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Serving the Customer or Serving the Boss?

“Centering on customers takes leaders who are more interested in excellence than ego. It takes a total alteration in agenda, attitude, and action.”

– John R. Patterson

Imagine you have tasked one of your staff members with gathering information you need to make a program decision. You didn't specify a deadline but you asked for a specific set of data that will take a couple of hours of work. Shortly after, a customer sends an email to the employee and asks a question about an issue the customer needs to resolve. It will take some digging and will require the employee to spend about 30 minutes to provide the answer. Which will the employee decide is the top priority? Responding to the customer or responding to you?

The answer, of course, is “it depends.” It depends on how much information the employee has, to make an informed decision. It depends on how clear they are about organizational objectives and performance expectations. It depends on their perception of who needs to be served first. And most of all, it depends on the tone and culture you have established for your organization. Are you more important than the customer? Or is the customer more important than you? How many employees do you know perceive that when the boss says “jump” their response needs to be “how high?” How many employees working for you perceive that, if they don't meet your needs and demands first, above all others, there is a price to be paid? Who are they serving? The boss who writes their checks or the people who give the boss the money through their tax dollars to make sure they can write the checks?

According to Chip Bell and John R. Patterson in their article, *Customer as Boss*, “Customer-centric leaders are not just customer advocates—they are stewards of a culture that relentlessly pursues positive experiences for customers.” Leaders who do not share this view can sometimes turn their focus to compliance or obedience. Do employees working for you feel free to respond to customer needs first before attending to yours? Do they understand your organization's priorities enough to have confidence that, if they address a customer's needs ahead of yours, they will be thanked and rewarded rather than admonished or punished?

You can ensure your organization responds to customer needs timely and effectively by:

- Discussing with employees the organization's mission, goals, objective and priorities
- Clarifying their roles in helping to accomplish the goals, objectives and priorities
- Assuring your employees that you value actions they take that support organizational objectives. This includes making decisions to respond to customer needs ahead of yours in the absence of clear information about order of precedence
- Recognizing and rewarding employees for taking the initiative to respond independently to satisfy and, hopefully, even exceed customer expectations.

Our organizations are not here to serve us. They exist to serve the customer. Communicating this message to our employees empowers them to serve the real boss.