

Customer-oriented approach – a consequence of discipline

On achieving a customer-oriented approach for your company not by means of propaganda, but by means of regular management.

LOYP AGENCY®, 2014

I asked a developer who was thinking about introducing a new product to the countryside real estate market: *“By means of what will you compete with them?”* He answered: *“I’m customer-oriented, and they are not!”* In the modern “business-lexis”, the concept of a customer-oriented approach, as well as of many other categories, is vague and rather subjective. What do we imply by it?

I think you will agree that when someone says *“they are customer-oriented”*, he means *“they were good to me”*, *“they showed me unknown qualitative characteristics of the product”*, *“they gave me fair warning”*, *“they saved my time”*, *“their actions did not lead to new risks”*. Everyone wishes this for himself. And, as a consequence, they very well understand the impression they wish counterparts to have for their business. The reality is that this desire alone and an internal sensation do not constitute a customer-oriented approach.

Quite often, the main effort of management on the road towards a customer-oriented approach is propaganda. Propaganda is active when the manager himself is absorbed in the idea. It is related both to HR (and further to requirements for job applicants) and to the existing staff. Calls to be attentive to the customer have a beneficial effect, and employees (certainly understanding that you are investing in requirements on them) one way or another start to show higher elements of customer-orientation. Inefficiency of propaganda as an instrument is that it works only while the manager is active. If he weakens his

propaganda, everything quickly slides back to the steady balance it was in before.

Let us discuss examples of a customer-oriented approach to you. A girl from a dealer service department calls you back the next day after a regular maintenance operation on your car and wonders whether you were satisfied with the service. What is her name? What mood is she in today? Has she any problems with her family? Did she want to call you? All this is unknown, and the girl, by her nature, could in principle be far from any ideas of “customer-orientation”. But we know for sure that she works within the process, she has her instructions, and her chief controls the execution of these instructions. Do not be under a delusion that if there were no such component of service and discipline in the company, the employee of the service department would show initiative and intense interest in whether everything is all right with you. I think you are under no delusion with reference to our example, but can still cherish such an illusion concerning employees of your own company.

Another example. Having installed a conditioning system, you get a quarterly message with an inquiry about the condition of the system and a reminder to carry out maintenance service. It happens through the relationship management system which automatically delivers such mails without involving any personnel. Today, it is hardly possible to build an effective discipline management system, or in many respects to ease the work of employees (leaving them time for

disciplined discharge of their functions) when dealing with a great number of customers without an information system.

There are examples of incorrect orientation of the working process and negative effects of personnel discipline. In a fast food restaurant, you are quietly offered a “new” fruitcake with coffee, and in another one a sales clerk recites (when you are under time pressure) a five-minute monologue (not looking you in the eyes and flushing as he understands the irrelevance of the situation), “Would you like to try *this*? No... Then, maybe *this*: *it* has a low cholesterol level and altogether, *it* is our new good one...” The sales clerk’s look and the text itself are far from being customer-orientated. What is the mistake? The sales staff of these two restaurants are absolutely differently motivated for additional sales; they have different management systems and duty regulations. Though they are disciplined and involved in the working process.

It turns out that the definition of “customer-orientation” is applicable not to the particular employee but to the process of interaction with the counterpart regardless of the reason for such interaction. Using the definition as a characteristic of the manager is possible only if the manager builds a “customer-oriented” process.

Traditionally (and mistakenly) the customer-orientation concept is related only to the attitude to the buyer. But this is far from being the first priority. The company should be customer-oriented both towards suppliers and towards employees. As a consequence, the employees should be customer-oriented towards each other. The idea is close to the back office processes quality issue. The back office should be customer-oriented to the commercial service and to production, and they in turn to the back office. Such customer-orientation will specify the process of formation of added values in the

company, and as a consequence (without additional control needed), refer to the customer.

If your accounts department always asks signed documents to be provided in due time, lay it under an obligation (administratively, rigidly, not at the level of conversations) at set terms to send signed copies of the documents to your counterparts. When you delay payment to the supplier, notify him in advance, not waiting till the payment date itself. And when you pay, send a small present as admission of liability for the delay. Do not let slip from your management attention such moments (there are plenty of them in any business), make them part of the process (develop general, hand-written rules of actions for staff in a particular situation). The discipline of their execution by each employee (bookkeeper, office-manager, purchasing manager and others) will become a habit, a part of the corporate culture. As a consequence, your sales staff will be more attentive to the little things that matter to customers not as if they were “obliged to” and not just before the expected payment, but simply because it cannot be otherwise.

Let us mention another element about general impressions of customer-orientation. Having purchased an item, you unexpectedly discover thoughtful details which were not a factor in your purchase decision. So, automatic turn-off of headlights at the beginning of its installation in expensive cars was not declared in the list of options when buying. And it is really pleasing, as you walk away from your car and realize that you have forgotten to turn off the headlights, to observe that they automatically die out right in front of your eyes. It is a little extra to what you expected in terms of product quality. It is a part of the company’s customer-orientation as a whole and is relevant for products of any consumer segment.

People, on the whole, can hardly be “re-educated” in a responsible labour age and will not change dramatically. Most likely, you will not be able to effect inculcation of a hypertrophied responsibility, if it has not been formed within them previously. In conclusion, we will briefly review only those factors of customer-orientation which are less connected to the subjective attitude of the employee to his work.

A non-perfect working process (the set rules of the game) is a manager’s mistake which can be quickly fixed. There can be an excess of expectations regarding

product quality, or there can be no such excess (it takes additional costs and is desirable, but not obligatory). If you have enough money, it is also quickly renewable. But the discipline based on a competently built management system, the manager’s attention to searching for effective ways to monitor it, its regularity and correct system of motivation does not suddenly appear. It is developed by daily work of the manager, and it is the discipline that you should pay all the attention to on the way to achieving customer-orientation.



1'287 words or 6'649 letters/marks