

# Implementing Service Excellence in a Technical Environment

## A marriage made in heaven or a road to hell?

Why is it that so many technically based businesses are able to make great products that are incredibly reliable, yet deliver a service experience that is flawed? We see this everywhere - a car that hardly ever goes wrong but a routine service experience that's awful, a laptop that's fantastic but a helpline that's anything but helpful, or a mobile phone that's bursting with new technology but a support line from the dark ages. It's something that's interested (and irritated) me for a long while so as someone that has a passion for helping organisations deliver service excellence I decided to investigate.

Over the past year or so I've had the opportunity to work on service improvement projects with 5 large technically based businesses. This has enabled me to observe and advise and I think I now know some of the reasons why these anomalies occur. I've also had the opportunity to test and learn what works, so I have a few suggestions for fixing the key problems.

I think the root of the problem often lies in the way technically based organisations approach improvement projects. They are usually highly skilled in the application of Total Quality, Lean Principles, Six Sigma, and/or whatever other process improvement techniques they favour, so they understandably turn to them when confronted with the challenge of improving a service experience. These approaches are undoubtedly excellent for what they were designed for, improving a process, but they are not as good at improving a service experience, which they were not designed for.

I have found this 'process improvement' approach to service can create three issues when used. I call them Heartless Systems, Paralysis through Analysis and Foreign Language.

### Heartless Systems

There are two key elements in any service experience – competence and character. Competence is the efficiency, accuracy, speed, value for money, etc., of the product and/or transaction; character is the friendliness, honesty, attitude, ease of use, etc., of the systems and people conducting the transaction. Competence is a science; character is an art. Competence requires the use of your head; character requires the use of your heart. And that is the crux of this first issue.

Technical people will have been hired, and perhaps promoted to senior positions, because they are great at using their head for science. It's natural to them, they love doing it, they've probably studied it and have qualifications and maybe even won awards for doing it. But using their heart for an art does not come as naturally to them. It perhaps makes them feel uncomfortable and awkward, and therefore it's something they are likely to avoid if possible. So they tend to develop systems that are very efficient but dull, perfect but boring, slick but heartless.

Worse still, they often assume that so long as the process is right, it doesn't matter if the person delivering it to the customer isn't. So they invest lots of time and effort into removing variances and/or inaccuracies from the product or process but don't go on to ensure the customer service people have a 'natural' ability and are trained and equipped to do it superbly.

So the nature, training and experience of technical people can easily make them blind to the fact that the character element of any service experience is just as important as the competence (some would argue it is more important).

### Paralysis through Analysis

If you're an engineer, a scientist, or an accountant you love numbers, formulae, measurements, and analysis. That's probably why you chose that profession. So when you decide something needs improving, the first thing you do is measure and analyse things, looking for the facts that prove what you should do and why you should do it. There's nothing wrong with that, service experience improvements benefit from good analysis; but they need a lot more. They also need imagination, creativity, and experimentation, and this is the core of issue two.

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## Paralysis through Analysis

The natural and understandable approach of technology based organizations and people is to over analyse any service improvement challenge. This can result in paralysis, because the precise proof of what needs to be done can't be found, or even the death of the project, because people get fed up and lose interest doing nothing practical and/or something else that needs to be done comes along and takes precedence.

This is not the fault of the 'analysts', it's just what they've been trained to do. It's their standard approach which works for them in process improvement projects. But it's too narrow an approach for service improvement projects, where it's difficult to predict how customers will react to something they haven't previously experienced, so the best way to find out is to keep testing and developing techniques that will create the desired results.

## Foreign Language

It's really tricky (maybe impossible) to get someone to comprehend something if they don't understand the language being used. The language service improvement people use is basically different to the language systems or process people use. There are however similarities, and this creates the third issue because we can easily then be fooled into thinking we're talking the same language when we're not.

For example, the phrase 'service delivery' can mean very different things. Service delivery to a process person usually means providing what was promised, perhaps as defined by a Service Level Agreement or a Key Process Indicator. But service delivery to a customer's service person means (or should mean) the total experience a customer has, which involves what any SLA or KPI says it should be (competence), but it importantly also includes the way it is delivered and how that makes the customer feel (character). I've found that realising this is important so that any foreign language issues can be addressed and potential problems overcome.

## So what works?

So if those are the challenges, what have I found are the best ways to overcome them? My recommendations for success are as follows.

## Create Systems with Heart

The goal is not to replace the science based approach with an emotional one, it is just to ensure that both key components, competence and character, are given equal prominence. I've found that in all the organisations I've helped, there are always a few people that 'get' the emotional, character stuff. Often though, because they are surrounded by people that don't get it, and maybe resist or mock it, they go native and keep their emotional side hidden in order to 'blend in'. The key is to find them, ensure they have equal status on the planning and implementation teams, give them tools and techniques to work with that will help them find and develop the emotional customer connections and then encourage and recognise the part they are playing.

## Turn Analysis into Action

There's nothing wrong with doing some measuring and analysing, it's a good way to find where best to focus attention, the key is to ensure that it is used as a step towards taking some action and doesn't become the only action that is taken.

So as soon as the results of any analysis start to show through, get people thinking of as many ideas for improvements as they can and then ensure they go and test them with customers to find the ones that work best. What's important is to quickly find things that show success ('quick wins'). They give a boost to morale, show the efforts are worthwhile and encourage people to carry on and perhaps start tackling the things that may take longer but will be worth the extra effort in the long run.

## Find a Common Language

In his bestselling book 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People', Dr Stephen Covey explained that one of those habits is to 'Seek first to understand, then to be understood'. I think this is the best way to approach the 'Foreign Language' issue. Before you have any right to expect people to speak your language, you must first to make the effort to understand theirs.

For me this was not too difficult because my early career was spent as an electrical engineer. However I still needed to do a lot of studying of the latest process improvement techniques so as to feel confident talking to the likes of Six Sigma Black Belts and Lean Practitioners. But then I found I could express the service experience concepts in a language with terminology they were familiar and comfortable with. This enabled us to eventually find a 'common language' for service improvement in their organisation that worked.

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### About Author Chris Daffy and CustomerImpact

CustomerImpact, a leader in combining customer feedback and business intelligence solutions, and Chris Daffy, a leader in customer experience management and service strategy have joined forces to show companies how to make service excellence and customer centricity deliver immediate business value and sustainable growth. From business consulting through to design and implementation services, CustomerImpact and the Academy of Service Excellence are uniquely positioned to help companies build a customer-centric culture and world-class customer service. Their individual competencies in program execution and customer service consulting combine to deliver a complete solution for companies eager to profit from lasting customer loyalty.

#### CustomerImpact

Western Europe Phone: + 44 -1483-549027

Central Europe Phone + 36-28-412-107

USA Phone +01-408-733-5818

[www.customerimpact.com](http://www.customerimpact.com)

For information

Please Email: [info@customerimpact.com](mailto:info@customerimpact.com)