

Citizen Services

Six Essential Elements to Government Customer Service

By **Wendi Pomerance Brick**



President Obama recently issued a Presidential Executive Order to all federal agencies to streamline processes and improve customer satisfaction with plans due to the Office of Management and Budget by this October.

How exactly do we improve customer satisfaction in government agencies? Great service in government is harder to provide and sustain than it is in private industry.

Perhaps more importantly, customer satisfaction can not be defined the same way. The biggest difference is that our customers are not always right. Government is often regulatory or enforcement in nature, and even when the service is about providing assistance, there are rules and conditions to follow.

Instead of focusing on satisfaction with the outcome (the customer is happy with the decision that is made), we must focus on satisfaction with the way we provide the services, e.g. the quality of the service delivery.

If I said to you "Be good at customer service", most people would think that meant "be nice to people." That's part of it, but it's only one-third of the equation. The other two-thirds are "accuracy of information" and "speed" and that's where focusing on fixing our processes will have a huge impact.

For example, if you are really nice to me, but give me the wrong answer, or a different answer than the person I talked to last time, that's not good service and I won't be satisfied. If you are nice to me and have the right information, but the processes takes forever to get resolution, that's not good service either. All three of these principles together must be present in each customer interaction, this focus on quality, in order to lead us to the customer satisfaction with government services that we are looking for.

Focusing on these core concepts in your organization will make a fundamental difference in the way you do business. Focusing on these core concepts in your individual day-to-day activities will make a fundamental difference in your personal success as well, but that's a subject for another time.

This Executive Order only affects federal agencies, but the message is clear. If you work for any agency how will you meet these expectations?

This information is for you as a leader, someone who has a sphere of influence whether it is formal or informal. Everyone has a sphere of influence. You don't have to be a manager to be a leader. Management is a title, leadership is a choice. In the wise words of Archimedes, "If you give me a lever and a place to stand, I can move the world."

Your place to stand is your fundamental belief in the value of public service, and the lever is you. You are both the belief and the action. If you make the decision to implement change for the greater good, you can make it happen. To take of this challenge and make changes that will "stick", consider the following approach.

There are Six Essential Elements to creating a culture of service in any organization.

1. Set Expectations - in writing, email, phone in person, driving, and any other way your team might make an impression on customers or potential customers.

2. Train Your Team - managers and front line staff alike need professional development support to make great impressions in every situation and direction on how to create an atmosphere where great service can thrive.

3. Empower Your Team - push decisions to the front line and focus on building great judgment and individual responsibility. A fully engaged work force is the key to the success of any organization.

4. Collect feedback - make sure to ask your customers what they think. Include all customer groups and multiple data gathering techniques.

5. Rewards and recognition - thank your team when they meet the service expectations!

6. Process improvement - streamline processes to eliminated wasted non-value added steps.

On Number Six, I challenge you to find a process that *doesn't* have waste. From internal processes like travel requests and purchasing and contracting, to external processes like qualifying someone for food stamps or unemployment, there are hundreds of opportunities to start streamlining right now.

Let me make one point about streamlining. Streamlining does not mean automating. Automating is

likely part of the result but it is not the solution. This is really important.

There is a lot of technology out there and lots of people saying their products can do lots of things. I've been through many automation projects from the simple to creating enterprise resource planning (ERP) solutions.

The most important thing to remember before automating anything, please, is to streamline the process *first*. Make sure you are automating good process. This is a huge "hindsight is 20/20" moment for lots of managers. They spend a lot of time and money automating something but didn't "fix" it first. What do you get when you automate bad process? Expensive bad process. (Read more about that in my recent blog post on GovLoop.)

As we strive to provide the highest quality service to our external (and internal) customers, follow the advice of another President who said "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

In the end, whether you are a manager or a front line team member, there are ways you can incorporate these six essential elements into your daily routine. If you are responsible for implementing the Presidential EO in your department of agency, you have a huge responsibility and a magnificent opportunity. Continue to be a champion of great service in government. It's not an easy role, but change what you can and your legacy will be to leave the world a better place.

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