

Employees vs. customers: Who is more important?

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(Image credit: Blake Wisz/Unsplash)

The age-old question — Who is more important: customers or employees? – is a misguided and potentially dangerous one. As a business leader, you shouldn't prioritize one group over another. Instead, you should link employees and customers.

One way to connect employees and customers is to use cultural tenets that are relevant and important to both groups. In this video, I explain why and provide examples from LinkedIn, Southwest Airlines and Ritz-Carlton.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/gxxil9GgA8Q>

Brand leadership expert Denise Lee Yohn inspires and teaches people to become great leaders. Reach out to her via her [website](#) and [YouTube channel](#).

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Transcript: “Employees vs. customers: Which is more important?”

You’ve probably asked — or have been asked — Which is more important: Employees or customers? It’s a timeless dilemma that most business leaders struggle with in decisions of resource allocation, policies and more.

Given recent workforce trends, it seems you should put the priority on employees these days. And more companies seem to be realizing that designing and managing employee experience is as important as customer experience. So, some people advocate for putting employees first.

But trying to choose between employees or customers is a false choice. Both are equally important — and attracting, motivating and retaining both groups is critical to the success of your business.

Lose-lose situation?

If you prioritize employees over customers, you could end up with employees who are happy and engaged but don't produce results — and/or customers who don't get their needs met. And if you put customers before employees, you'll probably lose employees to other companies that provide the compensation, work environment and development opportunities that you fail to.

So, you can't afford to prioritize one group over the other. Linking the two groups is what enables an organization to flourish. The question shouldn't be "Which is more important?" Instead, you should ask, "How can we connect employees and customers in a mutually reinforcing and uplifting relationship?"

One way to create this kind of connection between employees and customers is to ensure the cultural tenets of your organization are relevant and important to both groups. Your company purpose should give customers a reason to buy your products and services and employees a reason to work hard at developing them. Your core values should explain the attitudes and beliefs that guide interactions with people inside and outside your organization.

How companies are handling the question

The leadership at LinkedIn recently updated the company's core values into a culture statement to say, "We aspire to create a trusted, caring, inclusive, fun and transformational experience for each other at LinkedIn, and through our platform for every member of the global workforce." That last line is key because it explains that the organizational culture the company is cultivating extends to the members and customers using LinkedIn. In describing the statement, CEO Ryan Roslansky explained that LinkedIn seeks to be transformational "[n]ot only for ourselves, but for our company and the world."

Another example comes from Southwest Airlines. Part of that company's culture-building efforts, "The Southwest Way," is a Company Promise. It states, "Employees will be provided the same concern, respect and caring attitude within the organization that they are expected to share externally with every Southwest Customer." This statement clearly and explicitly states how and why the company operates the way it does: It promotes employees and customers.

Perhaps the simplest example of connecting employees and customers through culture comes from Ritz-Carlton. Its corporate motto is: "We are Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen." This speaks to the high esteem the company holds for its employees and its customers.

The recent attention that has been placed on employee engagement and satisfaction is a positive, needed development — but it shouldn't be at the expense of customer engagement and satisfaction. When you create a clear, meaningful and valuable link between how you serve both groups, you don't have to choose one over the other.