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CUSTOMER

SERVICE

ACTIVITIES

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SKILL-BUILDERS

INTRODUCTION

Quality Service

The push for service excellence is a common theme in organizational life today. We all know that keeping customers satisfied is what helps our organizations build and foster valuable reputations for dependability and quality. We also know that the customers' perception of service is fundamental to their degree of satisfaction. The practical meaning of good customer service extends far beyond technical excellence.

Providing quality service requires the ability to remain flexible and respond to the changing conditions and needs of the customer. Service representatives must have a combination of good interpersonal skills, competent knowledge of the products and services, and proficient problem-solving abilities. Understanding customer expectations and the basic components of customer service helps service providers to build these appropriate skills. Therefore, training and skill development play a critical role in any successful service improvement effort.

The activities presented in this binder can enhance your customer service-training program in an innovative and enjoyable way. They are intended to stimulate discussion and learning by actively engaging all participants. Because participants draw on their own experiences, these hands-on activities help to illustrate, emphasize, or summarize points in a very effective way.

In general, each activity provides training in several different customer service skills. The activities are intended to pave the way for the main subject area, or they may become the foundation on which to build the desired concepts. The activities cover eight different applications relative to quality customer service skills. Each application is discussed below in further detail.

1   CHANGE

This application identifies the need to be flexible, adaptable, and open to new ideas in order to understand and react to changing environments and situations.

Customers expect service representatives to be open to comments and recommendations and to be flexible when particular circumstances may require deviations from policy in order to meet their needs. To create this level of service, service representatives need to be adaptable and willing to learn on the spot. They need to stay close to their customers, remain aware of changing needs, and respond to them in a positive and timely manner.

2 COMMUNICATION

The focus of this application is on how people talk, listen, and express their ideas. It covers nonverbal body language as well as the spoken and written word.

The best intentions can be misconstrued because of poor communication skills. Satisfying customer expectations and improving perceptions requires solid communication skills. Service representatives must be able to communicate a message clearly to avoid misinterpretation and project a positive image of the organization.

3 DATA USAGE

This application highlights the ability to interpret data and information as well as to utilize resources effectively.

One of the main requirements for providing quality service is the ability to deliver products or services to customers in an efficient and timely manner — without error. Service accuracy is based on the ability to utilize complete, concise, and clear information. In order to achieve this, service representatives need to know what resources are available to them and how data can be accessed. They also must be able to observe, interpret, and apply the information accurately to achieve and maintain customer confidence.

4 EXCELLENCE

This application emphasizes knowing customers and their needs, exceeding their expectations, and providing added value to enhance service.

Because service is intangible, it is often difficult to define what makes "quality service." The service experience is only a memory for the customer; therefore, the goal of the service representative is to create uniqueness. Customers compare expectations to experience, so the target should be to "go the extra mile" by doing something that exceeds the minimum. This requires care, contact, and concern for and with customers. Service excellence means exceeding customer expectations by providing added value with cost effective, strategically based services and solutions.

5 NEGOTIATION

The application of negotiating is examined from a bargaining context as well as a way of resolving conflict.

The service representative must learn to utilize his/her own expertise while balancing the needs and wants of the customer. This requires a sense and understanding of what is right, acceptable, and doable. It also involves respecting the opinions of others and approaching conflict with an open mind. In order to provide service quality, it is essential to conduct negotiations with a feeling of partnership and to search for agreements that are satisfying to the customer and still meet company goals.

6 PERCEPTION

This application explores the view people have of things in the world around them and the effects that view has on concept formation and behavior.

Service representatives are vital to a customer-driven business because they serve as liaisons between the customer and the company. The results of these interactions directly influence the perception the customer has of the product or service and the company itself. Perception has a strong impact on the description and diagnosis of events as well as on subsequent behavior. It is necessary for the representative to understand the nature of customer expectations and focus on what can be done to help them. As long as customers believe that the level of service meets their needs, they will remain loyal.

7 PROBLEM SOLVING

This application includes the use of creativity and logic skills that are required to solve something that is capable of solution, such as puzzles, as well as coping with difficulties that cause problems in real life.

More than ever, organizations need employees who can identify problems and develop quick solutions. This often requires creative, "out-of-the-box" thinking. Those who give the best service do so by offering customers options in addition to innovation. A problem-solving mindset is one of the most important factors in being successful. That doesn't mean seeing everything as a potential problem, but rather thinking about what is happening, what outcomes are expected, what is needed, and what the alternatives might be.

8 TEAMWORK

The intent of this application is to underscore the importance of cooperation and interdependence within and among groups.

Research shows convincingly that teamwork is a principal factor in delivering excellent service. Organizations are holistic systems with functions that interrelate, and every employee has the ability to make a positive impact on customer relations. The highest level of service occurs when employees think of themselves and customers as a team, working together as part of the same process. Service teamwork requires an interactive community of co-workers who collaborate, overcome, and achieve together.

Choosing the Activity

The Applications Reference Guide provided on pages ix – xi shows the activities that are recommended for each of the applications listed above. An activity may be used as the main learning event or several activities may be used throughout the training session to reinforce or introduce any number of applications. For any given application, there are several activities that differ in complexity and in the demands made of the participants. Don't forget to evaluate the needs of your own customers — the training participants — and select activities that are most suitable for the intended audience.

Group Size and Time Required

Group size and the time available are considerations that will impact your choice of activities. The activities presented are very flexible and can accommodate a variety of group sizes and time constraints. The specified time required is an approximation since the actual length of the exercise depends on several factors (e.g., number of participants, extent and style of the debriefing session, etc.). The approximate time required for each activity includes several minutes for both setup and debriefing. A general guideline to follow is that the larger the group, the longer the time required. You may adjust a specific activity to meet your personal conditions by reducing or extending the "play" during a timed activity and/or the discussion period. Remember, however, that the activity is the vehicle for the learning process that occurs during the debriefing; be careful to find a comfortable balance and not to sacrifice one segment for the other.

Facilitator's Role

With experiential learning, the Facilitator's role is to help the participants make the connection(s) between the experience and the intent of the learning. There needs to be a good match between the metaphors of the event and the real-life issues. The activity itself must be set up, run, and processed with a link to the real world.

When using games and entertaining activities to teach a lesson, you must underscore the instructional message behind the fun so participants will take the training seriously. Therefore, the debriefing is a critical point in the overall process. The Facilitator leads people to insights by discussing, reflecting, and questioning what was experienced. Rather than telling the learning points of the exercise, an effective leader should guide participants into awareness.

Unless an activity calls for the Facilitator to take an active role, participants should be allowed to experience the event on their own. They should be allowed the freedom to make mistakes because this in itself is an excellent way to examine the situation and learn from its outcomes. As Facilitator, you should intervene only on questions of procedure and only to give as much detail as possible to answer the inquiries without influencing results.

Debriefing

The "debriefing" or feedback session is the most important step in making the connection between the activity and what is to be learned from it. Discussion questions and background information specific to their application have been provided with each activity. Choose only those questions that are relevant to the main topic of the training session.

The questions presented are intended to help guide participants in seeing the relevance of the activity within the context of the objective. They are by no means inclusive, and the Facilitator should feel free to add others. Remember that participant feedback during the debriefing session may lead to other areas of discussion not specifically included here. It is important to address those issues appropriate to the application and to "shelve" subjects that take the discussion off track.

Summary

When you provide employees with the proper training and support, you set them on the road to success. This collection of activities will provide you with the opportunity to strengthen the capabilities and effectiveness of your service representatives in an entertaining and unforgettable way. They are designed to challenge employees to beat their personal best and constantly strive to improve skills and output. Remember that a properly trained and well-informed staff will help deliver a winning performance — help them to stay focused, enthusiastic, motivated, and efficient.

APPLICATIONS REFERENCE GUIDE

ACTIVITY	APPLICATIONS									PAGE NO.
	Change	Communication	Data Usage	Excellence	Negotiation	Perception	Problem Solving	Quality	Teamwork	
A Close Resemblance *30 – 40 minutes*		■			■	■			■	1
Acute Accuracy *10 – 20 minutes*			■	■						5
Attending To Details *30 – 40 minutes*			■	■					■	9
Body Talk *40 – 50 minutes*	■	■				■				13
Box Score *20 – 30 minutes*	■		■		■	■			■	15
Bumper Crop *40 – 50 minutes*		■				■		■	■	19
Character Composition *30 – 40 minutes*	■	■			■				■	23
Collective Connection *40 – 50 minutes*	■					■			■	29
Country Time *30 – 40 minutes*			■		■	■			■	33
Custom Made *50 – 60 minutes*					■	■			■	37
Customer Account *30 – 40 minutes*		■			■	■			■	39
Dig It *30 – 40 minutes*		■			■					43
Double-Spaced *30 – 40 minutes*	■		■			■	■		■	45
Eye Alone *10 – 20 minutes*	■				■					51
Four to One *40 – 50 minutes*		■			■				■	53
Guesstimation *40 – 50 minutes*			■		■	■	■		■	55

ACTIVITY	APPLICATIONS									PAGE NO.
	Change	Communication	Data Usage	Excellence	Negotiation	Perception	Problem Solving	Quality	Teamwork	
Hidden Meaning *50 – 60 minutes*		■				■	■			61
Hot Topics *20 – 30 minutes*	■	■			■	■	■			67
In One Word *20 – 30 minutes*							■	■		75
It All Adds Up *30 – 40 minutes*		■	■							79
Make It Your Business *20 – 30 minutes*						■	■	■		83
Matter of Choice *50 – 60 minutes*		■			■					87
Mirror Image *10 – 20 minutes*	■			■	■					95
Mystery Box *30 – 40 minutes*	■				■	■			■	97
No Laughing Matter *40 – 50 minutes*		■			■	■	■			99
Parallel Performance *40 – 50 minutes*		■			■	■				105
Portraits *50 – 60 minutes*	■	■			■			■		115
Post Office Box *30 – 40 minutes*			■						■	119
Primary Colors *20 – 30 minutes*	■	■			■					121
Questionable Events *40 – 50 minutes*		■				■			■	123
Rate the R-A-T-E-R *50 – 60 minutes*			■	■		■	■			125
Reporting for Duty *50 – 60 minutes*		■		■	■				■	133
Rift Raft *20 – 30 minutes*	■				■				■	139

About the Author

Lorraine Ukens, MS is the owner of Team-ing with Success™, a company specializing in team building and leadership development. Her business experience, which spans more than 20 years, is applied in designing, facilitating, and evaluating programs in a variety of areas. Lorraine developed a comprehensive three-phase training program, titled *Team-ing with Success*™, to help in-house facilitators build and maintain high-performing teams. Lorraine holds an MS in human resource development from Towson State University (Maryland). She is an active member of the American Society for Training and Development.

MATTER OF CHOICE

Goal: To learn the impact of unique beliefs and feelings on customer interaction. Participants will examine individual personality traits by selecting individually representative terms from word pairs.

Applications:
- Communication
- Perception

Approximate Time Required: 50 – 60 minutes

Group Size: 5 – 50. Participants will be divided into teams of four to five members each.

Materials:
- *Matter of Choice* Worksheets (1 per participant)
- *Matter of Choice* Tally Sheets (1 per team)
- Pencils (1 per participant)
- Flip chart
- Felt-tip marker
- Clock or timer

Preparation: Duplicate one copy of the *Matter of Choice* Worksheet for each participant and one copy of the *Matter of Choice* Tally Sheet for each team.

Prepare a flip chart sheet with a set of the 10 word pairs from the Worksheet, allowing enough space beneath each to keep a tally.

Process:
1. ***Begin with a discussion*** about the wide range of different commercial items available and the variety of choices that everyone has to make every day. Ask the participants for some examples of choices we must make, both simple and complex. Next, introduce the topic of differences specific to individuals — likes, dislikes, wants, needs, personalities, etc. Tell participants that they will now have an opportunity to express their own individuality.

2. ***Distribute one copy*** of the *Matter of Choice* Worksheet and a pencil to each participant.

Process (cont.):	3.	*Explain* that, for each pair of words presented, each individual is to circle the word that best represents him/her and then write the reason why in the adjacent column. Point out that participants should be as explicit as possible in stating their reasons. Individuals will have 10 minutes to complete this task.
	4.	*Begin the activity.* Allow approximately 10 minutes for individuals to complete the task and then call time.
	5.	*Form teams* of four or five participants each. Ask each team to select a member to record the team's responses.
	6.	*Distribute one copy* of the *Matter of Choice* Tally Sheet to each team's designated recorder.
	7.	*Explain* that teams are to discuss their individual choices and reasons. The team recorder should complete the Tally Sheet by circling the term from each word pair that represents the majority of the team members. Individual reasons for each choice should also be recorded. Teams will have 15 minutes for discussion.
	8.	*Continue the activity.* Allow approximately 15 minutes for team discussion and then call time.
	9.	*Discuss the teams' results.* Have each team reveal its tally for each of the word pairs. Record the results on the prepared flip chart.

Variation:

After participants have responded to the *Matter of Choice* Worksheet individually, have them break off in pairs. Pairs are to share their individual choices and reasons, then discuss how any differences might affect a customer service interaction. If time allows, each pair can share their discussion with the group.

Discussion
Questions:

■ What were some of the reasons you gave for your choices?

■ What similarities did you encounter within your team (the group as a whole)? What differences?

■ How could this wide range of perceptions affect your ability to provide service?

■ What techniques can you use to discover the unique perceptions of others?

Debriefing:

Service representatives need to recognize that each individual is different and that customers are unique in their beliefs and feelings. Customers want to be treated like people, not account numbers; therefore, representatives must individualize the service and the solutions they provide. Service representatives need to show genuine concern for customers by letting them know that the company cares about them. This can be accomplished through the use of empathy, which fosters a service representative's rapport with the customer. Empathy is the ability of one person to put him/herself in another person's place and see the situation from that person's perspective.

It is important to control the urge to insist that you are the only one with the answers to a problem. It is better to balance the needs and wants of the customer with the sense and understanding of what is right, acceptable, and doable. This means approaching situations with an open mind and avoiding preconceived ideas, treating each customer equitably but not uniformly, and respecting the opinions of others.