

Escalation.... Be Proactive Not Reactive

“Escalate” is one of those words that can sound bad...weak... like the grown-up version of (tongue out) “Nnnnyyyynnnn-yynnn, I’m going to tell on you!” Unfortunately, it’s gotten that reputation because most companies escalate reactively and defensively.

In the retail setting here’s an example of a situation that can give “escalation” a bad rap: A customer walks into the store, asks for something that the employee insists is not possible, squawks because the employee is not helping him, and then demands to escalate the situation to the supervisor. Employee hangs head in shame, gives the superior’s name and contact information, and then dejectedly walks away, feeling powerless and empty. The customer labels the organization as incompetent, and even if he eventually gets what he needed from the manager, he’s left with the feeling of dissatisfaction.

Escalation can and should be utilized by companies as a positive, collaborative and proactive customer-focused strategy. It should be like a beautifully choreographed ballet. When the conductor raises his baton and the instruments sound, everyone knows exactly what they have to do. Escalation management allows for a coherent response to the question, “what can we do to resolve this situation?”.

What are the components of a strategic customer-focused escalation?

- a clearly defined process
- an understanding of the customer’s situation
- proactivity in making requests or offering alternatives
- an acceptance by the employee to champion the customer’s request
- an assignment of authority to the employee
- a culture of ownership and empowerment
- a mindset of courage rather than fear
- open communication within the company and with customers
- an agreement by management to back the employee’s message
- a goal of speedy resolution

Central to successful escalation is an

understanding of the customer needs, the problems or opportunities producing those needs, and the current and future personal and corporate impact of those needs. Without that shared background, companies will intractably stand fast on policies.

The most vital tool of escalation is communication: listening, questioning, and keeping everyone apprised of the current status of roles, responsibilities and timeframes. A modern escalation system is housed in a culture of ownership rather than obedience. As opposed to the “hot potato toss” where all vestiges of personal responsibility disappear once the spud leaves their hands, everyone who touches the process retains responsibility and accountability for the outcome.

For escalation to be powerful, both managers and employees need to understand what is required of them. Using the metaphor of a game of ball toss, the thrower and the catcher must have the skills and desire to play. If the thrower doesn’t throw, it stops before it starts. If the thrower throws the ball, but the catcher just looks at it as it plops on the ground, the game stops again. The same thing is true with ownership and escalation. The thrower (management) has to be willing to toss the responsibility and authority to the employee; the catcher (staff member) has to be willing to accept the responsibility and accountability associated with the toss. And they have to practice because sometimes the distances are longer, the weather is windy or the sky is dark. Both players need to choose to play. That choice is what ownership is.

Here’s what a GM of a global company had to say about management’s role in escalation: “When you give people responsibility and hold them accountable, you must give them authority or they have no control over their destiny. Escalation is good and bad, good if there is a process, bad if there are too many. As leaders we have to take escalation seriously. If ten things get escalated to me, then something is wrong with me. I need to look at why they can’t do it themselves. What must I put in place to

prevent these escalations?”

When employees see that a solution is outside of their scope, they should proactively initiate the escalation process, not wait for the customer to initiate it. The person who initiates the escalation is the “leader” regardless of his formal title or authority. His team are those managers or executives who have resources or decision-making power. He does not let go of the leadership reins just because his team members have bigger titles. He remains the conduit to the customer which preserves the front-line relationship with the customer. Here’s an example: A customer walks into the store and makes a request that falls outside of the decision-making parameters of the immediately available staff. Joe, the associate, recognizing this, and aware of whose authority is needed, immediately says to the customer, “Mr. Smith, now that I have the background information, I can see that this is extremely important to you, and I am going to contact the people in the organization who can make this decision. I will return to you in 10 minutes with a status update.” Joe then directly contacts Mr. X and Ms. Y in a conference call. He explains the situation, answers their questions, and specifies the answers or resources needed from each of them. Rather than obediently saying “yes sir” and “yes m’am”, he asks questions so that he understands the reasoning behind their decisions. If anyone were eavesdropping, they would assume that three equals were talking. The three team members decide what alternatives they can offer Mr. Smith. Mr. X and Ms. Y agree that they will continue to support Joe. They then set a time to assess whether this should continue to be a subject of valid escalation or whether the decision should routinely be made at a lower level. Like the game of ball toss, all parties in escalation are taking a willing and active role.

So, when you’re thinking about creating an escalation policy and procedure, remember it’s more than providing your staff with a list of executive phone numbers.