

# The Roles of the Senior-Level Executive

*Gail Scott, president, Gail Scott and Associates, Meadowbrook, Pennsylvania*

Improving customer satisfaction is on everyone's agenda, and reaches to every level of the organization. Senior executives may spend a lot of time stressing the importance of good customer service, but merely thinking about customers will not improve service to them. Without specific action, customer service plans remain just a dream. Although middle managers are understandably more involved in customer service initiatives because they manage the employees who provide the services directly, you as the senior leader must also play a major part. In this article, the sixth and final in our series, we identify the roles of senior leaders in championing the service cause. We hope you see yourself in this description.

## STEWARD

Managers and employees juggle multiple work priorities everyday. With all their responsibilities, they can easily lose sight of the importance of good customer service. Your role is to redirect their eyes, ears, and minds to the customer focus. Your organization's newsletter is one of the tools you can employ to perform as a steward. Write a service column that repeats your service goals and targets and that encourages everyone to participate in and take ownership of the initiative. Also, give and ask for service updates and highlight specific actions and results in every meeting and forum.

## ROLE MODEL

Everyone in the organization watches to make sure that your actions match your rhetoric; talk is cheap. Although being "on" all the time is hard, your visibility on the units communicates your function as the role model of your message. Talk to customers about their experiences and shadow employees as they perform their duties. These "rounds" allow you to observe the daily activities and subsequent conflicts from a staff and customer perspective. Try making these visits with two or three other senior leaders to ensure that your observation is not biased by your own preference or point of view. Think about questions you and your partners can ask staff, such as:

- What do you wish you could do to satisfy customers?
- What are three things that make satisfying customers difficult for you?
- What are customers telling you they want most from all of us?

In addition, make sure that your behavior is consistent with the service behaviors you expect from staff, especially while doing these rounds. Hold or open doors for customers and staff; smile, say hello, and acknowledge people's presence; make eye contact; and listen intently if people stop you along the way. If you have to deal with an upset customer, ask a staff member to join you to observe how you handle the situation and to process the experience.

By being visible, you can identify problems that can be fixed and you can give credible monthly reports of the problems and solutions. As everyone in the organization becomes witness to your proactive approach to understanding and improving service, your service message can spread and your action can inspire others to do the same.

### **CHALLENGER**

Unfortunately, many organizations harbor a good-old-boy network and/or untouchable personnel. As a result, some people (including physicians, long-term employees, and well-known members of the community) get more respect and are less accountable for their actions than others. As a senior leader, your job is to challenge and eliminate these norms to ensure that everyone in the organization is on an even footing and is treated with respect and dignity. You must instill the mindset that internal interaction between staff affects the overall external service output. Teach employees feedback-giving skills so they become more comfortable communicating with one another, even with higher-level personnel. Establish a culture in which offensive behavior, such as sexual harassment and abuse of power, is not tolerated.

### **PLANNER AND DOER**

Many teams spend too much time planning service improvement, but they never move beyond the dialog. As a senior leader, you must not only take part in the planning but you must also move along the doing. As a planner, attend planning meetings to help teams (1) develop clear missions, create acceptable goals, and establish realistic timelines; and (2) discover weaknesses that contribute to slow (or lack of) productivity. As a doer, you must help teams get over their planning hurdles. Help them prioritize issues, and push for immediate action and results. Focus on a few key opportunities that really will make a difference to customers, such as streamlining the scheduling process and decreasing customer wait times. If making those changes means taking people from their normal work schedules to serve on project teams, then make that happen. No one can call these shots and mobilize the teams better and faster than you, so use that advantage.

### **SUPPORTER**

Middle managers need your support as they work with their teams, but your support must go beyond giving them pep talks or motivational speeches. You should provide them opportunities to apply the service concepts. You can

- *create mentor teams, which comprise managers in all levels.* In this setting, managers get together once a month to share initiatives they have implemented and the successes and pitfalls of those initiatives.
- *devote a portion of your leadership meetings to building service skills.* These skill-building sessions should mirror what you want your managers to do with their employees. Provide coaches for managers who may be uncomfortable with these training opportunities.
- *meet with managers regularly.* These meetings give you a chance to communicate that all managers are accountable for service improvement. You can ask the managers the following questions during these meetings:
  1. What has your team done this month that has made a difference to your customers?
  2. What can I help you with this month that will improve your customers' feedback about your area?
  3. What are you learning about yourself and your staff from this customer service process?
  4. What can you share with other teams and managers that will improve us all?

## **PEACEKEEPER**

Internal customer relationships are the key to impressive external service. As a senior leader, your role is to engender peace and harmony among all staff members, because a harmonious environment naturally produces teamwork and efficiency. Sanction departmental visits and job shadowing as ways to make employees understand each other's job function. In addition, create internal customer report cards that the staff can fill out to give feedback about each other. Some of the items worthy of evaluating include:

- friendliness of staff
- responsiveness to requests
- willingness to solve problems
- ability to provide useful information
- ability to follow up and follow through with requests or questions

Above all else, however, you and your senior leadership team must first set a harmonious example. If your team includes people who do not work well together and who focus on competition rather than collaboration, getting the rest of the organization to buy into your ideas will be impossible. Help members of your team get to know one another as people. Assign them to subteams that include people they may refuse to or may not normally work with. Most importantly,

make sure to mix up the team, merging people of different ages, races, genders, or abilities.

### **CHEERLEADER**

The best way to encourage managers and employees is by recognizing and rewarding their efforts. By telling success stories, you communicate that improvement is attainable. By telling the conflicts of the stories, you communicate the realism and you teach by example. Either way, your sharing of these stories goes a long way toward inspiring and cheering on those involved in the process. Writing thank you notes and reading letters from grateful patients and families at public employee gatherings also are good ways to recognize efforts. You can reward individual or team success and contribution without breaking your budget. Although monetary reward is always a good incentive, little gestures, such as free donuts and coffee for the department, let people know that they are valued and their contribution makes a difference.

It may be difficult to attend to these behaviors, particularly when you are being pulled in so many directions. However, service to customers will not improve without focus and commitment. You, senior leaders, are critical to the process.

For more information on the concepts in this article, please contact Gail Scott at (215) 887-1021 or at [gscott@gailscottassociates.com](mailto:gscott@gailscottassociates.com).