

LEADING INTERNAL CUSTOMER CARE FOR EXTERNAL EXCELLENCE

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ABSTRACT

The customer care or service approach is designed to improve relationships with and ways of handling customers, that is to realign organisational strategies and processes towards satisfying customers' needs.

The best customer care programmes go further than a simple concentration on the (external) customer and recognise the fact that, especially in large organisations, intermediate departments or sections involved in the supply of a service are themselves customers of one another. There is a front line in which staff have direct contact with the final receivers of the service, and then a series of interfaces within the organisation where one member of staff (or a team) provides an internal service to another. There is thus a customer chain which stretches back from the end (external) customer to the point at which a product or service is designed and specified.

Genuine customer care is thus a by-product of internal relationships and culture, which renders it a leadership issue that should be part of an overall organisational strategy. Customer care has to start at the top, with leadership, as the way customers are treated is closely allied to the way staff feel about their jobs and the situation in which they do them. Customer care is unlikely to happen by chance and the effective leader ensures that it is never left to chance

INTRODUCTION

Leadership can be defined as influencing people by providing purpose, direction and motivation, while operating with the aim to achieve goals and improving the institution overall. This means, the ability to guide people in a desired direction by, amongst others, supplying them with the conviction that a task or the way of performing it, is essential to overall goal achievement and ensuring that the performance of all functions will increase the institution's current and future service delivery capacity.

Leaders are also expected to improve all resources entrusted to them, including people, as they are the most precious commodity of an institution; the heart of its functioning.

That is why institutions that are highly regarded in terms of customer service are those where extraordinary customer relations are practised throughout the institution, regardless of whether the customer is outside the institution or is an internal customer.

LEADING INTERNAL CUSTOMERS

Most efforts to improve customer care are targeted at (external) customer facing staff, as this is often considered the only point of service delivery. The danger in this approach is that customer care becomes a simple tactical issue when, it should in fact be strategic. It should be part of an overall institutional strategy, not a coincidental benefit. Customer care thus has to be considered as a leadership issue. True customer care is a by-product of internal relationships and culture. The way customers are treated is closely aligned to the way public servants feel about their jobs and the environment in which they do them, but even more importantly: to the way that they themselves are led. Customer satisfaction is unlikely to happen by chance and the effective leader ensures that it is never left to chance (Morris 1996: 7).

Well-led institutions are committed to clarifying their vision and mission. Invariably, their mission involves customers, reinforcing the place of internal, as well as external customers. While mission statements are important, the culture, which is required to support them, is crucial. Effective leaders focus on producing a caring culture for all the stakeholders involved in the achievement of the mission. And, since culture is a reflection of behaviour, words are not enough. Leaders must lead by example (Morris 1996: 9).

Leaders' behaviour is a key element of effective customer care. For better or worse, leaders are role models for their team. Their behaviour towards their staff, or internal customers, will be reproduced by those same staff in their dealings with their customers. It matters little that those dealings may be with colleagues, as internal care eventually has a rippling effect on (external) customer facing staff. The most serious mistake leaders can make, is believing that they have no impact on customer care because they never have any contact with (external) customers (Ahlström & Torfve 2004: 30).

In most cases leaders support the efforts of their entire team while having little direct (external) customer contact, as the function of leaders in terms of customer care is to commit their institutions to a customer satisfaction mission and empower their teams to deliver it. Once the mission is agreed upon, it has to be communicated clearly and regularly. It must become a belief and value for the institution rather than the latest initiative from the legislature or the executive or regulatory bodies. This will only happen when behaviour towards internal customers and reinforcement of standards at all levels is seen to happen. If a leader's behaviour is not supporting the mission, the initiative is doomed (Ahlström & Torfve 2004: 45).

For leaders to commit to customer care is not sufficient in itself. The commitment must be reinforced by both words and actions, particularly actions. Leaders need to develop the ability to motivate their teams to want to give the necessary level of service. Actual commitment from leaders is quickly apparent to staff. Their behaviour highlights it and provides the direction, which staff seek (Morris 1996:7).

It is essential that leaders offer visible support and encouragement when leading customer care (Fourie 1998: 231), as public servants must be empowered to make decisions even though some of those decisions will be less than perfect. They must also receive support if they make mistakes, and coaching to try to avoid similar occurrences. This is the only way to encourage public servants to want to help customers and is much more effective than trying to make them help. The knowledge and skills to achieve positive outcomes in customer contacts are well known. Motivating public servants so that they wish to use them is the key (Baily 1996: 38).

As the leadership has been contextualised in terms of customer care, it is also important to define customer care within the context of the public service.

MAKING CUSTOMER CARE A PUBLIC SERVICE REALITY

The customer care or service approach designed is to improve relationships with and ways of handling customers as dictated by the *White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery* (Notice No. 1459 of 1997) (herein after referred to as the *Batho Pele White Paper*). The best customer-related programmes go further than a simple concentration on the external customer and recognise the fact that, especially in large institutions, intermediate departments or sections involved in the supply of a service are themselves customers of the primary providers. There is a front line in which public servants have direct contact with the final receivers of the service, and then a series of interfaces within the institution where one member of staff (or a team) provides an internal service to another. There is thus a customer chain, which stretches back from the end (external) customer to the point at which the product or service is designed and specified. The front-line service can only be improved and maintained if all the other service points are improved and maintained. Baines (1996: 20) argues that merely because the front-line service is the nearest to the external customer, does not mean it is the only point of service delivery. Bearing in mind the significance of internal and not only external customers, it is important to consider how the theory of customer care can be made a reality.

Statements about improved customer care are cosmetic until the institutional vision and mission, plus the beliefs and values that underpin the culture, become truly customer centred. The *Batho Pele White Paper* (Section 1.3.3) states that to treat people as customers implies listening to their views and taking account of them in making decisions about what services should be provided; as well as treating them with consideration and respect. These principles gain tremendous significance if the fact is kept in mind that they apply to dealings with external, as well as internal customers (Baily 1996: 36).

It is especially important that internal customers who are closest to the point of service delivery be asked how to improve performance, (Mitchell 1991: 72), because then leaders will receive the input needed to develop a (an external) customer-satisfaction mission which will meet a number of objectives including (Baily 1996:37, Rapea 2004:78):

- defining the institution in a customer focused way;
- defining the leadership behaviour needed to support customer focus; and

- considering how to motivate staff to take part in the programme and maintain their commitment.

When attempting to promote effective customer care, leaders should, in addition to designing a customer satisfaction mission as described above (Morris 1996: 9):

- be involved in, and committed to, the customer satisfaction mission;
- give high-profile support for the initiative through words and deeds;
- make continuous attempts to improve standards of care in their own internal and external customer dealings; and
- ensure that customer care becomes part of appraisal at every level.

The argument is consequently made that leaders in the public service have to demonstrate that they are personally committed to the ideals of the *Batho Pele White Paper* by encouraging, monitoring and enforcing good customer care (KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Administration 2000: 35).

LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOUR THAT SUPPORTS CUSTOMER CARE

There are a number of issues that are important to leaders in the South African public service. Of primary importance among these is the manner in which services are delivered to the public. In carrying out its mandate, the developmental state's biggest asset is its people: not only the people who are the beneficiaries of its services, but especially the people who have to implement its policies. It is of utmost importance that these people believe that their contribution is being recognized (Zuma 2004:8).

When considering behavioural theories, the main distinction that is made, is between task-centred and employee-centred forms of leadership behaviour or styles. An employee-focused leader is mostly concerned with meeting the needs of the employees and being considerate when dealing with them, by so doing motivating them to reach higher states of performance and institutional goal achievement. Ivancevich *et. al* (1994: 392) note that employee-focused leadership involves showing empathy for staff needs and feelings, being supportive of group needs, establishing trusting relationships with staff, and allowing staff to participate in work-related decisions. It is important not to lose sight of contingency theories on leadership, arguing that overall leadership style is constituted by a number of factors, and is informed by the interaction between the leader's traits, the leader's behaviours, and the situation in which the leader functions (Horner 1997:271).

Current leadership theories include transformational leadership which is defined as aiming for the core, that is to influence the values and belief systems of staff and by so doing influencing their behaviour (Politis 2002:188). Whilst Covey (2000: 4-5), mentions principled leadership that is defined as being based on fairness, service, equity, justice, integrity, honesty and trust; all pointing to the requirements of professionalism that are becoming more prevalent in the South African public service.

Apart from considering the requirements that professionalism place on the behaviour of leaders in the public service (to be discussed later), it is also necessary to consider competencies required in the performance of their functions, as leadership should not be considered a natural, inherited trait, but rather a skill that can be studied, learned and perfected by practice.

COMPETENCIES REQUIRED FOR LEADING CUSTOMER CARE

The *Public Service Regulations* (Notice No. 21951 of 2001) define competence as "... the blend of knowledge, skills, behaviour and attitude that a person can apply in the work environment, which indicates a person's ability to meet the requirements of a specific post."

As applicable to any leadership position, some of the competencies that are viewed as being critical for optimal performance of the senior manager's role are (Rapea 2004: 33-34) (SAMDI 2003: 9-63):

- strategic capability and leadership – the ability to provide a vision, set the direction for the institution and inspire others in order to deliver on the institutional mandate;
- service delivery innovation – the ability to explore and implement new ways of delivering services that contribute to the improvement of institutional processes in order to achieve institutional goals;
- people management and empowerment – the ability to manage and encourage people, optimise their outputs and effectively manage relationships in order to achieve institutional goals;
- client orientation and customer focus – to display positive attitudes and behaviour, which demonstrates an awareness and willingness to respond to customers in order to respond to and meet internal and external customers needs, requirements and expectations;
- honesty and integrity – the ability to display and build the highest standards of ethical and moral conduct in order to promote confidence and trust in the public service;
- concern for others – the ability to consider the needs and difficulties of others and take an active interest in their feelings, capabilities and perspectives in order to assist them with the difficulties they face and act with warmth and concern;
- impact and influence – the ability to make an impact, persuade and influence others (individuals or groups) in order to gain support and action for ideas, proposals or initiatives put forward in order to achieve a specific objective or result; and
- team leadership – the ability to build cohesive and productive work and project teams in order to achieve the required outputs either as a work unit or as a component within the institution.

Based on the competencies of concern for others and impact and influence, the statement can be made that a leader who acts based on the respect due to subordinates, will not fail to inspire them, which is an essential means-end-principle of professionalism.

LEADING CUSTOMER CARE AS AN ISSUE OF PROFESSIONALISM

According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, profession means, "A calling requiring specialised knowledge and preparation including instruction in skills and methods as well as in the principles underlying such skills and methods, maintained by high standards of achievement and conduct." From this definition it could be concluded that the criteria for professionalism involve technical competence, as well as personal behaviour.

Professionalism furthermore refers to being competent, effective, efficient, ethical and qualified for performing assigned and accepted duties. It refers to commitment to an ethic of product and service quality, and a need to be innovative. Mafunisa (2003: 62) argues that professionalism is most effective when it begins at the top and proceeds downward throughout the departmental structures.

Leaders are responsible for setting an example, not only in terms of methods and use of public resources, but also for sound judgement and respect for the provisions of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*, the *Code of Conduct for Public Servants*, the *Public Service Act, 1994 (Proclamation 103 of 1994)* and societal values. Their behaviour consequently becomes a model for their colleagues and subordinates (Mafunisa 2003: 62).

To be worthy of the name "professional", a public servant should possess the following characteristics of empathy and credibility. That is, doing to others what they would like others to do to them, as well as inspiring their colleagues through their professional actions. Because of their credibility, colleagues and members of the public have confidence in them (Rohr 2000: 64).

Leaders should provide leadership in the area of ethics by way of "walking the talk". They should treat all people with whom they interact fairly, with courtesy and sensitivity, taking pride in any service they provide. In other words, a public servant must act in an exemplary manner and operate in such a way that the characteristics of an administrative profession are seen to be honoured (Rohr 2000: 75).

The essence of professionalism is thus acting in the absence of rules or direction from others, based on an inner sense of what is morally and professionally right. The question that needs to be asked in conclusion is what the core requirements are of leaders who are expected to lead service delivery and customer care in the South African public service.

CONCLUSION

If leadership is summarised as the ability to persuade others to seek defined objectives enthusiastically, the argument could also be raised that most leadership theories (whether trait, behavioural or contingency) are based to a large extent on motivation theories. It is the human factor that binds a group together and motivates it towards goals. Leaders in the public service thus have a vital role in developing morale and creating enthusiasm in public institutions.

In his state of the nation address in 2002, President Mbeki calls on all South Africans to "arise and act – Vuk'uzenzele!" and makes the pledge that government "will strive to give real meaning to the strategic challenge facing the Public Service – Batho Pele." Crucial to

note, however, is that Vuk' uzenzele does not mean "arise and talk" or "arise and think" or even "arise and plan", but in fact "arise and act".

When acting as a leader a public servant should thus act as a positive behaviour model. Leaders should do this through the socialisation process, the formation of character and conscience, bearing in mind that they exert a much greater influence on their subordinates through their personal behaviour than through the things they say.

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