

Empathetic listening

Dignity to prisoners

Customers are the reason our organisations exist. The hard reality is that customers pay our salaries.

When demand is greater than supply, the customer is easily forgotten. We are reactive to customer complaints. On the other hand, when supply is more than demand, the customer is the primary focus for our existence. We are proactive in understanding customer needs – stated and unstated. This is clearly the first step towards performance excellence.

To build a customer driven culture, leaders must walk their talk. The grapevine will, as usual, take care of the rest. Culture transformation is a top-down initiative.

For extraordinary performance, leaders and their organisations are advised to “listen” to the voice of their customers. In the current business environment, customers come in multiple *avatars*: external, internal, society, and mother earth. The key is to be proactive in understanding customer needs, collectively.

1987: Treat your Customer with Dignity – reproduced as is from Quality Fables™ Book 1

I had been called for my International Representative interview with Dr J M Juran to Paris. After a cordial one hour meeting he informed me that in the following week he will be conducting a public seminar on ‘Managing for Quality’ in London at the Cavendish Center. He encouraged me to attend.

Since mine was the last registration in a hall of 200 participants, I was gifted the seat nobody wanted. It was in the last row of an amphitheater at the extreme left.

The debriefing given to me was that I was to give Dr Juran feedback, session by session. Imagine my challenge at the intellectual and personal levels. I was terrified.

Dr Juran encouraged participation during his seminars. He was therefore inundated with questions – basic and technical. Each question was listened to, by him, with total attention, regardless of the distance or complexity (or lack of it). These were questions he must have been asked a million times.

At the feedback session I awkwardly asked him why he had allowed a particular participant all the time possible to ask a simple question, in a very convoluted way?

Dr Juran’s answer was profound:

“Each participant is a special customer for me. Each



SURESH LULLA

comes from a special or different background. This customer had the courage and need to ask the basic question in a crowded amphitheater. It is perhaps the first time he has been exposed to the subject. I owe him the dignity of listening attentively.”

This was my first lesson on customer focus for excellence.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Treat your customer with dignity
- Listening is an art
- Even a guru encourages feedback
- To achieve excellence, focus on the customer

1994: Customer First, Always – reproduced as is from Quality Fables™ Book 1

How often have we seen posters in organisations shouting messages such as “Customer First” or “The Customer is Always Right?” How often, as a customer, have you actually experienced this claim?

I wish to share a story of an expatriate, in India, who systematically made it happen.

In the mid-1990s, India had graduated from a license raj regime to becoming a relatively more liberal economy. Policies had changed that permitted foreign organisations to hold more than 50 per cent shares in the pharmaceutical sector. This is a classic story of an organisation that had been led by Indian executives for decades but was now to be led by an expatriate, since the multinational European parent had opted for a 51 per cent foreign ownership in India.

The person appointed to lead was of South American origin, who had had earlier postings in North Africa and South East Asia. He had never before set foot in India. The mandate given to him by his HO was “Transform the Indian operations into a customer-focused one in 1,000 days.”

I met this executive (let’s call him Victor Fernandez) in his second week on the job. Victor looked relaxed in his office that overlooked the Arabian Sea. Torrential monsoon rain lashed the windows. After the professional formalities, he explained to me his 1,000 days’ mission and what he had already accomplished. He said he had already achieved his goal! How?

Victor taught me the importance of execution.

*The author is founder,
Qimpro® Consultants
and author, Quality
Fables™*

He also taught me the power of simplicity. His prescription was:

I (Victor) called all the senior executives to the board room on my second day at work.

Next, I asked each executive to take a foolscap sheet of paper and to list their customers on the left of the sheet. Of course, each executive listed the dealers, chemists, etc.

I corrected their perception of customers and defined it as the person who receives the output of the work one does. Each executive listed more customers than the others in the room. It seemed a status symbol.

A moment of truth followed... *"What do you deliver to your customers?"* There was silence in the room. *"How do you measure your performance with your customers?"* Not a clue.

"When did you last meet your customers?" Prompt came the answer... *"Daily! In the car pool and cafeteria!"* *"No, no"* I said, *"when did you last meet your customers proactively?"* Heavy silence.

"Never mind", I said, *"let's make a simple plan. I would like you to list your 'A' category customers. I would then like you to proactively meet each customer for 10 minutes at their desk, weekly. The agenda for each meeting will be: How can I improve my offerings to you? Next, I would like you to log what you have agreed. I, Victor, will come and audit the log and action, weekly."*

Victor explained the first round had been completed. He was going to execute the second round that week. And the next week he would request the executives to cascade the same process down to the next level. He would request them to audit the performance of their respective managers, and he, in turn would audit their ability to audit! Quite simple.

Victor underlined the simplicity of his process. He made me understand the Plan-Do-Check-Act theory underlying his approach.

But that was not all. There was another by-product to this approach. The whole organisation learned from the grapevine that Victor spends his time reviewing deliverables to customers. He is customer-focused and walks his talk. Victor had faith in the grapevine for communication – efficient and effective.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Leaders walk their talk
- Strategic goals should be simple and clearly articulated
- Customer focus is no longer a choice
- Measurement is required in order to control and improve

- Get commitment of your people first. Behaviour will change thereafter and, hopefully, attitude

- A robust process can be simple, but must follow "Plan-Do-Check-Act".

2006: Prisoners are also customers

The year was 2006. I was attending the Global Benchmarking Network (GBN) Board Meeting in Singapore. The GBN Board Members were invited to attend the Singapore Quality Awards Ceremony at a seven-star hotel.

Attending the event were captains of government and industry. All very distinguished. One of the winners of the Singapore Quality Award 2006 was the Singapore Prison Service (SPS). Yes, that's right. The Singapore Prison Service. The SPS had earlier also won the Family Firm Award!

As we all know, Customer Focus is an important requirement for performance excellence. We also know that SPS customers do not come willingly. Being law offenders, they are transferred to the custody of SPS by the courts.

I learnt that apart from housing, clothing and feeding these captive customers, the SPS offers life-transformational services to rehabilitate them. It is important to note that SPS does not aim for customer loyalty! Finally, SPS employees are empathetic listeners. That sensitive skill gives dignity even to prisoners.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Anyone who receives the output of your work is a customer
- Customer empathy is vital
- Treat your customers with dignity

Conclusion

We are now in 2018. Over the next two years, if every municipality in India adopts performance excellence criteria, the quality of life of citizens will improve. Citizens are customers. Further, please note, this is not a capital intensive solution. It simply requires a change in mindset.

And what if our prisons adopt performance excellence criteria? Will Mallya, Modi and Mehul return? Our national bad debts can and should get resolved.

Finally, did you know that the Dubai Police, as well as Abu Dhabi Police, have adopted performance excellence criteria? – with positive results stemming from empathetic listening. As an Indian mother, a resident in Dubai, mentioned: "My children feel safe when they see a policeman". ♦