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Customer empathy motivator for perfection

by Dr. Karen Wolk Feinstein

When organizations fail their constituents, victims want answers, action and compassion. What good is a successful surgery if the patient suffers a deadly or debilitating infection because someone didn't wash their hands or clean their hospital room diligently? Passengers appreciate when airlines get them to their destination safely, but the trip can be ruined if they are stuck at their destination without their luggage and personal belongings.

It's not that mistakes don't happen. It's that they should not happen with regularity. How an organization responds is a barometer of both its empathy and its drive for excellence. Lies, indifference and avoidance can and should be replaced with empathy, problem-solving and the removal of root causes.

Leaders who respect and care for their patients, customers, passengers and workers expect the highest performance in the interest of customer needs. The capacity for empathy constitutes the soul of an organization — and the motivation for perfection.

It is a drive for perfection that motivates leaders to align everything they do with their customers' needs. Most important are the ways in which mistakes are handled and prevented. As organizations get bigger and more complex, this drive becomes essential.

Health care organizations that exhibit empathy and a resolute customer focus have gotten much positive attention. Both Southcentral Foundation's health system in Alaska and Thedacare in Wisconsin come to mind. They bring a customer focus to all that they do. At Thedacare, posters of "Lorie," their typical customer, hang every elevator, on every unit and meeting room, to remind staff, continually, that they have a responsibility for those who have entrusted their lives to them.

In health systems with empathy, the staff understands how it feels to get an infection and spend additional days or weeks in a hospital bed. They suffer with patients who are prescribed the wrong medication and unnecessary tests or endure wrong site surgery; when bills are exorbitant, unexplained and unexpected; when pressure sores develop from inattention. In such hospitals, health care is personal, and failures are seen not only as betrayals of their customers, but causes around which to rally everyone to ensure they never happen again.

Failures of empathy and excellence stand out particularly when things go awry. The local airline with a monopoly on a prime route needs to understand how lost luggage can make the difference between a successful outing or one of frustration. Indifferent "lost baggage" personnel compound the problem, especially when it inexplicably takes them weeks or months to resolve their error.

So what's the fix? How can developing and showing empathy in our health care systems and businesses once again be a central value? Perhaps a new kind of business training is in order, such as MBA programs that offer classes to teach "proactive empathy." Perhaps this training will help make organizations more capable of solving problems, coping with distressed customers and patients and facilitating better interactions among different components of the system.

Any meaningful commitment must come from the top — from the CEO and then to every level of management throughout the organization. The value of empathy — the heart of customer service, ongoing improvement and innovation — has to be ingrained at all levels and be sustained over time.

The information technologies that are essential in unwieldy and far-flung health care systems and corporations — organizations in which leadership can avoid interacting with both frontline employees and customers — may hold the secret for producing this fundamental business value and providing the critical accountability.

We at the **Pittsburgh Regional Health Initiative** have been working to leverage social network technologies to make personal relationships, communication and accountability possible, even in large, complex organizations. Indeed, knowledge networks may hold the key to enabling leaders to communicate their commitment to perfect service for customers. An entire workforce can rally around common goals and monitor and celebrate progress in reaching visible targets if there is a central node for perfecting performance.

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