



## ***“Who is your Customer?”***

This question, posed to a group of newly promoted supervisors in a Leadership training class at an established company, prompted some telling answers. “I don’t have any customers,” stated one new supervisor, relieved to be able to divert the question to some other participant. “We’re not allowed to talk to the customers,” whispered another. The results: ten different employees selected to go forth in leadership roles offered ten different definitions of the Customer in that organizational setting. Chances are those ten employees would also offer ten different levels of understanding regarding their roles in meeting customer expectations (if in fact they believed that they played a role). Consider the impact that this could have upon customer satisfaction!

The fact is that the Customer is a constantly changing and demanding presence for any business, and failure to stay closely attuned to Customer needs will ultimately impede an organization’s ability to succeed. This failure can manifest itself in any number of ways: decreased sales and loss of repeat business are obvious symptoms, but problems such as rising operational costs and poor employee morale costs can also be traced to lack of awareness of Customer needs in many cases.

Are the responses of the supervisor trainees surprising, or typical? It seems a simple question, and any sole proprietor or new business owner is sure to have a ready response: the Customer is the source of revenue and the focus of marketing, advertising, and business efforts. A brand new business, in particular, is likely to view every Customer as a personal relationship, and be highly attuned to customer needs and expectations.

The definition becomes more complex, however, as a business evolves into an organization with employees and other stakeholders. Businesses may fail to recognize the emergence of internal Customers as employees are added and boundaries are established for internal responsibilities. Customer management may be delegated to some core group of relationship managers, sales people, or service departments, contributing to the perception that Customer care and awareness is someone else’s responsibility. Market changes can lead to changes in Customer preference and expectation, while business units continue to operate under the old rules and assumptions.

A business that is serious about remaining competitive must regularly ask the question ***“Who is our Customer?”*** and then communicate the answer clearly and consistently to every level of the organization. A discussion of the answers to this question should be certain to consider at least the following to ensure a clear understanding of all potential demands on your business:

- End Users (purchasers of products or services)
- Internal customers (functional or departmental needs)
- External customers (suppliers or vendors)

- Investors, partners, or financial stakeholders
- Governmental or other regulatory stakeholders

“Who is your Customer?” To stay connected to your Customer, ask yourself and your employees this simple question. The results may surprise you, and are certain to keep your organization on the road to success.

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