PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS

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Specializing in helping organizations:

- Manage customer expectations
- Improve communications
- Strengthen teamwork
- Manage change

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

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Minor Matters Matter

The lawn used to look great. But in the last few years, weeds have taken over and despite our lawnification efforts, the weedy ones are winning. Time to call in the pros. I called four lawn companies that promise to work wonders. Each said they'd send someone by to analyze the lawn and leave me information. Each also (unknowingly) offered ideas for how to — or how not to — interact with prospective customers.

Company 1. The fellow asked for my name and as I was spelling it ("N-a-o . . ."), he interrupted me to tell me he already knew how to spell it. I think he was just trying to be helpful, but his interruption came across as impatience.
Lesson: Listening to customers is preferable to unnecessarily interrupting them.

CLIENT RELATIONS

Company 2. The fellow was cordial and told me that his sales guy lives in my town and can easily stop by. Hmmm, someone local who might have a stake in making my lawn look lush (or closer to green, at least).
Lesson: Finding something in common with the customer helps to build rapport.

Company 3. The woman told me that after I received the lawn analysis, I could call her and she'd help me understand it.
Lesson: Letting customers know you'll be happy to answer their questions is reassuring. But it might be better to provide a report that customers can understand without needing help.

Company 4. The phone rang seven times. I almost hung up. A fellow answered. Before I even said a word, he bluntly asked for my zip code "so I can help you better." In addition to my name, address and phone number, he requested a back-up phone number and my email address. He then asked: "What's most important to you about your lawn?" and I told him. He concluded by asking if I had any questions.
Lessons: Several, actually. See how many you can find.

Make no mistake; these minor matters matter. How customers feel they've been treated influences their purchasing decision. In fact, I know of mega-hundred-thousand dollar vendor selection decisions that came down to how the selection team felt the vendors had treated them.

As for myself, I analyzed the four analyses. No two judged the lawn to be the same size, no two used the same criteria for their analysis, no two agreed on the condition of the lawn, and all priced their services so as to make an apples to apples (or crabgrass to crabgrass) comparison impossible.

But I didn't have the time or inclination to follow up with each one. I selected Company 2. It was the only one whose report was clear enough that I could understand what I'd be receiving and what it would cost. I'm optimistic that the grass will soon be greener (than it currently is) on this side of the fence.

FEEDBACK GATHERING

Stamping Out Survey Snafus

Clients frequently ask me to evaluate their employee and customer satisfaction surveys. The good news: Many are well-designed, needing only minimal modification. The bad news: Some are dreadfully designed and if administered as is, will generate meaningless feedback. If you'd like to achieve survey savvy:

Focus on your purpose. One survey, sent to people who had used a particular service, asked them to enter the date and time. The date might be useful in summarizing feedback by week or month. But unless there's a need to analyze service delivery by time of day, it serves no purpose to ask respondents to enter it. Purposeless also characterizes the statement I've seen in several surveys indicating that items marked with an asterisk are mandatory. Flagging items as mandatory or optional is sometimes appropriate. But these were brief surveys in which every item served a purpose. If you can't clearly articulate the objective of an instruction, explanation or item in a survey, omit it.

Include only relevant choices. A Help Desk survey asked respondents how many times they had used the Help Desk in the previous three months. The six choices were: [Unknown], [Never], [1-4 times], [5-10 times], [More than 10 times], and [Other]. Now I ask you: What could Other refer to? Furthermore, since the plan was to administer this survey only to people who had contacted the Help Desk in the previous three months, why include Never as an option?

Guard against ambiguities. In this previous example, what is meant by "used" the Help Desk? If multiple interactions with the Help Desk were needed to resolve a given problem, does that count as one use or many? Ambiguities abound in many of the surveys I've been asked to review. The best way to trap them — preferably *before* conducting the survey — is to get feedback from a sample of respondents. Getting feedback doesn't mean having these people *take* the survey, but rather having them *evaluate* the survey so as to alert you to potential pitfalls.

Split AND items into two. Surveys often erroneously ask about two different attributes in a single survey item, such as whether information provided was accurate and consistent, or whether personnel were responsive and courteous. But information can be both consistent and inaccurate, and personnel can be responsive, yet boorishly bad-mannered. If it's useful to learn about both attributes, ask about them separately: Accuracy in one item and consistency in another, responsiveness in one item and courtesy in another.

Make the rating scale fit the survey statements. One survey I reviewed asked respondents to rate service delivery on a five-point scale from "dissatisfied" to "satisfied." But the items to be rated included statements such as: "The service agent was friendly" and "The on-site technician was competent" — statements that don't lend themselves to satisfied-dissatisfied ratings. To use this type of rating scale, provide a list of attributes to be rated, such as "Friendliness" and "Competence." Alternatively, leave the survey statements as is and change the rating scale to an Agree-Disagree scale or a Yes-No set of choices.

Request supporting information. When surveys focus exclusively on ratings, there's no way to know what, exactly, pleased or disappointed the respondents. Inviting respondents to "Please describe an experience [or please give an example] that helps us understand your rating" generates actionable information to support service improvements. This applies to both positive and negative feedback. One feedback form I looked at includes this item: "The information presented was valuable to me in my job. [Yes or No] If not, why not?" Great, but also ask, "If yes, how will it help?" That way, you'll know not only what needs changing, but also what should be retained.

Focus on relevance. A hotel feedback form asks guests to rate their satisfaction with staff service, the room, maintenance of the hotel, check-in, security, breakfast, dinner and the lounge/bar. Below this set of items is the following request: "Please provide us with any additional comments you have regarding food and beverage." Food and beverage? What about the staff service, the room, maintenance of the hotel, check-in, and security? This is a blatant Oops!

Get rid of glitches! In surveys I review, I often find misspellings, grammatical errors, missing words, confusing jargon, and puzzling acronyms. Leave these glitches in your feedback forms and you run the risk that respondents add an item of their own: The people who developed this survey are incompetent: [Yes] [Absolutely] [Positively].

Want some feedback on your feedback forms? Let me know.

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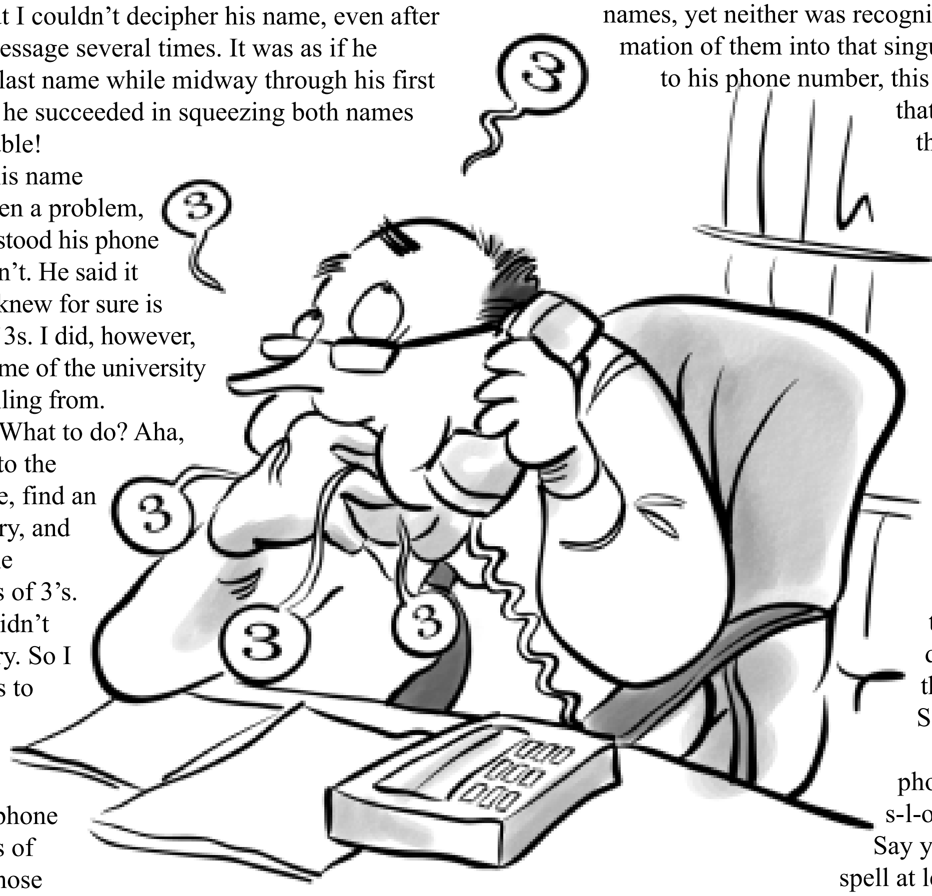
COMMUNICATION

For a Good Time, Call 333-333-3333

Some people mumble when they speak. OK, so be it. And some people speak too quickly. So be that too. But why is it that so many people mumble and speak too quickly when leaving a phone message? Especially when they want you to return their call.

Take, for example, a message I recently received. The caller wanted to order my SLA handbook and asked that I call him back. But I couldn't decipher his name, even after listening to the message several times. It was as if he began saying his last name while midway through his first name. Somehow, he succeeded in squeezing both names into a single syllable!

Not having his name wouldn't have been a problem, though, if I understood his phone number. But I didn't. He said it too quickly. All I knew for sure is that it had a lot of 3s. I did, however, understand the name of the university he said he was calling from.



What to do? What to do? Aha, I thought. I'll go to the university website, find an employee directory, and search it for phone numbers with lots of 3's. But the website didn't provide a directory. So I followed the links to some of the departments this fellow may have been in, seeking phone numbers with lots of 3's and people whose first and last name, when merged, might sound like this fellow's. But no luck.

I had no choice but to do nothing, probably leading him to think I don't return phone calls.

But the saga continues. About a week later, he called again and once again left a message asking me to call him so he could place an order. His name hadn't changed — still an efficient single syllable. But this time, I understood his phone number. I called. No answer. I tried several more times over the next few days. Still no answer.

I went back to the website, in search of I knew not what, and this time I noticed an email address I could contact for information. I sent a message saying I was trying to reply to a message from someone whose name I didn't know, but whose phone number was as follows. I asked if it would be possible to determine whose phone number it was and if so, could I please have his name and email address.

The next day I received a reply giving me both. Amazingly, both his first and last names were familiar names, yet neither was recognizable in his transformation of them into that singular syllable. And as to his phone number, this message explained that phone numbers at the university had changed and he should have given me his new number.

I called him. I found him. He placed an order. Happy ending.

But why do people make it so hard for themselves and, in the process, those they're trying to connect with? The reason, I think, is that most people just don't realize how their messages sound. So a few suggestions:

When you leave a phone message, speak s-l-o-w-l-y. Enunciate. Say your name clearly, and spell at least your last name. State your phone number as though the person you're calling isn't as smart as you are and can't hear as well as you do. State it so that the person can jot it down without having to replay the message 47 times. Oh, and give the correct phone number.

One other suggestion: Record yourself leaving a typical message that you might leave for someone you wanted to hear from. Listen to it and adjust accordingly. Have someone else listen to it and give you feedback. Adjust accordingly.

I look forward to hearing from you. If I'm out, leave a message. Clearly. Please.

MANAGING CHANGE

Coping Factors

People vary in how they cope with change. That seems obvious, but maybe not, given how often I meet decision-makers who assume that everyone experiences change identically.

The senior manager of a large division, for example, enumerated the range of employee reactions he had observed as he implemented a reorganization, and then asked me, "Do people handle change differently?" I was astounded that someone in his position — and someone as astute as he seemed to be — could be so oblivious to such differences. And yet he is hardly alone is his lack of awareness of individual differences. And he is hardly alone in being puzzled by all the reactions he encountered.

If you want to successfully manage change, a starting point is to anticipate these differences and appreciate what accounts for them.

Personality, in particular

Personality is one of the most obvious contributors. We each have a certain level of comfort — or discomfort — with replacing what's familiar, predictable and safe with that which is new, unfamiliar, uncertain, confusing, ambiguous, or potentially risky.

So when a company mandates the use of new tools, introduces a new business model, implements new processes, replaces a manager, or announces an upgrade, people adjust at different rates and display different reactions as they do so. Some people may complain (a little or a lot), some may reflect privately, some may quit, some may wholeheartedly embrace the change, and some may simply go along without a peep. These different reactions are normal responses to change. Note: *normal* responses.

I *like* my cluttered cubicle!

Despite the influence of personality, the reaction to any given change is at least partly situational. Someone who is generally averse to change may eagerly adopt a particular change because it's especially appealing or offers significant benefits. And conversely, someone who generally welcomes change may protest a given change if it poses a real or imagined impediment or threat.

So, for example, how people react to a change in location — whether it's to another city or the other side of the floor — may have more to do with the specifics of the new location than the person's attitude towards change. And even those most open to technological change may bawk at a major upgrade that coincides with their grappling with particularly pressing priorities. Indeed, the timing of a change relative to other changes people are coping with significantly influences how they respond to it.

Been there, done that

Familiarity with the nature of the specific change may also influence the reaction to it. I know people who have been through multiple mergers who now view them as "here we go again" rather than the shockeroo they experienced with the first merger. The experience of going through previous changes has prepared them to better cope with future changes.

And let's not forget the influence of work or life experiences. I once led a meeting of a group that, due to cutbacks, was being pounded by a vast increase in workload. As the meeting veered towards a veritable ventathon, I noticed that one fellow in the group seemed relaxed and unruffled. Afterwards, I privately asked him what accounted for his apparent comfort despite this burgeoning workload. "Oh, this is nothing," he told me. "I've only been here a couple of months. In my last job, our workload was much bigger than it is here. These people don't realize how easy they have it."

These are just a few of the factors that influence how people respond to change. Keeping them in mind will help in managing the transition to the Next New Thing.

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