

Customer Orientation in Companies – A Pure Sales Task? (Part 2)

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Based on the theoretical conceptual discussions in the first part of this article, we now describe how the approach was specifically used in a large workshop series at Mercedes-Benz Vans. The workshops were held with the management team and were conceptually closely related to the previously described approach. This approach was tested in a pilot phase and the final workshop concept was derived based on the collected insights. The workshops were in the pursuit of two goals. On one hand, to familiarize employees that were far removed from the customer towards the topic customer satisfaction and on the other hand, to develop precise process oriented measure to increase the customer satisfaction. This leads directly to the answer of the following question:

Is customer satisfaction a pure sales task?

Within the scope of the performed pilot phase, it was noted that a cross-functional participation in the workshops ensures the quality and breadth of the discussions. The ideas and measures that are developed together displayed the different perspectives and viewpoints of the participants. Thus, the suggestions were holistic in a manner that would not have been possible to achieve with a solely functional view. We can already conclude that the necessary holistic handling of the topic is not a pure sales task. The sales department is at this point in charge of the workshop design and executions. Therefore, the department can be considered as a type of missionary for the topic. To realize this role, a team that reported directly to the sales director was formed at Mercedes-Benz Vans. The content discussion still had to be cross-functional and participative.

An additional important insight from the pilot phase consists of the fact that it was sufficient for the workshops to hold the discussions along the high aggregated level of the process model as discussed in the first part of the article. A more detailed level leads to discussions that often end in a functional

oriented expert exchange that does not only exclude parts of the participants, but also does not conform with the goals.

To further visualize the discussions, several case studies were developed ahead of the workshops that detailed specific customer situations of the company. The cases were from the customer viewpoint and in this respect made up. The addressed challenges of the company all had a true setting and addressed different topics. This approach ensures a factual discussion of process weaknesses without trying to find scapegoats.

Searching for root cause of problems

Based on the insights from the pilot phase, the following approach for the workshop series was designed.

The introductory discussion always started with a common review of the case study that was selected for the day. The selection was not haphazard, but was related to the content of the day and participant structure and therefore appropriate for all repre-

sented functions. In a first simple step, the problem was introduced. The case study served to discuss at which points of the process the customer began to be upset. The result of the discussion was noted on the plot to be used in future discussions.

Based on the common understanding of the symptoms, the evaluation of the company processes could start and thus also the search for the important causes of problems. The entry into the root cause analysis is provided by the question, “At which point of the process model does the dissatisfaction of the customer become obvious?” Generally the problems can be found when the services are performed which is either during the order acquisition, the operative production, or after-sales service. The reason is that the conventional interaction between customer and company traditionally lies on the level of service performance. Based on these points in the process model, we asked several times for the “Why?”. The goal of the discussion was to determine the exact cause-effect relationship, visualize it in the process model, and to identify possible problem causes not only causal but symptomatically.

With the described approach it was possible to develop a common understanding across functions about why the customer became displeased and what the relation to the process was. Most of the time this deals with complex forces of partial self-reinforcing processes and activities that initially cannot be fully understood or comprehended. The common understanding builds the basis for the next steps of the workshop.

The holistic development of improvement measures

Following this analysis phase, the workshop participants were asked to decide the main cause of the problems and to plan measures accordingly. Only the true causes of problems are the right starting point to improve the situation sustainably and not just in the short-term. Consequently, ideas and measures should start on the cause level.

The discussions about the causes were not a large challenge anymore because of the analysis that was performed together and the basis was determined and discussed. This looked quite differently as far as the precise development of measures was concerned, because creative “out-of-the-box” thinking was required. However, the previous discussions about the case study and the cross-functional participation assisted in this part.

The main levers to improve the customer satisfaction that were identified as part of the workshop and were later on defined as part of the process strategies lie in the following areas:

- Improvement of (multi) project management
- Process optimization, especially concerning cross-functional processes
- Clarification of important interfaces

It should be emphasized that it is possible to identify some of the areas without an elaborate work shop. The employees hold the knowledge. However, the process that leads to the identification of the problem areas is at least as important. In this case the topics are the result of a cross-functional discussion between the whole leadership team of the company and the common understanding about where the largest opportunities are and which measures should be taken. They are suggestions by the employees who will later on be affected by these measures. This leads to a high identification with the ideas and the ability to implement them is increased.

Conclusion

The presented approach pursues two goals. First, to keep the customer in the mind of the employees and to thereby increase the customer orientation of the company as a whole. Secondly, to develop structured and systematic improvements measures that help to reach the goal of consistent

improvement of customer satisfaction. This is not only achieved through well meant messages, but with precise and concrete connections between the drivers of satisfaction and the company processes as well as the roles and tasks of employees. In front of this background, the participative discussion is already a good step into the right direction. Through the presented approach, it is possible to make the connection between the employees activities and processes and their effect onto the customer satisfaction. The responsibility of each and every employee for the topic customer satisfaction become transparent in this process. Another important aspect of the approach is the consistent process orientation that enables a goal-oriented cross-functional discourse and assists the understanding about cooperation in the company. The awareness is created that it is not enough to look at each single aspect of the company individually and then optimize, but that only when the overall system with its complex cause and effect relationships is considered improvements can be achieved.

Addressing our initial question again; is customer orientation a pure sales task? The article has shown that a participative discussion that addresses the interactions between the company and the customer stand in causal relation to each other. These interrelations do not necessarily have to be obvious and can often only be determined through intensive analysis and when looking at it with several different perspectives. Measures that appear to be logical in the first place often only address the symptoms and not the true causes. Therefore, they do not go far enough and are not sustainable. The task to navigate through the complexity of the often intricate correlations cannot be the sole job of the sales department. The seemingly very sales-driven topic of customer satisfaction reaches far beyond the sales organization and can only be minimally influenced by the sales department alone. The sales department should play the role of a missionary for the topic, yet it should not be solely held accountable for it. In the case of Mercedes-Benz Vans, this means that more than 500 managers from all functions and departments par-

ticipated in the workshop series. Cross-functional teams discussed intensively and developed process solutions together. The sales team was responsible for the workshop series, the documentation and the follow-up process. The actual change with regard to customer satisfaction can only be achieved if all departments work together.

“The realization of the workshop series enabled all managers at Mercedes-Benz Vans to become more aware of the topic of customer satisfaction. We connected seemingly far removed functions with the customer. The intensive and intentionally cross-functional discussions in the workshops led to numerous improvements. These are now being implemented by the newly created “customer satisfaction management” team. Schuh & Company effectively supported us in the conceptional phase as well as with the implementation of the team and the first workshop.”

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