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Release your hostages!



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What needed an overhaul?

TURNING HOSTAGES INTO CUSTOMERS! When you think of the worst organizations in the world for customer satisfaction, what immediately comes to mind? I've asked hundreds of audiences that question and they always come up with the same two answers: the IRS and the DMV. So it was ironic that on the same day I joked about these organizations in a speech to a high-tech giant, I received a call from an old friend who had just been appointed Director of the Missouri Department of Revenue - the IRS and the DMV all rolled into one. He asked me, a Gen X change agent, to come on as his Deputy and transform this historically bureaucratic agency into a leader in customer satisfaction. His pitch to me was "it's time to practice what you preach...if you can do it here, you can do it anywhere."

What was the single biggest obstacle?

Besides the obvious obstacles to creating change in a large government bureaucracy: low paid employees, stifling laws and regulations, political agendas, and conflicting special interest groups, the greatest obstacle was getting people to believe that customer satisfaction mattered. We didn't have customers, we had hostages. They didn't choose us, they didn't want to see us, and given the choice, they'd never come back. Like most non-competitive businesses, we had created a producer-centered culture focused on budgets, internal efficiencies, policies and procedures. The customers were at best a nuisance. The greatest challenge was to create a customer-centered culture where our language, measures, values and rewards were aligned with the voice of the customer.

How did you overcome it?

With a shared vision to "Simplify" our agency, and some unique customer satisfaction tools, we mobilized empowered teams to radically improve our key processes/systems (tax refunds, drivers licenses, car registrations, etc.) for the benefit of the customer. The teams spent extensive time being with, talking with and observing customers. For example we had a team observe a room full of taxpayers trying to complete their taxes. (The simulation was stopped after 30 minutes for fear of the staff's safety). Senior management worked a day a month in DMV offices to learn the jobs, feel the customers' experience, and pick the employees' brains. Customers set our performance goals (tax refunds in less than a week, in and out of DMV offices in less than 15 minutes, etc.) and we used the ideas of teams, managers and every employee to meet them. Employee suggestions jumped from an average of 12 total ideas per year to over 1200. Extensive measurement was put in place to capture the cost of the burden placed on citizens. We knew how much time and money citizens were spending doing their taxes, standing in lines, accompanying their child to drivers' license exams, etc. and we successfully implemented plans to cut those costs in half.

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