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## Making the commitment

**By Irving Stackpole**

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In the last instalment, I examined how training plays a large role in the success of customer service efforts in a long-term care community. The next step is committing to the value learned in training.

We can list basic laws related to driving a car, but unless drivers are committed to stopping at red lights and following traffic rules, the adverse results are accidents and worse. The same logic applies to long term care - the last thing operators want is a wayward employee "crashing" their customer service initiatives.

Employees ultimately lead customer service to success or failure because they interact everyday with customers, residents, families, referral sources, volunteers, and vendors. A manager's challenge is to foster their commitment to customer service. A mission statement is a good place to start building employee buy-in.

### Customer service mission statements

Creating a mission statement is a forum to state the community's customer service principles. The most important part of the process is to enlist the help of employees - their involvement in the mission creates a sense of ownership for that policy.

A mission statement can begin with words to this effect:

We at the Knob Walker Residences are a willing, caring, and supportive team eager to ensure our residents' health and safety in any way. Our customer service vision is to meet and exceed all customer needs and expectations.

From there, list various "mini statements" that, when viewed collectively, add up to a positive customer service experience. Managers and staff might draft the following, for example:

- We accept responsibility for every problem, need or concern that we learn about, including those we may not be able to solve ourselves.
- We strive to act as mentors and help each other.
- We will all report to work on time.
- We avoid gossip and similar hurtful activities.
- We emphasise the partnership between departments, residents, families, and staff.

Once the declaration is completed, post it in key areas around the community so that everyone - including customers and employees - can see it.

### 'Model' customer service

Managers must model the customer service behaviour they want employees to adopt. They must lead by example. In one community, a mission statement goal was to maintain a clean property. In the past, managers at that community would call housekeeping if they saw litter at the entrance. Doing so sent a poor message that only housekeepers are responsible for clean-up, when in fact customer service - especially first impressions - is everyone's job. When customer service became a priority, managers no longer called housekeeping if a small amount of litter was a problem.

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Instead, managers - who understand the connection between a spotless front entrance and the impact this has on a customer's first impression - now pick up the rubbish themselves when they see it. Staff do the same. With that action, managers help fulfil the mission statement, while also acting as role models for their staff. There isn't a better way to foster commitment to customer service ideals than to model the behaviour yourself.

Of course when one becomes aware of good customer service, this should be reinforced. Rewarding employees, the focus of the next article in this series, will go a long way in conveying commitment to excellent customer service.

### **Commit to change**

In the last article I introduced the "moment of truth", an interaction with an employee that gives a customer an impression of the long-term care community. A moment of truth can occur on the phone or in person, and it defines or reinforces how a customer thinks and feels about a care home.

Ask employees at the next staff meeting or training session what moments of truth they have witnessed. Then ask staff individually or as small groups to commit to one thing they want to start doing to demonstrate good customer service.

Write down these goals on a flip chart so everyone in attendance can see them. These actions are moments of truth waiting to happen.

### **Support and empower employees**

Inspire employees to take whatever actions are necessary to satisfy customers. If workers don't feel they have the power to provide excellent customer service, then mediocre efforts result. Try these ways to support five-star service:

- Stay familiar with residents' daily lives. For example, ask the care staff, "How did Mr Daniel's visit to the doctor go today?"
- Treat your employees like customers. Help them out by pitching in during busy times, such as folding recently laundered bed sheets as a work shift comes to a close.
- Respond promptly to employee concerns. You want employees to be there for your residents, and you must be there for employees. For instance, when a worker has a question about his or her pay check, get to the bottom of the problem that same day.
- Publicly reward employees for demonstrating customer service excellence. If Anthony the maintenance man decided to help serve tea to residents in the afternoon so he could get to know them better, then recognise Anthony's extra effort.

Employees like to feel good about their workplace, and being able to satisfy customer needs is one way to help them feel fulfilled.

Happy employees tend to provide better customer service, which leads to higher customer satisfaction. Commitment to customer service makes sound financial sense - residents and others who are pleased with a care home will spread the good news, which will lead other potential residents to your doors.

Finally, employees who work in an environment of superior customer service are less likely to leave their jobs.

When employees feel well-treated and have the power to do their jobs favourably, managers get something very important in return - loyalty.

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