

Customer Centricity Begins at “Home”

A great customer experience starts with designing a great employee experience.



Being customer centric is most widely viewed as persistently asking, “What would my customer say? You constantly question whether your work and the systems and processes you use are serving that desired end. You live in the mindset that any interaction within your organization has a potential impact on the customer’s experience of doing business with you.

But there is a missing component to a definition that focuses exclusively on external measures of customer centricity: that is, your internal company culture and how you view one another. The most mature customer-centric organizations understand that your colleagues who get paid for interacting with you are your customers just as much as those people who pay for the privilege. Treating colleagues with the same concern and appreciation as you would extend to a customer is a hallmark of truly great service oriented companies. Customer centricity truly begins at home.

If you or your colleagues don’t buy into the value of your product, your brand and the customer experience you are seeking to create, you won’t be able to live that promise when working with your customers. Customer centricity begins with pride in the brand you represent and believing it represents the best of you. That’s why when management at a famously customer-centric organization such as Southwest Airlines is asked about how they have achieved that status, they will respond that they *are not* a customer-centric organization; they are an employee-centric organization. They view their employees as their most important customer and their goal is to satisfy their employees. They believe that an engaged, motivated, loyal employee will translate into engaged, motivated and loyal customers.

This view holds that for customers to be truly at the heart of your business there has to be a culture behind the scenes that places them at the core of every decision made, every business process executed, and every interaction designed - regardless of whether the customer is directly touched by that interaction. **So designing a great customer experience starts with designing a great employee experience.**



Changing the Culture Behind the Scenes

Companies whose customer service is a competitive differentiator understand that the people closest to the customer need to be empowered to make a difference – to solve problems, to think creatively, to color outside the lines. These companies believe a better customer experience results in a better bottom line, so they frame their enterprise goals around defining *better*. With *better* defined, the tools required to build and to support it can be designed and the employee behaviors necessary to ensure it can be communicated and rewarded.

Whether you are the rep using a tool to address a customer’s needs or the developer who built the tool for the rep, you are part of the experience. Customer-centric companies ensure there is a common understanding of what it means to be customer-centric. They communicate that any employee can have an impact on a cultural commitment to customer centricity. Their external metrics – such as market share or customer loyalty – are then complemented by internal metrics – such as collaboration, adoption of new solutions, employee satisfaction, and retention – that indicate your organization delivers the employee experience necessary to develop true keepers of the customer experience flame.

With this in mind, there are two key components to creating a behind the scenes company culture of customer centricity. One is top down, the other bottom up.

1. Strategic Experience Alignment (SEA) – This is a senior management led process of ensuring that all of your organization’s people, processes, and systems are aligned so that they facilitate the creation and support of the experience your customers and employees need to have if your company is to accomplish its strategic objectives. That’s a long academic sounding sentence. What does it mean? Simply that once you’ve determined what *better* looks, feels, and behaves like, every interaction among your employees and/or customers needs be designed and measured by how well it serves *better*. If it’s not contributing to a better experience, determine why and change it.



All people and systems aligned to help ensure the desired customer/employee experiences

2. Co-Creation with Employees – With *better* defined and the guiding principle of SEA in place, the next step is to engage your employees in the process of designing, creating, and maintaining the processes, systems and behaviors necessary to make it happen. This bottom up push is critical to your cultural change success. No one knows the obstacles, issues, challenges and opportunities abounding in your business better than the people who live it every day. Listen to them. Encourage employee ownership of improvements and solutions.

It is important to note that if the goal is to change your company culture, co-creation of that culture can’t be project-based or a passing fancy. It has to become the way you do business. Employee and customer engagement needs to be baked into the way you manage. Doing the right thing has to be the mission and there needs to be trust that the metrics will follow that thinking. Ongoing feedback loops need to be established and action needs to be taken on what is learned. Hold employees accountable and put customer centricity mentoring programs in place to help ensure continuous improvement.

Bottom Up Empowerment Begins with Clarity from the Top

Employees who understand what they are championing and the behaviors expected of them become daily co-creators of your brand, product, or service. They understand what the organization is trying to achieve, how achievement is measured and they understand what is helping and what is hindering the achievement of those goals. Empowered by clarity of both purpose and path, your employees become partners in ensuring you deliver on your customer-centric promise.

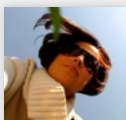
The challenge here is to drive empowerment beyond the people whose compensation and performance evaluations are tied directly to customer satisfaction - call center operators, sales teams, customer service representatives. You need to tie in those employees whose jobs don't make the direction connection for them. It requires understanding, coaching, and rewarding behaviors that get you to *better*.

Clarity from the top is essential for creating and sustaining this desired cultural change, and there are three (3) key aspects to creating clarity:

- 1. Enterprise Goals and Metrics Based on Customer-centric Imperatives:** When leadership declares what indicators are important enough to be measured, tracked and acted upon, it sends an unambiguous message to your team regarding what's important. Focus on a better customer experience begins here.
- 2. Individual Performance Management Tied to Enterprise Goals:** With enterprise goals in place, all personal goals and professional development initiatives can be mapped back to them. Individual accountability begins here.
- 3. Business Performance Management Tied to Commitment to the Individual:** With enterprise and individual goals linked, you are now in the position to measure how well the business is serving its employees. Through continuous feedback and tracking of metrics you can answer questions such as:
 - Are we providing the right work environment?
 - Are employee incentives driving the desired behaviors?
 - Are the desired behaviors having the desired effect
 - Do employees feel ownership of and accountability for the results?
 - Do customers feel the difference?

The fact that a great customer experience can be a significant differentiator in the marketplace has been well documented. Research studies abound that indicate even small improvements in customers' perceptions of the experience of doing business with a company can have a dramatic bottom line impact. Less widely accepted is the understanding that customer centricity can't be dictated to employees from on high. It must be nurtured, created in collaboration with your team and rewarded. As Sprint CEO Dan Hess noted in a customer experience conference keynote speech after describing how Sprint had transformed the experience of dealing with Sprint on online, on the phone and in Sprint stores, "Now we have to do the same thing for our employees." Well said.

About the Author:



Jerilyn MacLaren-Hall has been promoting Experience Design (XD) for the last 10 years and has led hundreds of projects focused on areas such as cross-channel marketing/service/ support experience design, enterprise collaboration and ideation (and business process change), business transformation and change management, brand strategy. Prior to joining MISI, Jerilyn lead Accenture's Communications and High Tech User Experience Lab for North America out of the Innovation Center. She also carried the title of Thought Leadership Champion at the center and was tasked with developing points of view on emerging business strategy & technology trends that she used to facilitate client collaboration & ideation/ innovation sessions.