

Sustaining A Customer Service Initiative: The Need for Long-Term Commitment - By Dennis Snow

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Most customer service improvement initiatives fail to produce sustained results. While such a statement may seem harsh, I think that most would agree with the statement based on their own experiences.

After investing significant amounts of time, effort, and money in service improvement initiatives, most organizations do not attain the sustained results they were hoping for. Failure is usually not due to a lack of creativity or resources. Failure is most often the result of a lack of long-term commitment to the hard work that sustainability requires. The "launch" phase of an improvement initiative can be challenging, but it is also energizing. Top management is involved in the launch, frontline employees join improvement teams, and service communication abounds. There are skeptics, of course, but most are hopeful that this time things will actually get better. The launch phase may last several months, or even a year, depending on the organization. The service initiative launch usually includes such activities as:

Creating a service improvement team or committee

Developing service standards

Communicating the details of the service initiative to the organization

Developing and implementing training programs for all employees

Developing and implementing a service recognition program

Each of the above activities are important and must be carefully planned and executed. The launch, however, simply gets things going. Now comes the excruciating and disciplined work to keep things going. Most organizations simply aren't that committed and stop short of doing the things that truly sustain the service initiative. Delving into the bowels of the organization and messing with processes, procedures, structure, etc. is very difficult and usually not as glamorous as the initial launch. But that is where sustained improvement lies. The purpose of this article is to provide principles and processes for achieving long-term success.

Accountability

The cause for the failure of most service improvement initiatives is the failure to change the organization's formal accountability processes. Without proper accountability, service improvement remains a "nice to do." It must become a "have to do." This means reviewing and adjusting all of your accountability processes to include customer service elements. This is a painful and time-consuming task, but it is vital for long-term success.

Performance Appraisals

Changing the appraisal process is difficult. While most of us hate performance appraisals, we've usually become comfortable with whatever process our company uses. When implementing a service improvement process, it is vital that the performance appraisal process evolves to include specific elements of the initiative. The behaviors that you've identified as core elements of your service initiative must be included in the frontline performance appraisal mechanism. The leadership team usually attends some kind of training during the launch of a service improvement initiative. Leadership appraisals must reflect all of the elements that were discussed in the leadership training. Leaders must be required to set specific service objectives for their areas of responsibility and be held accountable for achieving those objectives. Look at the current appraisal process your organization uses. Does it significantly reflect the elements of service that you say are important to the organization? Be very critical of the appraisal process. Making changes will be hard and bureaucratic, but such changes must occur to ensure sustained improvement.

Job Descriptions

Like the performance appraisal process, all job descriptions must evolve to significantly reflect the critical elements of the service improvement effort. Management job descriptions must reflect expectations regarding leading a service-driven organization. I'm not talking about a casual mention of service. It must be clear from reading your organization's job descriptions that service excellence is a core expectation. Reviewing and changing job descriptions is mind-numbing work. Few organizations are willing to do it. Only those organizations willing to make a long-term commitment to service excellence will take on such an effort.

Promotions

Who is moving ahead in your organization? There is probably no single decision that more clearly communicates what an organization values than deciding who gets promoted up the corporate ladder. It is one thing to say that those employees who live the values of the company are the ones who will move ahead. It is something else to ensure that "living the values" is truly a part of the promotion decision. There are, of course, many factors that go into a promotion decision. If, however, being a customer service role model isn't ingrained in the process, you are leaving to chance the most powerful factor in developing and sustaining a culture of service excellence. In your company, what is the process for selecting individuals for promotion? Is it a carefully orchestrated process that ensures that those with the right mix of talents and skills are promoted,

or is it a process that relies on contacts and connections? Instituting a rigorous system for succession planning is difficult, but it is another action that separates those companies that are truly committed to service excellence from those that simply want a quick fix.

Merit Increase/Bonus System

For those employees who are bonus eligible and/or receive merit-based pay increases, what are the criteria for the various levels of compensation? Does customer service performance play a significant role in the decision? Are customer service criteria clearly outlined so that everyone understands how service performance impacts their pay? The criteria, of course, must align with the values that are at the core of your service initiative. This process requires objective measurements of performance and thorough communication of expectations. Adjusting the compensation system causes a lot of short-term anxiety, but is important for long-term sustainability of any service improvement process.

Training

Most service initiatives include training for all frontline and management employees. Organizations mistakenly think that such "kickoff training" is all that is necessary. Organizations that are truly committed to creating a culture of service excellence know that kickoff training simply provides a common understanding of the service initiative and begins the education process. Such training must never stop. Most of the organization's internal training mechanisms will have to evolve to include consistent messages about service excellence.

New Hire Orientation

New hire orientation is usually a dumping ground for a variety of topics that have no business appearing in orientation. Since all new hires go through orientation, it seems easiest to simply add any new rule or policy to orientation. Such information will never be remembered by the new hire, since there is usually no context for learning most of these subjects. The purpose of orientation parallels the word itself, orienting new employees to the organization and getting them headed in the right direction.

The company's approach to service excellence should certainly be a part of orientation. If service excellence is to be a competitive differentiator, all new employees must understand what is expected from a service perspective. Review your new hire orientation. Let's say that it lasts one day. How much time is dedicated to customer service issues? 15-minutes? 30-minutes? If customer service is supposed to be a critical component of the culture, doesn't it deserve more attention than a 15-30 minute brief overview? Make sure that the content that was included in the service initiative's kickoff training is included in new hire orientation. This will involve condensing, moving, or even eliminating other content currently in the orientation program. That is probably a good thing.

On-The-Job Training

Who conducts the on-the-job training in your organization? Are those employees selected to train others simply the most available or are they truly role models of your service culture? Being selected as a trainer should be an honor. It should signify that, not only is the employee technically expert, he/she embodies the values of the organization. Organizations that sustain a culture of service excellence carefully select their trainers using specific criteria that include modeling excellent service. These trainers are, in fact, trained on training others. They are taught how to put together a training plan, how to adapt training to different learning styles, and how to incorporate the organization's values in the training. This means that train-the-trainer sessions must occur to ensure that service is an integral part of on-the-job training.

Pertinent training materials, such as instructor guides, training manuals, participant materials, etc, must evolve to include the service initiative's content. Many times I have been asked to assist with an already existing service improvement initiative that had not achieved the hoped for impact. In some cases, the initiative was kicked off 2-3 years previously. One of the first things I ask to see is a sample of training materials. I'm sure you are not surprised that many times these materials are seriously out of date and include nothing about the "new" service initiative. Yes, it takes a lot of time to review and update the materials, but such updates help to ensure that the service initiative continues past the kickoff and doesn't rely on trainers to "remember" to include service content.

Ongoing Training

Formalized refresher training on customer service should occur yearly at a minimum. Such training can take place in a variety of formats such as best practice forums, e-learning, or simply straightforward training that continues to build on the service initiative. Committing to ongoing formal training demonstrates that service is not a flavor of the month initiative, but an ongoing organizational strategy. If it has been a year or more since specific, formal customer service training occurred in your organization, it is time to bring the troops back together.

Interview/Selection Process

Whenever I consult with an organization, or conduct a customer service seminar, I stress the importance of adapting the interview/selection process to ensure that the process is designed to, a) ensure that service-oriented individuals are hired, and, b) ensure that the interview/selection process models the service standards of the organization. Everyone usually agrees that this is an important part of the improvement strategy, but it is also an action that typically gets delayed and delayed. Why? Because it is hard to do. The interview process must be analyzed to make sure the right questions are asked. Perhaps experts need to be brought in to help with the redesign process. The Legal department needs to bless the changes (and that is rarely fun). Investment needs to be made in training interviewers in behavioral interviewing techniques. If the company has an employment office, investment needs to be made to ensure that the facility truly reflects the desired service culture.

Visit your company's employment office. What does the environment and process communicate? Look at the question outline that interviewers use (if one even exists) and see if the questions help zero in on the service orientation of applicants. If the process doesn't help ensure the hiring of service-oriented individuals, it is like bailing out a leaking boat. You are trying to improve customer service but are likely hiring some of the wrong people. Don't let that continue!

Communications

There is typically a lot of communication during the launch phase of a service initiative. CEO forums, newsletter articles, videos, etc. all help in getting word of the initiative out to all employees. As time passes, however, communication regarding the service effort typically drops off. While this is natural, there are certain types of communications that must continue if customer service is to remain on the radar screen.

Customer Satisfaction Measurements

Employees at all levels of the organization must know what customers are saying. Employees need to know what is working and what is not working in regard to service. If you are not continually measuring service, either through internal measurement processes or with the help of measurement professionals, you are just guessing at how you are doing. If everyone in the organization does not receive ongoing communication regarding these measures and how their function impacts the results, you are missing out on 90% of the value of measuring customer satisfaction. Regularly measuring and communicating customer satisfaction requires a lot of thought, a lot of time, and sometimes significant amounts of money. Organizations that have sustained a culture of service excellence, however, recognize that ongoing measurement is really the only way to know how to properly allocate resources to ongoing improvement.

CEO/Executive Communication

When CEOs and executives get behind a service initiative, they usually support the effort with plenty of energy and enthusiasm, for a while. Eventually other business issues overwhelm the executive team. Again, this is natural and to be expected. Mechanisms must be implemented, however, that keep customer service on the corporate radar screen. Each executive must select a regular meeting in which customer service issues will always be a part of the meeting agenda, forever. Attendees must be prepared to discuss service progress and challenges faced by their respective workgroups. The tendency will be to let the subject drop off the agenda as time goes on. Truly committed organizations will not allow that to happen.

At least once a year, most CEOs conduct a "state of the organization" address. A standing part of such an address should include significant time dedicated to customer service issues - successes and challenges. This is a marvelous time to recognize the service heroes in the organization. If it has been a year since the top executive of your company has significantly demonstrated his/her commitment to service excellence in a public and company-wide manner, it is time for him/her to do it again.

Ongoing Communication

Take a look at the posters, fliers, etc. that were produced and posted during the service initiative launch. Have they become worn, faded, or have they disappeared completely? Refresh the visible communications mechanisms to let employees know that the initiative is alive and well. As time goes along it is important to revise these materials so that they are in sustain mode instead of launch mode. This takes thought and creativity.

Remember those regular service improvement articles that appeared in your company newsletter at the beginning of the service initiative? Have such articles been nudged aside or replaced completely by other newsletter content? This may send a signal to employees that the customer service initiative is no longer a priority. Again, it's important to keep such content fresh and innovative, but it is even more important to ensure that such content remains prominent.

Sustaining a Culture of Service Excellence: A Checklist

The following checklist is provided to assist you in assessing how well you are following through on creating a culture of service excellence - beyond the launch phase. The checklist summarizes the thoughts discussed in this article:

Have all performance appraisals been revised to significantly include customer service factors?

Have all job descriptions been revised to ensure that customer service is reflected as a significant job expectation for everyone?

Does your organization have a rigorous succession planning process to ensure that only those who truly live the organization's values are promoted up the corporate ladder?

Are merit increases and bonuses connected to customer service performance?

Has new hire orientation been revised to include the key messages of the service initiative?

Are on-the-job trainers carefully selected as service role models? Are they trained to be effective trainers? Have all training materials been updated with the latest service content?

Have your employees attended formalized customer service refresher training in the last year?

Has the interview/selection process been revised to ensure that the company is hiring service-oriented employees and modeling the company's service values?

Are ongoing customer satisfaction measurement systems in place? Are the results communicated to everyone in the organization?

Does the executive team visibly and publicly demonstrate their commitment to the service improvement process on a regular basis?

Is there ongoing communication regarding customer service that is up-to-date, fresh, and creative?

Any question to which your answer is "no" or "not really" is an area that should be addressed immediately if you are to keep a service improvement initiative alive. I admit that there is a lot there. But if you are truly committed to creating a culture of service excellence, these are the areas that will yield a long-term payoff.

Concluding Thoughts

A service improvement initiative is similar to an exercise program. The beginning is exciting. You buy exercise equipment or join a health club, buy workout clothes, and read about exercise routines and healthy living. The first few workouts are invigorating and you feel pretty good about yourself. Then, other things begin to take priority. You skip going to the gym or taking your run. Each time you skip a workout it becomes easier to skip the next one. Pretty soon your running shoes are gathering dust in the closet or your gym membership lapses. Most people repeat this cycle over and over. Only those individuals who are truly committed to sustaining a healthy lifestyle are willing to put in the hard work of running when it's raining, working out when they are tired, or eating a healthy meal when a Big Mac is simply a five-minute drive away. The same is true with a customer service initiative. The real success lies in what you do after the big, exciting launch. Yes, it is hard work, but the payoff is sustained service excellence.

About the Author

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