

Accountability is the Key to Exemplary Customer Service

In their book, *Accountability: Freedom and Responsibility without Control*, authors Rob Lebow and Randy Spitzer take us on a journey of discovery as they look at a new way to manage our organizations and ourselves. Their fictional character, Kip (Stan Kiplinger) says this: "Accountability is the issue! If you can't find a way to get people to be accountable, you're going to find it hard to make anything else work, let alone your business."

How true it is. At the risk of oversimplification, I have recently been pondering the issue of accountability, and how the lack of it seems to be at the heart of so many of our societal woes. In fact, some time ago, I read an interesting study that had been done in a California prison. When inmates were asked why they were in prison, there were many replies, such as:

- I had a lousy attorney
- My get away car broke down
- My girlfriend ratted on me

Only a small minority (less than 10%) said they were in prison because they committed a crime!

So what is accountability? It is owning the consequences of our own decisions and actions.

As customer service providers, it is the *ability* to account for our actions, and the *willingness* to demonstrate an attitude of caring toward our customers. It is the desire to respond to a request for help, or information in a timely manner. It is follow-up, pure and simple. It is a privilege to serve those with whom we interact, whether they are internal or external customers.

Accountability is not:

- Smoke and mirrors
- Empty promises
- Lame excuses
- The blame game

Perhaps you've heard the story of the late quality guru, W. Edwards Deming, as he was meeting with a group of managers several years ago. One of the managers was lamenting about all of the "dead wood" he had in his organization. Deming looked at him, and calmly said, "Did you hire 'em that way, or did you kill 'em?" That is an interesting question.

Very few people start a new job not wanting to do their very best. But somewhere along the way, they often become cynical, disinterested, or simply complacent. When that happens, service suffers.

So how do we create a culture where people are accountable, and where exemplary customer service is the norm, not the exception?

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Here are a few ideas:

- If we desire a culture where call center reps, support staff, supervisors, and other individual contributors become more accountable, we must create an environment that encourages and rewards people for being accountable.
- We must have an environment where open communication takes place constantly; where people are not afraid to present their point of view, and where differing opinions are respected and championed.
- We must create an environment where there is a high level of trust, and people are independent, yet interdependent. We have to be willing to share information, give and receive feedback for improvement, and model this behavior as managers and leaders.
- We have to be willing to admit mistakes, and to allow others to make mistakes without being thrown under the bus. If we can't do this, we create a culture where people become "victims" when things go poorly, always looking for someone else to blame. The real "victim" is often our customer. And everyone suffers in this environment.
- We must value a learning orientation, where people can acquire new skills, and practice them in a supported environment. As leaders, we must model these values as well. If we act as if we have all the answers, our associates will not place value in discovering new ideas and new ways of doing things.
- And lastly, we must have an expectation and a belief, that people *want* to do their best. When we expect good things out of our people, they usually deliver. Sometimes, we have to get out of their way, and let them do just that.

This is very difficult work. It is some of the hardest work we will do. As parents, helping our children become accountable for their actions is difficult work as well. But it can lead to great rewards - in our business, and in society in general. When we create an environment where accountability thrives, where people have a sense of freedom about their jobs, and are responsible in meeting customer expectations, we all win. And we all have a lot more fun along the way.

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Note about author:

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Switzer Resource Group, Inc. works with businesses & government organizations, helping them improve their customer service, increase sales, and enhance teamwork through providing skill-based training, hands-on coaching, and the use of other resources as needed.

They do this by creating an environment where managers and individual contributors become active partners in their own and their organization's success.

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