

Amateur or Professional?

A common sense guide to presenting a professional image in even the most difficult customer situations

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Introduction

If you deal with customers for long, you are bound to run into situations that will call for direct, and at times, pointed communication. This can be the case of telling them where you were wrong or had failures in supporting them – or it can be pointing out where the expectations they have are unrealistic and actually work to everyone's disadvantage instead of benefit.

This white paper provides examples of how you can demonstrate true professionalism in some difficult situations when dealing with customers.

Big Project/Little Project, A Project Just the Same

One of the most fundamental things I have learned is that the Enterprise Customer Relationship is an ongoing "project engagement" and NOT a bunch of disparate tasks and activities.

Here is a real-life scenario. The customer, a major semi-conductor manufacturing firm, wanted to upgrade the systems environment that we managed for them on an outsourced basis. The upgrade was small (application of a software patch). The request was received by customer service. A support ticket was promptly opened and handed off to the department that handled patch applications. Information in the ticket included the nature of the request, timeframe required by the client and constraints.

Promptly at the time requested by the client, early on a Saturday morning, the person owning the request (let's call him Fred) took down the server, applied the patch and realized that he needed assistance from another organization to perform a key task to complete the client's request. Fred engaged that person (let's call her Sarah) who committed to picking up the ball where Fred left off. Well, now that Fred had done his job he went to the beach (out of cell/pager range).

Sarah dutifully performed her task, requested by Fred, and closed the ticket.

The client, on the other end of the activity, sees the server, and connections to it, going up and down. They acknowledge the fact that their managed services provider was doing the requested work so they weren't (initially) concerned. However, after a couple of hours of NO activity or updates they sensed something was awry. Especially since their server was still down. And, wouldn't you know it - month-end processing was to begin the following day.

To make a long story short, the change was backed out to restore things back to the way they were. The client was impacted by more than 24 hours of downtime at the beginning of their month-end processing cycle. Needless to say, I had to get my suit on and go visit the client.

The client gave us "one more chance" to get it right. As a result of this experience, a policy was instituted such that ANY change to a customer's environment was to be considered a project, with a plan, to include (at a top-level):

- Nature of the request – including information on the business and technical reasons for doing this
- Risks and assumptions

- Scheduling constraints – including time zone and other time sensitive periods like month-end processing to be avoided
- Primary and backup (24x7) contact information for each person involved in the project, including client, managed service provider, and 3rd party vendors
- Single point of accountability at your firm for the entire effort (a.k.a. project manager)
- Detailed list of tasks, activities, timetable and owner
- Clear identification of the "point of no return"
- Back-out plan
- Steps to validate that the work was performed properly, all prior capabilities have been restored and new capabilities (if any) are working properly.
- Final confirmation from client that "all is well."

Once a plan has been drafted, it must then be reviewed in detail with the client to confirm everyone is on the same page. And, depending on the complexity of the project, it may require multiple project/status meetings leading up to the time of actual execution.

An obvious response from the staff was "geez, it will take more time to do the plan than it will to do the work." The reality is, however, that the breadth and depth of the plan should be commensurate with the size and complexity of the work. One way to look at it is, there are projects with a big "P" and those with a little "p." However, both are projects just the same, requiring at least the basics of good project management.

We leveraged the above planning process to "re-do" the work for the semi-conductor client and it went off without a hitch.


In summary, the major lesson learned is that EVERY change request from a client should be handled as a project.

Wait for the Bullet or Fall on the Sword?

Even with good project management, things can go awry. As we saw in the last section, without appropriate project management they can get significantly worse. Here we'll discuss how to handle the customer meeting that became necessary as a result of our causing significant impact to the client's business.


Preparation for a client meeting, of this nature, is absolutely critical. This includes identifying the goals and objectives of the meeting, the key topics and who will cover each. In this particular situation, where we had caused the client business impact, it became even more crucial to adequately prepare the chronology of events to demonstrate to the client that we completely understood what actually happened. After investing several hours extracting this information from the various personnel involved in the incident, we had our summary ready. A few of us put on our suits and went to visit the client.

The opening moments of a meeting such as this are the most crucial. After introductions, my opening went something like this:




"The reason we are here is because we caused significant impact to your business, probably even more significant than we realize. I am here to tell you that I take 100% responsibility for this and commit to you that it will not happen again. What we'd like to do is provide a walk-through of what happened, our key learns and what we've done to ensure that this will not happen again."

The client went with my lead, and we had a VERY cordial meeting. All well and good...I didn't realize the impact of this approach, on this particular client, until many days later...



The IT person of this particular client, who was in the above meeting, was on the phone with one of my customer service staff and commented that "My boss was ready to rip your boss a new one. Because he came right out and said "we screwed up" and took full accountability, all the venom that had built up immediately evaporated."

To be clear, this is an example of a best possible outcome, but I assure you that taking this approach consistently provides significant benefits:

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- You will ease tensions in even the toughest situations of this nature. Clients (reasonable ones at least) know that "shtuff" happens. They simply want to be assured that you understand the impact to their business and the details of what actually happened. And, that learns from the experience were taken into account to put things in place to ensure that there will not be a recurrence of a similar nature.
 - The client's confidence in you/your firm will increase because you are willing to stand up and confirm that a mistake was made and that you aren't one to make excuses.
 - Finally, your support team will observe you standing up to "take the heat" which will truly enable them to focus on what they do best (the "technical stuff").


In summary, the major lesson learned is to be proactively humble. I could have walked into the client and taken a bullet in the head. Instead, I elected to fall on my sword. By self-inflicting the pain and criticism, I created a more constructive environment that encouraged the client to move forward on positive actions and conversations.

Because the Contract Says, Make It So?



How many times, as a service professional, have you been put in the position of fulfilling on a customer contract that included unreasonable terms? Terms that set both you and the customer up for ultimate failure. How you handle this situation will determine if you are an amateur or professional.

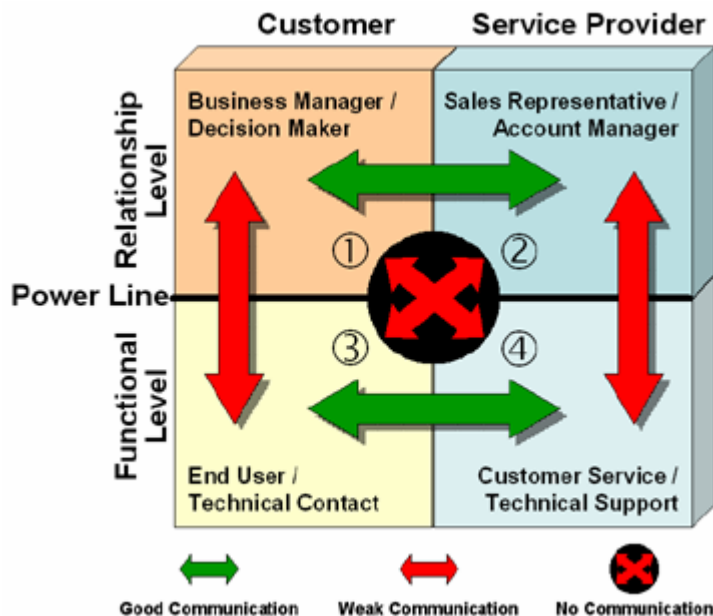
The (real-life) scenario: A contract is written such that your company, a Managed Services Provider (MSP), owns the customer's *internal* IT software change management process governing multiple software development teams' use of the hosted server environment that your company manages. During the initial implementation meetings with the customer, the service team is repeatedly asked "what is the status of our change management process?" The service team, totally disoriented with this request, continues to provide non-committal responses and ineffective updates as they flounder with this contract requirement. The customer can't take it anymore and escalates to management (you).



Upon review of the situation, and contract, it is clear that this specific item in the contract does not serve the best interests of the client or the MSP. As such, a conversation needs to take place to renegotiate this particular term. On comes the suit, and it's off on a plane to visit the customer.

In my case, the approach taken for the customer meeting went like this...

I requested a meeting with 2 key client personnel: the project leader that we interact with on a daily basis (below the power-line, as shown in the diagram below) and the business manager responsible for the outcome of this relationship (above the power-line).



I met with the project point person first to learn more about what she was trying to accomplish, her approach and assumptions based on the contract. I learned that she was simply trying to operate within the bounds of the contract, holding our feet to the fire, regardless of it being reasonable or not.

I subsequently met with the business manager who was responsible for the (business) outcome of this project and relationship. My lead-off comments were that of acknowledging the contract as something that smart people at both of our firms put together. However, neither of us were part of that process. I then pointed out a particular term that was troublesome for both of us, apologizing on behalf of our company. I indicated that, while this is a contracted term, we need to change it or we can look forward to mutual failure, which is something that neither of us wanted. The client readily agreed.


We then went back to the client's project leader to indicate that she needed to develop and facilitate their change management process for their internal resources. My service team subsequently got back to doing what they do best, NOT trying to wrestle with contracted terms that are not in our area of expertise or best interest.

Key learnings and principles:

- Just because the contract says it, does not make it right.
- If the contract does not support a mutually beneficial / successful relationship, renegotiate terms.
- Go "up the food chain" above the power-line to resolve these issues.


Is the Customer Always Right?

As a service professional, you have likely heard the proverb "the customer is always right." While there is wisdom in this statement, you must use care not to take this literally. Here is a real-life




scenario to consider...

A Managed Services Provider (MSP) received a request from a "demanding" customer asking for full access to their managed systems environment to perform a software install. The reality is that providing full read/write access would compromise the MSP's ability to maintain the security, system performance and uptime requirements of the contract.



As you can imagine, the service team wrestled with this request. On one hand, they considered the philosophy that 'the customer is always right': "It is their environment, and if we simply grant them access to do this quick software install we have fulfilled on their important request. What better way to demonstrate responsiveness to the customer?" On the other hand, they considered the reality that if the customer's technical resources mistakenly damaged the environment, they (the MSP) would ultimately be responsible for fixing it.

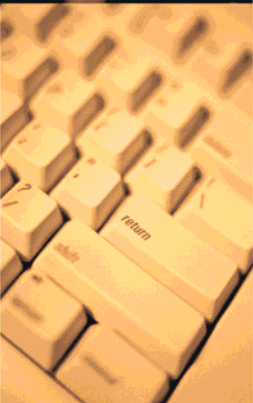
Unsure how to proceed, the service team sought guidance from senior management. Together we weighed the options, and then got the customer on the phone.



We explained to the customer that anything is possible. If they would like us to grant them access, we would be happy to do so. And, (the most important aspect of this entire conversation), upon completion of their work we would have to re-provision/re-secure their environment so that we could remain compliant with the contracted service level agreements (SLAs). We explained this task typically requires 24 hours of downtime for an environment of the size and complexity of theirs, and asked if they could afford this downtime.

The answer from the customer was an emphatic "NO." The result: we sought and found an alternative way for the customer to accomplish their objective that did not require providing full access, or taking any downtime.


Principle: The customer is not always right. However, don't tell them they are wrong. Help them come to that understanding as a product of their own conclusion.



If you are in the business of helping customers find solutions to their problems, make sure what they are presenting to you are problems, not solutions. It is important to know the difference between what a customer *wants* and what a customer *needs*. In this case, the customer *wanted* full access to their environment when they *needed* to install software. Once you get past the *want* (or demand), you are in a better position to help the customer fulfill on their *need*.


Avoiding the Swirl Factor

Proactively managing your customers' perceptions of and experiences with your firm is critical to ensuring their satisfaction and loyalty. This becomes especially complex when there are many company personnel who have the opportunity to interact with the customer. If these interactions are not well orchestrated, you can easily become caught up in "the swirl factor." Here is the real-life scenario...




The Managed Services Provider (MSP) and customer have been down a tough road but are still committed to working together to turn things around. At a routine status meeting with the customer, the MSP suggests that a monitoring audit take place of all system components that they are managing, on behalf of the customer. This audit is meant to ensure that all critical components of the customer's configuration are being monitored at the appropriate intervals. It is agreed that subsequent to the audit, an in-depth review will take place with the customer to discuss remedial actions. The customer and the MSP (at least those personnel at the meeting) both understand that updates/changes to monitoring will likely result from this audit.

Back at the office, the MSP service manager promptly opens a work ticket requesting that the monitoring center perform this audit. So far, so good. But wait...



The individual in the monitoring center dutifully performs the audit and emails the results of the audit to his customer contact (who wasn't at the above mentioned meeting). The customer contact receives the audit results out of context, identifies several critical system components not being monitored and escalates internally - "they're doing it to us again." When the customer's senior management learns of this situation (namely, that the MSP is not monitoring several critical service components), they escalate to the senior management-level of the MSP. Let the swirl begin!




Many people from the MSP and the customer are now "spun up" in a highly emotional and reactionary state. Had this audit request been better orchestrated, the customer's perceptions would have remained neutral to positive and the heightened stress-levels (of all involved) would have been non-existent.

A better approach to this scenario would have been for the MSP service manager to request the audit, indicating that the results should be provided to the MSP account team for internal review and discussion of next steps. Subsequent to the internal review and agreed upon course of action, the MSP account team would then review the results and recommendations with the customer "in context."

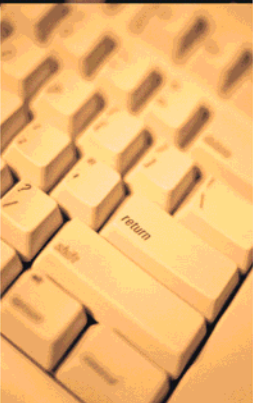
In summary, the key principle is: Orchestrate all customer-related activities and communications, keeping in mind, once again, the [four quadrants](#). Each customer-related task is NOT a discrete activity. Even the most innocent actions and information, taken out of context by the customer, can result in significant problems.

You Get What You Pay For




We have all heard the proverb "you get what you pay for." While we may have taken this to heart in our personal lives, we need to make sure that we don't forget the essence of this and how it impacts our customer relationships. Here is the scenario...


A managed services provider (MSP) has a customer who, due to cost constraints, bought the lowest cost solution to meet immediate business needs, with little room for growth. After 3 years, the solution provided by the MSP has become outdated (technology out of rev, etc.), making it increasingly difficult for the MSP to support. The result is that the customer experiences persistent, business-impacting problems. While various attempts have been made to suggest upgrades and add-ons, the customer keeps bringing the conversation back to the "immediate problems" being experienced. In essence, the customer is managing the MSP instead of the MSP managing the customer's experience.



How the account team (service representatives and account manager) responds to this situation can be delicate, but is absolutely critical. Too often the service team dutifully performs daily fire-fighting to resolve the persistent issues and constantly takes heat from the customer related to the recurring problems. All the while, the team is commenting (internally) on how outdated and ineffective the customer's solution is. The posture of the MSP team is "well, this is the customer's solution that we must support per contract, so let's just keep at it." This is insanity, continuing to do the same thing yet expecting a different result.


A professional responds to this situation by taking very proactive steps, including:

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1. Acknowledging the reality of the situation. The solution that we are providing the customer, while good at the time of implementation, is now outdated causing unacceptable business impact to my customer. And, the relationship is becoming increasingly unprofitable as we expend more and more resources reacting to the problems that result.
 2. Engaging the entire account team to define a recommended solution to the root-cause (an upgrade/redesign).
 3. Meeting with the customer to discuss the current reality and...UPSELLING.




If the customer decides not to heed the advice of the MSP, then an alternative outcome, although much less desirable, may be to part ways with the customer. That is, if/when a relationship no longer provides mutual benefit, then it is no longer healthy and should be terminated. Continuing down the same path without making foundational changes will only cause both businesses increasing financial impact, and stress to the personnel involved.

So, key principles to remember include:

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- Set clear expectations up-front about what your product/service can do, what it can't do, and when it will be necessary to discuss upgrades/add-ons for supportability and the customer's anticipated growth.
 - Don't let the daily noise cloud judgment or take focus away from the root-cause problem.
 - The customer should and does get what they pay for – and they know it!
 - Definition of insanity – continuing to do the same thing, expecting a different result.

Conclusion



There are many instances where things need to be communicated to customers and expectations reset – for the benefit of both parties. It is important that you demonstrate a thoughtful approach to this in order to maintain professionalism and a constructive dialog. It sometimes means falling on the sword, but more often it means understanding the customer's problem (not just what is in the contract) and working together to find the right solution – that you both can live with.



More About Customer Centricity, Inc.

Customer Centricity, Inc., is a business consulting firm that works with companies to align their resources to exceed customer expectations in the most efficient and effective manner possible. We leverage our real-world experience to help our clients continuously improve their service delivery and management capabilities to:

- Increase profitability
- Improve customer satisfaction and retention
- Increase operational efficiencies
- Improve employee satisfaction

Customer Centricity optimizes the interaction between people, process and technology in several ways:

- Comprehensive assessment methodology to identify the actions that will yield our clients the greatest return
- Skills Training to enable customer-facing personnel to deliver exceptional levels of customer service
- Design and Implementation of business processes to serve the customer and manage corporate resources in efficient, effective and consistent manners
- Identification of the appropriate business processes to automate, enabling companies to get the most from their investments in technology

Customer Centricity's approach is to work closely with our clients to help them understand what they are doing right, and their opportunities for improvement. We provide pragmatic recommendations that provide immediate benefits, and we drive continuous improvement programs help our clients realize significant return on investment in a very short period of time (measured in weeks, not months or years).

To learn more about Customer Centricity, call 603/491-7948 or visit our web-site, www.customercentricity.biz