The Three Stages to Developing a Customer-Centric Culture

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A customer-centric culture is the "make or break" component of any customer experience initiative. It was great getting to let loose on this all-important topic alongside Ryan Floersch of Gladly during our recent CXPA webinar. We discussed all kinds of ways to begin working toward an enhanced culture, or (if you're lucky enough to have the beginnings of it in your organization already) how to accelerate the positive momentum you've already garnered.

While there is certainly no perfect culture, there are those environments that give life to customer experience work, and those that make it nearly impossible. So how can we, as customer experience and contact center leaders, be intentional about something so nebulous?

I'll concede that there is no perfect formula for motivating people toward customer-centricity. Even so, these proven techniques outlined below can act as a blueprint on which to build your custom approach.

But before we begin, there's one thing I need to establish upfront: a cultural change of this magnitude requires a great deal of time, and it cannot be done alone. Be sure to gather the true support of your leadership team, and surround yourself with a strong change coalition before embarking on this journey.

Ready? Then let's dive right in!

The Three Stages: An Overview

This approach is organized into three stages:

- **The Gate** The quest for customer-centricity begins at the hiring stage.

- **The Fence** A significant portion of your employees are sitting on the fence and need a push.

- **The House** Create an environment in your company where employees are intrinsically motivated to help customers and co-workers alike.

Stage One, The Gate

As with any construction, getting the foundation right is key to the structural integrity of what you're trying to build. And when it comes to your organization, that foundation is the people you hire on your team.

Companies need to be mindful of who they hire, and ensure that your employees meet the high standards you set for them. But before you can hire to that standard, it's essential to establish what that standard is first. In simple, yet specific terms, you must define your culture. Then and only then can the group begin to move toward the new objective.

Establish a "Top Talent" Beacon

When you look inside the world's most customer-centric organizations, there is fierce pride. These organizations often receive hundreds of applications for each opening, but are selective in who they interview and hire.

Once hired, that top talent actively brings in more top talent. And they treat the act of referring a friend like a sacred pledge: they only invite someone into "the family" if they know they'll be an exceptional fit. This continuous cycle actively attracts the type of employees that will have a strong desire to serve customers uncommonly well from day one.

And while the flywheel of intentional hiring is incredibly helpful, it's still important that you continue to woo the type of people who already love what the company is about. If you hire employees who aren't already living your company's mission, giving them a paycheck will not change a thing. Find the candidate who will be intrinsically motivated and excited to make your mission a reality for customers.

eNPS Will Reveal Much

The best way to know if you have a strong referral culture (like the one described above) is by instituting an "eNPS" score. The eNPS question will look something like this: "On a scale of zero to ten, how likely would you be to recommend this as a place to work?"

This will allow you to gauge the willingness of employees to act as an ambassador for your organization.

Your eNPS score will range from -100 to 100. The type of culture described above will very likely rate in the 50+ range (a "good" referral culture would be in the range of 20-50). But don't despair if your eNPS score is low. You've done the right thing to establish a baseline early—keep reading for methods to improve it!

Be the Gatekeeper

As a CX leader inside of my organization, I'm privileged to have peers ask me to interview their candidates for roles of all types. I imagine myself as the customer, asking questions that will help me understand if this person is going to create a great experience for me or not.

But the role of the CX leader does not stop in the interview stage. Customer experience should play a vital role in the onboarding process as well. New hires should be educated immediately on who the customer is, and the essential role they play inside of the customer's journey.

Stage Two, The Fence

Every organization has a population of employees who are "on the fence."

These individuals have the capacity to excel inside of a customer-centric culture, but for a variety of reasons, just aren't fully engaged. In these cases, it's important for companies to take active steps towards re-engagement.

This is not only done for the benefit of those employees riding the fence; it's also a critical move towards the protection of your best talent. As serial entrepreneur (and coach to many other entrepreneurs) Andy Bailey says, "'A' players will not play with 'C' players for long." You run the risk of your best employees either losing motivation, or moving on to a new working environment where they can be appropriately challenged.

Achieve Harmony Between Culture and Brand

The most effective way to reduce the "fence" population is by creating an authentic alignment between culture and brand. And while we may be tempted to simply replicate famous cultures from amazing brands such as Zappos, Amazon, and Virgin Group, the better approach is to inculcate a culture that's true to you. Because every brand is unique, and therefore every culture must also be unique.

In her brilliant book "Fusion: How Integrating Brand and Culture Power's the World's Greatest Companies", Denise Lee Yohn makes it exceptionally clear that this is the linchpin to a customer-centric culture. Compelling organizations are authentic; and the way the company presents itself to the world must emanate outward from the inside at all levels.

Ramsey Solutions in Nashville, Tennessee is one such organization. It's chartered by none other than famous financial radio personality, Dave Ramsey. Dave is *fanatical* when it comes to developing an authentic culture. Every employee is expected to live by the

principles the Ramsey Group teaches to its customers; if you're not living the mantra of "helping others and extending hope", you're bound to stick out like a sore thumb. This laser focus draws exactly the right talent from all over the world and prevents employees from riding the fence. Employees represent the brand with such fervor that the entire community takes notice, and ultimately customers win.

All or Nothing

As Jeff Toister describes in "The Service Culture Handbook," a redirection in culture cannot be a "pet project" or just another program. It must be the central priority from which every other business initiative flows.

Leaders at all levels must actively participate and set the new precedence. Not just once, but again and again and again, until mentalities and behaviors finally begin to change. For those employees on, or gravitating towards the fence, we must prove to them definitively that this culture shift is not a "here today, gone tomorrow" fad. And this will require tremendous focus, repetition, and consistency from leaders.

Stage Three, The House

As a recap, we've covered how to attract the very best customer-centric talent going forward and how to motivate your existing employees to get off the fence. Let's bring the discussion home and learn how to embed the new culture into the very fiber of the business.

Customer Ambassadors

Despite being a massive organization with over 155,000 employees, Schneider Electric boasts one of the most customer-centric cultures I've ever seen.

With a global organization this complex, it can be incredibly difficult to establish any form of consistency. One way they've been able to achieve this is by fostering an army of "Customer Advocates." These individuals are hand-selected across the business and go through intensive, ongoing training. Then these ambassadors bring that evolving CX strategy back into their functional groups. What a brilliant way for the Customer Experience group to extend its roots and to drive meaningful change throughout!

Strengthen Internal Relationships

Think about the "cool house" where everyone went to hang out when you were in high school. While you may not have recognized it at the time, it was likely the strong relationships among the family that pulled you in.

The truth is that there's a fundamental human desire to live in a community—in fact, we're drawn to groups that support each other. And it's no different in companies either.

When we create a sense of belonging within the organization, your employees will bring that feeling of camaraderie and welcoming into the customer relationship as well. Alternatively, if internal relationships are dysfunctional or shallow, it's nearly impossible to "go deep" with customers. As Denise Lee Yohn says, "Your employees can and will only deliver experiences to customers that they experience themselves."

As we discussed in the webinar, one way that leaders can set this example is in their treatment toward each other. When leaders build strong, supporting relationships with each other—and eschew the politics and back-biting that can sometimes build in organizations—they create an atmosphere of trust and respect that's foundational to fostering a culture where serving well is the natural instinct.

To conclude, **a customer-centric culture is built from the inside out** When we are zealous enough to only allow the best talent in, tear down "the fence" mentality, and create an authentic service environment inside of the organization, customers will be blown away by the transformation!

Nate Brown is a perpetual student of the
world's greatest experiences and the people who create them. Having spent the first decade of this career managing a complex technical support environment, Nate

transitioned to Customer Experience 2015 and is loving every minute of it. Nate currently serves as the Chief Experience Officer for Officium Labs and can be found at a variety of conferences speaking and training on the CX topics he loves.