405 Lead a Team to Improve Customer Service

Providing Customer Service

The objective of any organisation providing products and services to customers is to meet or exceed their expectations. These expectations could be related to food, drinks, service, entertainment, value for money and ambience, as well as the basic requirements such as safety, cleanliness and security.
All staff have responsibilities for providing high standards of customer service, not just those who speak to customers face-to-face.

Team and Individual Performance

The way that you and your staff perform has a direct impact on achievement of your organisation's objectives. High standards will help to ensure:

- Customer satisfaction, minimising complaints.
- More likelihood of returning customers.
- Positive comments helping to increase custom and building reputation.
- A healthy position in the market place (beating off competition).
- Prevention of accidents / food poisoning which could lead to serious implications for the business.
- A healthy and successful financial position.
- Opportunities to develop the business further.

Improving Customer Service

It is the responsibility of managers and supervisors to help improve customer service. This means:

- Indentifying and removing problems.
- Seeking ways to make good customer service even better.

If you fail to improve customer service, the potential outcomes are that:

- Customers will reduce in numbers, possibly seeking other alternatives such as competitors.
- Individuals and the business will be put at risk of harming themselves, colleagues or customers (accidents, illness).
- Financial performance will suffer, risking cut backs, closure, job losses,
- Motivation of staff will be affected (stress, boredom, conflict).
- Products and services may become outdated (trends, lifestyles change)
- Opportunities to grow the business will be missed.

Planning Work Activities

Planning plays a vital role in providing good customer service. It allows you to ensure that resources are available and meet the standard required to provide the service. Planning gives you the opportunity to consider the best way to use resources, acquire them, organise them effectively and to consider any action you may need to remove problems or weaknesses.

Planning activities might include:

- Meetings with key people (such as clients, managers) to discuss requirements.
- Identifying the resources you have (staff, supplies, time, money).

- Methodically identifying tasks and allocating time and people to these effectively.
- Identifying any shortages of resources and considering alternative sources.
- Identifying any shortfalls in skills and providing training.
- Identifying potential problems and considering contingencies.
- Briefing staff to inform and delegate responsibilities.
- Carrying out testing/dry runs to ensure the plans will work.

Presenting Plans

Whether you are presenting plans to customers, management or staff you should:

- Select the most appropriate way to present the plan (e.g. e-mail. written report, meeting).
- Be prepared with all the information you need and ensure it is accurate and that the plans are realistic and achievable.
- Consider the types of questions that may be asked and prepare responses.
- Ensure that the correct people are attending or receiving the information.
- If arranging a meeting, choose a convenient and appropriate time and place.
- Allow opportunity for those involved to participate and offer comments and ideas.
- Allow adequate time for planning before the event/activities are to take place.
- Ensure that any plans are agreed and that you have full commitment from all parties.
- Keep clear and accurate records of any communications.

Effective Meetings

Meetings can be a productive way of giving and sharing information and providing a medium for discussion and ideas. Carried out badly, they can be a waste of time and resources and have a negative effect on the business, teams and individuals.

When organising a meeting you should consider the following tips:

1. Whether the information you want to share justifies a meeting (i.e. is there a more suitable method of communicating, such as e-mail?) A meeting is valuable to share ideas or plan something complex but not suitable for just giving out a list of facts). It is also a cost in terms of time and resources.

2. Select your topics and invite those for whom the subjects are relevant and who will contribute to the meeting.

3. Ensure that the meeting is at a suitable date and time for people to attend and consider any arrangements and costs involved (such as travel/overnight accommodation).

4. Select a suitable venue which is accessible and conducive to effective communication (no distractions, noise etc.) Provide suitable equipment such as furniture, screen and projector, flip chart, note paper and pens etc. as well as suitable refreshments (even if it's only water). Arrange the table and chairs so that people can communicate easily (e.g. a small circle). Don't make it too comfortable (such as lounge chairs and a coffee table).

5. Decide how long the meeting will last / how long each topic will require and stick to the timetable. Use a watch or delegate a time keeper.

6. Set a realistic and relevant agenda and distribute to all invited attendees in advance. Ask them to confirm their attendance by a given deadline or apology if unable to attend.

7. If you are going to have an AOB (Any Other Business) section in the meeting, ask attendees to send you their requests before the meeting so that you can assess whether they are appropriate, that you will have time to discuss them and so that you can prepare in order to answer any questions accurately.

8. Ensure attendees have a copy of the previous meeting so that they can raise any issues at the beginning. You should have gone through previous minutes to check action points have been achieved or are in the process of being achieved. Mention any issues at the beginning of the meeting. Allow time but don't allow this to turn into a meeting about the last meeting!

9. Use a standard template to record topics, actions agreed, people responsible for actions and target dates for achievement.

10. Arrange a CHAIR PERSON to control the meeting and a SCRIBE to take notes. The most senior manager does not have to be the chair – you should select the most appropriate person, or rotate responsibilities.

11. Ask attendees to sign a register. This is useful to check who attended but also for Health and Safety.

12. If attendees are visitors to your premises, begin with 'Domestics' i.e. fire evacuation arrangements, location of toilets.

13. If you are chairing the meeting, you will need to manage the attendees – provide opportunities for people to contribute and respond to questions. Use your knowledge of their personalities (e.g. encourage shy people, prevent strong characters from being over-bearing). If you are an attendee, listen and comment but respect others and remember who is managing the meeting.

14. End on time and thank attendees. Inform them when they will receive the minutes and how (e.g. e-mail). Check you have contact details for each attendee (these could be written or register at the beginning).

15. Get the minutes written up in agreed format, proof–read and sent out by the agreed date.

Encouraging Teamwork

You cannot provide high standards of customer service without an effective team. Staff will be motivated to contribute if you:

- Provide clear objectives.
- Ensure each person knows the parameters of their role - responsibilities, tasks, level of authority and lines of authority.
- Allocate tasks which match the person's experience, skills and qualities.
- Identify those who want to be 'stretched' or take on more responsibility - and allow for this in planning.
- Recognise the limits of what a team can do with the resources they have - there is difference between pressure and stress.
- Recognise your own role and style and use your position wisely depending on the situations you are dealing with.
- Monitor effectively - where you trust staff to perform let them with minimal interference. Intervene only when you have a genuine concern.
- Resolve problems and conflict promptly.
- Provide opportunities to share comments and discuss progress (meetings, performance reviews).
- Reward staff for good practice.

Underperformance

Individuals and teams will not always perform to the required standard. There are many reasons for this, including personal issues, relationships, lack of knowledge, problems with the business and its resources and external factors (such as the economy affecting sales and putting pressure on the team).

You can recognise underperformance from:

- Analysing data such as sales/budgets.
- Observing the condition of the work environment (unsafe/unhygienic)
- Observing staff activities and behaviour.
- Gaining feedback from others (customers, colleagues).

In order to deal with underperformance effectively you should:

- Be objective - get the facts (not rely on hearsay or be affected by your personal feelings and prejudices).
- Select an appropriate method, time and place to discuss the issues with the team/individual and give them the opportunity to explain and offer solutions.
- Give people the opportunity to improve and provide the tools they need to do so, such as training (you cannot expect staff to perform a task or meet a standard if they have never been told how!).
- Use the organisation's grievance and disciplinary procedures correctly and remember the law (e.g. discrimination).
- Balance the requirements of the business with personal motivations (e.g. don't force extra hours on someone if it is unrealistic for them).
- Be sensitive to the effects of people's private lives on their performance (e.g. if they are coping with illness or bereavement).