

Leading from the front

Nurture service employees and great service behaviour will follow.

By effectively managing their service employees, firms nurture the type of service behaviour that delights customers and ensures their loyalty — and contributes to the organisation's success and longevity.

This core competence is achieved through building the employer-employee relationship. When service employees perceive their organisation as one that has sound human resource management (HRM) functions and activities such as recruitment and selection, training and development and rewards, they are able to do the firm's main work of serving customers well.

Researchers found significant relationships between service employees' perceptions of human resources practices and customers' attitudes about the service received.

When service employees describe the HRM practices in their work environment in positive terms, customers also report they receive superior service quality.

Sound human resource management practices include the following:

Selection criteria

The starting point for quality service is the quality of staff to deliver quality service. The recruitment objectives are to select staff with the right attitudes and behavioural characteristics for service delivery.

Many organisations are looking beyond the technical qualifications ("what") of applicants to assess their service orientation.

The functional quality ("how") is an important facet of the perceived service. Service employees need to know "how" to deliver quality service (skills and knowledge necessary to do the job) and possess the quali-

ty of service inclination (that is, their interest in doing service-related work which is reflected in their attitudes toward service and orientation toward serving customers).

An ideal recruitment process for service employees assesses both service competencies and service inclination, resulting in employee hires who are high on both dimensions.

Hiring approaches include observing behaviour, conducting personality tests, interviewing applicants and providing potential service employees with a realistic job preview.

Training

To provide quality service, it takes more than just having the right people in the right jobs. They must also be trained to deal with customers and satisfy their needs and expectations.

Service employees must have strong interpersonal skills to deal with customers on a daily basis and have a good knowledge of the product or service they are offering.

During the service encounter, how the employee behaves is a large part of the service experience.

Service employees need specific training in interpersonal, technical and functional skills. These training objectives are crucial because service employees play an active role in satisfying customers.

Rewards

Having appropriate reward policies in place is important in inducing service employees to deliver quality service.

Employees want recognition and a share in the benefits that result from their efforts.

For instance, if customer satisfaction and retention are viewed as important outcomes, service behav-



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iours that increase those outcomes need to be recognised and rewarded.

Dealing with angry customers is a thankless task and employees who perform the task well should be recognised and rewarded. If recovery efforts go unrewarded, they will not be performed effectively and customer satisfaction and retention will suffer as a result.

Supervisory support

For service employees to provide quality service in customer relationships, it is critical that they are well supported by their supervisors, fellow team members and other departments in the organisation.

Even if the employees know what to do, they may not be able to execute tasks because supervisors have not provided the necessary support.

If the service employee perceives

that his supervisor shows concern for employees and provides support in general, this will lead to a positive appraisal of the environment and increase in job satisfaction.

Team support

Excellent service generally occurs as the result of the actions of a group of people working together. Although it is the frontline staff who ultimately deliver the service to the customers, they need the full support of those in the backroom in order for the service encounter to run smoothly.

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Although not every member of the firm actually deals directly with the end customer, each job is important in ensuring quality serv-

ice being delivered to the customer.

Internal marketing theorists have argued that it is impossible for businesses to provide better service to external customers than they provide to their employees or internal customers.

Service employees who feel supported and feel they have a team backing them up will be better able to maintain their enthusiasm and provide quality service.

Motivated service employees offer service quality that is difficult for other organisations to imitate. That is why they are a key source of sustainable competitive advantage for service firms. - Singapore Straits Times/Asia News Network

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