

FRONT LINE CUSTOMER SERVICE

- Communication
- Customer Focus
- Handling Difficult People
- Problem Solving
- Adaptability/Flexibility

COMMUNICATION

Clearly conveys and receives information and ideas to individuals or groups. Invites and constructively responds to feedback. Keeps others informed as appropriate. Demonstrates effective written, oral and listening skills. Maintains a positive attitude consistently, despite difficult or challenging circumstances, and communicates positively when working with others.

Organizations thrive when the flow of information and ideas is timely and accurate. When quality of communication is a consistent high priority. Good communication results in mutual understanding, harmony, and action. Poor communication wastes time and resources, hinders goal accomplishment, and sours relationships. Leaders communicate to inform, persuade, coach, and inspire. People at all levels share ideas, learn from each other, and keep each other informed about problems, opportunities, progress, and solutions. Effective communicators provide a clear message that is understood by everyone in the audience. They are attentive listeners who are open to others' ideas. They deliver a message that is consistent but fine-tuned for a particular audience. It has just the right tone. The perfect pacing. The best possible wording. The audience finds the message to be crisp. Relevant. Impactful. Effective communication, whether written or verbal, enables you to convey your vision, to point the way forward, and to energize others to work together and pull in the same direction.

➤ **Exceptional**

Delivers messages in a clear, compelling, and concise manner.

Actively listens and checks for understanding.

Articulates messages in a way that is broadly understandable.

Adjusts communication content and style to meet the needs of diverse stakeholders.

Models and encourages the expression of diverse ideas and opinions.

➤ **Consistent**

Is effective in a variety of communication settings: one-on-one, small and large groups, or among diverse styles and position levels

Attentively listens to others.

Adjusts to fit the audience and the message.

Provides timely and helpful information to others across the organization.

Encourages the open expression of diverse ideas and opinions.

➤ **Inconsistent**

Has difficulty communicating clear written and verbal messages.

Tends to always communicate the same way without adjusting to diverse audiences.

Doesn't take the time to listen or understand others' viewpoints.

Doesn't consistently share information others need to do their jobs.

Resources:

Adams, S. (2013, November 19). How to communicate effectively at work. Forbes.

Charan, R. (2012, June 21). The discipline of listening. Harvard Business Review Blog Network.

Cherry, K. (n.d.). Types of nonverbal communication: 8 Major nonverbal behaviors. About.com Psychology

Cohan, P. (2012, December 4). 5 Ways to communicate more clearly. Inc.

Nierenberg, A. (2005, February 17). Adapting to different communication styles. Small Business Advocate.

Bailey, E. P., Jr. (2007). Writing and speaking at work (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Bough, B., & Condrill, J. (2005). 101 Ways to improve your communication skills instantly (4th ed.). San Antonio, TX: GoalMinds, Inc.

Garcia, H. F. (2012). The power of communication: Skills to build trust, inspire loyalty, and lead effectively, Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press

Hamilton, C. (2013). Communicating for results: A guide for business and the professions. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.

Weeks H. (2008). Failure to communicate: How conversations go wrong and what you can do to right them. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

CUSTOMER FOCUS

Discovers, understands and meets needs of customers (internal and external). Gives customer needs priority and responds quickly to customer concerns. Builds positive customer relationships. Does not allow internal company issues or personal feelings to interfere with customer service.

The most important people in any organization are customers. Whether for profit or non-profit, community-based, social serving, or governmental agency, there is always a customer of some kind at the heart of most every action. Without customers, it's likely your organization would not exist. In some roles, there is a direct link to external customers and in others the connection is more indirect. Or the customer you primarily serve is inside the organization. Bottom line – those who please customers the most will win. Winning organizations are always customer oriented and responsive. Winning strategies always include a customer-facing lens. Being successful means continuously paying attention to customer needs and adapting as these evolve. You need to evaluate and flex, understand and respond. A focus on customers opens up thinking, drives innovation, and creates a responsive and agile organization. Internal or external – they're equally important. It's hard to develop a high level of customer satisfaction externally if those within the organization are disengaged.

➤ **Exceptional**

Anticipates customer needs and provides services that are beyond customer expectations.

Uses customer insights to drive and guide the development of new offerings.

Serves as a strategic partner to build, grow, and maintain profitable and long-lasting relationships with key accounts.

➤ **Consistent**

Gains insight into customer needs.

Identifies opportunities that benefit the customer.

Builds and delivers solutions that meet customer expectations.

Establishes and maintains effective customer relationships.

➤ **Inconsistent**

Is unaware of customer expectations.

Acts on incomplete or inaccurate understanding of customer needs.

Conducts work activities from an internal, operational standpoint.

Fails to build effective relationships with key customers.

Resources:

Hall, A. (2013, May 17). Listening to customers yields success. Forbes

Spiegelman, P. (2010, January 18). Connect with your customers. Entrepreneur.

Merholz, P. (2009, March 6). The best way to understand your customers. Harvard Business Review Blog Network.

Steinkirchner, S. (2012, August 22). 5 Ways to improve your customer service. Forbes.

Young Entrepreneur Council. (2013, December 4). 4 Ways to turn an angry customer into a satisfied one at your startup. Upstart Business Journal.

Cockerell, L. (2013). The customer rules: The 39 essential rules for delivering sensational service. New York, NY: Crown Publishing Group.

Curtin, S. (2013). Delight your customers: 7 Simple ways to raise your customer service from ordinary to extraordinary. New York, NY: AMACOM.

HANDLING DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Able to constructively deal with customers who are upset or challenging. Listens well and allows the person to vent. Maintains personal and procedural boundaries, moving interaction towards a satisfactory conclusion. Does not allow harsh words or strong negativity to affect his/her composure.

➤ **Consistent**

Consistently relates to all kinds of people inside and outside the organization.

Able to defuse even high-tension situations comfortably.

Never loses composure when dealing with an irate customer and always acts professionally.

Continually handles emotions well under pressure and does not let frustration show when dealing with difficult people and situations.

➤ **Inconsistent**

Unwilling to handle criticism and complaints from customers (even if unsubstantiated).

Does not listen well to customers and becomes defensive when confronted with a difficult customer.

Appears to not listen or is too busy constructing his/her own response.

Gets caught up in emotional reaction versus trying to understand and listen to the customers' perspective on the situation.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Sees and is able to define problems and find causes. Owns the problem until resolution. Finds workable solutions or works with other resources to resolve the issue. Proactively implements solutions and changes as needed to keep small problems from becoming big problems. Looks beyond the obvious and doesn't stop at the surface symptoms.

➤ Consistent

Always looks beyond the obvious and doesn't stop at the first answers.

Personally follows up with the customer to ensure that the problem is resolved.

Once a problem is uncovered, he/she works with internal or external resources to ensure the issue doesn't happen again.

Anticipates problems and makes recommendations of how processes or issues can proactively be resolved.

Works to find root causes and doesn't just focus on the symptoms and superficial causes.

Involves customers or stakeholders when generating new solutions or alternatives.

Holds self personally responsible for ensuring new solutions are implemented successfully.

➤ Inconsistent

Jumps to conclusions without exploring options to resolve the problem.

May be a fire-ready-aim type.

May miss the complexity of a problem and force-sit it to what he/she is most comfortable with.

Responds quickly without full follow-through or analysis to get it off of his/her desk.

May be stuck in the past and what worked before; cannot think creatively to resolve problems in different or innovative ways.

ADAPTABILITY/FLEXIBILITY

Maintains focus and positive attitude amidst change or when under pressure. Able to modify or shift behaviors in response to changing conditions, new information or customers' needs. Accepts and embraces changes in his/her job or in the organization. Maintains productivity and effectiveness in spite of changes. Is able to see the merits of perspectives different than his/her own.

Those skilled at situational adaptability recognize the need to be flexible and act differently because no two situations are exactly alike. They know that using the same approach, tone, and style in different settings may be consistent but not necessarily effective. You wouldn't behave the same way in a team brainstorming discussion as you would when managing a customer complaint or navigating a politically charged strategy session. Quickly adjusting and fine-tuning your behavior in real time allows you to be versatile in different situations and interactions with others. Situational adaptability means paying attention to circumstances and adjusting accordingly. Bringing empathy in times of stress and change, firm direction in times of uncertainty, or diplomacy in times of conflict. Continuously gauge the impact you're having and stay alert to make adjustments to your demeanor and approach. Be flexible to meet the needs of the moment. The outcome will be ease of transaction and effectiveness of interaction.

➤ **Exceptional**

Picks up on the need to change personal, interpersonal, and leadership behavior quickly.

Observes situational and group dynamics and selects best-fit approach.

Seamlessly adapts style to fit the specific needs of others.

➤ **Consistent**

Picks up on situational cues and adjusts in the moment.

Readily adapts personal, interpersonal, and leadership behavior.

Understands that different situations may call for different approaches.

Can act differently depending on the circumstances.

➤ **Inconsistent**

Uses same style and approach regardless of the situation.

Fails to notice changing situational demands.

Expects others to adjust to his/her preferred style and approach.

Things being true to self is all that matters.

Doesn't take time to understand interpersonal dynamics.