

Service by Management Decree

By T. Scott Gross

“Poof! We’re a quality service culture. From now on the customer will be first. Everyone will smile and do whatever it takes to keep our customers happy.”

Too many top executives view customer service as just the latest fad, something that can be accomplished by decree. Too bad. It just can’t be done that way.

First of all service is one of the rare products that is produced on demand, on the spot. It cannot be recalled if defective. And it’s difficult as the dickens to measure since the very idea of quality service differs from customer to customer.

Traditional manufacturing techniques for quality control don’t fit and the TQM crowd refuses to admit that there is something different about a product that doesn’t shoot off the end of an assembly line.

Second, changing an organization’s culture is fairly analogous to turning a supertanker. It isn’t something that can be done on the spur of the moment. There is momentum to consider. In one case the momentum is physical; in the other it is cultural. But any way you slice it, turning a large body takes time and planning.

Are You One of Those....?

“Oh, are you one of those motivational speakers?”

“No! I may be motivating but *please* don’t call me a motivational speaker.”

That’s a routine that has become a regular part of my life and I have to say that I’m starting to get a little thin-skinned about it. Too many companies are hiring speakers, sometimes me, to come “spizz” the troupes. Then it’s “Go home, kid. We’ll have you back next year.”

Maybe that’s the price you pay for writing a book that’s fun to read. But who said that management had to be dreary to be serious?

Turning an organization to focus on the customer is not an overnight process. It can’t be accomplished by decree. And it certainly won’t be accomplished by calling in a speaker for the annual management retreat.

Turning on a customer service culture can be fun, but it is rarely easy.

Here are some of the steps:

- * Agree on a vision. There’s no point starting the journey without knowing where you want to go.

- * Inventory your current culture. How are people managed now? What cows are sacred? Are you willing to serve them for lunch?

- * Discover who can be easily recruited to join the crusade. Who would rather fight than switch?

- * Determine how the current behaviors are being rewarded, held in place, and think about how you might reward more customer-focused behavior.

- * Decide if you are really committed to a process that

requires more effort than simply re-writing the manual and creating a jazzy slogan. Will you be willing to stick to the project for the long haul? The long haul being measured in years not newsletters.

- * Choose a model, not necessarily from your own industry, against which you can compare your operation.

The Starting Point

The wrong first step is to blindly organize a corporate retreat simply because it seems to be the “thing to do.” A retreat may be a great place to start, but not if your intention is to return home with elaborate plans and a stone tablet declaring that the customer has just been crowned king.

Instead begin with the idea that the first meeting is for getting commitment to begin the process. Talk about what adopting a quality service culture would mean to the organization. Talk about what sacrifice might be in store and decide to at least look at the possible obstacles.

You’ll also need a strong internal champion to keep the process on track even if you opt to bring in an outside consultant. And if it is necessary to get outside help, make certain that the consultant you choose is willing to make a point of learning your business from the inside out and is willing to commit at least several

years to the project to keep you on track.

Getting started is more important than arguing over process. And the journey is as important as the destination!