

OVERCOMING CUSTOMER SERVICE OBSTACLES IN THE GAMING INDUSTRY

By Bill Zender

Jeffery, the VP of casino operations of a Midwestern casino, was totally frustrated with the results of his table game customer service program. After a number of “optimal customer service” training classes, and several months of supervised monitoring, his employees weren’t any better than they were before the program started. His people weren’t rude to the players; they never were. However, all the finer points the outside consultant emphasized, greeting the new customers, introducing the next dealer, making eye contact and inviting customers to sit down to play at their tables, which at first were followed “to the letter,” failed to be noticed in the recent customer service report. His dealers and floor supervisors received low marks in every area of customer service. Even his pit and table game shift managers couldn’t hit the satisfactory mark. Why had their training not taken hold? Why weren’t his employees taking the program seriously? How was he going to explain this to his general manager?

There were several big reasons why Jeffery’s customer service program was bound to fail. First, the program lacked support from the organization. This lack of support wasn’t transparent and recognizable; it was due to underlying issues. Second, the employees on all levels lacked the personal resolve to follow through with the project as it appeared in the project analysis and objective report. Third, the training as a whole should have been embraced by his table game employees. Instead, he heard that the program was perceived by personnel as a nuisance or even a punishment. Where did the program go wrong, and what should he have done to position the training to be more successful? It might not have been so much “what” Jeffery should have done, but more so what should have been “understood” about his situation prior to the program.

Obstacle 1: Importance of a Supportive Company Culture

A company’s “culture” is not necessarily a collection of mission statements, slogans, icons or mottos; it’s the way every company acts and operates based on beliefs, internal motivations and sometimes, unspoken rules. A company’s culture is the backbone

to methodology used by the company to handle their day-to-day operation. Their operational culture is a collection of the company’s psychology, attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values. It has been defined as “the specific collection of values and norms that are shared by people and groups in an organization and that control the way they interact with each other internally and with stakeholders outside the organization” (Hill & Gareth, 2001). Your company’s present culture and attitudes are guidelines used by the company’s management and employees to dictate how they interact with customers, vendors and each other. Without an open, friendly and constructive company culture, spending time and money on superior customer service will be a waste.

Subsequently, the savvy executive that opts to steer his company into more customer-friendly waters may be up against some tough seas. The gaming industry’s culture has never been considered exceptionally open and friendly. It has survived years with the “dumb up and deal” ethos, and it’s been “us against them” because they’re “out to win our money.” In the late ‘70s I worked as a floor supervisor for an “us against them” casino manager in downtown Las Vegas. This was at a time where Nevada had a monopoly on legalized casino gaming (Atlantic City opened about this time). The casino manager’s philosophy was not to worry about treating a player poorly and running him off: “For every player that walks out the door, there will be two more walking in to replace him.” That wasn’t the only casino at that time with that attitude. Once while employed as a dealer at the old Royal Inn Casino, I got into trouble for “being too friendly to the players.” It seemed that I was not allowed to talk to players that were winning, or that was the belief of my “arm folded, podium kicking” pit boss.

Since cultures are created internally, over a period of time, they can’t be corrected overnight, and it can’t be accomplished without “top down” support. In other industries, it is argued that it is leadership that affects culture rather than management. When one wants to change an aspect of the culture of an organization, one has to keep in consideration that this is a long-term project. Corporate culture is something that is very hard to change, and

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employees need time to get used to the new way of organizing (Burman and Evans, 2008). For companies with a very strong and specific culture, it will be even harder to change from "sweater" to "greeters."

In Jeffery's situation, he was fighting not only internal cultures, but cultures established many years before by the gaming industry as a whole. You can't change the beliefs of a culture that has embedded its roots in over 30 years of negative customer mentality within a short period of time. Before Jeffery started implementing the "optimal customer service" program, he needed to make corrections to the company's established culture. This situation alone might have taken a number of years of hard work and reorganization before having a chance at improving customer service to the required level.

Bottom line: If your company's culture doesn't support a friendly and open working atmosphere, along with the ingrained negativity created over the years by the gaming industry, you may be a long way from reaching the level of optimal customer service.

Obstacle 2: The Lack of Employee Empowerment

A "strong" culture is said to exist where staff responds correctly to situations on their own because of their alignment to organizational values. In a strong culture, employees conduct themselves based on what they feel or know is the belief of the company. When there is little alignment with organizational values and control must be exercised through extensive procedures and bureaucracy, it's considered a "weak" culture. In this case, employees are hesitant to act and require detailed and copious numbers of guidelines or continual instruction from immediate supervisors. Under a "strong and identifiable" culture, the employees are allowed to take their first step toward "empowerment."

What really is empowerment? Is it something that can be constructively structured, or will it result in a workplace "free-for-all," with everyone doing what they want to do? Recent research suggests that the opportunity to exercise individual discretion and complete meaningful work is an important element contributing to employee job engagement and their personal well-being. There is evidence that personal initiative and motivation are increased when people have a more positive attitude about their relationship with their job. Empowerment to employees in the work place provides them with opportunities to make their own decisions with regard to their tasks. In today's competitive business environment, more and more managers are practicing the concept of empowerment among their subordinates to provide them with better opportunities to appreciate their own "workmanship" (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Not such a bad idea in a duty-redundant work atmosphere such as dealing and table supervising.

What are the key elements to employee and workplace empowerment? Ken Blanchard, John P. Carlos and Alan Randolph describe three keys that companies can use to increase their employee's role in the day to day operations. In their book, *Empowerment Takes More Than a Minute* (1996), the authors illustrate steps that managers must use to empower their employees: (1) share information with everyone; (2) create autonomy through boundaries; and (3) replace the old hierarchy with self-managed teams.

With the first key to empowering people within an organization, sharing information with everyone, management gives the employees a clear picture of the company and its

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current situation. By allowing employees to view the company information, it helps to build trust between employer and employee. The second key, create autonomy through boundaries, builds upon the previous key. By opening communication through sharing information, it opens up the feedback about what is holding them back from being empowered. The third key, replace the old hierarchy with self-managed teams, ties all the keys together. By replacing centrally oriented management with self-managed teams, more responsibility is placed upon unique and self-managed teams of individuals which create better communication, productivity and job awareness (Blanchard, Carlos, & Randolph, 1996). Many gaming operations have opted to hold pre-shift meetings with their entire staff to pass along information regarding changes in procedure and upcoming events. Are the employees allowed to ask questions and pass back information as well?

Instead of relying totally on an outside consulting firm to create the customer service program, maybe Jeffery should have used the consultant's knowledge to help him form teams from his own employees. After giving them general directions, have them develop the customer service program internally. Involving employees from different shifts, levels of responsibility and areas within table games, allows everyone to have direct or indirect input into the customer service program. By empowering the employees to create their own program, they will automatically buy into the process and target objectives. Lower level commitment among their organization will increase the chances of implementation success tenfold.

Obstacle 3: Lack of Consistency and Commitment

One problem many gaming operations face is their decision to institute customer service training in only one or two departments of their entire facility. "Let's see how it goes in the restaurant before we make a commitment to train the whole establishment." A number of years ago I was contracted by a casino in California to provide a customer service seminar for their dealers and table game supervisors. Management was interested in developing a better customer service policy for the pit based around their new policy of allowing the dealers to keep their own tips. They wanted the dealers to understand the importance of customer service and how better relations with the customers would increase their tips while, at the same instance, increasing the table game revenue. I applauded their effort, but I also advised them of the problems they would suffer through their limited, one department efforts. I explained that a player who is subject to superior enjoyment while playing table games may have his entire pleasurable experience destroyed because of a poor experience at the cage and valet on the way out of the casino. Without committing to train all employees throughout the entire facility, management runs the risk of wasting their customer service investment when the satisfied customer finds the department or area that provides him or her with terrible service.

How committed is the executive committee to achieving superior customer service? This goal can only be accomplished through top-down leadership and commitment. The executive committee cannot decide that they want the operation to achieve superior customer service levels, then mandate it and forget it. They can't hand the ball off to middle management and expect their operation to reach the level of customer service that was intended.

The MGM Grand in Las Vegas is the perfect example of how support failure from the top will lead to failed levels of customer

service at the frontline employee position. When the MGM Grand opened in the mid-1990s, their customer service target was to provide a friendly and happy experience to both the casino customers and hotel guests. Unfortunately, upper management handed off the responsibilities to middle management, and without upper management's support the customer service program failed miserably. Within a year, morale among the "cast members" decayed to a point where the MGM's "superior experience" became mediocre at best.

Final Thoughts

In wrapping up this discussion, let's go back and review the important aspects of achieving superior customer service:

- Be sure your gaming operation has an open, friendly, strong and identifiable company culture. If not, you need to establish this essential criterion first, before moving forward toward superior customer service.

- All the major companies known for their superior customer service, Ritz Carlton, Nordstrom's, Southwest Airlines, etc., credit much of their success to their ability to empower their employees to make decisions and handle customer-related situations. These companies truly believe their business success is due to their employees' "empowerment" to interact and service the customers.

- A top-down total superior customer service commitment is necessary if the gaming operation has any aspiration in achieving success. The executive committee must commit time and resources to a customer service program just like they would to constructing a new facility. Without this commitment, middle management will not be able to shoulder the load, and the program will be doomed to fail.

- One final comment: Unlike building a new facility, superior customer service programs do not have a completion date; only mile posts and evaluation periods. Customer service has to be treated as a "work in progress." Never ending, always moving forward looking for methods and strategies to improve customer service quality.

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