

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



N A M I

K A R T E N
Speaker, Consultant, Author

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- Manage customer expectations
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- Manage change

Author of:

- *Managing Expectations*
- *Establishing Service Level Agreements*
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You're Welcome

My out-of-state friend Jody, a member of a group that wanted to increase its membership, suspected that the group did too little to make newcomers feel welcome. When I visited Jody and she invited me to attend a meeting with her, I proposed an experiment. I said I'd pretend to be a first-time visitor and see how welcome I felt.

When we arrived at the meeting, Jody went on ahead. No one greeted me at the door. No one approached me as I waited for the meeting to begin. Though I wandered around the room, no one seemed to notice me. This group communicated a strong Message of Unwelcome.

By contrast, consider groups that have member volunteers at the door to greet people. For example, my local chapter of the National Speakers Association (the New England chapter) excels at making newcomers (and oldcomers!) feel welcome

when they arrive. A welcoming attitude also includes introducing ourselves to newcomers, acknowledging them during the meeting, and

SERVICE ORIENTATION

providing information to familiarize them with the group, all things the members of my National Speakers Association chapter do well.

You're here, but who cares?

Service professionals often communicate Messages of Unwelcome. For example, twice a year for several years, I presented a week-long workshop at a particular hotel. Yet, not once did the front desk staff acknowledge me, recognize me, or welcome me when I checked in. In fact, they usually looked glum and gloomy. Compare this with another hotel where the front desk staff have always greeted me with a friendly, welcoming smile. Given a choice, I'll choose this hotel chain over any hotel in the Glum and Gloomy chain.

Often, people just don't realize how they sound. When I called a friend in a large company, she answered in an aloof, standoffish voice. When I identified myself, her tone changed to her normally friendly, upbeat voice. Wouldn't this tone be equally appropriate with people calling on company business? Similarly, the outgoing message of a vice president I called had a distant, go-away tone. When we finally connected, he was cheerful and informative, a striking contrast. Which tone of voice is better if you want to sound welcoming: "Who cares?" or "Great to talk to you."

What about you? Have you ever experienced frontline personnel who looked indifferent while asking for obligatory information? Or support staff who answered the phone in an impatient, I-don't-want-to-be-bothered tone of voice? Or service personnel who never even made eye contact? Have you ever *been* that sort of person?

How people are greeted and treated can make all the difference in how satisfied they are with your services. Communicate "You're welcome" and they will thank you.

MANAGING CHANGE

The Hurly-Burly Hubbub of Change

When I give presentations on managing change, people are eager to know how to implement change quickly and without all that troublesome turbulence. The bad news: Turbulence is a fundamental component of the change experience; you can't eliminate it. The good news: By understanding of how people experience change, you can reduce the duration and intensity of that turbulence, and thereby implement the change more quickly.

How people experience change

Change upsets the relative stability of whatever came before. When I ask my audiences about changes they've experienced in their companies, they don't lack for examples: Reorgs, more reorgs, and still more reorgs. A new project or a project cancellation. New technology. An abrupt priority change. A new manager, a departing team member, a move to another city (or another building), a merger, successive rounds of layoffs, a promotion. In all these changes, what was familiar vanished, along with the comfort level associated with what was familiar.

Almost any change — or even just a rumor of a coming change — can create some turbulence, a state that may entail commotion, confusion, turmoil, disorder, unrest, instability, hurly-burly, uproar (all synonyms for turbulence) — as well as chaos, insecurity, pandemonium, upheaval, disarray, bedlam, disruption and hubbub (synonyms of the synonyms). Who knew there were so many words that so aptly capture the turbulence triggered by change?

In coping with change, you might feel like you've been whacked in the head, punched in the stomach, or turned topsy turvy. You might become preoccupied, absent-minded, forgetful, distracted or fatigued, and you might experience shock, anxiety, fear, anger or uncertainty. You might feel like you're on a runaway roller coaster *even* when the turbulence is triggered by something positive (win the jackpot in the lottery and you'll see!).

What's perfectly normal?

Here is what's important to understand about this state of turbulence: It's perfectly normal. It's human. It's how people react to major change. Major change is a felt experience, and people are more likely to react emotionally than logically and rationally. As a result, this turbulence (to repeat, this time with emphasis) is **perfectly normal**. Therefore, it's unreasonable to introduce a change and expect everyone to instantly adjust. Some people will, but many won't, and wishing that it were otherwise won't make it so.

Your role, should you decide to accept it

Now here's the key point: If your role entails introducing, managing or influencing change, how you communicate with those affected can significantly increase — or decrease — the duration and intensity of that turbulence.

As I stated in the Managing Change section of my book, *Communication Gaps and How to Close Them*, "In times of uncertainty, such as those triggered by technological or organizational change, most people have an intense need to know what is happening and how it will affect them. Yet so often, communication in the form of information, empathy, reassurance and feedback is in short supply."

Therefore, you'll increase the duration and intensity of the turbulence if you:

- Expect or demand an instantaneous adjustment to the change.
- Unreasonably prod people to "get on with it already."
- Withhold information about what's happening and how it will affect people.
- Refuse to accept that adjustment to change may entail a temporary drop in productivity.
- Find fault with people when they make mistakes while adapting to the new way.
- Focus entirely on the technical aspects of the change, ignoring the human aspects.

Conversely, you'll reduce the duration and intensity of the turbulence if you:

- Accept that a certain amount of pushback is inevitable.
- Keep people informed about what's happening, doing your best to stay ahead of the rumor mill.
- Treat the old way with respect, recognizing that it was a place of relative familiarity and comfort.
- Acknowledge the turbulence people are experiencing and listen to and empathize with their concerns.
- Acknowledge progress and even small successes.
- Build trust so that those affected will be open to your ideas and advice once they're in that turbulent state. Trust is a key factor in minimizing the turbulence.

This is not to say you should mollicoddle people and give them all the time in the world to adjust. You still have deadlines to meet and goals to achieve. But by understanding how people experience change, you will more effectively manage the hurly-burly hubbub so as to meet those deadlines and achieve those goals.



COMMUNICATION

Signs of the Times

Even being Boston-based, I've never (dare I admit it?) been to Fenway Park. I don't much follow baseball except during the World Series, and even then, only when the Red Sox are playing. I do know how to get to Fenway Park, though, unlike many visiting fans.

If you take public transportation to a game, you're likely to catch a train at Park Street station. But trains departing from this station split into multiple routes, so if you're a visitor, you might not be sure which train to take.

Fortunately, during baseball season, transit personnel thoughtfully post signs stating which trains go to Fenway Park. But how effective are these signs? Last time I was in this station, I located a transit fellow and asked him if, despite the signs, people still ask for directions. "Yes," he told me, "a lot of people ask. People don't read the signs."

But looking around, I became convinced that some people ask not because they don't read the signs, but because they don't even notice the signs. You see, this station is a superb case study of information overload, a visual mangled jangle of input, a reader's delight.

Picture this. On the walls of the station are advertising posters. Down the center of the platform are freestanding structures with more posters. Large signs display subway maps. Tall racks hold bus schedules. On the vertical beams along the platform are still more signs. Every other overhead horizontal beam displays travel information. And on the remaining beams, amazingly, are more ads.

Amid all this visual clutter are people. People to-ing and fro-ing. People racing to their train. People dashing on or off trains. People lugging briefcases and clutching packages and pushing carriages.

Commuters, knowing their way, can ignore this visual cacophony. But given this frenetic overload, how many visiting baseball fans might miss the Fenway Park signs? How many would even think to look for them? No wonder many people ask for directions. Fortunately, transit personnel graciously assist.

Of course, this is not a uniquely transportational situation. During a trip, I asked the cashier at a tiny store if the store took credit cards. "Yes," he said, flashing a what-a-dumb-question look, "there are signs all over the store." True. Clashingly bright posters, ads and displays were attached to every shelf, mounted on every wall, even suspended from

the ceiling. Supersize stores are even more confusing. So are many websites, monthly statements, and installation instructions. No wonder people need help finding their way.

In delivering your services, do you ever give your customers key information that's masked by clutter? In your service guides and procedures manuals, do you ever put critical caveats in a place they're likely to miss? Do you ever make it hard for customers to find *what* they need to know *when* they need to know it?

Before you claim that customers don't follow your written advice, find out if they even saw it. And if they repeatedly ask for information that you've already made available, find out why. It may be that you need to make the information easier to find and easier to read.

I don't know, maybe making the Fenway Park signs bigger or using a red background or adding baseball images would make them more visible. But if you ever want to take me out to the ballgame, don't worry. I know how to get us there.



LISTENING

Are You a Lax Listener?

Many people are so preoccupied with their busy, dizzy lives that they rarely take the time to really listen to others. Yet, not listening can trigger low morale, disillusionment, distrust, and a “why even bother?” attitude in those who feel they’re not being listened to.

Here are four of the many styles of lax listening:

1. Some lax listeners ask for input and then ignore it. Managers who do this ask their employees for ideas and then continue on their merry way, as if they’d never asked. Most people realize that their input won’t always be acted on, but they’d still like an explanation.

For example, in one company I consulted to, a frustrated employee whose manager repeatedly asked for input and then ignored it told me: “I just wish he’d tell me why he’s decided not to use my ideas.” Hearing her manager’s reasoning would show that he really listened; in addition, it would provide insight into his thought process, enabling her to offer ideas that he’d be more likely to consider.

2. Some lax listeners conduct surveys and then squirrel away the results. Surveys communicate to respondents that their views matter. But survey results so often seem destined for the Bury and Ignore pile. That was the final resting place for the customer satisfaction survey one manager had conducted.

“What action have you taken based on the survey?” I asked. “Well, none yet,” he told me, opening his bottom drawer to show me the completed survey forms. “Have you reported your findings to your customers?” “Um, no.” When was the survey conducted? Eight months earlier!

When you conduct a customer or employee satisfaction survey, you are telling people that you want to hear their views. When you don’t communicate the results, your message converts to, “We were only kidding!” People who respond to a survey and then hear nothing more conclude that they weren’t really listened to.

3. Some lax listeners listen in a distracting, disorienting, or preoccupied manner. Being able to do many things at once is a survival skill. In this age of Too Much To Do and Not Enough Time, people excel at simultaneously reading their email, talking on the phone, chatting with a visitor, writing a report, and chomping on nachos.

But just because you *can* multi-task doesn’t mean you *should*. Being a good listener means more than just switching your ears into the On position; it means looking like you’re listening. I call this Persuasive Listening. When people describe someone as a good listener, what they’re referring to is verbal and physical evidence that the person is paying attention, such as eye contact, nodding, asking questions, and utterances — provided the utterances consist of “OK” or “yes, I see” or “good point,” as opposed to yum, burp, belch and zzzzzz.

4. Some lax listeners change the subject as soon as the other person has finished speaking. For example:

The other person: I’m having a terrible time with my job.

You: Think I should buy a whatchamadoodad for my home PC?

Habitual lax listeners excel at “it’s all about me”:


The other person: I’m having a terrible time with my job.

You: Me too, I have a real jerk of a boss.

The most proficient lax listeners ignore the other person altogether:

The other person: I’m having a terrible time with my job.

You: A storm’s coming in. This weekend, we ski powder!

Any questions, let me know. I promise you chomp-free listening. 

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