



Secret service

It's all very well being able to talk to your agents – but what about giving them the chance to talk too? The importance of hearing what your staff have to say should never be underestimated, argues **Graham Jarvis**

Customer-facing staff are a company's key asset, making the difference between good and poor customer service. According to the Gallup Organisation, companies with fully customer-engaged employees will grow two and a half times faster than those that don't.

Good managers realise the importance of this correlation – they know it can deliver greater staff and customer loyalty, while generating greater profitability over a long-term period. After all, no company can be profitable or exist without a skilled, experienced and knowledgeable workforce. So their customer and operational insight should be highly valued by their managers.

The trouble is, life isn't quite as simple as that. Although there are some progressive companies out there in the market, most firms still take a very authoritarian view of management. You can still find, according to the experience and research of people management and leadership consultancy MC², a number of managers out there in the market who either don't ask staff the right questions, or fail to ask at all.

No one is perfect, and no one has the answers to everything in life. Unfortunately, managers are often expected to have all of them. Some managers will avoid asking questions if they feel intimidated, thinking that their own staff know more than they do. For example, have you ever asked someone a number of questions, which might seem simple to them, and been made to feel stupid? It can make you feel vulnerable to lose credibility.

There's a lot of pressure on managers to

use their own initiative, so a balance has to be struck between having the ability to think for oneself and inviting other managers and team members to comment. Some face another problem in that they don't have the necessary people skills to communicate and empathise effectively with their subordinates. So they become disengaged, leading to low team morale and a loss of respect for managers.

Fully fledged customer-engagement delivers satisfaction, which is a key driver for motivating staff and customers. The buck starts with managers and team leaders, because they need to understand how to create a productive and happy environment for their staff to work in. It's about finding ways to get the most out of people.

So, will authoritarian and egotistical styles of leadership encourage employees to share their ideas and insights with you? This kind of manager is more concerned about his own self-interests, being the king pin, and is not open to constructive feedback from his subordinates. It's unlikely that they will, because it's about

control from the centre as managers.

Making it easier

Authoritarian management styles can lead to a climate of apprehension, to de-motivation, fear and loathing, of guarding one's own wicket. This discourages openness, making it harder for managers to gain the help of their staff to fix everyday customer and operational issues.

Even staff surveys and performance evaluations will be tainted because of a feeling that trouble could be ahead. Tough business decision-making is part of being a manager, but managers like this won't realise when things are going wrong and make the right decisions unless they involve their staff in the process. That means giving them the opportunity and the ability to talk without fear of being scorned or reprimanded.

The approach of encouraging open dialogue on a regular basis, collaboration, knowledge sharing and trusting staff offers a more constructive approach. Part of this equation requires managers to be approachable, to become a mentor. Although a stick and reprimands might be required more than a carrot in some circumstances, managers will benefit from gaining staff feedback about everything from business processes that might be preventing them from increasing their sales performance, to customer needs and perceptions of the company's services and products.

"Customer-facing employees can provide you with the top ten hot spots that need addressing, and it is a quick and cheap way of conducting customer research", says John Curtis, ►

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► managing director of MC2. More approachable management styles like this lead to an increase in teamwork across the business, particularly if staff know that their feedback and ideas are making a difference to their organisations and their customers. So the conversation is two-way, as managers have to prioritise the right issues and regularly communicate the progress of the subsequent solutions.

Encouraging words

By encouraging communication, managers “can also identify good performers within this process, and good contributors to reward in the future,” Curtis explains. It then also becomes possible to understand why an agent might be underperforming, because as Egg’s John Jennick, senior customer and people experience manager says: “You can have a good agent, and a process that doesn’t allow the agent to be great.”

It’s the job of managers to facilitate and listen to their agents. By doing so team and business performance can be improved, as indeed can their personal reputations as managers:

“If you have a great business, great people, and great propositions you are likely to have great customers, but it’s not just one or the other,” says Jennick. It’s particularly crucial because call centres agents are said to be the most measured and monitored employees. They work in an industry where high quality customer service and experiences are becoming an increasingly fundamental aspect of their jobs.

So, Egg involves staff in its tactical strategies, encouraging and rewarding honest feedback. Its teams participate in regular customer-agent forums. Customer and employee survey data, generated using an online surveying and reporting tool, and call monitoring are also used to measure and improve team, organisational and individual team member performance. By comparing employee and customer feedback from the surveys you can find the grey areas, creating a more accurate picture of the issues affecting staff, customers and the business. It’s also good for agent confidence too, particularly as they are supported by a front line member of the team. The process is used to enable their personal development, helping staff to gain customer skills and knowledge more quickly.

Some notable results have been attained with its associates hitting ‘record highs’ with 90 per cent of the company’s ‘associates’ understanding how their work contributes to the success of their department.

The majority of their staff, according to a whitepaper, believe that their department is committed to customer satisfaction. These measures are then combined into a people development matrix, which links them



with pay and the skills of each agent. This encourages staff to constantly deliver a high quality of customer service, knowing that they will be rewarded for their efforts. One of the key metrics is a fall in absenteeism. “Agents work in partnership with customers, using a carrot rather than a stick and as a result absenteeism has decreased by 40 per cent,” says Gary Schwartz, vp of product marketing at surveying and reporting company Confirmit.

Trust your staff

On the whole, people want to do a good job, so managers need to create a culture from day one that’s about trust and control. Not only

do they need to become good behavioural role models, they also should encourage their employees to use their initiative, and reward them for any innovative ideas that improve team or corporate performance.

That means releasing some control from the centre, and giving them the ability to make decisions when they are talking with customers. It’s important to have staff that can contribute to the knowledge pool, that can think for themselves. This will reduce absenteeism and staff turnover, preventing drainage of skills and invaluable knowledge walking out the door some day when staff have had enough of a particular manager, or the way things are run generally within the company.

It’s imperative to reward staff members who go beyond the call of duty, and that may involve fixing their bonuses to individual performance. It’s also possible to use incentive management schemes, which might offer other kinds of rewards that are relevant to them. For example, would someone who doesn’t drink be pleased to receive a bottle of whisky for a money-saving idea? In effect there is a case for segmenting employees in order to deliver incentives that are meaningful to them. So these schemes need to help the company to move staff towards the primary purpose of the business.

These schemes can encourage them to share their insights and views that will enable innovation and increase the performance of the business. Callidus Software has recently

“In today’s market, there is more to be gained by incentivising agents and encouraging feedback, than ignoring the value of staff as an asset to the company. This should encourage good behaviour from staff.”

Don't ignore agents' value

In today's market, in which the downturn is set to bite for months to come, there is more to be gained by incentivising and encouraging feedback, than ignoring the value of staff as an asset to the company. This is why staff should be perceived more often than they are at present as partners to the business, with incentives that demonstrate the value of each individual employee, department and team in a way that is meaningful to them.

This should encourage good behaviour in such a way that staff are able to look not just after their own personal interests within the firm, but also those of their customers and their colleagues. The result is the development of better, more productive and profitable relationships.

Good managers will know how to motivate their staff, and which incentives work. They also trust them to carry out their tasks to the best of their abilities, and collaborate with them rather than micro-manage every little detail.

While entrusting their staff, and giving them more ownership of the role, good managers also know that sometimes things won't work out well. But does this mean that the stick rather than the carrot should come into play? "The use of the stick is detrimental to performance, reducing the will of staff to deliver quality insight", says John Jennick. That's particularly true when defining what is good or bad behaviour. Sometimes it might just be a case of a team or an individual in need of more mentoring or training.

This illustrates why asking questions is important. But what other questions should managers ask their staff? The following are suggested by MC² and others who've participated in the research for this article:

- **Do we as a business deserve your loyalty as an employee?**

- **What's good and what's not good about working here?**
- **What is your vision for the organisation?**
- **If this were your business what would you do differently?**
- **What do our customers want?**
- **What kind of experience would you expect as a customer? If it was your mum on the phone how would you react?**
- **Which products are easy to sell and why?**
- **How can the organisation deliver the expected levels of long-term service and benefits to its customers and key stakeholders?**
- **What part can you volunteer to play in achieving this?**
- **How well do you think your management team understands what our clients need and how can you improve this understanding and their response to it?**
- **Which IT systems work well for you, and how can they be enhanced?**
- **How can your management/team leader help you?**

By asking questions like these it will be possible to ensure that your employees are fully engaged with your customers and with your organisation. As suggested by the Gallup Organization's Human Sigma and Frederick Reicheld's virtuous circle offer, among other similar approaches to managing staff performance and customer management, a more profitable approach to doing business. With happy employees you will create happy and long-term customer relationships; that is providing you ask the right questions, in the right way and at the right time. Staff will often have many of the answers. ■

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researched the impact of managing incentives in this area, and it has published some relevant papers such as 'Shifting culture: clear incentives influence behaviour'. The papers set out to demonstrate how good use of incentive management can help companies to achieve business agility, culture and changes in values.

In effect, it suggests that employees can benefit from best practices in incentive management even when financial compensation packages are not relevant, as might be the case in some service environments or in the public sector.

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