

## **Why Customer Feedback and Training are Not Enough**

Discover the missing link in daily operations for leading associates' involvement to retain customers.

Programs play a critical role in executing and maintaining consistency as well as supporting the structure and discipline of the enterprise. Through policies and procedures programs communicate the actions from senior management to the frontlines and define, for the enterprise, what it needs to accomplish in order to retain customers.

Practically every enterprise uses customer service programs as a part of a formal learning system for the associates of that enterprise. Programs contain specific **training** processes, sets of actions, to enable the frontline leaders to manage workplace experiences and relationships on a daily basis. These programs also provide **feedback** for associates from both colleagues and supervisors. The purpose of executing customer service programs is for frontline managers to become proficient at delivering the services and products customers come to expect.

One particular "best practice" suggests that another equally, if not more, important experience to continue associate's workplace learning is that of asking, inquiry or questioning. "Asking" as a process, set of actions, which is mostly unconscious and non-verbal thus difficult to manage. Asking is often better lead through workplace relationships and experiences.

### **Managing and leading workplace relationships and experiences**

An example of managing workplace relationships/experiences would be when a new associate joins an enterprise they are trained on what to do and how to deal with the three primary workplace relationship areas of customers, associates, and partners (internal and external). These programs are usually managed as "Customer Service", "Teamwork", and "Collaboration."

If there are failures or lapses in the delivery of products and services, while they can be caused by infrastructure, they often occur on the "people-side" of operations through workplace relationships and experiences. On the frontlines of daily operations, workplace relationships and experiences are so intertwined that they practically become one as far as cause and effects are concerned.

Continuing to manage relationships/experiences for the long-term requires winning the "hearts and minds" of associates by leading relationships and experiences as well. Our research indicates that for team leaders to continue the involvement of associates they must be able to maintain their focus, learning,

and commitments on a daily basis. Also best accomplished with activities as it takes processes, or sets of actions, to lead workplace relationships and experiences not only with customers, but also among fellow associates and partners as well.

While managing workplace relationships/experiences within the enterprise creates formal focus, learning, and commitments for associates, it is the informal aspects that leading relationships/experiences both compliments and continues through daily operations. For enterprises it is CRL (Customer Relationship Leadership) for their CRM. Workplace studies indicate that as much as 75% of learning is informal learning. This means that over the long-term associates will get 25% of their learning from managed programs and 75% through workplace relationships and experiences, which occur informally through daily operations.

Whether you are talking about managing or leading associates the bottom line is that at the end of the operations day it is actions that get results. This is why processes, or sets of actions, are so important whether they are a part of systems or programs from senior management or are processes initiated on the frontlines. Either formally or informally, team leaders need processes to both manage and lead workplace relationships and experiences.

The processes for leading associates should be viewed as secondary and to compliment or continue/maintain the managerial processes/programs. Beginning with a frontline team leader and leading the “how” for the “people-side” of daily operations to execute the “what” needs to be done from senior management. An old idea brought back new--this practice was present, even if informally, in the ethics of great entrepreneurs with names such as Walton, Disney, Watson, and Kroc.

### **Developing a “Secondary Asking Process”**

Of the processes which team leaders can lead themselves, the one we find missing the most often is that of asking/inquiry/questioning. Especially the non-verbal or informal aspects of this process that accounts for the majority of learning, communication, thought, and emotion—all of which are critical to maintain focus, learning, and commitment.

Basic to human nature, we all from childhood have formed and shaped our learning by “asking/questioning,” again mostly non-verbal and unconsciously, through our thoughts, emotions, and communications. While most enterprises make sure that associates get feedback for learning they overlook the fact that feedback supports learning but by itself does not initiate or continue learning.

Few enterprises place emphasis on involving associates in the asking/questioning processes, or activities, for the purpose of continuing

learning, focus, and commitments in daily operations. The asking process also maintains a third and often lacking type of feedback for associates (in addition to feedbacks from colleagues and supervisors); that of feedback from the daily activities themselves.

### **The benefits of asking**

Why have a secondary asking process at all? A frontline “Secondary Asking Process” can be a critical solution to the caught-in-the-middle syndrome by providing team leaders a career skill for activities to maintain associates’ pride, passion, involvement, self-motivation, intentions, cooperation, accountability, and attention. The process enables team leaders to lead workplace relationships/experiences simultaneously with managing them.

As a team leader initiates the asking process with their associates they create a practice by repeating the actions in a cycle. These actions create the following not simply for customers but for fellow associates and partners (internal and external) as well:

- ❑ Invitations which **demonstrate intentions**
- ❑ Asking which **fosters learning**
- ❑ Feedback that **maintains focus** on “critical” activities as well as a **customer dialogue**.
- ❑ Sharing which **develops assessments** or informal measurements.
- ❑ Thanking, the pivot point of the practice cycle, upon which it repeats and is crucial for **appreciation and recognition**.

The practice becomes a tool for an enterprise to take a user-centered approach to leadership. Working backwards for alignment by leading the “how” to compliment/continue the management of the “what” needs to be done. Proving the value of programs by involving all levels of the organization.

Unlike existing “asking/inquiry programs” initiated by management, this practice is merely a process, set of actions, with a primary purpose of providing frontline team leaders with a skill and tool for keeping associates customer-focused, learning, and committed in daily operations.

### **About the Author**

George Reavis is a principal and founder of ThankingCustomers.com. He is a practitioner with over thirty years of experience in customer service. Contact him at [george@thankingcustomers.com](mailto:george@thankingcustomers.com) .