

Eureka! The Service Excellence Tipping Point

The ONE THING that makes the biggest difference to service delivery

Do you ever have 'Eureka!' moments? Those experiences when something that's been on your mind and perhaps troubling you for some time suddenly becomes clear and the answer or solution is obvious. I have them regularly. Unfortunately for me they usually occur in the early hours of the morning. Sometimes I am woken up at a ridiculously early hour with a brainstorm of an idea that I then realise is the answer to something I've been thinking about for ages. And often the answer I get is something that been in front of me all the time, but I just didn't see it. I guess that's why Tom Peters calls them 'blinding flashes of the obvious.'

I had one the other day. I was in Cannes, working with a team of managers from one of my customers. At 3.30 a.m. I was woken up by a brainstorm and then had to spend an hour or so writing down the things in my head before I could get back off to sleep again. What burst into my brain was an answer to something that I had been thinking about for ages. I'm regularly asked, "If service differentiates us from our competitors and helps us to create sustainable competitive advantage, is there ONE THING that we should focus on above all others?"

It's a great question and it deserves a great answer. But I admit that up until that morning my answers hadn't been as clear-cut as they should have been. I'd answered with what you might call 'consultant speak' and waffled on with answers like "it all depends upon your current position" or "it's different for every organisation." But I guess what I was really saying, but wasn't prepared to admit, was that I didn't have the precise answer they wanted.

Well now I have! I am absolutely clear what the focus should be. I know what the Service Excellence Tipping Point is. I am convinced that for almost every service business nothing else will make more of a difference. It's something that if you have or do it, every service initiative will be quick and/or easy to do. But if you don't they will become hard or impossible. The good news is that it's easy to understand. And when I tell people about it they almost always agree that it is the key thing. But the bad news is that it's not easy to do. In fact it's really hard. So although virtually everyone agrees, very few of them actually do what they should do about it. So it remains the domain of just a few, rare organisations. I guess this must be the reason, or at least one of them, that so few organisations earn the reputation of being 'famous for service.'

So what is it? Why has the realisation of what it is got me so excited? And why am I calling it the Service Excellence Tipping Point; the one thing that makes all the difference?

The answer is populating your organisation with people that have a 'natural ability' for service. I'm really annoyed with myself that it's taken me so long to get it because the clues have been in front of me for ages. Not long ago I was co-hosting an Institute of Customer Service tour of the UK to see how businesses that have a reputation for service excellence do it. The one thing that everyone spotted was that all the people we met in these organisations were 'naturally warm and empathetic.' I've been hosting service excellence study tours like this for years so I should have noticed this earlier. And when a couple of years ago at the European Conference on Customer Management in London I was lucky enough to interview Jack Welch, he told me that in his view, the most important role any leader has is to ensure that he/she brings together a 'winning team.' This is echoed by Jim Collins, the respected academic and author of books like Built to Last and Good to Great, who has written that sustainable success is dependent upon having what he calls, "the right people in the right seats." And in a recent issue of Customer Strategy, Andrew McMillan from John Lewis told us that, "Employing great people is the starting point because there are some things that are inherent and can't be trained." This same message has been repeated by person after person but I just hadn't seen it or understood it clearly enough until now.

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So the key to service excellence is having the right people in the right places. That means people with some 'natural' abilities that are absolutely necessary but cannot be trained. They are people with a 'flair' for service that don't need to be taught or shown how to be good at it because they do it naturally. It's also people who would feel uncomfortable working in an organisation that did it any other way.

I've therefore been studying this subject in order to understand where such natural ability comes from. I've had the opportunity to meet and learn from eminent psychologists and specialists on the subject like Professor Adrian Furnham of University College London and Drs. Robert and Joyce Hogan from America. Both agree that personality drives behaviour which then drives work and business success. This applies right through an organisation from leaders to front line staff. And personality is about 50% due to genes (nature) and about 50% due to the way someone was brought up and learned to manage their environment as they grow (nurture). So the old adage 'hire for attitude, train for skill' is absolutely right. But most businesses don't do it. They hire for experience, or intelligence, or aptitude (or simply availability) and then try to train for attitude (or behaviours). And that doesn't work!

To quote Adrian Furnham:

"Only massive trauma changes personality, which is hard-wired. Yes, attitudes change, but people are remarkably stable. They choose and change their environments to suit their personality; not the other way around. So what you see is what you get with most people over the age of 21."

So a customer service training course, no matter how good it is, will not change personality. But it is personality that mainly drives behaviour. That's why, at least in my experience, many (perhaps most) customer service training courses make little or no long term difference.

That last sentence is, I know, going to really upset lots of people in training departments and training businesses that provide customer service training. (I met Andrew McMillan from John Lewis recently and he told me that when he wrote an article containing a similar message he was bombarded with e-mails from people in training departments and training companies telling him he was wrong.) In fact I'm part owner of a training business that focuses on helping organisations achieve service excellence, so you could say that makes me a hypocrite. But I know it's true. That's why in our organisation we focus on education and learning rather than training and why we tell our customers that if they don't have the right people in the first place no amount of training will turn the wrong people into the right people.

Another perspective on this comes from Dr. Stephen Covey, the author of [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#). He claims that the two vital elements of human behaviour, which show whether a person is or is not trustworthy, are Competence (Skill) and Character (Personality). Competence can be trained, character cannot. So helping people learn about the goals and principles of an organisation, the operating procedures, the systems and processes, the amount of responsibility and authority they have, the best way to deliver great service experiences, etc., will work. But trying to teach them to be warm, empathetic, helpful, optimistic, friendly, cheerful, etc., if they do not have these traits naturally, will not. So the key is to recruit the right people in the first place, not to train the wrong ones later.

I'm also convinced that if you want to make service make a worthwhile difference, on your front line of service you should aim to have 100% of the right people. As you go deeper into the organisation the percentage may reduce, but I think you still need to keep the percentage high if you want everyone to work together with the right focus.

So, now you know why it's easy to understand, but hard to do. It's easy to understand because it's obviously right. It's hard to do because it means only recruiting people that have this natural ability, and never taking whoever you can get because you must have someone, or anyone, or at least the best of a bad bunch. It also means finding practical, ethical (it wasn't their fault you hired them) ways to deal with any wrong people that have been hired in the past.

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It's also hard to do because most organisations do not have a simple way of assessing existing and potential people to know if they have the required natural talents for service. That's why we've also been working with a team of colleagues and specialists to create a system called STARS (Service Talent Assessment & Recruitment System) to make the best proven techniques available to anyone that wants them. It provides a YES-MAYBE-NO (for service work) analysis on anyone tested. Existing users of the system report amazing results. Results like –

- massive reductions in staff turnover (e.g., from over 60% to under 30% a year)
- substantial improvements in teamwork (growth in person-to-person cooperation and communication)
- a noticeable boost to customer satisfaction and loyalty (customers noticing a vast improvement in service and voting with their feet, their words, and their wallets)

Experience shows that making the changes necessary to introduce this usually causes some unsettlement and turmoil for a period. But it also shows that it's really worth going through it because the difference it makes can be astounding. For example it makes the implementation of any new programmes or initiatives to improve customer service go with speed and ease. It even makes the not so well thought out ones work well too. It also enables managers to concentrate their efforts in the right places, on the people that are doing a great job, instead of in the wrong places, on those that aren't (which is where they often spend most of time if you've hired the wrong people). And above all, it makes being at work a pleasure, with everyone helping each other and doing their best to deliver great service experiences.

So if you're serious about service, get to it! It's the most important part of your job and undoubtedly the one that will make the biggest difference. If you do, you'll discover what a remarkable impact it will have. You also be one of the few that have done it, so you'll automatically be different to almost all your competitors. You'll have advantages over them they will not understand and will find almost impossible to copy. And you'll enjoy coming to work more than you've ever done before.

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.

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