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See Your Business as Customers Do

I once did some consulting and training with the leadership team of a large water treatment company. Their customers ranged from small restaurants to large cities. They have great technology, great systems, but their customers were having trouble reaching help when they needed it.

The team thought things were just fine. But when we role-played scenarios of customers needing help, they got lost in their own systems. Ouch. Kind of embarrassing, but a needed wake up call. What was the key to their turnaround?

Seeing things as their customers do.

Here are a few simple recommendations.

1. Identify the many sources of insight that are available. You don't have to use them all, but each has its own story to tell. They include:

Direct input: Herb Kelleher, the late CEO of Southwest Airlines, would wander the halls, travel on their planes, and just talk with customers. The late John C. Bogle, Founder of the Vanguard Group, would help handle customer calls in their contact center. Not easy, but what an example. I know how demanding time is, but figure out how to spend at least some of your time with customers.

Social posts: Culling through sometimes very unfiltered input from customer social platforms can take some emotional toughness, but the most effective leaders do it.

Focus groups: Focus groups have long been a trusted and valuable source of detailed information from customers, such as what motivates and engages them.

Employee input: Employees who directly serve customers know what's going on. As obvious as this is, I've observed that many organizations don't take full

advantage of this incredible source of input. MBWA—management by walking around—will never lose its value.

Operational data: How accessible are you to customers? Why did they contact the organization? Did you resolve problems, and how long did it take? What suggestions, what innovation opportunities came out of that? There are many potential sources of information to mine.

Product and service reviews: Those on Tripadvisor, Yelp, Amazon, and other sites provide valuable insight, and you'll see how customers describe experiences and products to others.

Surveys: They still matter. If they are easy for customers, ask the right questions, and represent a good sample, they can be very helpful.

2. Find the time. Think about your schedule and how you can find time to spend with customers. Make time for the aspect of leadership.

3. Be ready to work through any initial awkwardness. It's not easy to handle customer interactions. Or work the counter. It may feel weird or even non-productive at first to spend unstructured time with employees and customers. The best leaders say it becomes the norm; it becomes an essential part of their routine.

The water treatment company I mentioned? They made it their mission to understand their customers better.

They listened. They encouraged feedback. They spent time just talking with customers and employees. It became one of the greatest turnarounds I've seen. They grew loyalty, market share, and top and bottom line results. Their employees became more engaged and their customers felt heard.

And they got that time back and more. "We're focused on the right things, not just putting out fires," as their director put it.

Many of the best decisions you make as a customer service leader will come by putting yourself in your customers' shoes. Seeing things as they do.



Watch the video!

Did you know?

A 5% increase in customer retention can increase profits by 25%–95%. (Reichheld & Sasser,

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