I have been looking at customer feedback data from a couple of areas around the university, and I keep seeing phrases like ‘poor customer service’ and ‘rude’ popping up in the comments. I am not bringing this up because of what the comments say, but because of what they don’t say.

Based on these comments, the departments could do the following to improve customer service or address rude employees:

- Implement customer service training
- Coach their staff to improve their performance
- Ensure that customer service is emphasized in the annual review process
- Coach or reprimand the rude employees
- Monitor the staff interactions with customers

One department in particular that I have been working with for the past few years keeps getting these same comments over-and-over, year-after-year. Their leadership regularly provides staff with customer service training, implements new customer-support technologies, monitors staff, and takes steps to resolve customer issues quickly, but the comments keep coming. If the department is taking the correct actions to address poor customer service and rude employees, then why do these comments keep appearing?

The reason these steps may not be addressing the customers’ feedback, is that the comments may not actually be referring to service issues or employee behaviors. If someone says that an employee was ‘rude’ to them or gave ‘poor service’ without any additional explanation, those are pretty ambiguous statements. What do they mean by ‘rude?’ Did the employee really exhibit negative behavior toward the customer? Was the employee unhelpful, or did the customer just not get what they wanted and label that as the employee being ‘rude?’ In order to properly address customer feedback and improve service, we have to be certain of what the issues truly are.

Using deterministic reasoning we can conclude that if we define a problem incorrectly and then attempt to solve it, we will be fixing the wrong issue. Unfortunately, this also means that we will be wasting time and resources to improve something that is not actually an issue, or provide a service or product that customers do not want. Worse yet, the original problem will still exist and continue to create customer dissatisfaction.

It is imperative that we take the necessary time to formulate and ask the right questions, and clearly and correctly define the problem before committing resources to trying to fix it. A clear definition of the problem will allow us to focus our resources where they are

Defining the right problem

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needed. It will also ensure that the correct problem is solved, customer needs are met, and we can monitor and prevent a reoccurrence.

Obstacles to defining the right problem

In my experience, there are three major issues that inhibit people from asking questions and taking the time to define the problem clearly before taking action and trying to solve it. These obstacles are:

- The solution appears obvious / they think they know the answer
- It takes time to investigate the problem and define it
- They do not know how to define the problem

The first obstacle, the solution appears obvious, was addressed at the beginning of this article. When a there appears to be an obvious solution, there is a desire to jump on it, fix the problem and move on. I am not saying that the most obvious answer isn’t the correct one – sometimes it is. What I am saying is that there are often other factors that contribute to the issue and which the obvious solution does not address. There are also instances were a problem masquerades as something entirely different. When these situations arise (and they pop up more often than you would think), the obvious solution will not have any noticeable impact because you are solving the wrong problem.

The second obstacle is that it takes time to investigate problems and understand them. There is often pressure to address issues quickly, and the time it takes to assess and correctly define the problem is regarded as a delay rather than an important step in addressing the issue properly. I am not advocating dragging your feet, but I strongly urge you to take time to examine the problem before jumping in to fix it. There are times when it is appropriate to push back against pressure to rush to a solution. You can point to the potential for failing to correct the right issue, wasting resources, and needing to do rework as the reasons for patience and thoroughly defining the problem.

The third obstacle is not knowing how to dig down through the ambiguity and clearly define the problem. In this case, not knowing what to do leaves people grasping for solutions, trying anything that seems logical, or failing to take any action at all.

Defining the problem

Any time you are looking at a problem, you need to view it from the customers’ perspective to make sure you understand it the way they do.

In an ideal situation, you will know who provided the feedback and can go talk with them directly. Speaking with a customer in-person provides an opportunity to have them describe their service experience in detail, and you can ask probing questions to clarify points and vague terms (like ‘poor service’ or ‘rude’).
When you are unable to go talk with the customer directly, like when you get feedback from a mass survey, it will require a little more sleuthing to identify the real problem. When this is the case, you may find that conducting a highly-focused customer survey, holding focus groups, or selecting customers for post-service interviews will help you determine if there really is an issue, and the true nature of the problem. These approaches give you the opportunity to formulate questions that focus on the specific aspects of your service that have received complaints. Using the ‘poor service’ and ‘rude’ examples, you can ask customers to rate the quality of service they have received and describe their experience, or ask why they feel an employee was rude to them. Additionally, you can ask customers to fill out complaint sheets that ask for details about their service experience, observe interactions between customers and employees, or interview employees to get their input regarding service quality.

Using these methods, you can develop a pretty clear picture of what is really going on, whether the issue being describe by customers is truly occurring, or if there is some other problem that needs to be addressed. With this information, you can then write a clear problem statement that summarizes the issue from the customers' point of view and describes the performance gap(s). The problem statement needs to be supported with relevant information like expected performance targets and actual performance data. Once the problem is clearly identified, you can proceed to finding a sound solution and fixing the problem. This way you will be confident that the work you are doing will truly make a positive difference for your customers.

I welcome your questions and feedback about this topic or any other service operations or process improvement topic. You can email me at clayton.taylor@asu.edu.

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Clayton Taylor, MBA, is the Director, Organizational Performance and a Certified Six Sigma Master Black Belt working in the Office of the Executive Vice President, Treasurer and Chief Financial Officer at Arizona State University. He leads the Organizational Performance Office. He and his team currently consult with diverse Business and Finance and university-wide operational areas to lower costs, improve operational efficiency and provide the highest quality customer experience to internal and external customers. Mr. Taylor can be reached at clayton.taylor@asu.edu.