

ОБЩЕСТВЕНИ КОМУНИКАЦИИ И ИНФОРМАЦИОННИ НАУКИ
PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION SCIENCES

**PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR MANAGERS TO SUPPORT CUSTOMER
DELIGHT – CURRENT STATE AND FUTURE NEEDS**

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Abstract: *Being surrounded by an always faster changing environment, organizations are facing the continuous need for change. Shifting customer expectations, combined with better information and an easy online comparison of products, prices and services require an increasing customer centricity. The concept of customer delight has emerged to offer assistance for this need. The decision-making power should be returned to the customer facing point, while managers have to re-think their behavior and role as a leader. For its implementation related trainings offers for the management, but also for the rest of the employees, are needed. Reviewing the current offer for professional learning there seems to be a lack of target-oriented learning opportunities.*

Keywords: *Customer delight, professional learning, leadership, change management, Servicereise©*

INTRODUCTION

Coming from local or national markets where regional companies were taking care of their respective business and their customer's needs, we were moving to a, depending on the products and services required, global market. Multinational companies and the nearly unlimited online offers changed the rules within many parts of the business. In the year 2000 Deming asked the question: "Who will survive?" And he replied: "Companies that adopt constancy of purpose for quality, productivity, and service, and go about it with intelligence and perseverance, have a chance to survive" (Deming 2000a, 155). To embrace the change and the ability to adopt to new requirements always was and still is one success factor for the long-term survival of a company. "In addition to speed of change, there has also been a marked increase in the complexity of the environment" (Ansoff 1979, 33). Ansoff's statement from 1979 has rarely been more accurate than today, while describing the coming challenges in the future where competition is expected to continuously grow. "In a market with fierce competition, and rapid changes of customer-orientation, only the effective delivery of service quality can enhance corporate profit and competitiveness" (Zhu et al. 2010, 105). This is leading to the main topic of this paper: The changing customer expectations and the need for adequate professional learning, especially for managers, to get to a newly to be defined customer centricity. "Recent changes in the international operating environment have forced companies to optimize *efficiency, responsiveness and learning* simultaneously in their worldwide operations" (Bartlett and Ghoshal 2003, 273). While customer satisfaction developed to a basic requirement the next level of evolution is the concept of customer delight. As competition is growing, changes are becoming faster, meanwhile customers are getting more demanding.

The successful company of the future has to offer more than just fulfilling the expected needs of the customer. Particularly in customer facing situations, “the direct interaction between employees at the interface to the market and their customers emerges as a central element of success. If, in the past, these relationships were classically sales-driven, they are becoming more and more customer-driven due to fundamental changes in customer behavior” (Maas and Graf 2004, 330). Or, as stated Oliver stated already in the year 1986: “It will not suffice to have customers that are merely satisfied“ (Deming 1986, 141). This extended concept of delight is going to change the way leaders are managing and measuring their teams, as “in the future leadership will be forced to meet the challenge of orienting itself to customer needs and asking the question as to how it can create value for customers” (Maas and Graf 2004, 342). The baseline of expectations is expected to rise constantly, while the level of understanding for negative deviations will decrease. Even if this is a new concept, the findings from Kahneman and Tversky, published in 1981, applies here: “The reference outcome is usually a state to which one has adapted; it is sometimes set by social norms and expectations; it sometimes corresponds to a level of aspiration, which may or may not be realistic“ (Kahneman and Tversky 1981, 456).

All this has to be managed in an environment where the exchange of experiences between various industries will become more and more important to get to a new perspective. “The benchmarking of best practices from one industry to another industry is becoming more appealing due to constant demands and changes being placed on organizations” (Guindon-Nasir 2010, 1). In short, managers have to adapt their style of leadership and to further develop their skills by professional learning. As they are not only facing new content-related challenges but also new employee related ones, those have to be motivated to embrace the required change. “One of the greatest challenges associated with employee engagement is that there presently is no silver bullet solution for creating an engaging environment. What may increase one employee's engagement may have the opposite effect on another employee. The good news is that employee engagement can be influenced by leaders, managers, and other employees in the organization” (Guindon-Nasir 2010, 11). Managers have to secure to be prepared for the new challenges and then, in a second step, to fulfill their leadership duties. Where its highest priority means the management of change.

These are situations in which learning will become essential for survival and further development (Probst 1995, 164). Based on these the current professional learning opportunities for managers, which are linked to customer delight, will be reviewed. The requirements for those learning opportunities will be elaborated and a current state will be shown. Additionally, future needs will be formulated.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This publication is primarily based on a literature review. The target is to understand the current state and the future needs of the professional learning for managers to enable them to introduce the concept of customer delight. To get a deeper understanding, a comprehensive analysis of the existing publications will be carried out. This will include relevant published research papers which also extend to journals, online available content, and the offers of professional learning. In addition, a survey among trainers will be conducted to understand what kind of trainings they currently offer in relation to customer delight. Here one focus area will be the identification of target-oriented management training approaches to support this concept and its demands towards the responsible leaders. This research of current professional trainings for managers will be based on offers of the German association for trainers BDVT e.V. (association for training, consulting, and coaching). As there is a multitude of training programs available in the market, this selection should guarantee a minimum level of quality in regards of the trainers and their offered training programs.

RESULTS

“Customer delight is the reaction of customers when they receive a service or product that not only satisfies, but provides unexpected value or unanticipated satisfaction” (Chandler 1989, 30). The results of the study are preceded by an insight into the concept of customer delight. Within a survey in the year 2018 Burghard and Dolle asked 100 customers (multiple choices were possible) what kind of offer would delight them. Out of these 98% of the customers voted for soft service factors like asking for their wishes, listening to what they are asking for, realization of agreed tasks and showing empathy. Only 2% of the responding participants preferred monetary benefits like gifts, vouchers, discounts, or rewards (Burghard and Dolle 2018, 2). This is again confirming the findings of Arnold et al., that “favorable encounters resulted when employees provided extra information, anticipated the customer’s needs, showed interest in a customer or were especially attentive to a customer” (Arnold et al. 2004, 1137–1139). Based on this, to achieve delight there needs to be something beyond the product quality, product performance, or price – it is the interpersonal connection between humans directly linked to the behavior of even everyone working in the company. However, it is worth noting that “customers who are treated poorly are more likely to blame the retailer, more vividly remember the bad experience, be energized to take action and tell others, and be motivated to alter their own patronage behavior” (Arnold et al. 2004, 1142). This implies the importance of guaranteeing a positive customer experience and the special responsibility of the management to set up delight-oriented processes and to create the prerequisites for enabled employees. Gouthier stated in 2013, that the responsibility for achieving customer delight and in particular its realization cannot only be attributed to a single position in the company, but is the responsibility of all managers and employees in the company (Gouthier 2013, 62). Which is reinforced by a survey among customer managers which pointed out that emotional customer loyalty is the most important target within the management of customer delight (buw Unternehmensgruppe/Center of Service Excellence CSE 2013). Ali et al. are considering delightful experiences as vital for the determination of customer loyalty. (Ali et al. 2018, 2).

Whenever customers are involved, their rating mostly expressed in sales, repurchase rate or retention rate, is vital to the survival of the company. The confirmation or disconfirmation of the services or products received determines the level of success. “Note that one's expectations will be negatively disconfirmed if the product performs more poorly than expected, confirmed if the product performs as expected, and positively disconfirmed if performance is better than anticipated” (Oliver 1977, 480).

An important and supporting aspect within the concept of delight are emotions. “Research on emotions in social psychology describes delight as a secondary-level emotion, which is characterized by a combination of lower level emotions” (Arnold et al. 2004, 1134). Finn mentioned one year later, that “customer delight is conceptualized as an emotional response, which results from surprising and positive levels of performance” (Finn 2005, 104). Bösener stated in 2015, that customer delight is seen in most of the research published, as a mix out of surprise, joy, and excitement (Bösener 2015, 36). Or can also be described as an intense positive customer emotion (Bösener 2015, 28).

In summary can be mentioned, that the concept of customer delight is seen as going further than customer satisfaction. Especially the implementation within an organization has to be based on a holistic approach for further organizational development. To fully understand the concept of customer delight additional research needs to be carried out. For the moment, “customer delight has not received the same level of empirical study as customer satisfaction” (Meyer et al. 2017, 67). As the practical implementation in companies is growing and they achieve positive results with it, the importance of this concept will increase. This will result in further research.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Organizations themselves are not able to learn. Their development is based on the learning of their employees and their use of the newly acquired knowledge. Only the constant application in practice will create new, and repeatable behaviors that delight customers. “Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs” (Senge 2006, 129). As mentioned here the achievement of delight is based on human relationships, so the customer-facing employee needs to be trained to create an unexpected experience for the customer. Companies and their managers cannot afford to expect that this happens by chance, they constantly have to train their employees. In a survey in the year 2011 Barnes et al. got to the result, that the quality of the customer-employee interaction is key for feeling and perception of the customer. “This is significant for service providers because it reinforces the importance of selecting and training the best employees” (Barnes et al. 2011, 371). Or, in other words, “in a highly competitive and turbulent environment, continuous learning and innovation are essential for the survival and prosperity of an organization” (Yukl 2006, 457).

In consideration of the above, ongoing, target-oriented training has got a key role here and there needs to be the focus from management side. The German institute for standardization anchored continuous employee training and education with its standard of achieving customer delight through service excellence. (Deutsches Institut für Normung e. V. DIN SPEC 77224 (2011), 19). While learning is constantly ongoing and has no end date “organizations and their leaders will have to become perpetual learners” (Schein 2004, 393). Based on the current state of research, this also includes employees and can therefore be expanded accordingly. The result of ongoing professional learning are well trained and prepared employees. Here it is important to note that not only customer-facing employees have to be trained. To ensure that everyone within the organization is enabled to understand the concept of customer delight and the necessities related to it, a large proportion of employees need to be trained. On one hand they have to develop a deep understanding regarding the new customer-centricity, and, on the other hand they have to internalize their new role and the probably adjusted company’s processes and targets. “Employees need to understand intimate information about the company’s offering as well as the customer base” (Barnes et al. 2014, 387). Or, as described by Barnes et al.: “Giving employees the flexibility and power to delight consumers capitalizes on opportunities to exceed expectations” (Barnes et al. 2014, 387). Without the required freedom employees will not be able to succeed, so their empowerment is key to securing future achievements and a constant rise of customer retention, which, in the end, is equivalent to financial success.

In this context, it is the responsibility of management to “train, reward and motivate employees in a manner that is adequate to satisfy them” (Ali et al. 2018, 9). Referring to Haasler, education has the effect of building human capital, which increases the productivity of workers (Haasler 2018, 539). In regards of all types of training and professional learning it is important to consider, that change will not occur from one day to another. The implementation of a concept like customer delight is based on ongoing regular trainings to constantly support the learning process of everyone involved. The results will be visible afterwards, while they will grow as time progresses. Deming described the effects of learning as delayed (Deming 2000b, 63). To support the change managers, have first to understand and embrace the new concept, while being open for the realignment of their duties and the company’s targets. Only once they are convinced, they will become to successfully accompany their employees. During the transition period they need to act as trainer and mentor, while staying consistent regarding demands on their team. Partially perceived deviations between theory and practice were described by Yukl. As he stated that “many leaders fail to explain job responsibilities, scope of authority, performance standards that must be attained, and the relative

priority of different aspects of performance. Sometimes the message is inconsistent, such as when the leader says something is important but acts as if it is not. Sometimes the leader asks for something that is inconsistent with the needs of the client or customer” (Yukl 2006, 137). Therefore, employees in general and managers in particular must learn.

A review of relevant reports in Germany shows that professional learning is embedded in the professional environment. The statistic of the German Federal Statistical Office is supporting this and mentions that already 77% of the German companies used professional training to qualify their employees in the year 2015 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2017, 1). In this context, the wishes of the employees are worth mentioning. It is important to ensure that the company targets and the desires of their people are corresponding. To get further insights here Michael Page asked 846 employees about their professional resolutions for the year 2021. The employees' first-place goal was to take the next career step (60%), second a clear communication and transparency from their employer (56%), and third with 38% is to learn new skills (Michael Page 2021). It becomes visible, that they would like to take more responsibility for their actions, which should be supported by relevant information and target-oriented learning. Stating that the companies are willing to further develop their employees and that those are willing to learn it is key to ensure that the right content is available to be learned.

Because of the novelty of the customer delight concept, it is important to ensure that the necessary training concepts are offered. This implies that the trainers who are offering this are already familiar with the specific needs of it and the associated priorities. The range of training courses on offer is unmanageable and the review of a focus group is needed. Therefore, in the year 2019 members of the BDVT e.V., the oldest association for training, coaching, and consulting in Germany, were selected. In total 45 trainers answered the questions regarding their offers related to customer delight and management training. Management trainings were offered by most of the participants (91%), while concerning customer delight the ratio of offered opportunities dropped to 27%, which led to the question for combined training offers including customer delight and managers. Here only 13% were able to give a positive answer. So, even if companies and managers are willing to further develop their level of knowledge, it seems to be critical to get to the right learning program. This leads to the challenge to select the appropriate trainer before the internal change management can take place. As part of the current research, one training option to overcome the current lack of programs stood out. The name of this tool is *Servicereise*© (service journey) and it was awarded with the European Training Award of the BDVT e.V. in the year 2022. It was designed to create the awareness for customer delight, while a uniform understanding of it is still missing (Herzig 2023, 84). By using this tool, the focus of the participants will be directed towards their specific needs within their professional environment. Throughout this process a target-oriented learning experience can be built.

CONCLUSION

Referring to the question posed by this study, it remains to be stated that customer delight is a relatively new concept which has not been fully examined yet. At the moment there is even no agreed definition in place. Currently the majority of researchers describe customer delight as an independent concept. It has the origin in the customer satisfaction approach but goes far beyond that, while also incorporating additional soft factors. As those are more difficult to measure, managers are facing new tasks and challenges within their leadership work. To cope with those requirements a supporting learning environment has to be set. Within this, managers and employees need to get the freedom to try, to make mistakes and to learn. Leadership positions must assume a pioneering role in the context of change. To do this, they must learn themselves, set a good example and guide their team accordingly. At this point professional training needs to provide supportive

offers. Looking back on the survey made, there seems to be a lack of learning opportunities to support the integration of the customer delight concept into practice. For organizational implementation, this represents an additional obstacle that must be overcome.

This can be used as starting point for future researchers. Requirements for advanced training measures should be examined and developed. Also, it has to be defined who has to provide this kind of offers. There is, for example, the question if organizations should develop their individual programs or if independent trainers should develop more generic programs which can be customized if required. Once various training offers are available it has to be defined which kind of employees should be trained. In a first step this has to be examined and defined from a scientific point of view. Based on these results recommendations should be developed for the roll out within organizations. Including the target audience for customer delight related trainings and the type of implementation. Especially within profit-oriented organizations the corresponding options for measuring success have to be defined and established.

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ПРОФЕСИОНАЛНО ОБУЧЕНИЕ ЗА МЕНИДЖЪРИ ЗА ПОДКРЕПА НА УДОВЛЕТВОРЕНИЕТО НА КЛИЕНТИТЕ – ТЕКУЩО СЪСТОЯНИЕ И БЪДЕЩИ НУЖДИ

Резюме: Заобиколени от винаги по-бързо променяща се среда, организациите са изправени пред непрекъсната нужда от промяна. Променящите се очаквания на клиентите, съчетани с по-добра информация и лесно онлайн сравнение на продукти, цени и услуги, изискват нарастваща насоченост към клиента. Концепцията за удовлетворението на клиента се появява, за да предложи подкрепа за тази нужда. Силата за вземане на решения трябва да се върне към клиента, докато мениджърите трябва да преосмислят поведението и ролята си на лидери. За прилагането му са необходими предложения за свързани обучения на ръководството, но и за останалите служители. При преглед на текущата оферта за професионално обучение изглежда, че липсват целево ориентирани възможности за обучение.

Ключови думи: удовлетворение на клиента, професионално обучение, лидерство, промяна в управлението, *Servicereise*©

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