



## Does Your Customer Experience Grant Permission?

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Your customers and employees hold the key to customer service excellence. Too often, these stakeholders who know the most about the customer service experience never share their ideas and the insights that could lead to more efficient processes, a better work environment, and delighted customers.

Have you given your front line employees and your customers permission to share ideas and insight?

The true customer service experts are the current participants in your customer service experience: your front line employees, and your customers. Front line employees have their finger on the customer pulse daily, and the customer is uniquely qualified to report their perspective of the business and the customer experience. In order to gather the valuable feedback available from the 'true experts' and implement aligned business-focused insight into the customer experience you first need to grant permission for feedback input.

Tapping into your front line employee and customers as a source of intelligence requires several steps but can pay dividends. As a leader, you must be prepared with a system that demonstrates to your employees and customers that you truly want their honest feedback. That system must explicitly ask for feedback, listen to it, analyze its merits and alignment with organizational Mission, Vision, and Values, and either adopt the recommendation or report back why you choose not to act upon the feedback.

Feedback acceptance is the first step. A system that genuinely requests feedback from employees and customers demonstrates that permission to provide feedback is granted. Accepting feedback is no simple feat. It requires you to set your ego aside and understand the distinct line between business opportunity and personal criticism. For the most part, feedback will not be directed to you as a person, but to your business. Reframe perceived personal criticism as a business opportunity (if

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possible), keep an open mind, and objectively move on to the second step.

Second is feedback analysis. Not every idea should be implemented – some feedback will be contrary to the thriving survival of the business.

When analyzing feedback, one of the first considerations should be alignment. Alignment is the factor that drives emotional involvement and personal investment in the success of the organization. Alignment can only occur when the Mission, Vision, and Values are aligned up, down, and across the organization, and when every person in the organization agrees with, and supports, the statements made in the Mission, Vision and Values.

Alignment is the factor that turns a group of disparate athletes into a winning team. Taken one step further, alignment between the organization and its suppliers, business partners, and customers creates a wonderfully powerful and efficient machine that drives relentlessly toward attaining the common vision.

Alignment begins with Mission, Vision and Values. All organizations should take the time and effort to discuss and decide upon a set of Values that specifies what the organization must do, and what it must not do. Values capture the personal integrity, business ethics, philosophic framework, and all other factors that are life-guiding principles for the people that make up the organization.

Values inform the development of a Vision. The organization's Vision specifies what the organization is on Earth to accomplish. "Sam's Summer Vacation Lemonade Stand will cure world hunger" is an example of a vision statement. For Sam, this vision makes him happy to get up in the morning, and go to the old Lemonade Stand.

The Mission sets out the broad actions that will, if followed, eventually lead to fulfillment of the Vision. An example of a Mission Statement is: "Sam's Summer Vacation Lemonade Stand will work to unify the neighborhood, slaking thirst and earning money from June through August. All of that revenue will be donated to World Vision."

Analyze the focused insight from your front line employees and from your customers. If you see clear alignment with the organizational Mission, Vision and Values, then you are off to a great start. Aligned feedback is a good sign that customers and employees understand and believe in your Mission, Vision and Values and are interested in helping improve your business because they agree and believe in them as you do. Complete alignment will not always be readily forthcoming, however.

Take the opportunity to put misaligned or inappropriate feedback in juxtaposition with the Mission, Vision and Values, and open a discussion to seek solutions that capture the essence and benefit of the feedback,

while supporting the Mission, Vision and Values. Without challenge or attack against the employee or customer, open a discussion to understand their perspective. Perhaps they can enlighten you to a new interpretation. If the feedback is completely out of line, explain how the inappropriate idea is not feasible, or how it does not fit into the business model, preferable with some suggestions for improving alignment.

Each opportunity may trigger a new conversation, and each conversation across the organization will lead everyone in the organization closer to alignment with the Mission, Vision and Values. Soon enough, you should recognize a steady increase in alignment between the feedback received and the Mission, Vision and Values. Lead the organization through the repeatable alignment process to home in on the ultimate goal – Perfect Organizational Alignment!

Next, qualify the best ideas against a broader audience of front line employees, and customers if possible and appropriate. The same potential benefit may be gained with a less disruptive innovation, or significant additional benefit may be gained with marginal additional effort.

Third is implementation (adoption or adaptation) of the idea. Change management is a difficult task for most people, and leaders are people, too. We humans like predictability; we like things to stay the same. But to move forward and continue to grow, we must embrace change, and implement feedback-inspired improvement! Honestly – did you think 20 years ago that there was any benefit to a telephone that you carried around with you all the time? Implementation of good ideas is critical to building trust that the original request for feedback is sincere.

The idea's author will embrace its implementation, but coworkers may not. Leaders must be proponents of change, and must champion implemented ideas. When the idea fails in practice despite good theory, leaders must embrace the knowledge gained through failure, and must protect the idea's author from negative peer pressure. Encourage everyone to go back to the drawing board to try again.

Alignment and implementation will not always be easy. Alignment and implementation often requires organizational culture change. Any cultural change requires a great deal of time, attention, and energy. If you have a challenging Mission, Vision and Values, you will find that alignment leaves some customers feeling alienated, not aligned. Similarly, you might notice an uptick in attrition if you have employees for whom personal values are incompatible with those of the organization. Though it may feel like pain, the light at the end of each of those tunnels can only be seen with alignment (straightened tunnels cleared of debris and obstructions), and the tunnels are there with or without alignment.

In moments of doubt, consider the bright, shining light in the eyes of your aligned employees. Consider the employment referrals that will bring 'pre-

aligned' friends and acquaintances. Consider the bright, shining light in the eyes of your aligned customers. Consider the customer referrals of 'pre-aligned' friends and acquaintances. Look out to the horizon where you will find yourself surrounded by a tight-knit organizational culture that reflects your mission, vision, and values.

Gathering good feedback requires granting permission to the stakeholders positioned to offer the best ideas with the best focus on customer experience improvement. Repeating the process requires strong leadership and support of positive change. The result will be a culture of improvement, and an ever-improving customer experience will create and defend a differentiator between your organization and competitors. But move quickly; your competitors might be reading this, too!

**About Jim Graham.....**

Jim Graham, Directing Consultant with Maximum Business Advantage, has several years' experience working with large organizations in technical, consulting and managerial roles. His most recent corporate experience was as a consultant for IBM working on large-scale government implementation projects as a quality and risk manager. In this role, Jim led a team of individuals who worked together and virtually in various locations across the country. A strategic, blue-ocean thinker, Jim has consistently produced extraordinary efficiency-gaining and cost-reducing action plans for various organizations. Jim is passionate about service delivery, risk management, and ethical and sustainable business practices. Jim has an MBA specializing in Services Marketing and Management and a Master of Health Services Administration degree. Visit Maximum Business Advantage on the web at <http://www.servicedeliveryexcellence.com/> or reach Jim via email: [Jim@MBAAZ.com](mailto:Jim@MBAAZ.com).

Comments? Suggestions? We would like to hear from you. Please email the editor at [sspanews@thesspa.com](mailto:sspanews@thesspa.com).

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