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*
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The Black Hole

When I experienced a technical problem and sent an email message to the online support address, I received an immediate automated acknowledgement giving me a ticket number and advising me that I'd be contacted within 48 hours with a response to my problem. I appreciated receiving this acknowledgement because it reassured me that my query had been received. But 48 hours later, nothing. And 72 hours later, nothing. And . . . you guessed it. It's been more than a year and a half now, and still nothing. My problem seems to have fallen into the Black Hole.

This experience is hardly unique. Many people I've talked with have told me about problems they've had that fell into the Black Hole. When I ask what they mean, they tell me about submitting queries and then never hearing back. No response, no follow-up, no explanation, no clue as to the status of the situation — or even when they'll be advised of the status.

What a clogged, congested place the Black Hole must be. Who knows, maybe after a hundred thousand years or so, it will eject its contents and customers will finally get the responses they've been waiting for. But most customers aren't that patient.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Are you a contributor to the Black Hole? If so, please be aware that failure to get a response makes customers grumble, grouse and give your department or company a bad name. And for some customers, not being notified of the status of the problem is even more aggravating than not having a resolution to it. Not knowing, and not knowing *when* they'll know, makes customers angry. And that anger is exacerbated when they've been advised that they *will* hear back within 48 hours.

I don't know when I'll stop not knowing

True, sometimes things take longer than promised. Sometimes you just don't know how long it will take to address the problem and come up with an answer. And no one likes to contact a customer and say, I don't know and I don't know when I *will* know. But most customers would rather know that than nothing at all.

Savvy service professionals don't let their customers feel ignored or forgotten, and that's true whether or not they've started working on the problem, and whether or not they know when a solution will be forthcoming. They regularly make updates available to customers, even if those updates consist of stating that there's been no change since the last update.

If customer satisfaction is important to you, make it a practice of asking yourself, Who has submitted a problem and wants to know what's happening? Who is expecting a follow-up call or awaiting an email update? Then contact those people. Don't contribute to the Black Hole. It's crowded enough there without your help.

TEAMWORK

Conducting a Temperature Reading

My spell-checker claims that "appreciations" isn't a word. My spell-checker is wrong. Appreciations are part of a wonderful technique called a Temperature Reading. This technique was created by Virginia Satir, a family therapist whose models and techniques are highly applicable in organizational settings.

A Temperature Reading is a communication tool that helps teams reduce tensions, strengthen connections, improve understanding, and surface information, ideas and feelings that might otherwise be suppressed. It's one of the tools I most enjoy teaching people because it's easy to understand, easy to use, readily adaptable to numerous different situations — and so effective.

A Temperature Reading consists of five segments:

1. Appreciations. During the typical run-around-like-crazy workday, teams often overlook or ignore the positive things they've experienced or observed. In this first segment, everyone in the team who would like to can express an appreciation to one or more others in the team. An appreciation takes the form: "I appreciate you because . . ." or "Thank you for . . ."

In other words, speak directly to the person ("I appreciate you"), rather than to the rest of the team *about* the person ("I liked when she . . ."). An appreciation can be for anything, whether large or small, and whether critical to the team's efforts or simply a kind gesture. Although you may initially feel awkward giving or receiving appreciations, over time you may be surprised at how satisfying it can feel both to give and to receive.

2. New Information. This segment is for information sharing. Often, members of a team have information that other team members may be unaware of, may need to know, or would simply find interesting. Anyone with such information can offer it. Issues that might otherwise feed the rumor mill often get resolved during this segment.

3. Puzzles. This segment provides a sanctioned opportunity to describe something you've found unclear, confusing or puzzling and would like explained. Often, another team member can quickly provide the needed clarification during or after the Temperature Reading and the mystery is solved.

4. Complaints with Recommendations. In most workplaces, complaints are not welcome. By contrast, this segment explicitly invites complaints. But unlike a gripe session, this segment has a constructive tone, because the person voicing the complaint offers a recommendation for addressing the complaint or requests recommendations from the group.

5. Hopes and Wishes. In this final segment, team members who would like to can express a hope or wish pertinent to the team, its members, or issues of interest to the team.

Pointers for running a Temperature Reading

1. Have a facilitator lead the Temperature Reading. Any member of the team can serve in this role. Some teams rotate the role of facilitator so that each team member can gain experience in guiding the activity.

2. Conduct a Temperature Reading regularly. A full Temperature Reading takes anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour or more, depending on the size of the team and its circumstances. Some teams do it weekly, some monthly. Some do it at the end of a project or at key milestones during the project. If time doesn't permit a full Temperature Reading, focus on Appreciations and skip the rest.

3. Adapt the Temperature Reading to multiple settings. For example, you can use it to gather customer feedback by translating the five segments into five questions, such as: What's working well? What's coming up that could be important? What problems have you experienced? What improvements would you like to see? What should we keep an eye on as we move forward?

Similarly, a manager who conducts a monthly one-on-one with staff members might translate the five segments into five agenda topics, such as accomplishments during the past month, information and ideas each has for the other, puzzles and uncertainties, grievances with recommendations, and goals for the next month.

4. Tweak the terminology to fit your culture. For example, if Temperature Reading is a name that wouldn't go over well, call it a team check-in, or monthly review, or project checkpoint, or something else. If you don't like Appreciations or Hopes and Wishes, you can call them Looking Back and Looking Forward. The terminology is yours to adjust so that it fits the context in which you'd like to use it.

By the way, don't feel obligated to wait for a Temperature Reading to express an appreciation. Do it when you think of it. It's a wonderful, and wonderfully contagious, habit.

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MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

A Psychic-ology Lesson

Do you expect the people you interact with most often to know what you're thinking? If so, watch out, because you could be setting yourself up for disappointment. It's best not to expect others to know or do things they don't know they're supposed to know or do.

How'd I get to be so smart? Easy. By repeatedly doing what I'm now urging you not to do. Here's an example. Many years ago, my husband Howard and I headed out on a vacation getaway, with the idea of finding overnight accommodations along the route. As we looked for a place to stay, a roadside sign near the entrance to a motel caught my eye: Sauna.

I love saunas, but rarely get to partake. Howard offered to go in and see what rooms were available. I said, "Fine, if it's OK with you, it's OK with me." That (just so you don't miss it) was my first mistake. I knew he'd know what would appeal to me. *That* was my second mistake.

A few minutes later, he returned and said he'd checked us in. We unloaded our luggage and went to our room.

Did I say "room"? Roomlet was more like it. This was a room better suited to two peanuts than two people. The bathroom (using this same peanut math) was designed for half-a-peanut. I had assumed that Howard had taken a look at the room before checking in. I was wrong. (Mistake #3).

But cramped quarters alone would have been a minor matter. Upon further examination, I discovered that the mattress was squishy soft. The towels were a tad threadbare. The dresser wobbled. And the carpet . . . but never mind.

I was upset, but it was my own doing. I was excited by the prospect of a sauna, and hadn't stated any of my other motel expectations.

Oh well, the sauna would more than compensate for the other deficiencies. We went to find it. The sign on the door said: Out of order.

That's when I started screaming at Howard for his flawed psychic skills, "You should have known I wouldn't like this place!" No, I didn't really scream. I whispered. . . but with ferocious intensity.

Having barely unpacked, we decided to pack up and leave. The manager, seeing the don't-argue-with-me look in my eyes, cancelled the room charge, eager to be rid of us before we scared away guests who felt as we did about tattered towels and cold saunas.

Here's the thing: No matter how well any two people or groups know each other, and no matter how in synch they think they are, their views of what's important almost always differ to some extent. The problem in this situation was that I forgot that, and so I didn't spe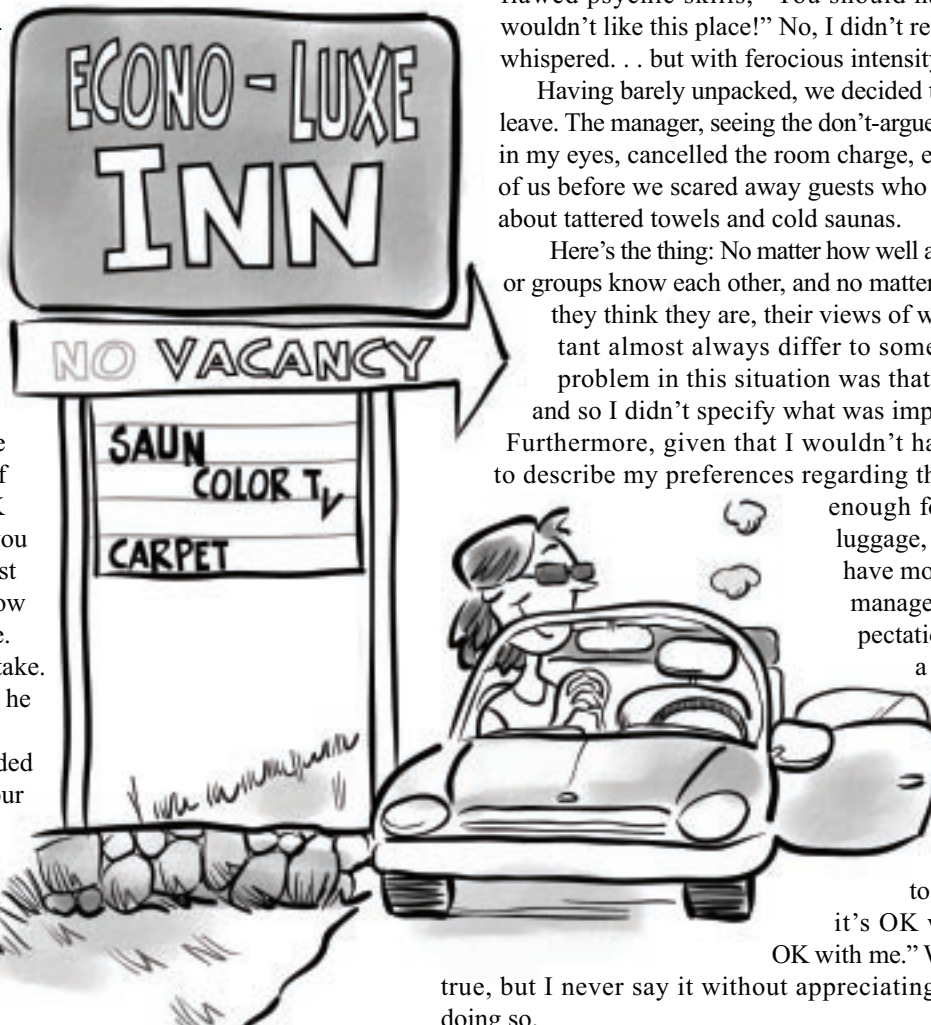cify what was important to me. Furthermore, given that I wouldn't have thought to describe my preferences regarding the room ("big enough for us *and* our luggage, please"), I'd have more effectively managed my own expectations by taking a look for myself before checking in.

I learned a lesson. I no longer say to anyone, "If it's OK with you, it's OK with me." Well, that's not true, but I never say it without appreciating the risks of doing so.

Happily, less than a mile up the road, we found another place. A condo apartment. Kitchen, bedroom, the works. It was beautiful. We *both* made sure we'd *both* be happy with it. It was more expensive than the Mushy Mattress Motel, but well worth it.

Did I mention that it had a sauna? A private sauna! A private functioning sauna! Saunafaction guaranteed!

MANAGEMENT

Open the Door

Gregg, the director of a division I was consulting to, told me proudly, "I have an open door policy. My staff can come and talk to me any time." When those in the upper reaches of an organization are accessible to employees, the entire organization benefits from a culture of trust, open communication, and respect. But in my work with organizations, I have often encountered open door policies that miss the point. For example:

⚓ Some managers claim to have an open door policy, but they're never there when employees come a-calling. There's always another meeting, another appointment, another problem that seems to have a higher priority.

⚓ Some managers are available to employees, but their simultaneous availability to their phone, email, and a steady stream of people stopping by with "just a quick question" suggests that the door is a little too open.

⚓ Some managers are available to employees, but then arbitrarily dismiss whatever the employee came to discuss. Or so it seems to employees who hear nothing further about the issue they raised.

⚓ Some managers, in hopes of cultivating a staff of problem-solvers, command that their employees "be prepared with a recommended solution when you come to see me about a problem." Unfortunately, these good intentions sometimes discourage employees from seeking help with pressing problems that they don't know how to solve.

And then there was Gregg's situation. Greg had been charged with converting his division into a profit center which would proactively seek projects from client departments and sell the value of the group's services, rather than addressing only the projects that clients requested. Gregg's staff, a very bright bunch, were troubled about some of Gregg's ideas for implementing this change. Fortunately, Gregg's door was open.

But, like many open door policies, Gregg's was flawed because it was a passive approach to hearing what was on people's minds. Granted, many of Gregg's staff weren't reluctant to speak their minds. But for others in the group, having ideas and communicating them to management were two different things. For such employees, the very notion of proactively approaching their higher-ups, especially to voice objections, is a gulp-inducing experience.

Unfortunately, it's sometimes the people who are most hesitant to present their ideas who have the ideas most worth hearing, and that was the case in Gregg's division. After one of my visits, one of his staff members sent me a lengthy email message in which she detailed her ideas for how the transition to the new business model could take place. Her ideas were intelligent, organized and on target. "But," she wrote in her message," I haven't presented these ideas to Gregg for the simple reason that he has never asked."

What accounted for her reluctance, I don't know. Clearly, she should have taken the initiative. But that's just the point. She didn't, and she wouldn't. And she is just one of many people I've encountered in client organizations who refrain from approaching management because, for one reason or another, they are not comfortable in doing so.

Rather than merely claiming to have an open door policy, managers who truly want to hear from their employees should consider more proactive measures, such as establishing fixed office hours they will reserve for employees, scheduling one-on-ones with employees, and following up on issues raised. They should occasionally exit their office and go out to employees to see what's on their minds. And they should ensure that time spent with employees is dedicated to those employees and is interruption-free. As in, turn off the phone — and shut the door!