

## **Developing Strong Customer Relationships**

Developing robust, positive customer relationships is a challenge and takes time and commitment to accomplish. With day-to-day pressures, it's important to remember to reflect on your medium- and long-term goals, as short-term objectives may look quite different when you assess them alongside the bigger picture.

Developing or building on an existing relationship, where you don't have a history of reliability and delivery, will mean some core components need to be built before you see signs of loyalty from your customer. You can increase your credibility and start to build trust by demonstrating you have a genuine interest and understanding of their business, care about meeting their expectation, and then ensuring you deliver on each and every interaction, no matter how small.

### **Key steps in relationship building**

1. A strong relationship based on a solid history of customer service and excellent performance does not usually require the same level of detail and ground work to achieve a great result. You have background information and experience already.
2. A less mature relationship will need discussion to establish agreement on solutions and ensure expectations are met.
3. Relatively new customers need to be listened to in great depth so the account manager very clearly understands what the customer wants. It is very unwise to rely on assumptions or use other customer expectations at this point in the relationship.
4. A new relationship will need to see each step carried out thoroughly, so the relationship can start to build some experience and credibility, and gain a track record of interest, understanding, and delivery.

Strong relationship -----			New relationship
1	2	3	4
Clarify expectations and confirm desired outcome	Clarify expectations and confirm desired outcome	Clarify expectations and confirm desired outcome	Clarify expectations and confirm desired outcome
	Talk through ideas and discuss options for moving forward/likely solutions	Talk through ideas and discuss options for moving forward/likely solutions	Talk through ideas and discuss options for moving forward/likely solutions
		Listen to the customer's ideas and thoughts on how they want this specific situation addressed	Listen to the customer's ideas and thoughts on how they want this specific situation addressed
			Build a clear history of the business, previous requirements and solutions, successes and failures

Time

Building strong customer relationships is not unlike completing a new jigsaw puzzle. While you may have some idea where parts of the puzzle fit, there is plenty of work to be done to get the picture completed. There is a risk of losing puzzle pieces, or putting them in the wrong place along the way unless you pay regular and sufficient attention to the retention and use of the things you learn as you go about your business.

**Help your team**

If you are managing a team it's good to focus them on developing in four key areas:

- Trust • Reliability • Active listening • Authentic Interest

Everyone learns at a different pace, depending on their newness to a subject, state of mind and wellbeing, knowledge, skills and interest/ability in that area. Don't be surprised when someone needs to be shown things more than two or three times. It doesn't mean they are stupid, incapable, unwilling, or lazy. More often than not it is a normal part of learning and developing new skills.

One of the most common barriers to learning is fear. Fear of failure, or fear from past experiences and mistakes. The more patient and encouraging you are, the more likely you will get good results from your people. Fear is common for people who have little experience in managing customer relationships, particularly if they are determined to do a good job – it can be quite overwhelming for a new person. Encouragement and positive reinforcement of the things they are doing well will help them grow in confidence.

People have different learning needs depending on the task they are required to do and this impacts on how quickly they pick things up.

- Visual – learns best by being shown or reading
- Auditory – learns best by listening/talking through the details/issues
- Kinesthetic – learns best by practice

It's worth asking your colleague what helps them learn and then using that information to help them succeed.

Once they are up to speed with the basics, it's a great opportunity to delegate more responsibility and key client relationships.

Successful delegation requires:

- Good preparation and your ability to communicate and listen well.
- Regular monitoring and an environment that encourages learning and accepts mistakes are a given.
- Regular (e.g., hourly, daily) review of work in progress to check they get it and build confidence. Formal reviews 6-12 monthly.
- A system so that your people know they have to report back to you at regular intervals (daily updates, either in person or by email) or when they get stuck.

It's worth giving some time and thought to delegating and then supporting your colleague's work in this area. The positive and negative impacts are usually quick to come to the surface. Regular communication and support will help to ensure your customers are getting the information and service they need and your colleagues are growing their skills and developing great customer relationships.