

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



N A M I

K A R T E N

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Specializing in helping organizations:

- Manage customer expectations
- Deliver superior service
- Improve communications
- Build trusting, supportive relationships

Author of:

- *Managing Expectations*
- *Establishing Service Level Agreements*
- *Communication Gaps and How to Close Them*

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Improving Survey Effectiveness

They love me . . . they love me not . . . Although petal pulling isn't the most reliable way to gauge customer satisfaction, it's certainly the fastest. But if you prefer precision, you may want to run a survey. Be careful, though: a poorly designed survey is worse than none at all. To help your next survey succeed, keep the following guidelines in mind:

Make the survey action-oriented. If customers rate a service attribute — let's say your responsiveness — as 2 on a 7-point scale, you know there's a problem, but you don't know what it is or what to do about it. To avoid this state of Not

Knowingness, ask customers to cite examples or experiences that will help you understand their ratings. That way, you'll be able to tackle the problem.

And if (oh, happy day!) ratings are high, their explanations will clarify what you're doing well, so you can continue doing it.

Know your customers. What's most important to your customers as service recipients may be other than you realize. If possible, find out before creating the survey what aspects of your service are especially important to your customers and focus your survey on those aspects. But whether you can do this or not, consider including a survey question that asks: "What aspects of our service are most important to you? And how well are we doing in addressing those aspects?"

Keep the survey short. Avoid nice-to-know-but-so-what questions. A well-designed survey can be completed in less than ten minutes. More than that, and customers will either dump it, pass it to the nearest underling, or fill it out haphazardly, all of which can lead you to draw unwarranted conclusions from the responses you do manage to collect.

Maximize survey response. Few people jump with joy at the prospect of responding to surveys. To ensure an adequate response, stress how it will help you help them. State how long it'll take to complete. Specify a due date, or the survey will take up residence in the do-it-later pile. Shortly before the due date, send a friendly reminder to those who haven't responded. Send an equally friendly reminder shortly after the due date — a few more people will respond. After collecting the surveys, send a thank you note to each respondent. And pay particular attention to this final item.

Publicize survey findings. Customers sometimes wonder if you pay any attention at all to their survey responses. If you want them to believe you're paying attention, inform them of the results and the adjustments you'll make based on these results. When you implement customer-suggested adjustments, publicize them and emphasize that they were triggered by customer feedback. If you want successive surveys to succeed, don't overlook this essential element of providing feedback to customers about their feedback to you.



MANAGING CHANGE

Changing How You Manage Change

When companies undertake a major technological or organizational change, the People in Charge sometimes get so focused on driving the effort forward that they ignore the impact of the change on the people affected by it. Sometimes, they even seem unaware that there *is* an impact. Yet how people are treated during a change effort — and how they are prepared for it and guided through it — can make all the difference in whether the effort ultimately succeeds.

In particular, successfully managing change requires attention to relationship building, information dissemination, and involvement by those affected.

Relationship building

A common approach to implementing large-scale change is to create teams to handle various aspects of the change effort. Often, these teams are cross-functional. And frequently, the members of these teams have never worked together — or have never worked together *successfully*. Nevertheless, once declared a team, they are expected to magically function as a team, moving in unison towards The New Way.

Rarely, though, is the transition from a group of disparate individuals to a smoothly functioning team quick or easy. Creating that well-oiled team takes more than doling out assignments and cranking up some project management software. If the team doesn't take steps to build the foundation for a collaborative, cohesive relationship among team members, it may never reach its full potential.

Building that foundation may include such activities as establishing group norms, formulating ground rules, developing tracking and feedback mechanisms, and taking periodic temperature readings of the group's efforts. Teams can also benefit greatly by identifying differences in communication styles and work preferences.

In the absence of activities like these, conflict is likely, and probably sooner rather than later. And while a small amount of conflict can be energizing, no team benefits from excessive, prolonged or unresolved conflict. Investing in relationship building is invariably less costly than recovering from the divisiveness that may result from its absence.

Information dissemination

In times of uncertainty such as that triggered by major change, people have an intense, though rarely articulated, need for

information. They want to know what is happening, and how it will affect them. For example, in several organizations I've visited, employees whose work would be affected by a significant change in computer technology weren't informed about the scope of the effort, the skills they'd still be able to use, the training they'd receive, and the temporary drop in productivity they might experience during the transition. Is it any wonder that anger and frustration became the norm?

Readily available information can help reduce the very human fears about *what it means for me*. Therefore, aim to disseminate information not just about the change itself, but also about its impact on processes, responsibilities, expectations and opportunities. For example, video presentations, written reports, Q&A sessions, demos, and information posted on intranets can help reach different groups of employees. Where feasible, use face-to-face methods of getting the word out; for example, periodic meetings with small groups provide a forum for presenting updates and answering questions.

Often, the evidence that you are *willing* to communicate is as important as the precise information communicated, because it tells those affected that they are an integral part of the process. Most important, it reassures them that they haven't been forgotten.

Involvement by those affected

Buy-in is key to successful change. Unfortunately, some people interpret "generating buy-in" to mean inducing those affected to adopt the change quickly and wholeheartedly, with not a hint of complaint, confusion or concern. Yet, not everyone can so readily come to terms with That Which Is New. The transition from the old to the new takes time — and must be *expected* to take time. Nevertheless, the adjustment can often be accelerated by involving those affected. People are often willing to accept and support a change if they've had a say in the matter.

To achieve buy-in, try to involve those affected as early in the effort as possible. For example, invite personnel to discuss the steps that will help them gain familiarity with the changes. Ask selected employees to help devise ways to ensure that their peers become comfortable with the new procedures and don't fall back on the old ways. Conduct interviews to identify the biggest concerns in each affected group and take some steps to address these concerns. Even small steps will do, because they provide a way of saying "We're listening." 

CRITICAL THINKING

Going Bananas, but Within Reason

Americans consume six billion bananas annually. Six billion! I read that in an airline magazine.

Afterward, during moments I reserve for thinking about fruit, I got to thinking about the number. It didn't seem reasonable. I mean, six billion bananas is a *lot* of bananas. I thought maybe I'd misread the figure and it was really six million. But that level of consumption would be too low. And I couldn't possibly have looked at "six hundred million," all written out in words, and seen "six billion."

Finally, I divided six billion by a population of 250 million, and discovered it comes out to only 24 bananas per person, or two a month if you consume your bananas on a regular schedule.

That's not really so many bananas, and it probably includes all the ways you can eat them that aren't straight from the banana tree, such as banana bread, yogurt, banana cream pie, banana pudding, baby food, and of course, bananas flambé. So six billion begins to seem not so unreasonable.

Questioning reasonableness is important these days, and not just in a bananalogical context. To an astounding extent, people are accepting alleged facts and reported figures as The Truth, without applying common sense and a healthy dose of skepticism. In addition to airline magazines and other non-computer-generated sources of information, the Internet has provided access to humongous heaps of information.

One consequence is a growing tendency to accept that information as unquestionably valid and accurate. And so, we fall victim to statistics that sound impressive, but are misleading. We become subject to scams, even though the very fact that something seems like "a good thing" should be

reason to question it. We become vulnerable to ready acceptance of information that's presented in multi-syllabic, high-fallutin' language.

In effect, we are ignoring our ability to think critically. And the first step in critical thinking is to recognize that it's something we can, and should, do. While facts can sometimes be difficult to refute, we can readily practice critical thinking about numbers, and in particular, the proliferation of numbers in the spreadsheets that clog our electronic and physical in-boxes.

An excellent critical-thinking question to ask is: "Are these results reasonable?" When we see a report that shows more instances of some condition than we anticipated, we have to learn to think automatically, "Gee, that seems large."

We have to instinctively question whether the result is valid or whether it might be an error caused by a miskeyed calculation, a misplaced decimal point, or a misstatement in the way a query was constructed. We need to think about valid ranges so that when a report displays a value outside that range, it catches our attention.



There's nothing like eyeballing the data and asking, "Do these results make sense?" So as I further focused on fruit, I concluded that it doesn't make sense that Americans consume all six billion of those bananas. I see far too many bananas going bad on supermarket counters to believe they all make it to the check-out line.

After doing some what-ifs in my banana spreadsheet, I estimated that we consume only about 94% of the annual six billion, a mere 5,640,000,000 bananas. Now *that* seems reasonable!



COMMUNICATION

Working in Isolation

Does your team communicate adequately with pertinent personnel who reside elsewhere on your org chart? For example, if you're on a help desk and you notice a puzzling increase in the number, type or source of calls, don't tuck this information away in a spare mental cubby hole. The change might be due to flawed training, an influx of new employees, a buggy product, or a multitude of other things, and should be communicated to groups that could be affected — or that could explain the increase.

The *absence* of expected changes should also be communicated. For example, if a spike in calls usually follows a software upgrade, but this time the call volume has held steady, what's up? It could be that the implementation worked perfectly. On the other hand, it could be that customers became so distraught, they pulled their hair out and went home. Or upped and took their business elsewhere. Determining which it is could be important.

What's important is that the communication between groups is systematic. This doesn't mean scheduling more

meandering meetings (unless they're held in Hawaii, of course). And yet another report that no one will read is certainly not the solution. But an agreement that each group will contact the others immediately when critical incidents occur would be a great start. And a location on your intranet where you post information of concern to multiple groups might be valuable.

Identify the significant others in your organization and work with them to identify information you can exchange regularly for your mutual benefit. Isolation is a delightful place to visit, but think twice about living there if you want to manage your projects effectively and deliver superior service. 

My book, *Communication Gaps and How to Close Them*, focuses on communication failures that arise in building strong teams, delivering superior service, and managing change. For an excerpt on communicating during times of major change, see <http://www.nkarten.com/book2.html>.

PRODUCTIVITY

Procrastination-Inspired Productivity

The ability to procrastinate effectively is vastly underrated. I rarely get as much done as when I'm putting off doing something I don't want to do. When the deadline looms and I can stall no longer, I complete the task faster than if I'd started sooner. So for me, putting things off actually saves time. (Do you like this reasoning?)

One trick for converting a putting-it-off mentality into a getting-it-done reality is to divide the task into small chunklets. Then spend a mere 10 minutes on one chunklet. Any chunklet will do.

After 10 minutes, put it away, and later (or tomorrow, if

you're an experienced procrastinator), spend another 10 minutes. Or work on another chunklet. Some chunklets won't seem so bad once you've gotten started and you'll see them to completion. Before you know it, the terrible task will be done.

If you're reading this newsletter as a way to put off tackling your own dreaded do-its, let me not discourage you. In fact, if you'd like to continue procrastinating after you finish it, you'll find more newsletters and numerous articles on my website (<http://www.nkarten.com>) on such topics as customer service, measurement, persuasion skills, and service level agreements. You'll be excelling as a Procrastination Pro. 

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