

# The Truth about Customer Service

A transcript of a Shaun Belding conference address  
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## THE TRUTH ABOUT CUSTOMER SERVICE

*A transcript of a Shaun Belding Conference Keynote, 2009*

...I've been particularly surprised – thrilled – by the high level of interest in customer service in this organization. I mean, I'm passionate about customer service, but I'd better be – since it's what I do. It's nice to know that I'm not alone with my obsession.

I do recognize that customer service for most of you is a somewhat peripheral part of your jobs, and not the burning issue it is for me. It's like the underlay below a carpet. You all know it's there; you all know it's important. It makes everything soft and cushy – but it's really not top of mind on a daily basis.

But this is all the more reason that, when you have opportunities like the training sessions you've had, you should make a concerted effort to take the things that peak your interest and burn them into your memory. To try and turn them into habitual behavior – into action which doesn't require thought – that doesn't require conscious effort.

Whether its paying closer attention to how precisely you communicate, learning to ask better questions, using more effective language strategies or writing better emails - if the new skills don't become part of your daily ritual, they will disappear from sight. And if this happens, the seeds of change we have planted will never take root.

Today, however, there is something even more important I need to talk with you about.

You've all already heard me talk about customer service. We've talked about and explored skills, and techniques and distinctions and expectations. It's good stuff – all of it.

But the truth is, all of these things only represent maybe 20-30% of what customer service really is. That's it. And that's all that I or any

other customer service expert can actually help you with. What I want to talk about today is the other 70-80% of what makes up world-class customer service – the things I *cannot* help you with.

You see, the hardest part of customer service is something I can't teach, and can't really influence to any significant degree. It's kind of customer service training's dirty little secret that trainers don't like to talk about much – because it reveals the indisputable limitation of the training process.

Try as I might, and as passionate as I may become, I simply can't teach attitude. No one can.

Truth be told, we all have the *capacity* to be World-Class Customer Service providers. Assuming we're skilled at what we do. Assuming we have the ability, knowledge and expertise, we all have the *capacity* to be superstars.

What most of us lack, however – yes, I mean most of us – is not the capacity, but the *conviction*.

You see – outstanding, breathtaking, amazing service can only happen when we have the courage to unequivocally put our own needs and egos on the shelf. When we are prepared to say: “Right now, at this moment in time, I am yours – and there is nothing more important to me in the world than you. At this moment in time my only need is to ensure that yours are met.”

This is hard for most of us. It is impossible for some of us. Some simply disagree with the concept of putting another person's needs before our own. We all want to feel respected. We all want to feel that our rights are equal. And it's very tempting to feel that, regardless of the fact that one of us is the customer and one the service provider, that we deserve the same considerations and the same level of importance in the relationship. And that just isn't the case. Sorry. It's true.

We've all heard that 'the customer is always right' and most of us intuitively know that this isn't accurate. But their needs are paramount. In the relationship – for there to be genuine world-class

customer service, the customer's needs must *always* come before our own.

I understand if you aren't comfortable with this. I even understand if you are vehemently offended by the notion that a healthy relationship should be so lopsided from a give and take point of view. Yet the anecdotal proof that this is what is required to achieve World Class Service is irrefutable.

When I collect stories of outstanding customer service, it's a theme that recurs over and over again. I hear about the young store clerk who works 30 minutes after closing time on a Saturday night to help a desperate customer.

I hear about a pharmacist who can't reach a doctor to confirm a prescription by telephone, driving to the doctor's office to confirm it in person, then driving the filled prescription to the elderly customers' house.

I hear about a graphic designer working 48 hours straight over a weekend to help out a panic-stricken customer.

I hear about a city bus driver sprinting into a shopping center to retrieve a purse left in a store by a blind passenger.

If we take Customer Service to a macro level, beyond the business world, we hear about our firefighters – facing possible injury or death, racing *into* a burning building because someone in there, someone they've never met before, needs them.

These levels of commitment – of absolute selflessness – are the things we all admire and respect in others. They are things we want in those who serve us. *Yet precious few of us expect it of ourselves.*

But here's the thing. Here's the kicker. Here's the conundrum:

We all have the need to feel important and respected. This is a basic human condition. Consciously or subconsciously, we all seek these things out. Yet in a Customer Service role, there is only one way for us to get those needs fulfilled, and it seems counterintuitive to most of

us. Because the pathway to fulfilling our needs is to actually abandon the quest for them – and pursue instead the fulfillment of the needs of others.

As any professional speaker, trainer, actor, comedian will tell you, in order to be successful when you're on stage, you have to be prepared to do whatever it takes to connect with the audience. Your needs, your feelings become unimportant as you work to influence the audience's emotions. You live the moment for them– not for yourself. Your payback comes at the end - if you were good - when the audience rises to their feet in thunderous applause.

Your workplace is *your* stage. And each of you play a vital role. But it would be presumptuous for me to stand here and tell any of you to do whatever it takes to do your role well. That's not my job, nor my place. That's your decision, and yours alone.

All I can tell you is that, without a shadow of a doubt, that is exactly what it takes. That is the single, overriding recipe for success. It's what will move you from good to great, and from great to World-Class.

But I also won't tell you that you should strive to be a World-Class service provider. That, as well, is not mine to say. What I can tell you, however, is that those who genuinely are World-Class Service providers, those who stand out, those we talk about – are never wanting for respect, or admiration – or for work. They are in demand at every level in every successful organization – from part-time co-op students who do all the dirty work, to CEOs.

To get there, you need to be skillful at what you do, continually question and improve your interpersonal skills, *and have the courage to lose yourself to the customer*. It is not for the faint of heart. But the ultimate payoff to the customer, to your organization, to you...is huge.

We've all heard the saying, 'what goes around comes around'. Most of us profess to believe in this – in karma – but when push really comes to shove, most of us still don't quite trust it.

The difficulty is getting past the quid-pro-quo mentality. Most of us are prepared to deliver the pro quo, but only after we have assurances of the quid. But karma doesn't work that way. Neither does customer service. World-Class Customer Service is about giving to one person, knowing that you may never see a payback from that person, but trusting that the payback will come in some way at some time. World-Class Customer Service is not for everyone. But that's why those who embrace it stand out so much.

I wish you all the greatest success in all of your endeavors. And, for those of you who choose the journey of becoming world-class customer service providers, I'd wish you good luck, but you won't need it. However you choose to define success, you will find it. That is my promise to you.

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