

Treat employees as your customers, not as robots

By John A. Goodman

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Recently, during a connection through O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, I approached Starbucks for a quick cup of coffee. The barista said, "I'm just brewing a new pot, so I'm afraid there will be a two-minute wait, but of course it will then be free. Can you wait?" For free coffee, I could wait.

Compare this to another recent airport experience with a mechanical delay. The gate agent became short and rudely said, "I have no idea," when multiple passengers asked about the extent of the delay.

Was the first employee good and the second, bad? Absolutely not! In both cases, the employees were playing the cards they were dealt by management.

As a business owner or manager, you are responsible for providing employees with the tools and guidance they need to deliver products and services to your customers. Front-line employees are not robots and need the following five prerequisites to be successful in dealing with customers:

- Customers who have proper expectations — if they have been misled by sales, the employee can't be successful.
- Easy access to information on key aspects of the business, such as status of orders, price and availability of merchandise.
- Training and skills on how to answer predictable questions (such as the rationale for policies), find inventory and use systems. Also, they must be able to explain how the merchandise they are selling works.
- Products that deliver what was promised — the French fries should be hot and the beer, cold.
- Empowerment to fix most customer issues on the spot, such as the barista in the above Starbucks example. Situations vary and employees need some flexibility.
- Even the best employee gets embarrassed, frustrated and sometimes rude when asked for information or action they know they should have — but do not. One domestic airline employee told me, "I should have known how long the repair would take, but no one in operations would tell me. When the 20th passenger asked, I just snapped at them because I was embarrassed to not know." In 90-plus percent of cases when employees are rude, it is because they are backed into a corner by the customer's question and are embarrassed they cannot respond to a reasonable request.

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Your employees are your conduit to your customers. If they lack the tools, authority and information they need to give great service, they will fail. Not only do you lose customers and foster negative word of mouth, but you also lose good employees. Half of all voluntary turnover among good employees is due to them saying, "I'm not getting paid enough to take all these hassles." Not being able to satisfy customers is a major source of employee hassles in most companies.

Jim Rosenheim, owner of the Tiny Jewel Box on Connecticut Avenue NW, says, "I hire all chiefs and no Indians. Everyone is an expert, empowered and expected to make relationships, not sales." He assures they are skilled, well trained and empowered to handle questions or problems. At Amtrak, when the operations department changed procedures to FIRST communicate in one minute the issue causing the train stoppage to the conductor BEFORE working to resolve the issue, one conductor told me, "It changed my life — I stopped looking stupid in front of 200 passengers."

Here are a few steps to improve both employee morale and customer service.

1. Ask your employees their three biggest frustrations in giving good service. You will be shocked to hear about a lack of simple tools, information, empowerment or policies that do not make sense. If employees believe customers have unrealistic expectations or are too demanding, ask yourself, "Where does the customer get those expectations?" Often, it is your own marketing message. Take action on one issue that they raise, and expect to see a huge positive impact because you have given them hope that things will change.
2. The next time you get a complaint about rude or unresponsive employees, DO NOT start out castigating the employees — ASK why they acted and said what they did. Preface your question with your belief that they are good people and employees and must have been lacking tools, empowerment or information to give good service. Again, you will be surprised at their answer.

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