

Becoming Truly Customer-Focused — No Matter Where You Work

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How do you succeed in business? Probably a thousand books have tried to answer that question, but the Baha'i teachings make it fairly simple — you serve others. Abdu'l-Baha wrote:

Your criterion should be to pursue your commercial activities with such fairness and equity as to be a cause of guidance to others.

In any business or work environment, doing work in the spirit of service to humanity most often comes down to your interaction with your customers, your understanding of who they are, their needs, and your purpose in meeting their needs. You do not succeed in business by serving yourself and by focusing on your own needs. You succeed by doing the best possible job to meet the needs of other people.

Only cartoonish caricatures of businesspeople portray them as caring solely about making money and gaining personal advantage. The more successful and intelligent business entrepreneurs and executives understand that their own success depends on their ongoing ability to retain and satisfy the needs of their customers – and the needs of society.

For that basic reason, becoming customer-focused has become a high priority and challenge for most companies. This philosophy has resulted in efforts to design products with customer needs in mind, guaranteed money-back customer satisfaction; and mission statements such as “ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen” at the Ritz-Carlton hotel chain.

More and more, doing work in the spirit of service has become a common goal in those companies striving for total quality. These companies have also experienced the rewards. Unsurprisingly, customers want to keep doing business with companies who serve them well. One study of the financial performance of those companies who won the National Quality Award in the United States demonstrated that their stock price, or shareholder value, increased thirty percent more than the norm for Standard & Poor’s Five Hundred.

Simply, serving customers well means good business.

But many who work in large organizations do not directly interact with the final customer of their product. They may be engineers working to design a part of an automobile that will then be produced by one manufacturer, sent to an auto assembly plant that will final-assemble the car, which will then be distributed to a dealer. That part travels a long way from the engineer to the final customer. How do we then create a system that encourages the spirit of service to customers, even for employees with no “customer-facing” responsibilities?

If we design organizations and management processes with intention, that intention must enable each individual in the business to develop a connection with their customers, and empower them to act with a spirit of service.

By understanding the process chain — from the designer and the engineer, to each successive stage of work in the process, to the final customer — we can build in customer interaction. This works best by mapping the entire process from beginning to end and defining a series of teams, each with responsibility for a stage of the process and delivering their work to the team at the next stage. Each successive team must then develop a close relationship with the team members who receive their work. Whoever receives or makes use of your work then become your customer, the one you serve. At the same time, you can begin to understand your effect on the whole chain and the final customer.

Honda, for example, has articulated the spirit of service in their Three Joys:

- the Joy of Buying a product that exceeds the needs and expectations of each customer;
- the Joy of Selling that occurs when you develop a relationship with a customer based on mutual trust; and
- the Joy of Creating that results from engineering and manufacturing a product when recognizing the sense of joy in customers and dealers.

That shared joy comes from knowing that your purpose centers on creating joy in others and working together in teams. The entire organization, designed and managed in a way that creates joy at each stage of the process, can then better understand and continuously reflect on how to best serve its customers.

Anyone who meditates on the Baha'i principles that pertain to spirituality and work, and then experiments and innovates, can find better ways to incorporate those profound principles into their work and their organizations. No one knows the one right way to achieve this. Our challenge? To learn from others and then strive to perfect the application of this important principle, articulated by Abdu'l-Baha in a speech he gave in Boston in 1912:

The fundamentals of the whole economic condition are divine in nature and are associated with the world of the heart and spirit.

This is fully explained in the Baha'i teachings, and without knowledge of its principles no improvement in the economic state can be realized. The Baha'is will bring about this improvement and betterment, but not through sedition and appeal to physical force — not through warfare, but welfare. Hearts must be so cemented together, love must become so dominant that the rich shall most willingly extend assistance to the poor and take steps to establish these economic adjustments permanently. If it is accomplished in this way, it will be most praiseworthy because then it will be for the sake of God and in the pathway of His service.