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Theme: Motivating customer service performance

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Self Starters only need apply!

The dream of any organisation seeking to deliver exceptional customer service is to employ only those people who are naturally positive, enthusiastic, proactive and 'up for it'. People who can take anything that life, and certainly anything their customers throw at them, and come up energised, ready to help and eager to get on with the job.

Ideally we will advertise for such people and they will arrive in our organisations ready-packaged with this attractive range of attributes, so that all we need to do is train them in our products and processes and off they go. In delivering customer service perfection, they will look and sound just like those customer service professionals we see portrayed – and perhaps portray ourselves – in so many corporate marketing campaigns.

If only dreams came true

In the real world, not many of those walking through our door live up to the image we have conjured up and even those who come closest to it need more help, support and encouragement to deliver the level of service our customers crave than many of us would care to admit.

So what's the answer?

Maybe we should start by recognising the challenges that any customer-facing role presents. When you ask almost anyone why they want to do such a job, they reply with words to the effect, "Because I like dealing with people". And such a role certainly offers those who possess the right disposition and aptitudes great personal rewards. But we should also recognise that in any organisation, dealing with our fellow humans can be 'challenging'. For 'challenging' read perplexing, demanding, draining and, on occasions, downright demoralising!

Therefore, as employers, how can we offer the kind of encouragement to our key customer service personnel that will keep spirits and, most importantly, performance up - even in the most trying of circumstances?

Take the money and stay?

We may well decide to go down the incentives route. Targets can be set, key performance indicators established, CSI goals identified. Then an array of rewards, financial and otherwise, can be offered in return for results. It's fine if it works, but what if it doesn't, or only to a limited extent? What if the targets still aren't met? Customer churn remains stubbornly high? Staff attrition rates, and therefore recruitment costs, continue to be unacceptable? Excessive sickness and absenteeism plague the organisation? And then there's the ultimate nightmare – to keep up momentum, you have to make ever rising financial commitments in order to maintain acceptable performance levels?

The fundamental problem is that more money and rewards do not compensate for an unsatisfying or even wretched work experience. Many people may be willing to be bought off, but

only for so long. And those who are willing to take the money and stay tend not only to make their own working lives a misery, they have the same effect on those around them.

So, to pose the question once more, “What is the answer?”

Perhaps we need to approach the problem from the opposite direction by looking at the work experience itself. Many organisations tend to see the work experience they offer in terms of tangible factors such as remuneration, environment, facilities, resources etc. However, as that doyen of management theory Professor Herzberg proved all those years ago, these are things that are dissatisfiers. That means if we get them wrong, or we are perceived as getting them wrong by those who work for us, they cause dissatisfaction. Unfortunately, when we get them right – often at great cost - our people merely cease to be dissatisfied. Getting them right does not result in a lasting, positive work experience. Herzberg (sorry for the history lesson here) argued that a different set of factors were responsible for that much desired positive work experience. He christened these the ‘motivators’. And he declared that the most significant motivators were achievement and recognition. For us this means creating an environment where everyone has opportunities to succeed and receives full credit and appreciation when they have.

“I’m only ever told when I’ve got it wrong”

Now this knowledge has existed for well over half a century, but I am willing to wager serious money that if any of us go out into the workplace and ask, “When was the last time someone congratulated you on doing a good job?”, the reply – all too often for comfort - will be, “Never, I’m only ever told when I’ve got it wrong”. And that’s putting it politely! Recently, I was told by a Customer Service Advisor in one organisation, “Our General Manager was here for eighteen months before he came to our department. That was to announce that some of us were being made redundant and if we didn’t pull our fingers out, the rest of us would be going as well.”

At this point I can hear you saying, “But achievement and recognition are elementary leadership theory, I know all that already”. That may be the case, but it doesn’t explain why so little of it seems to be happening out there. Perhaps the reason that we don’t do it as often as we need to is that we regard it as theory that just doesn’t work like that in real life. What we really mean is, people don’t react in the way they are supposed to.

So, lets go beyond Herzberg and add something extra to the way we handle achievement and recognition in our organisations.

It ain’t what you do...

I suspect that most of us were brought up to believe that “we should treat others as we want to be treated”. That philosophy lies at the root of the customer service visions of many organisations. The problem is that although it sounds right, it doesn’t stand up to close scrutiny. Why? Because it works on the assumption that everyone wants to be treated in the same way - and many years of bitter experience have taught us that really isn’t the case.

To give this some context, let’s draw on my own organisation’s research into the effect of personality at work. We have identified four fundamental ‘drivers’ which heavily influence patterns of behaviour in most situations . You won’t need to undergo a psychometric assessment in order to recognise your ‘driver’, just think about how you react in a crisis situation.

Controlling “I’m in charge. Let’s get on and get it sorted. We’ll talk about it later.”

You are focused on the result. You value decisiveness, directness and action.

Thinking “Stop. We need a plan. Let’s consider our options. Act in haste, repent at leisure.”

You are focused on getting it right. You value structure, attention to detail, and

thoroughness.

Feeling “Think of the person as well as the problem. Let’s show we care. We’ll do what’s best for all concerned”

You are focused on people issues. You value loyalty, consideration for others, a human touch.

Entertaining “Crisis, what crisis? Look on the bright side. No-one died - yet!

You are focused on a sense of perspective . You value humour, enthusiasm, energy,.

How should this influence our approach to achievement and recognition within our own organisations? The answer is to recognise each person’s personality driver and then give them what they need, rather than what we need.

For example, if you are dealing with someone who is focused on the outcome and is eager to ‘get on with it’, home in on the results they have achieved rather than how diligent they have been or on the personal sacrifices they have made to get the job done.

With analytical, detail-focused members of staff, congratulate them on their diligence, thoroughness and the quality of work undertaken.

Someone with a strong bias towards feelings and emotions will respond best when their care and consideration for others and outstanding personal effort and contribution are highlighted.

And for those entertaining characters who love to be in the limelight, go with the humour and, whenever you can, recognise and praise their morale boosting efforts.

So, what conclusions can we draw from all this?

Of course we should do all we can to recruit those ready-made customer service heroes. But we need to recognise that there may not be enough to go around and, due to the ever increasing demands of the job, everyone, regardless of ability and experience, needs ongoing help, support and encouragement.

Clearly, well-structured incentive schemes can be effective, but keep in mind that they do have drawbacks in certain situations.

Critically, if we subscribe to Herzberg’s assertion that achievement and recognition are the most effective motivators in any work environment then, for maximum effect, they need to be tailored to the personality needs of our people. So it’s not just a case of doing it, but doing the right thing with the right person.

As a final thought, you need to place yourself in the motivation equation. So just bear in mind that if your driver is, for example, ‘controlling’ and you are recognising the achievements of someone whose driver is ‘feeling’, then although your instinct is to focus on the results, their need is to hear about their personal effort and particularly the appreciation others have for their contribution.

It may hurt, but I can guarantee that you will be pleurably surprised at the motivational impact of your new approach!