

PAPER: NEW STRAITS TIMES (OPINIION)

DATE: 11 JANUARY 2017

PAGE: 19

GOOD SERVICE

EMPOWERED FOR BETTERMENT

Companies in the UK allow employees to act independently to ensure customer satisfaction

DURING my recent travels in the United Kingdom (UK), my family and I encountered several customer-related issues, but they were resolved in a quick and efficient manner that prompted me to examine how different our services system was in Malaysia.

It was evident that each of the persons we met, who solved our problems, had acted on their own authority. They each had been empowered to resolve customer issues as immediately as possible.

For instance, we had a discount voucher that had to be used by Dec 24. Being visitors and not aware that the voucher was for food, we did not bring it along on our shopping trips.

On Christmas eve, due to our need for meal preparations, our purchases amounted to slightly more than what was expected. We paid the full amount because we did not have the voucher with us.

On Boxing Day, I thought I would just try if the voucher could still be used, and perhaps, a credit note be issued with the amount set off against our purchases on Dec 24.

I enquired about it, and while my husband was not at all positive, in just under 10 minutes, the refund was processed after the cashier consulted another slightly senior staff member at the next counter.

Later, at a restaurant, we paid a full sum for a purchase made during an



Empowerment refers to measures designed to increase autonomy in workers, enabling them to represent the company's interest in a responsible way.

offer period. Again, we brought the discount available to the notice of the cashier, who then just quickly checked with a senior member, who was also serving at the counter, and the refund was immediate.

A third incident was even more amazing. We returned home and I found that when I used a new overseas phone SIM card to call back home, I was charged the full amount instead of the rates advertised by the phone company.

I wrote an email and within 24 hours, a reply came and an apology was issued. The balance was reinstated in my account and if I still had doubts, I could contact them.

This brought me to think how difficult each of the three instances would have been had they occurred here in Malaysia.

We would probably be told that the discount voucher was for use only on Dec 24, and as for the other two problems, a refund would take a long time or might not even be possible.

What is the difference between our counter staff and those in the UK?

An obvious answer is empowerment. Empowerment refers to measures designed to increase the de-

gree of autonomy and self-determination in people and communities, enabling them to represent their interest in a responsible and self-determined way.

Richard Branson, the founder of Virgin Group, believes that empowering employees to solve problems and make every customer experience memorable was key to Virgin's legendary service.

Empowerment, however, is not without limits. Although employees may be allowed to break policy from time to time in order to serve the customer, the employees should also ensure that the decision does not endanger anyone.

It is the freedom to make decisions within safe boundaries that make an employee even more keen to work and prove himself on the job.

Established rules and processes must be clearly defined and within these rules, the employees can experiment with new methods to serve customers. It inspires innovation and creativity in employees, and this works to the customer's benefit.

Empowering employees to work together, rather than referring all queries to the senior management,

will allow employees to work out solutions to customer problems.

Most times, our sales persons are dependent on the supervisor, who in turn, will look for the manager, who will then look for the store general manager. And by the time all these processes take place, the customer will end up feeling frustrated.

How then, do we start the empowerment process?

It will do well to inform the employees about the company's or store's mission and vision. They are not there just to sell a product. Their duty is to ensure that every customer who enters the store leaves with a memorable experience.

For Branson, employees at every level are encouraged to provide customers with a complete experience, from the time they check in until the flight is over.

A similar scenario may be brought to a grocery store, or to a clothing shop. Value for money should include quality, price and experience of the customer who enters the store.

Empowerment starts from leadership and, at the same time, a sense of trust that once the employee has been trained, they are then left to use their creativity to serve the customer. Annual training or refresher courses can be conducted.

Employees should be praised for their creativity, and if they have problems, they should be allowed to approach any member of the management to air their grouses.

Perhaps we can look forward to better services if empowerment is practised by the top management of all organisations, no matter the size, a small shop or a giant shopping centre.

gracem@um.edu.my

The writer is a research fellow at the Faculty of Law, Universiti Malaya