



TUNING IN TO THE OUTSIDE

There has been much discussion in recent years about incorporating quality management techniques into our processes and corporate cultures. But, the core of quality management is a customer focus. That is, having an outwardly oriented company. You may call them customers, clients, or stakeholders. The name is irrelevant. The point of this article is that too little time is spent by organizations listening to their customers, and that is an important aspect of a successful business.

Most people judge organizations based on interactions with the company's representatives. Customers tend to transfer feelings about individuals into generalized impressions about the company. Think about your last encounter with a receptionist when trying to reach someone who could answer your questions. Was the person helpful by routing your call to the appropriate employee? Was your inquiry met by a rushed voice, a curt response, and a transfer before you had finished posing your question? How did you feel? Did you think, "Boy, are they having a bad day"? Or did you say, "What a miserable firm, who else can I deal with?"

We often talk about the importance of first impressions, and usually administrative personnel are the ones we think of, but other staff members are equally critical to making and maintaining a positive image. If, for example, your clients regularly deal with technical employees, you may need to help those key people more carefully listen and effectively communicate. Sharing information about customer likes and dislikes with others in your firm is important too.

How can you look at your firm and its employees from your customers' points of view? Opinion or satisfaction surveys are an excellent way to get input. Keep in mind that anyone who participates in your survey is doing you a favor; so, design the data collection instrument in an easy to complete fashion. Also, before you start that process, define your objectives. Analyze the results in a timely manner and take appropriate action(s). Remember, the goal is to improve how you operate, so in turn, you increase customer satisfaction. Sometimes, in looking at a company from a customer point of view, more candid and objective information can be obtained if the inquiries come from a third party. While surveys can be an important source of information, simply meeting with clients, asking provocative questions and listening are also great ways of gaining intelligence on how your customers view your company.

To illustrate by example, let me share with you a brief story from a Principal of a professional service firm... Recently, a senior project manager left this firm and the Principal spent time meeting with clients served by this manager. What he learned was that at least one major client assumed that the manager had been asked to leave. When the individual asked probing questions, he learned that the client had been displeased with the manager's work and communications with them. The firm had been at risk of losing the client, and didn't even know it! The moral of this story is that many customers will not take the initiative or are uncomfortable in relating dissatisfaction. They will, however, communicate with their actions by choosing another service or product provider. Therefore, it is essential that you periodically ask questions to learn "how are we doing?"

Whatever means you employ, ask the necessary questions that will give you suggestions on how to improve. Listen to your customers... before it's too late.

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