

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



NAOMI

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Specializing in helping
organizations:

- Manage customer expectations
- Deliver superior service
- Improve communications
- Build trusting, supportive relationships

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- *Managing Expectations*
- *Establishing Service Level Agreements*
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Taking Time to Talk

When your department runs into snags in working with other departments, how do you resolve the situation? Getting together to talk can help not only to rectify the current problem, but also to minimize future problems.

Consider, for example, the four departments whose customer support responsibilities required them to interact, but whose relationships with each other were tense and conflict-driven. Each department saw the other three as trouble-makers and helpless, hopeless hindrances. To reverse these perceptions and help them build harmonious relationships, I was asked to meet with members of the four departments. I

had them divide into small groups, with each group comprising people from all four departments.

As they formed groups, I heard many introducing themselves to each other. Clearly, some members of the four

departments had never even met — a situation I've found among many groups that are quick to find fault with each other.

I asked them to talk with their group-mates about a series of issues that revolved around the challenges their customers posed for them. After they discussed each issue in their small group, we gathered as a full group so they could report their insights and recommendations.

Once they started conversing, they realized how little they had understand about each others' responsibilities and activities. In short order, they discovered that certain problems they had blamed each other for had valid explanations, such as ambiguous standards, unspoken expectations, and priorities each department had that the others were unaware of. Some of their problems, they discovered, could be readily resolved with a tweak or two. Even some of their larger problems had solutions that were far from insurmountable.

Their discussions of their shared needs and frustrations led them to a clear conclusion: In terms of their customer support responsibilities, they had a lot in common, and could accomplish more by collaborating than by fuming and finger-pointing.

Bump smoothing

To conclude our session, I asked them to discuss what they'd like to do next to improve their relationships. Foremost on their long list of possibilities was that they wanted to continue their conversations through regular gatherings. Other suggestions included spending time in each other's areas as observers, creating a repository for capturing shared concerns, and committing to discuss rather than stifle frustrations that involved their interactions with each other.

This session was brief, yet most participants left with a more positive perception and a deeper understanding of the other three departments. Certainly, these initial discussions were just a starting point in smoothing the bumps in their relationship. Yet, they had accomplished a lot simply by taking the time to talk. Might you and the groups you interact with benefit by doing the same?

RELATIONSHIP
BUILDING

SURVEY SAVVY

Avoiding Misinterpretations

If you conduct customer surveys, are you aware how easy it is to misinterpret survey findings? The issue is not whether the responses have been appropriately tabulated and number crunched, but rather that you may not be asking what you think you're asking, and your customers' responses may not mean what you think they mean.

Let's say, for example, that you provide widget support and your survey asks: "How much time do you spend daily using a widget?" And suppose the choices take the form:

- Not at all
- A little
- A lot

"Not at all" is clear. But one person's "a little" is another person's "a lot." So if 37% of respondents claim they use their widgets a little, what would that response tell you? Possibly something. Possibly nothing. It's difficult to say.

Now, suppose the four choices are quantitative, such as

- Not at all
- Up to two hours a day
- Between two and four hours a day
- More than four hours a day

Again, "not at all" is clear. But what about the other three choices? Most people don't track their time unless management requires them to (and even then, the fudge factor has been known to creep in).

Moreover, people's perceptions of how much time they spend on a task are rarely precise. In fact, estimates of time spent are related to attitudes about doing that task. People who hate widgets might experience one hour of widget time as three hours. Conversely, those who resent any work that's not widget-based might underestimate their widget time. In short, there may be little relationship between responses to this question and reality.

Interpretations and misinterpretations

Even if customers track the time spent on every task to four decimal places, what can you determine from their responses? For example, suppose you've done previous surveys and now

find that widget use is up among certain customer departments and down in others. What can you conclude from that?

The answer is not a thing, unless you're willing to gather additional information and perform additional analysis. After all, if widget use has increased in a particular department, it could mean that departmental staff have become more sophisticated in its use. Or it could mean just the opposite: that the department has hired novices who are learning on the job, and s-l-o-w-l-y.

Similarly, an increase in widget use could mean that your support services have become deficient and customers are spending more time muddling through their problems themselves. Or, it could mean you've done a first-rate job of educating customers to solve problems on their own.

Putting ratings into perspective

Take another type of survey question. Suppose you ask: Are you satisfied with the responsiveness of the widget support group when you've had a problem? Let's say that 85% of the respondents rate your responsiveness at the high end of the scale and the other 15% rate it at the low end. Your reaction might be that despite a few malcontents, you're doing a great job.

Is that a valid interpretation? Well, that depends. If you analyze these responses, you might discover that of the 85% who rate you high, most call you very infrequently and always with trivial problems. And that the other 15% are those who call often and with problems that are both complex and urgent.

In other words, if you're going to have customers rate the quality of your services, it's advisable to also determine how important those services are to them. A low rating by those who truly need your help is much more serious than a high rating by those for whom you're an afterthought. So in this example, it's not the 85% that matters; it's the 15%. If the results were just the reverse and 15% of your customers rate you as top-notch — and they're the 15% with mission critical needs — it might not matter so much that the 85% who rarely contact you are less than ecstatic about your services.

If you're planning a customer satisfaction survey, look at each item and ask yourself: What does this item really ask? And when I get the results, what will I really know?



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COMMUNICATION

Splish Splash, I Was Takin' a Bath

When I checked into a hotel recently, I was delighted to find that my accommodations featured a jacuzzi bathtub. With its several nozzles for creating swirling water, this would be a real treat.

Over the jacuzzi timer was a sign that said, "Fill tub before setting." Why, I wondered. As one possessed by a profound sense of "what if?" I turned the timer, curious to see what would happen. The answer: nothing. Odd, I thought, why would they post a meaningless instruction?

I filled the tub part way, covering all but two of the nozzles. I set the timer, noticing that once again nothing happened. Foolish sign, I thought, and settled into the soothingly hot water. Thus ensconced, I pushed the "jacuzzi on" button. Be aware, dear reader, that up till this moment, the rest of the bathroom was dry.

Suddenly, instead of the underwater swirling I was anticipating, water from the nozzles sprayed fiercely in all directions. Quickly, I pulled the shower curtain closed, but the projectile-like jets of water blew aside the shower curtain and drenched the entire bathroom. In the few moments it took me to turn the jacuzzi off, all the towels were soaked, along with my bathrobe, the floor, walls, ceiling, and a swath of carpet in my room.

Ah, I realized (too late, of course), the cryptic sign was intended to prevent just this sort of water-ific situation: Fill the tub, it was warning me, because if you don't, the bathroom


floor will become a training ground for ducklings. But given the sopping wet consequences of ignoring its advice, surely the sign would have been more effective if it had explained the "why" behind the warning: Instead of a lackadaisical "Fill tub before setting," perhaps something like "To avoid damage or flooding, fill tub above nozzles before turning jacuzzi on."

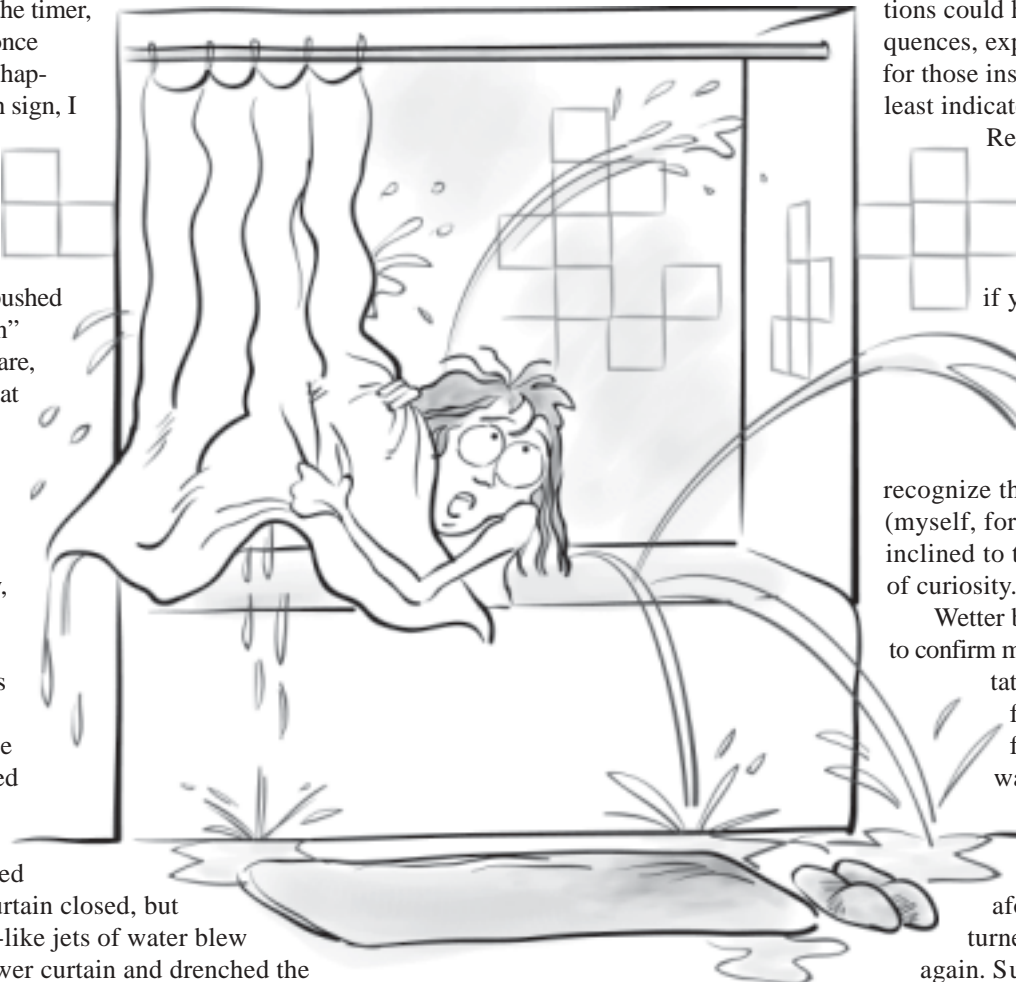
There's a larger lesson here than mere jacuzzi-izing: Don't assume that others will follow your instructions simply because you've provided them. If their failure to follow your instructions

could have dire consequences, explain the reasons for those instructions. Or at least indicate that these are Really Important Instructions and they'd better pay attention. And if you haven't explained the consequences of failing to follow the instructions, recognize that some people (myself, for example) will be inclined to test them, just out of curiosity.

Wetter but wiser, I wanted to confirm my revised interpretation of the sign. I filled the tub further, till the water covered the remaining nozzles, and with trepidation aforethought, I turned the jacuzzi on again. Sure enough, it

behaved flawlessly, creating exactly the sort of underwater turbulence that a well-behaved jacuzzi should. After a pleasant soak, I bailed out the bathroom, returning it to its former state of unsogginess.

Happily, I found that the jacuzzi was a luxurious stress-reliever, even if the stress it relieved was caused by my attempt to use it in the first place. 



SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS

When Trust Alone Isn't Sufficient

A service level agreement (SLA) is a highly effective tool for improving communication between service providers and customers, helping them to more effectively manage expectations, clarify responsibilities, and minimize conflict. Yet, not everyone buys into the value of an SLA. For example, although several members of a group I was working with were in favor of creating SLAs, one fellow lambasted the idea. This was not your average everyday lambasting; he profusely disliked SLAs, and loudly insisted that if people trusted each other, they didn't need a formal agreement. Trust alone would suffice, he insisted.

Now, I don't know what triggered this reaction. Perhaps he'd had a negative experience with SLAs that left him skeptical about their merits; many people have had such experiences. Or maybe he feared that his group would be locked into meeting unachievable service levels, something that needn't happen if SLA are established as living documents.

In any case, he was wrong. In an ideal world, trust really would suffice. However, in *this* world, relying on trust alone is foolhardy. Even when people make service commitments with the best of intentions, they may not remember precisely what they agreed to. And in the absence of an SLA, providers and customers often discover — usually at the most inopportune time — that they have different interpretations of what they agreed to.

What makes SLAs valuable?

Service level agreements are valuable for the simple reason that we're human. SLAs can help you clarify the terms and conditions of service delivery and keep service targets in clear view. They guide the monitoring and evaluation of service effectiveness. They provide an avenue for making service changes when such changes are warranted. By providing these benefits, SLAs help to create trust if it was previously lacking and to strengthen it if it already existed.

An SLA stands the best chance of succeeding if the parties to it view it as:

- **An expectations-managing mechanism.** An SLA helps each party better understand the other's expectations about service delivery. In doing so, an agreement helps the parties achieve shared expectations.
- **A conflict-reduction tool.** The communication process involved in establishing an agreement helps the provider and customer better understand each other's context. As a result, misunderstandings occur less often and are more readily and amicably resolved.

- **A living document.** The parties manage their agreement — and their relationship — by monitoring service delivery, holding periodic reviews, and negotiating changes as deemed necessary.
- **An objective process for gauging service effectiveness.** In creating an SLA, the provider and customer agree on the service indicators they'll track and examine to gauge service adequacy. These indicators provide a context for open and cooperative discussion about service effectiveness.

If you'd like your SLA to succeed
Unfortunately, not all SLAs are successful. Some fail to function as hoped. Others never even get completed because the parties to it run into problems while attempting to create it. Clearly, the process of creating and managing an SLA is not without pitfalls. During more than a decade of providing SLA training and consulting, I've identified six key contributors to SLA success:

1. Use the SLA as a win-win tool, not as a weapon. You can't build agreement by clobbering the other party.
2. Don't arbitrarily rush SLA development. It's a big job. You will fail if you view your SLA effort as a start-today, done-tomorrow project.
3. Create the SLA collaboratively, not unilaterally. If it's not an agreement, don't call it an agreement.
4. Include all key elements. Most SLAs I've reviewed for clients do a moderately good job of capturing the service elements. Many, however, omit one or more of the management elements necessary to ensure success.
5. Learn how to create an SLA. Attempting to establish an SLA without understanding potential traps and trouble spots creates more problems than it solves.
6. Manage the implemented SLA. An SLA that is not managed dies upon implementation.

See my website (www.nkarten.com) for more articles on how to create successful SLAs and for information on my on-site SLA workshop and my 160-page handbook, *How to Establish Service Level Agreements*.