



## The Seven Skills of Highly Effective Support Staffers

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What makes a support staffer successful? After working with hundreds of support engineers, support technicians, support analysts, and support reps (and I'm probably leaving out a few categories!), I see a small set of common characteristics of highly successful support staffers. Some skills I believe are built in: You'd better hire people who are wired that way, as there's little you can do to change their natural bent. But all skills can be enhanced and developed further through appropriate training and management practices.

1. **Enjoy helping people.** The main, seemingly obvious, and curiously overlooked competency of anyone who works in support is to enjoy helping other people. Many times I've been asked what keeps us working in support despite grouchy customers, broken products, and the unrelenting drive to cut costs—and the answer is very simple: It's the thanks we get when we can deliver a good solution for customers. It happens a lot (not always, but a lot), and we thrive on it.

More than any of the other skills described here, this one's probably more built in than trainable—although soft-skills training and technical training both increase the likelihood of delivering good solutions to customers...hence job satisfaction...hence the tendency to want to help more people. On the management front, don't put silly obstacles in the way of enjoying helping people, such as awkward canned scripts or absurdly short limits on the length of phone interactions.

2. **Project an assertive manner.** Meekness is not a good attribute for support staff. Sure, you want to avoid arrogance, but the other end of the spectrum, the doormat approach is just as bad. You will want to recruit people with a bit of backbone, but you can develop assertiveness through appropriate technical training ("If I know what I'm talking about, it's a lot easier to be assertive.") and soft skills training ("I can come across as competent even if I don't know the answer off the top of my head.") As a bonus, assertive staff members turn out to be much easier to manage: There's

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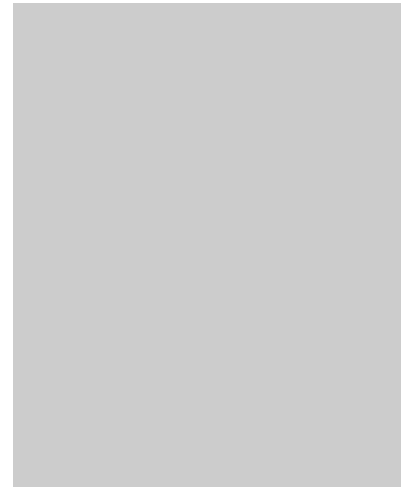
nothing more troubling to me than someone who says yes but doesn't deliver as promised, a typical coping mechanism of the terminally meek.

3. **Thrive on multitasking.** Let's face it: Support can be hectic. (Is this the understatement of the year?) Some people prefer a predictable environment where they can plan their day in advance. That's great; they should probably work somewhere else. For everyone else, techniques and discipline for managing a support queue with multiple cases can make the difference between a mediocre and a high contributor. For instance, the discipline to never close out a task without defining a clear next step means that switching back to that task in the future will be easy and fast.
4. **Be intellectually curious.** One of the great and underappreciated benefits of working in support is that we get to play with the products in all kinds of unexpected ways. Especially in high-complexity support centers, it's critical that the staff welcome working with problems for which no solution exists (yet!). Training on troubleshooting techniques makes all the difference. Rather than seeing walls against which to bash one's head, the support staff should see intriguing puzzles to stimulate one's brain. It's all in the way one attacks problems.
5. **Be tenacious, but know when to give up.** A generous amount of persistence is precious in support when the solutions are not immediately visible, as I just described, but it's also useful to know when to give up and concentrate on something more productive, be it another customer or another approach. Overly pigheaded approaches are very costly (and ultimately futile) in support. You want to carefully dial the effort level to avoid rat holes, being able to reach a level of completion that's acceptable to the customer without going further than that is essential.
6. **Say no gracefully and without guilt.** To me, this is the critical support skill: being able to tell a customer that no, their request cannot be granted—and have the customer thank you for it. This is an eminently trainable skill and one for which I've proudly trained dozens of individuals: Empathize with the customer, apologize sincerely for the problem, and focus on a solution, even if it's not the one the customer wants. There must be at least one master of the “no” in your organization; observe, admire, and learn.
7. **Enjoy being a team player.** I started my career in training and found that “lone wolves” could do very well as instructors. When I moved to support, however, it became clear that individual heroism, while striking, was often a hindrance rather than a gift. When it comes to teamwork, management practices are very important. Are all your objectives individually based? Then I would suggest that you add a few team goals to underline the importance of teamwork.

Take a few moments to assess each team member's competency on these seven critical skills and how well the management team fosters them.

**About Francoise Tourniaire.....**

Francoise Tourniaire is the founder and principal of FT Works, a consulting firm that helps technology companies create and grow their support operations. FT Works offers a full range of soft-skills training courses to help support organizations maintain and develop the seven critical skills of successful support staffers. For more information, visit [www.ftworks.com](http://www.ftworks.com).



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