Customer Service Commitment Profile

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Introduction

This Customer Service Commitment profile is designed to help individuals understand how effective they are at providing excellent customer service. This is done by looking at how the individual assesses their own effectiveness, as well as how well they think the organization as a whole is doing in the area of customer service excellence.

Customer Service is a broad and often complex subject. This assessment breaks the subject down into six competency areas. These areas are:

1. **Service Leadership, Vision, and Commitment**
2. **Feedback and the Voice of the Customer**
3. **Establishing Service Standards**
4. **Empowering People to Serve the Customer**
5. **Customer-Serving Processes and Systems**
6. **Rewards and Recognition for Service Excellence**

Individuals completing this assessment will be assessed in all six competency areas.

It is important to note that the data provided by this assessment will only be valid and useful if the person completing the questions is as honest and accurate as possible, and focuses on what they perceive to be true at the present time—not what they might or should say if things were a little different in the future.

This is a self-scoring profile. Once you have rated all the statements first from your own viewpoint and then from the perspective of the organization as a whole, you will be given instructions on how to plot your scores on the Customer Service Commitment profile shown on page 5. This will give you a diagrammatic representation of the present commitment to service excellence you show and the commitment you believe the organization has made. It will also reveal the gap between the two. General interpretative information is included in the back of this booklet for all six competency areas to help individuals determine whether future improvements can be made by the individual or the organization.

Directions

On the next two pages, you will find 48 statements about Commitment to Customer Service Excellence. For each statement, think about whether you agree or not, and how strongly. You should circle the letter that most closely fits your view, using the following scale:

SA = Strongly agree
A = Agree
D = Disagree
SD = Strongly disagree

Please use a ballpoint pen or hard pencil and mark your answers clearly.

Customer Service Commitment: Questions

1. A clear vision exists of what service excellence should look like.

2. Service values are well communicated and understood.

3. Customer-service improvement strategies are translated into specific goals and strategies.

4. Lifelong learning about customers is valued and practiced.

5. There is regular debate and discussion at work about customers and their needs.

6. Customer-service excellence is demonstrated every day: people "walk the talk."

7. Role modeling is used consistently to demonstrate what good customer commitment "looks like."

8. The customer is the number-one priority.

9. Customer feedback is regularly sought, both formally and informally.

10. Most customers feel that there is a sense of warmth and empathy on the part of the company.

11. People find the time to talk directly with customers.

12. What customers are saying to front-line service staff is well understood.

13. Customer complaints are welcomed as opportunities to improve.

14. Customer feedback is regularly shared and discussed with others.

15. Training in active listening is available and encouraged for those who need it.

16. Customer comments are systematically collected and categorized for analysis and action.

17. Customers completely understand the standards of service that we strive for.

18. Customer service excellence is a prime part of the job description.

19. Everyone understands what they can do to rectify a problem with poor service ("recovery").

20. There is a high commitment to quality and professionalism in all customer dealings.

21. The organization explains clearly and precisely what should be done to serve the customer well.

22. Policies and procedures regarding customer-service excellence are available and understood.

23. Standards are quickly adjusted according to customer comment and feedback.

24. The difference between poor, average, and excellent service is always very clear.

25. Ideas on how to serve the customer more effectively are regularly communicated.

26. Front-line customer-contact people are given the resources and support they need in order to do their job.

Customer Service Commitment: Questions

27. Training in how to provide excellent customer service is available and regularly attended.

28. The concept of the "internal customer" is well understood and practiced.

29. There is a strong commitment to and accountability for doing whatever it takes to meet customer needs.

30. Suggestions for improving customer service are carefully considered and acted on where appropriate.

31. Product and service knowledge is high.

32. The stresses and strains of dealing with some customers and some complaints is fully appreciated.

33. Service mediocrity is never tolerated at any level.

34. People here know which staff members are able to resolve problems for customers.

35. Discussions are often held with suppliers to find ways of improving the overall quality of customer service.

36. There is a process for actively seeking information in order to continuously improve service quality.

37. Considerable effort is made to avoid minor errors regarding service.

38. Customer-service performance is tracked and measured over time.

39. Customers can gain easy and friendly access to the staff so their needs will be met.

40. There is a sound system in place for ensuring that the same customer problem does not reoccur.

41. Performance excellence in serving customers is highly valued.

42. Tangible rewards are available for "going the extra mile" for the customer.

43. It is important to recognize those who provide excellent service; they are role models for others.

44. Face-to-face personal appreciation for service excellence is often shown.

45. People are rewarded or promoted on a regular basis as a result of their outstanding commitment to customer service.

46. Customer service awareness "events" are a regular part of work activities.

47. People are more often "caught doing something right" rather than "caught doing something wrong."

48. Outstanding customer commitment is celebrated individually and with the team.

Scoring Your Instrument

Separate the scoring sheet from the response sheet. You will see that your SA, A, D, and SD responses have translated into numbers. Your first task is to total these numbers and enter them in the appropriate column-total boxes at the bottom of the page. Be sure you add the numbers accurately.

The six column-total boxes correspond to each competency area in the Customer Service Commitment descriptions shown on page 8. By translating these column-total scores, you can now plot these numbers on the grid on page 5 by making appropriate marks on the appropriate competency axis. Each scale runs from 0 on the left to 24 at the right of the scale.
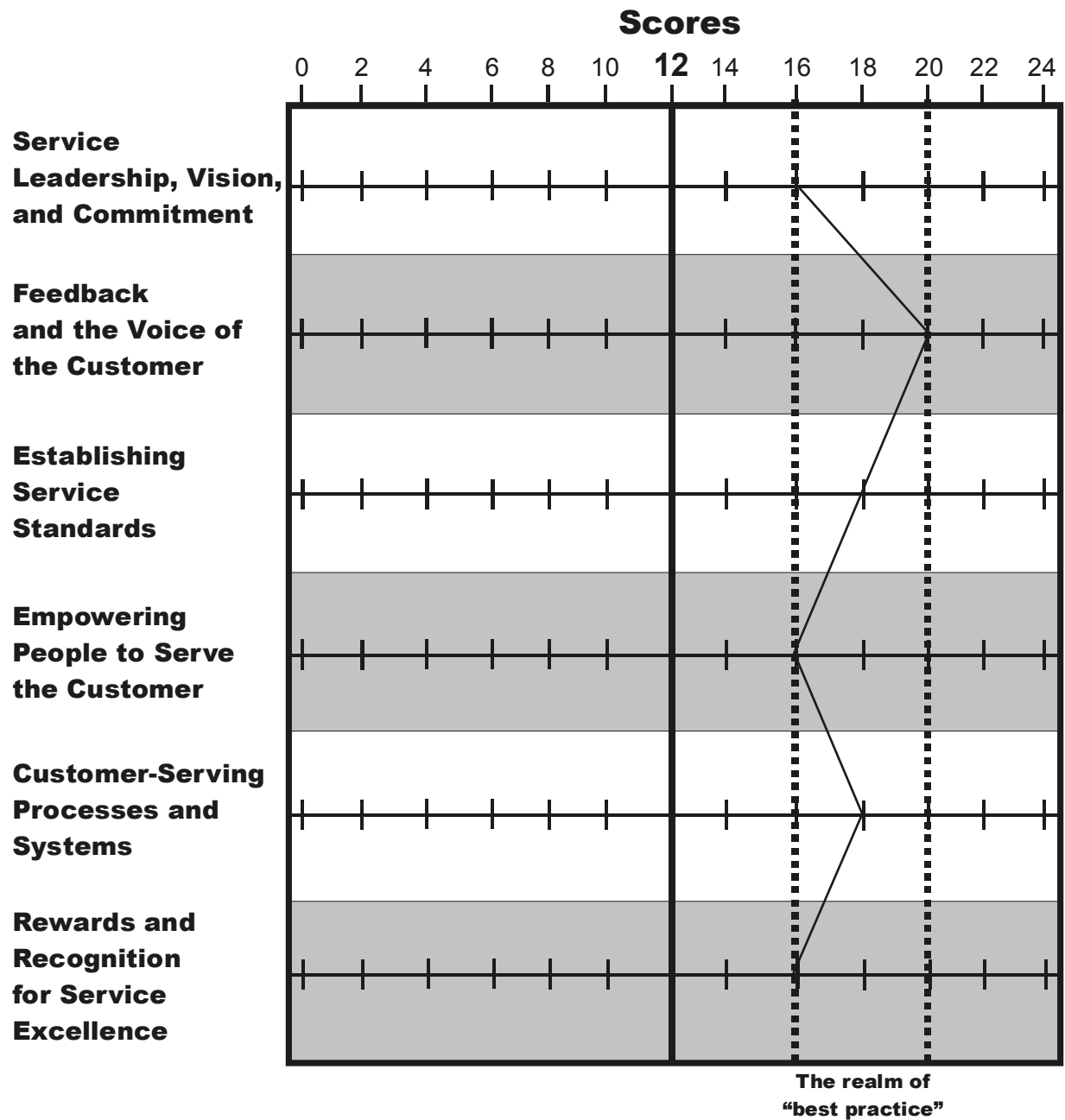
Each column will give you two scores—one that reflects your personal view, and one that reflects your view of the organization as a whole. Both of these points should be marked on the appropriate competency axes. Sometimes these points will be the same or very close together, while at other times they will be wide apart. (This creates the gap that will be analyzed further.)

There might also be a gap between individual or organizational scores and the scores of best-practice companies (the area between the dotted lines on the right-hand section of the grid).

Once you have the two scores from all six column-totals plotted on the grid, use your pen or pencil to connect all six points with a straight line. Then turn to the Interpreting Your Results section of this booklet, which starts on page 7.

Your Scores

Your Name: _____ Date: _____

Scores

	0	2	4	6	8	10	**12**	14	16	18	20	22	24

Service Leadership, Vision, and Commitment

Feedback and the Voice of the Customer

Establishing Service Standards

Empowering People to Serve the Customer

Customer-Serving Processes and Systems

Rewards and Recognition for Service Excellence

The realm of "best practice"

Take your column totals from the scoring sheet and plot them one at a time on the chart above, using the symbols of a cross for your personal score and a small circle for the organizational score. Each horizontal scale should therefore contain two marks—one for your personal total score, and one for how you perceive the organization. Once you have plotted all six horizontal bars, connect all your personal scores (the crosses) and all the organizational scores (the circles) with straight lines. Some of these scores will be close together, but there is probably going to be a gap (and in some cases quite a considerable one) between the two resultant lines.

Your Individual Score

Once you have responded honestly and accurately to each item and plotted your individual score and your organizational score, you are ready to:

1. **Review your personal performance in each of the six competencies.**

2. **Review the relative performance of the organization in terms of your perception of its scores in each competency.**

3. **Compare your score and the organizational score for each competency and study the gaps between each pair.**

4. **Determine your priorities (for yourself and for the organization) in terms of changing behavior or actions.**

The essential value of any measurement instrument is in the extent to which it provides a useful indication of a current situation and some guidance in terms of what an individual can do to change it for the better. The individual can then analyze the results and decide whether any adjustments or changes are necessary or desirable.

The items on the assessment, when scored, should provide a useful basis for such a review. To deepen or extend this further, ask two or three of your colleagues to complete the profile as well, to see whether they share your perceptions (especially as far as the wider organization is concerned).

Whatever your scores (and whether they are yours alone or enhanced by the views of others), consider developing a stronger commitment in those competencies you are weakest in. You will find broad descriptions of each competency on page 8.

The descriptions not only provide more detail about what each competency involves, but they also suggest what best-practice organizations are doing in these areas—those organizations that score 16 or above on each of these scales in this assessment. Your individual score should be viewed in relation to how far away it is from this realm of best-practice (as shown on the graph).

Interpreting Your Results

It is now widely recognized and understood that an organization's success rests on how well it understands the needs of its customers and then responds to those needs by delivering what is required.

Organizations that set the standard for service excellence within their industries all do the same things when it comes to building and maintaining extraordinary levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty. Organizations looking to reach these benchmarks should take these steps, in priority order:

1. Have a **clear vision** of what constitutes superior service and communicate it to all employees at every level. Everyone in the organization must believe in the importance of service quality. This requires service-focused **leadership and commitment.**

2. Pay attention to the customer. The **customer** must be heard and understood, and the organization should respond—often in unique and creative ways—to their evolving needs and constantly shifting expectations.

3. Establish concrete **standards of excellent service** and regularly measure to see how well these standards are being met.

4. Hire customer-focused and **empathic people** (particularly those on the front line), and coach them carefully and extensively so that they have the knowledge and skills to achieve the service standards. **Empower** them to work on behalf of customers, whether inside or outside the organization.

5. Make sure that **customer-serving processes and systems** are widely understood and consistently improved by motivated and enthusiastic teams of employees across the organization.

6. Make sure all employees are fully aware of what it takes to give excellent customer service, and establish systems for **recognition and reward** for service accomplishments individually and at a group level. It is important that the entire organization celebrate the success of employees who go that extra step for their customers.

This instrument addresses all six of these customer-service "steps" as competency areas.

Each of the competency areas is described in more detail in subsequent pages.

The Customer Service Model for Excellence: Six Competencies

◼ Service Leadership, Vision, and Commitment

Without a tangible vision of what service excellence looks like, we have no way to know how much we need to improve. A service vision needs to be created, shaped, and communicated at every opportunity. This is usually best done through direct effort on the part of organization leaders, who make sure that they discuss the vision at every opportunity so there is widespread individual commitment and accountability for achieving it.

◼ Feedback and the Voice of the Customer

The customer makes judgments about service and quality every time he or she deals with the organization. The organization needs to develop multiple ways to get feedback about how it is doing to make sure that the ever-changing voice of the customer is constantly heard and understood. That feedback should be used to make any changes that will create benefit and be of value.

◼ Establishing Service Standards

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Every individual across the whole organization must understand and be committed to standards of service excellence in every area and at all times. These minimum standards of service should apply to every part of the organization and be communicated and understood at all levels, including the customer.

◼ Empowering People to Serve the Customer

Service excellence is achieved through people. Every individual and team needs to understand who its customers are (internal and external) and what they must do to provide service excellence. All individuals (and particularly those dealing directly with the customer) need to be given the authority and freedom to deliver service that is "customer-friendly" and they need to be as sensitive to customer needs as it is possible to be.

◼ Customer-Serving Processes and Systems

A powerful vision for service excellence that focuses on customer feedback and a highly empowered staff is not enough: Quality service must also be delivered on a consistent basis. To do this, every process or system needs to be well-designed and to run smoothly, according to plan. Individual needs are never quite the same, so every process must be flexible enough to "bend" and adapt, but still continue to deliver service every time.

◼ Rewards and Recognition for Service Excellence

Most organizations offer rewards and recognition for achieving goals or targets, but these rewards often reinforce goals other than for customer commitment and service. Service excellence itself must be rewarded and recognized; public opportunities for recognition should be held on a regular basis so these service achievements can inspire others.

Service Leadership, Vision, and Commitment

One of the most important purposes of having a vision of how customer service should be is to direct the attention of people in the organization toward the real priorities of the customer, and then guide their individual actions. Communicating this vision to the customers helps to attract customers to the organization.

Coaching employees, developing service-delivery systems, measuring organizational performance, and managing sales and marketing are all efforts that must be based on the vision. A well-defined service vision declares an organization's competitive direction. It is its "guiding light," so it will have to be communicated over and over again, until everyone in the organization sings the same tune.

The service vision must become an integral part of an organization at all levels. All responsibilities must be aligned with a single vision of what the organization is trying to accomplish with customers and how it wants them to judge or view performance. The service vision must therefore be actively communicated throughout the organization through strong leadership and highly visible commitment. The actions and behavior of everyone who leads a team, not words, are what will communicate this.

To be entirely customer-focused, senior managers must believe that giving good service to their customers (including their subordinates) involves clear leadership and open communication at all times. They need to be ever-responsive to their team and act as its champion. Their subordinates must have the resources and facilities they need to deliver excellent service to their customers, whether they are internal or external.

Leaders should spend time each week talking to a small number of external customers, to make sure that they are receiving excellent service. Every time they meet with them for any reason, the first question they should ask is, "What have we done since the last meeting to improve our service?"

All formal or informal performance appraisals should cover customer commitment as a key performance measure. Leaders should also encourage teams and departments to measure customer service in their teams and/or departments.

The vision "lives" through the actions of individuals as role models for service, and it is these role models who, to a very large extent, determine the level of commitment to any initiative taken by the enterprise. It becomes obvious that the attitudes and commitment of the leaders will be clearly mirrored when leaders visit various parts of an organization and talk to and observe employees. "Walking the talk" is therefore of extreme importance. People do not merely want to hear their leaders expressing commitment to customer service and service quality; they wish to see the commitment in the leader's behavior.

Feedback and the Voice of the Customer

Every enterprise that is seriously concerned about continuously improving its service makes it a priority these days to continuously and carefully listen to its customers, understand what they're saying as it applies to the business of serving them, and then respond creatively to what they say about how the organization is doing.

Listening, however, is not enough—there has to be a purpose. There are four reasons to listen to customers: The first is **to understand the customer's moments of truth** and map what the cycle of that experience looks like from the customer's standpoint. A "moment of truth" is a critical customer contact time or moment when front-line people interact with a customer and make an impression of one sort or another. There are literally thousands of moments of truth in most organizations in any given month. You can determine the critical contact points and measure how well your organization is managing the cycle toward a positive outcome.

The second reason why you should keep up with what customers are thinking is **to keep tabs on the markets**—the pool of individual customers' changing wants, needs, and expectations. Understand that in this era of constant change, what the customer knows, expects, and needs (critical to the market-research business) is as fluid as anything else. You must keep up with these changes and even learn how to predict them.

The third reason to listen and listen diligently is **so you do not miss the unexpected or the new.** The public knows what it wants or needs; if you don't want to hear their suggestions, the competition will.

Finally, listening carefully to customers is a valuable way **to involve the customer** in the business. Breaking down them-vs.-us barriers is usually the beginning of a good business relationship.

The listening effort begins when you decide just who it is you are talking about when you say "the customer." You can't be all things to all people, yet few organizations have "plain vanilla" customers with the same needs and expectations.

There is no one "best" way to listen to customers, and there is no such thing as paying too much attention to customers' ideas and opinions. The cardinal sin is to believe that there is nothing more to learn! Here are some variations on the listening theme, practiced by people who are known for their attention to quality and service.

- Formal research
- Front-line contact
- Customer hotlines
- Comment and complaint analysis
- Consumer advisory panels
- Mutual education

Try to develop several ways of continuously finding out about your customers and what's on their minds. It will provide the whole organization with ample opportunities to tap into their ideas and experiences. The last drop of potential can then be squeezed out of every encounter we have with a customer who has something he or she believes is important for us to hear.

The ultimate key to your success: do something with what you learn. What good does it do us to codify our customers' moments of truth and chart their cycles of service if we don't use the information? Anyone who deals with a customer needs to know not only the moments of truth for that customer, but also the impact of what happens during those moments of truth.

Establishing Service Standards

When it comes to evaluating whether or not superior service has been provided, the discussion begins and ends with the customer's assessment. Superior service is there if the customer says it is. It isn't there if the customer says that it isn't or votes with their feet and goes to a competitor. The only true and reliable way to measure the quality of service that has been delivered is to find out about the customer's most recent experiences and how satisfied they are with those experiences.

Companies known for providing distinctive service *consistently* meet their customers' expectations. Far from leaving anything to chance, they establish consistently clear, customer-oriented performance standards throughout their organizations, and then constantly and meticulously measure performance against those standards. They do this by establishing standards of service and then putting these in policies, procedures, work instructions, job descriptions, etc. to ensure that tangible standards are written into the culture.

Dynamic, information-based customer-service processes that can be fine-tuned and adjusted to changing customer expectations are based on standards everyone is committed to, as well as on information about how well those standards are being met.

Organizations that set the benchmarks for customer service are 100% committed to measuring customer satisfaction and using the results to guide delivery processes. They measure formally. They measure frequently (usually weekly, but the really good companies measure daily). Then they attach important individual, work-group, and organizational outcomes to the results.

Their ways of asking the questions vary, but the questions asked are very specific to their particular customer profile. If there is nothing immediately useful to be learned from an open-ended, global query, they will instead develop a series of questions about all aspects of the customer's encounter with the company: speed, accuracy, cordiality, helpfulness, completeness of information, response to inquiries, and any other moments of truth that build the overall impression of quality.

The results of these measurement efforts typically become the focus of subsequent internal dialogue and problem-solving efforts. After all, an organization's system for measuring the quality of its service is only as good as the follow up—the efforts it makes to effect those improvements.

Empowering People to Serve the Customer

The interactions between front-line employees and customers make or break the enterprise at every moment of truth. Meet customers' expectations and both win. Miss, and everyone loses. The ultimate success or failure of those critical, person-to-person transactions turns on success or failure when it comes to hiring good people, training them thoroughly, and managing them in a way that encourages them to do what needs to be done for customers.

Front-line people must be able to "stand up"—sometimes literally—to a high level of customer contact. Not all of it will be pleasant. Dealing with customers calls for a level of maturity and self-esteem that allows personal feelings and problems to be put aside so you can focus on customers and their wants and problems. Service workers need social skills and an understanding of the normal rules of social behavior.

Service workers also need tolerance and stamina. The strain of constant, intensive encounters with people who are essentially strangers leads to burnout. Under this kind of stress and pressure, customer service people need to be able to continue to perform capably and willingly without withdrawing into robotic, detached behavior or becoming aggressive and hostile.

Empowerment means encouraging every individual to make that extra effort— and to use their imagination and initiative. It also means accepting mistakes when well-intentioned efforts fail to work out exactly as planned. The goal is that best-of-all-worlds where empowered employees confidently and capably address unique problems and opportunities when and where they occur.

When employees are satisfied with the way they are treated, satisfied with the availability of the right tools to do the job, and satisfied with management support for delivering high-quality service, customers are more likely to be satisfied with the quality of treatment they receive from those employees and more likely to continue doing business with the organization. And when a mistake is made, they'll be much more understanding and forgiving!

There are two dimensions to empowerment—one is organizational, one personal. Giving employees overt permission and encouragement to work consistently in our customer's best interests, providing support for their efforts, treating them as we expect customers to be treated, and rewarding and applauding their triumphs and achievements are necessary organizational tactics that help us convince our front-line workers that they really are empowered to work for the customer. These responses recognize that empowerment isn't something given; it is instead a process of releasing the individual employee's power or capability by removing the barriers that prevent their expression.

The personal dimension of empowerment has to do with things internal, with the capability and skill of the employee to respond appropriately when the barriers have been removed. The potential must be there, but it also must be nurtured and developed. Finding people with the ability to handle empowerment is a selection issue. Developing that potential is the coaching side of the coin. Neither, however, creates total customer commitment. That will come from the breadth and depth of experience that empowered employees amass and continually reinvest on behalf of the customer—to the benefit of the organization as well as to themselves.

Customer-Serving Processes and Systems

It is widely believed that most large businesses are made up of hundreds of individual processes, but only about 20–30 are considered to be important to the customer. The simpler and better managed they are for consistency and reliability, the more likely that they will satisfy the customer. Unfortunately, processes almost always flow across the organization, not up and down. When the process breaks down and causes customers to complain, no one is in place to take responsibility for fixing the problem. Yet when it is repeated or magnified, it can impact every level.

There are three major global customer-serving processes in most every organization. These are:

1. **Demand generation**—creating demand from the customer for products and services. Functions such as research, sales, and marketing use demand-generation processes.
2. **Demand fulfillment**—fulfilling customer orders created by the demand generators. Functions such as production, logistics, and distribution use demand-fulfillment processes.
3. **Cash generation**—funding the business or collecting the money from customers who have purchased products or services. Financial functions use cash-generation processes.

If this model holds true, it will be relatively easy to describe the sub-processes that "sit" under each of these headings. Once this has been done, you can introduce a robust mechanism to manage these processes and begin acting on your commitment to satisfy customers through process improvement and quality *methods.*

Senior managers need to be part of all these processes and act in custodial roles. The primary mechanism for improvement in "excellent service" companies is the extensive use of well-trained and focused teams. Such teams are skilled in sound fact-based problem-solving techniques and coached by trained facilitators and team leaders. This allows the whole organization to potentially work on process improvement toward greater customer satisfaction.

Effective process and systems design for the customer means:

- **Teams need to be made up of people who work with the process that is to be improved.**
- **Analysis techniques based on hard data and facts should be systematically used.**
- **Everyone should be trained in effective teamwork and problem-solving skills.**
- **Team recommendations should be clearly accepted or rejected; where implemented, they must be standardized across the process.**

This all sounds just like good common sense, but you would be surprised at how quickly we ignore some or all of these factors. Excellent-service companies manage their process-improvement teams well, and delight their customers in the process!

Rewards and Recognition
for Service Excellence

Managers in exemplary-service organizations understand the "twin-engine" motivation of good and widespread reward and recognition. Recognizing employees for a job well done isn't seen as a superficial or wasted effort. It is understood for what it truly is—a confirmation of accomplishment and a reinforcement of commitment.

In most of these organizations, there is a positive payoff for trained employees who meet the service standards. Those who go the extra step for the customer become "service heroes." They are held up as role models and rewarded accordingly, because their managers and their managers' managers know that the celebration of organizational, group, and individual service accomplishments is essential if the delivery of high quality service is to be the norm, not the exception.

If people are a resource, they can and should be developed in order to increase their ultimate value. The never-ending process includes formal on-the-job training, guided experience, effective coaching and monitoring, performance reviews, organizational support, and general service-awareness training.

Some general training can be very effective, but there is usually not enough emphasis on improving behavior (as opposed to improving skills or knowledge). Most enterprises need an integrated approach with a common language for all employees across the company. However, although common language and core training should be the same, we understandably have varying levels of base knowledge and awareness. Training should recognize these different levels of ability, and programs should be designed accordingly. Training, however, is no panacea in itself. Self-learning and practice in the use of new behaviors is the cultural payoff. This new behavior is then reinforced by openly providing plenty of support and encouragement as often as possible.

Effective incentive and reward programs can be created using a combination of paid trips (such as cruises), merchandise, and purely "feel good" mental pay-offs. Many organizations make only minimal or sporadic use of such recognition. They'll have to use a structured approach in order to make it a widespread part of the way business is done. The key to this culture change is to start in small ways: Immediately identify and publicize any examples of customer-service excellence. Little by little, the whole organization learns that certain behavior yields the most recognition.

Often linked with recognition and reward is creating a sense of *celebration.* The significance of being a part of something important cannot be overstated. In fact, it might be the most important operating principle of all. A strong culture of celebration needs to be developed in order to lift and sustain the highest possible employee morale.

Action Notes

Now that you have plotted your score and read the associated competency descriptions, use the page below to make a number of action notes for yourself or the wider organization. You should try to focus first on areas where your scores are weakest.

In a group situation, small groups of three or four might like to underline or highlight key points in a description of a specific competency that is of interest to the whole group, and then brainstorm what can be done to improve performance in the future. This activity would be of significant help later on if groups consist of people who work together and they select competencies that relate to particular weaknesses in the organization or department.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Warner is a professional manager with over 20 years' experience working with multinational companies in the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States, and Australia. He has been the senior staff member in human resources departments, and has held several professional leadership positions with responsibility for large groups of employees. Jon has in recent years been involved in wide-ranging organizational consultancy work and the pursuit of best-practices leadership for such major organizations as Mobil Oil, Quantas, United Energy, Dow Corning, Coca Cola, Barclays Bank, National Bank, Honda, BTR, Gas and Fuel, Air Products and Chemicals, and Caltex.

Jon is managing director of Team Publications PTY Limited, an international training and publishing company committed to bringing practical and fun-to-use learning material to the worldwide training market, such as the One Page Coach® storyboard-based integrated training packages. He holds a master's degree in Business Administration and a Ph.D. in organizational change and learning, and lives and works on Australia's Gold Coast.

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