

Service: are we up for it? Are we up to it?

A little while ago I came across two articles on the same day in different sections of *The Times* about delivering customer satisfaction.¹ Customer satisfaction is about service and it's some thoughts on service that I'd like to share. The first article was about how Walmart (Asda) has set about (re)branding itself as being warm and friendly. It has achieved this through a focus on 'mission, purpose and values', i.e. through the now standard accepted approach to bringing about culture change. An important aspect of this seems to have been the idea that, in their words, "We are all colleagues; we don't use the word 'staff'." This seemed to be saying something important about how they wanted to be as people together in the company. To gauge the effectiveness of their new approach a mystery shopper visits each store twice a week to check that the staff are indeed 'happy to help'. Asda lost the number one spot for being 'warm and friendly' to Sainsbury's and they are determined to get it back. And so it would seem on the basis of the article are their staff, who seem to be quite competitive about it.

(This does raise the curious image in my mind of two teams of staff from different supermarket chains arguing it out: "We're more warm and friendly than you!" "Oh, no you're not, we are!" etc. Trolleys at dawn, perhaps.)

The supermarkets are not alone, of course. All customer facing staff are now required to be warm and friendly in their relationships with customers. (French Post Offices, somewhat exceptionally, retain their independence from this point of view and consider a general disdain as a suitable attitude to those requiring their services.)

Now, we all know, don't we, that to get staff to treat customers well, they in turn have to be happy at work?

This brings me to the second article. This reported on a survey into the whether there was a positive link between employee and customer satisfaction. This reached the University of the Bleeding Obvious conclusion that keeping your staff happy didn't automatically result in staff keeping their customers happy. (Those of you with Vodaphone – ranked as one of the top 100 companies to work for by their staff – may have personal experience of this disjunction.)

We have known throughout history that personal happiness is not in itself a motivator for achievement, let alone a motivator for promoting the happiness of others.

So, we have two approaches here. The first, Asda, might be called the traditional psychodynamic approach to changing values and culture. That is, people/staff are brought to see that

different values, in this case warmth and friendliness to customers, is a good thing and will bring benefits all round. Usually, in culture change programmes, these benefits are seen to be for the individuals themselves as well as the company and the customers. This process is backed up by an intensive inspection regime which tests whether these values are being lived out. Presumably, if you persist in wanting to be a miserable old sod then you're out. Another way of describing this is that it's about giving people a narrative that makes sense to them, a narrative that will lead them to see that they need to behave differently. For me, the important point to note is that these narratives tend to rely heavily on self interest as a motivator for service others.

The second approach relies on a specious link between my happiness and yours.

Of course, being treated as a customer in a warm and friendly manner is a welcome advance in many customer-facing organisations. But I'm left with two nagging questions. The first concerns that nasty issue about corporations being intrinsically pathological. People can fall for narratives that are not always pleasant. The second, which is more about our lives at work, is about what is going on back down the supply chain into the depths of the company. Are matters so warm and friendly there? Is this level of interpersonal respect an aspect of life in the everyday working relationships of the company as a whole?

For, in organisations, we all provide service to one another, to customers, to colleagues and to other organisations. In organisational life no man (or woman) is an island either. Those of you who remember TQM (Total Quality Management) will remember that that approach in the late 80s/early 90s was founded on getting us all to see what these service relationships were and how those relationships needed to be improved to deliver 'Total' quality. (I did wonder at the time what a 'totality' of quality might amount to.) Unfortunately TQM, which at least made us see these relationships and their significance, descended into a mad bureaucracy of service level agreements between everybody, which effectively bureaucratized something that was really about human relationships.

(Despite TQM, it is still common in my experience to work on processes in organisations and find that staff have very little understanding of how they relate to others in delivering whatever service they are involved with.)

I want to leave that thought about service there for a moment and share an article that came more recently to my attention from Don Berwick², someone many of you may know from his work on quality systems in health delivery. In this article he writes as he often does about customer service in health care delivery. He calls what he sees as the level of customer service required

'patient-centeredness'. This is, unfortunately, a phrase that has become almost meaningless in its use and misuse as a slogan in health care. Admitting himself to being an extremist on this point, he defines patient-centeredness' quite precisely thus:

"Call it patient-centeredness, but, I suggest, this is the core: it is that property of care that welcomes me to assert my humanity and my individuality. If we be healers, then I suggest that that is not a route to the point; it is the point."

As you might imagine from previous Newsletters this resonated with me. He is after all appealing – no, demanding – that he is related to as a human being with his own desires, choices and self expressed needs and views. He's demanding mutual self-regard.

I think it's important to be clear that this is not the same as 'the customer is always right'. As a human I know only too well that I'm not³ and treating ne as a human recognises this. (I have to recognise it too.)

Now, let us, as a mind experiment, imagine that health systems really set out to adopt Don Berwick's definition and approach to patient-centeredness. The challenge for us – the genuine challenge for all of us concerned to make organisations not just better places to live in but better things to relate to and receive service from – is how do we bring about the type of living in organisations that would lead to staff delivering such a level of service, a level of service to one another as humans?

While you're working on that one, bear in mind the challenge I received from a reader following the previous Newsletter about the evident fact that "Many people go to work for social interaction – with or without the aim of moving the organisation or their own ideas forward. In fact it would seem to be one of the more powerful motivators."

It's a bit of a facer, isn't it? We seem to have organisational development and culture change tools that make purpose a driver for changing behaviour. We have a demand to be treated as a human, as it were independently of purpose. We have people, many people, for whom the purpose of the organisation is an irrelevance. We may be hitting the limits of the possible here. By which I mean that we can only do – but must do – our best, give it our best shot. Why?

Because as I seem to be returning again and again to, our lives in organisations are at a very basic level about no more but no less than about how we are with one another as human beings. And that therefore the levels of service we give one another – either as customers, patients, colleagues or staff – depend crucially about what we believe about the nature of possible and desirable human relationships. It's not what we do that counts but how we are.

So, getting better service appears to be about making us better people, better humans, having open-hearted (loving,

thinking-it-
through.com

4 Buttercup Close
Harrogate
HG3 2WU

T:
01423-508781

M:
07775602475

E:
[ian@thinking-it-
through.com](mailto:ian@thinking-it-through.com)

W:
[www.thinking-it-
through.com](http://www.thinking-it-through.com)

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dare I say) relationships with one another.

In relation to that, the challenge of making us better employees seems a piece of cake. Although I seem to have bumped into the conclusion that to make us better employees means making us better humans.

Hey ho, let's be our best.

1. 'Life as an Asda checkout girl is about 'mission and fun' and 'Who says a happy staff is good for business?' both in *The Times* 11 May 2009

2. 'What 'Patient-Centered' Should Mean: Confessions of an Extremist' published as a web exclusive by *Health Affairs*.

<http://content.healthaffairs.org/cgi/content/abstract/hlthaff.28.4.w555>

Let me know if you'd like a copy and can't find it.

3. There's a whole separate chain of thought here about us as customers. We have been taught that we're always right. The old adage that you never win an argument with a customer has a lot of truth. But we know that we're not always right. The 'customer is always right' approach is based theoretically on a belief in a transactional/homo-economicus basis for human relationships. From my perspective, not accepting that belief the, necessary, requirement to pay attention to my needs has been construed into a rule about me always being right. It's another example of a rule being used instead of a moral precept.