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4 Building Blocks for a Customer-Centric Culture

by Lynn Hunsaker

It's popular to tout customer-centricity, yet it's very difficult to consistently demonstrate. The word centric means having a specific thing as the focus of attention and efforts. Customer-centric means that concerns other than the customer's well-being are in the background while the customer stays in the foreground.



That may seem simple enough, yet reality proves the elusiveness of customer-centricity. In Accenture's Delivering the Promise study, 75% of executives viewed their customer service as above-average, while 59% of their customers reported their experience with these companies' service as somewhat to extremely dissatisfying. Likewise, in CMO Council's Customer Affinity study, half the companies said they are extremely customer-centric, but only a tenth of their customers agreed.

The building blocks of customer-centric culture are communication, skills, accountability and systems.

1. Communication. The vision and values that top management communicates, both verbally and behaviorally, set the tone and direction. What top management focuses on guides the thinking and efforts of the entire organization. The key is consistency: at every opportunity, continually communicate the necessity of making it easier and nicer for customers to get and use solutions. Consistency occurs in formal and informal meetings, written correspondence, external messages, and in every business process and every management ritual such as performance reviews, annual operating plans, performance dashboards, etc. Consistency builds trust and passion, which are necessary ingredients for true customer-centricity.

At Amazon.com, founder Jeff Bezos once began a meeting by announcing that an empty chair at the table represented the customer. Throughout the meeting, the executives were compelled to include the customer in the discussion, as if present. This became a habit – the group's way of thinking and doing.

2. Skills. Customer-centric values and vision must be supported by proficiency in related technical and soft skills. Examine competency requirements for everyone – not just customer-facing roles – relative to your customer-centric values and vision. This includes channel partners, suppliers, and other external entities. Proficiency is the vital link between strategy and execution.

At Nordstrom, employees are selected on their capabilities to anticipate and meet people's needs. They're encouraged to try new approaches to selling and customer service, with the mantra use good

judgment in all situations giving them a tremendous sense that they're trusted to always do right by the customer.

3. Accountability. What gets rewarded gets done – whether the rewards are tangible or intrinsic. Interestingly, intrinsic rewards have proven to be more powerful in adjusting a group's ways of thinking and doing. Risk tolerance and penalties also determine the degree to which customer-centricity takes root. Above all, monitor cause-and-effect and also perceptions of fairness in terms of logic and equity; these elements are pivotal to success.

At Enterprise Rent-a-Car, customer sentiment is measured at the rental office level. Only employees in offices that score at or above the overall company average are eligible for promotion, raises or bonuses. At EMC, achieving the target for their leading indicator of customer sentiment, system availability, is a go/no-go determinant of the bonus for the entire company.



4. Systems. Systems-thinking means acknowledging the big picture and linkages between its components. Scrutinize your business policies and procedures and tools for their contribution or detraction from the goal of making it easier and nicer for customers to get and use solutions. Systems include formal and informal inter-department communication and interactions and handoffs, and connections outside the enterprise.

At Dell, SVP of customer service Dick Hunter asked employees to send him notes about the inconsistent and dumb things the company was doing. Combining this input with customer's verbatim comments to their call center led to significant changes in the customer experience.

Motives are at the heart of true or false customer-centricity. Customer-centricity as priority number one must permeate the entire business, and be un-challenged by other concerns as the organization's primary focus of attention and efforts. All other goals are more likely to fall into place with consistent customer-centricity.

Find out how to customize these tips to your situation; contact the author lynn.hunsaker@clearaction.biz.