some sound customer service and management strategies, any organization can increase its holdings in today's global business environment.

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