

# PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



N A M I

K A R T E N  
*Speaker, Consultant, Author*

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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*
- *Communication Gaps and How to Close Them*

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## Saga of a Shredded Suitcase

**A**s a frequent flier, I've had that disconcerting experience in which I go to Point A and my luggage goes to Point B. Once, my luggage went to a more exotic destination than I did. I have a fantasy that some day, my luggage will go to Point A and I'll go to Exotic Point B.

On one trip, though, rather than parting company with me, my luggage parted company with itself. As my suitcase emerged on the conveyor belt, I saw, with horror, that it was mangled. Ohnooo!! The zipper was ripped halfway open, and the top of the suitcase was bent back so as to reveal its contents. (We are warned to wear clean underwear in case of an accident. To that I now add, *pack* clean underwear in case of nosy onlookers as your shredded suitcase passes by on the conveyor belt!)

Normally, I see these zany experiences as stories for future presentations. Not this time, though. This time I was angry! Off I went to the Customer Service Desk, dragging my tattered suitcase behind me. And there, I had that rare experience of service personnel who excelled at anticipating customer needs.

### Anticipation aforethought

The service rep peered at my suitcase and said it must have gotten caught on the conveyor system in back. Oh great, I thought, picturing my unmentionables strewn all over the place. But before I could vent my concern, she said she'd check in back in case anything had fallen out. When she returned, she said she hadn't found anything, but I'd better look in my suitcase and make sure nothing was missing.

To open my suitcase, I had to rip apart the rest of the zipper. Oh, how much happier I would have been if it had simply gone to Exotic Point B.

I riffled through my stuff. Nothing was missing. Unfortunately, though, my suitcase had just taken its last trip. Just as I was about to screech, "NowwhatdoIdo?" the service rep said she'd get me another bag. It was a skimpy substitute, but for this brief trip, it would suffice. Before I could ask how I'd return it, she explained that it was mine to keep.

But what about my own suitcase? Just as I was about to demand that it be fixed, she said she'd send it out to be repaired. And just as I started wondering whether it might be beyond repair, she said that if they can't fix it, they'll replace it. And before I could inquire how I could check on the status of the repair, she gave me the phone number of the repair shop.

And just as I was about to ask how I could call the Customer Service Desk if I had questions, she said, "Here is my name and phone number. Please call me if you have any questions."

As exasperating as this experience was, it aptly illustrated one of the key attributes of a savvy service provider: the ability to anticipate customer needs, particularly during times of stress. And (once I simmered down), I realized that I did indeed have a story for future presentations. I hope that one day I'll get to tell it in an exotic location, and that both my suitcase and I will enjoy the trip.



## CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

## How to End (or Even Avoid) Disputes

**T**hink about some of the disputes you've been involved in. How can you keep these clashes from escalating? It's a special skill to be able to gracefully terminate disputes with none of the parties suffering from black eyes or bruised egos. Even better, of course, is to keep the matter from reaching dispute level in the first place. Next time you find yourself embroiled in a divisive difference of opinion, try the following:

✓ **Listen carefully to the other person without interrupting.** If your goal is to trigger the other person's anger, interrupting every five words will do the trick. Otherwise — and it's not easy when you hear outrageous claims made about you, your work or those you care about — clamp down on your vocal cords and let the other person state his or her case. Listen with the genuine intention of trying to understand the other person's perspective. You'll gain a much better sense of the person's concerns. And different though those views might be from your own, to the person who holds them, they're real, valid and important.

✓ **When it's your turn, present your case calmly.** State the facts and state them accurately. Don't try to become a master intimidator. Make your points concisely and even-temperedly so that the important facts don't float away on a stream of hot air. And watch that tone of voice and body language; speaking in a blaming tone or with blaming gestures may make the other party not at all disposed to considering your ideas. In fact, the more successful you are at speaking in a calm, quiet tone, the more receptive the other party will be to listen to you.

✓ **Explain, don't argue.** If you're puzzled or upset by something the other person has said or done, resist the temptation to hurl accusations. Instead, explain your reaction. Providing an explanation is important: Disputes often arise because of an innocent misunderstanding that can be easily rectified. If you can determine that this is the case, you may discover you're both on the same side of the issue.


✓ **Let the other person save face.** Although the urge to humiliate can be strong when you're eager to get your way, people are more likely to accept your viewpoint if you make it easy for them to do so. Once you scream, "You're an idiot!!" so they hear you on Jupiter, it's a lot harder to reorient the discussion so the other person can save face. You may not agree with the other person's

ideas, but try to respect his or her right to an opinion that differs from yours. In fact, see if you can empathize with it. Rare is the situation in which you can't find merit in the other person's views. If you can avoid being rigidly and vehemently one-sided, you're more likely to resolve the dispute to your mutual satisfaction — and that, after all, is the ultimate objective.

✓ **Swap places.** This technique can have some interesting outcomes. For some agreed upon brief duration, have a conversation as though each of you is the other person. Try to get into each other's head, and explain the other person's viewpoint as if you're that person. Or get together with colleagues and create a role play in which you take the role of other person, and someone else stands in as you. Or simply imagine yourself as the other person, and as that person, make a case for his/her perspective. Don't be surprised if you actually begin to see the other person's perspective in ways you hadn't before. And with an awareness of that perspective, you may see a new way of presenting your ideas — one that takes that perspective into account.

✓ **Look for a win-win solution.** Even if you feel adamantly that your position is the only acceptable one, look for ways that the other person can benefit. If you're determined to fight till you win, you may succeed, but don't believe for a moment that you won't pay a price. Word of mouth has a way of turning today's victories into tomorrow's losses, as you build a reputation as someone who's difficult to deal with. And what does it say about you if the only way you can get your way is by bludgeoning the other person into submission. If each of you is willing to give a little, together you can gain a lot.

### Decibel dampening

If reacting automatically or at a lofty decibel level has been your style, dare to try some new behaviors. Be alert for the next time someone provokes you. If today is an average day, you may not have long to wait. Start by taking a deep breath and counting to two billion. If the matter hasn't diminished to sub-dispute levels or disappeared altogether, use these guidelines and then use them some more until they become second nature. If you treat people in a respectful, let's-figure-this-out-together manner even when you disagree with them, you'll save wear and tear on yourself. In the process, you may find your differences aren't so major after all. 

## ATTITUDES

## How to Get Rich Quick

**R**etirement may still be eons away, but it's never too soon to start planning. I decided to figure out how much money my husband and I have to accumulate so that when we retire, we can live beyond our means. I set up a spreadsheet to calculate the impact of investing various amounts over various periods of time at various rates of growth, and plugged in some numbers.

When I looked at the bottom line, I was delighted. More than that, I was ecstatic. It showed that if we put away \$50 a month at 5% from now till the Age of Retirement, we would be worth seven billion dollars. That's what it said: seven billion dollars. Amazing what you can accomplish with sound fiscal management.

Then the little help desk in my head said, Hold on just a second. Does this result make sense? At first I ignored the question, because I was so enjoying the prospect of rolling in dough. But the help desk was persistent, and finally I had to admit that the total did seem to be off by maybe a zero or two. I double-checked my logic and found one very minor glitch. Couldn't make much of a difference, I said to myself, hoping and praying.

I corrected the error and looked at the bottom line. Let's just say it was closer to seven *thousand* dollars than seven billion. Gone were the visions of a delectable future of summer ski trips to New Zealand, generous donations to my favorite causes, and frequent dining at restaurants where you don't have to stand in line to give your order.

Do you question the reasonableness of the results you get when you do your own calculations? And if you provide computer support, do you encourage your customers to question the reasonableness of their own results and

those they review? One of the most compelling features of computers is the speed with which data can be manipulated and twiddled and tweaked and queried. But it's this very speed that lulls people into complacency. It's so easy to become mesmerized by the immediacy of a result that you don't question its validity.

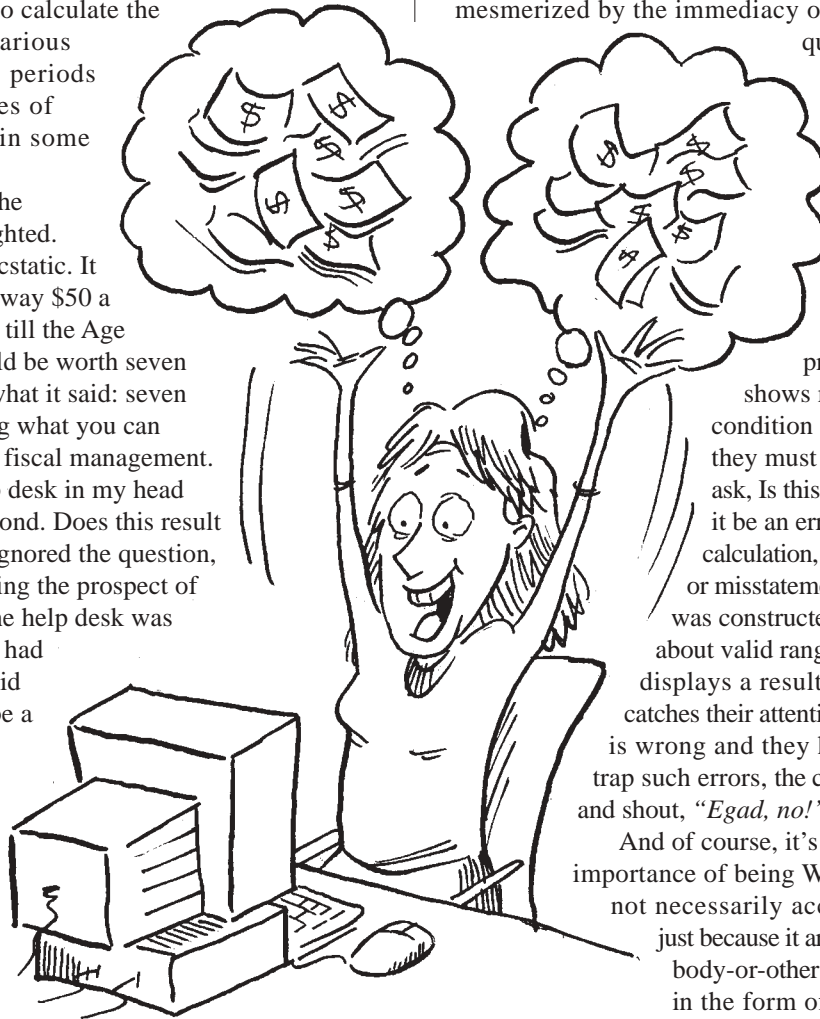
That's why it's a good idea to help your customers develop a healthy skepticism of computer-generated information. Encourage them to think about the reasonableness of their results. When they produce a report that

shows more instances of some condition than they anticipated, they must learn to automatically ask, Is this result accurate? Or could it be an error caused by a miskeyed calculation, misplaced decimal point, or misstatement in the way the query was constructed? They need to think about valid ranges so that when a report displays a result outside that range, it catches their attention. After all, if the result is wrong and they haven't taken steps to trap such errors, the computer won't stand up and shout, "Egad, no!"

And of course, it's a good idea to stress the importance of being Web-wary. Information is not necessarily accurate, valid or helpful just because it arrives via email or somebody-or-other's snazzy site. Gullibility, in the form of instant acceptance, is escalating, yet a small dose of skepti-

cism and a questioning attitude can save you from passing misleading or damaging information to others or acting on it yourself as though it were The Truth.

If nothing else, periodically remind your customers (and yourself!) to eyeball results and ask, Do these numbers make sense? Does this result seem sound? Is this information believable? Thanks to computers and a splendid spreadsheet snafu, I've had the opportunity to be very, *very* rich. Yet how glad I am that I questioned my results while still young enough to survive the shock of learning the truth.



## SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS

### When is an Agreement Not an Agreement?

**S**ervice level agreements (SLAs) have proven to be a valuable mechanism for improving communication, managing expectations, and creating trusting relationships between providers and clients. However, if established in the wrong way or for the wrong reasons, SLAs can exacerbate the very problems they are intended to solve. Consider these three examples:

- **Company #1:** A director felt his clients complained too much. Annoyed by what he described as nonstop grouching, he instructed his staff to “create an SLA to stop the complaints.”
- **Company #2:** A chief information officer directed his staff to produce a service level agreement “to make our clients more cooperative.”
- **Company #3:** A group I visited was developing a service level agreement to improve its partnership with its clients. Partnership? Great idea, but when I inquired about how clients had reacted to the idea of an SLA, I learned not a single client had been invited to participate in its development — or even to provide input.

#### Creating a common understanding

To talk about an SLA under these circumstances is a contradiction in terms. An SLA is, first and foremost, an *agreement*. Creating an SLA entails discussion, negotiation, compromise and collaboration. Calling something an agreement that captures the views of the provider only — who then foists it upon clients in hopes of stifling complaints or enforcing cooperation — doesn’t make it an agreement.

In fact, the truth is just the reverse: A so-called agreement that is actually a unilateral, do-it-our-way-because-we-said-so document is an excellent way to make a bad situation worse. Not only will such an SLA not reverse troublesome client attitudes; if clients are dissatisfied


with their service experience, a provider-imposed SLA will increase their dissatisfaction. Simply stated, an SLA cannot succeed if clients view it as something done *to* them, rather than *with* them.

#### First, strengthen the relationship

So what are the options when a provider views its clients as complaining too much, being uncooperative, or resisting partnership, as in these three companies? In such situations, I’d suggest putting any thought of an SLA on hold, and instead focusing on strengthening the relationship with clients.

How? By taking some small, but visible, steps to gather client feedback, eliminate sources of miscommunication, address grievances, and help clients understand the rationale for decisions they see as arbitrary. Most important, strengthening the relationship entails taking the time to understand — *really* understand — the client perspective. What, exactly, is leading clients to behave in ways that the provider experiences as complaining, uncooperative, or unreasonable?

In my consulting work, I find that most provider personnel rarely talk with their clients except in conjunction with specific products, projects or problems. As a result, their understanding of their clients is limited. These groups may benefit from an SLA, but more beneficial than rushing to produce an SLA is creating more opportunities to talk — and to listen.

An SLA used as a communication tool rather than a weapon can improve service because all parties involved understand what they can reasonably expect of each other. So if you are considering establishing an SLA, think carefully: Are you doing so primarily to whip those pesky clients into line? If so, stop *now* before you invest time and effort in a solution that’s certain to backfire. 

See my website ([www.nkarten.com](http://www.nkarten.com)) for information on my customized, in-house SLA workshop and my handbook, [How to Establish Service Level Agreements](#).

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