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Effective communication: Prerequisite for successful service quality implementation. A South African perspective

ABSTRACT

In the quest to establish communication as a critical management function both literature and research have stressed the importance of effective communication as a prerequisites to the success of various programmes including service quality. Effective internal communication, leadership and employee issues seem to be three generic aspects of critical importance in the potential success of any organisation. This article will attempt to give academic insight into the link between service quality initiatives and these three aspects and will attempt to underline the importance thereof with current research results.

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of a service quality strategy is a multi-dimensional process reaching far beyond the principles that are being implemented. Firstly the organisation has to prepare for change, then identify and prioritise the required alterations. Furthermore, organisations also have to develop internal as well as external skills such as listening, effective communication and servant leadership to uphold the new service quality improvement strategy and lastly, organisations have to control cost in order to contribute to the bottom-line of the organisation.

Although the importance of quality is well appreciated in the market, there seems to be major perception and implementation problems. Berry, a highly respected author in the field of services, stated in an interview that service quality is a journey more of the heart than of things. Service quality is not necessarily improved by improving technology. Quality service is a function of leadership and good internal communications (Anonymous, 1988).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication Issues Hampering Service Quality Initiatives

Berry (Anonymous, 1988) used a journey metaphor to stress that quality service is not a programme but rather a never ending journey. According to this guru in the services industry an organisation will fail if it thinks of service quality as doing a little training or starting an incentive programme. The commitment has to be an obsession. It's a philosophy and a journey but never a programme (Anonymous, Bank Marketing, 1988). Crosby (1996) underlined Berry's opinion by stating that implementers are under the illusion that quality is caused by activities and programmes, such as benchmarking, empowerment and team building. He noted that organisations mistake activities for change and as a result cause very little change. The same viewpoint was uttered by Deming who stated this in the first of his 14 points in, "Adopt the new philosophy" (Carr & Tyson 1992). This new philosophy proposes the concept to define quality as customer satisfaction. It also implies creating an organisational culture, a set of values and systems that can drive and sustain this new philosophy (Holpp, 1990). Service quality can be improved only through a systematic, step-by-step voyage that enhances the employee's ability and willingness to provide service by creating an organisation that supports service in all areas (Berry *et al.*, 1988). In order to achieve this, one of the key factors will have to be effective communication.

Effective communication will assist in the current direction of organisations into self-directed or self-managed work teams that will provide an excellent opportunity for

integrating the thinking, methods and tools of the quality movement into everyday work. This can achieve the results promised by the quality gurus of the twentieth century without the negative effects that come from regarding implementing "quality" as a programme (Logan, 1995).

Another key factor is the reality that management fails to realise that the development of service quality remains to be a senior management issue that strikes at the very heart of the organisation - it's true culture. In other words, effective managers do not begin solving service quality problems with the people who do the work. It is solved at the highest level within the organisation with real commitment to service quality. This obviously does not imply that service quality is resplendent jargon reserved for management circles but this is where it has to start (Anonymous, 1988). This argument underline David Crosby words: *"People perform to the standards set and attained by their leader"* (Vasilash, 1996.)

Therefore, the main barrier hampering the development of quality is the lack of top management commitment (Coulson-Thomas, 1996). One of the fundamental changes needed when introducing a quality initiative is that of attitude and the importance of management commitment cannot be over-emphasised (Bricknell, 1996). Top level executives of outstanding service organisations understand that in the new economics of service, front-line workers and customers need to be the centre of management concern (Heskett *et al.*, 1994). A clear and shared quality vision and top management commitment is an essential ingredient for the success of quality and is crucially important in the management of change. The vision must be shared, the purpose of the change communicated and employee involvement and commitment secured (Tanner, 1994). Therefore the ability to communicate is an essential management quality (Crosby, 1996). Successful communication of vision requires integrity and a relationship of trust. If the whole organisation is not working as a team to encourage quality the efforts will be in vain. The commitment to quality needs to be sustained if the barriers to full implementation are to be identified and overcome (Coulson-Thomas, 1996). When top management has proven its commitment, it will flow through the organisation and become part of the make-up of each and every employee in the organisation.

Once this commitment has been established organisations should beware of general solutions that can endanger quality programmes. Every organisation needs to formulate and refine its own approach to quality in the light of experience and changes in circumstances. This will reflect many considerations, such as market place factors, leadership style, corporate culture and the contributions of suppliers and customers (Coulson-Thomas, 1996). Donnelly (Anonymous, 1988) warns against managers that are still looking for quick fixes when it comes to service quality. He states that some managers decide to improve service quality by simply hiring an after dinner motivational

speaker, buying a book for branch managers and sponsoring a Saturday picnic.

From the above-mentioned information, it becomes clear that a broader, more comprehensive approach to quality is a requirement for any organisation embarking on the quality journey. Quality initiatives need to embrace less tangible factors such as feelings and attitudes in order to ensure success.

Leadership: Prerequisite for Service Quality Success

Delivering excellent service requires a special form of leadership called "servant leadership" (Berry *et al.*, 1994). Built on trust and relationships, the servant leadership concept can provide a healthy, diverse, sound culture that is also able to maintain profits as it genuinely values people (Sarkus, 1996). Servant leaders find ways to recognise good performance and to motivate their teams.

Servant leaders serve the servers, inspiring them and enabling them to achieve, viewing themselves as setting a direction and a standard of excellence, and giving people the tools and freedom to perform (Tice, 1996). Because these leaders believe in their people, they invest personal energy coaching and teaching employees, challenging them, inspiring them, and of course listening to them.

One of the most important aspects in new quality leadership is senior management's ability to create and support an empowering atmosphere (Feigenbaum, 1996). Empowerment, today means that people do not only choose what they wish to listen to, but also tend to talk back and have the means to make themselves heard (Schultz *et al.*, 1993). Findings of a recent study concluded that managers with a commitment to service quality are more likely to empower employees (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996) as it is essential in a high contact environment that decisions should be made by the entire organisation and not exclusively by management (Christison, 1994). This in essence directs the organisations away from the military-style hierarchies, where top-down communication was at the order of the day and it establishes a new, broad-minded and all embracing communication-oriented leadership style.

There are many barriers to empowerment, including a lack of appropriate rewards, mistrust and lack of self-motivation on the part of front-line employees and leader's skills (Howard, 1997). Wickisier (1997) advises leaders to avoid quick fix tactics but to take a long-term view to empowerment that involves commitment of the top management team to world-class excellence and the full utilisation of the employees.

Paying attention to the barriers to and problems of change management, the importance of leadership also becomes apparent. As managers are playing a critical role in this

tidal wave of change (Wade, 1996) their ability to manage change effectively has always been highly acclaimed. In part, this is because managing change is the most difficult and demanding task placed on managers (Cannon, 1993). Change management remains the biggest challenge in achieving lasting performance improvement (Scott, 1996).

Employee Research: Prerequisite for Service Quality Success

There are three important reasons why organisations should not only conduct customer research but also get involved in employee research (Berry *et al.*, 1994):

- Employees are the customers of the internal service and are thus the only people that can accurately assess internal service quality.
- Employees can offer insight into conditions that reduce service quality in the organisation.
- Employee research serves as an early warning system. Based on employees' more intensive exposure to the service delivery system a system break down is often noticed before the customer does.

Another important motivational reason for conducting employee research is to ensure employee retention (Peak, 1996). Retaining employees is as critical as retaining customers as organisations cannot get customer loyalty if employee loyalty is absent and employee retention saves money and increases competency.

The argument surrounding employees also received attention in an article by Hansen and Steadman (1991) where the authors claimed that the transformation to a service quality culture required the commitment of top management and continuous communication to all employees.

In addition to the above mentioned, Piercy and Morgan (1991) emphasised the importance of evaluating the impact of a strategy on the satisfaction and motivation of members of the internal marketplace. It has been proven that in cases where employees are not at one with the strategies implemented they will not be motivated to implement it with enthusiasm and the possibility of success will diminish rapidly. The main reasons for this is that organisations exist because their members enact the personae of roles and premises needed to produce collective, focussed behaviour. The collective and individual behaviour is useful only the extent that it achieves rewarding outcomes. To determine whether outcomes are rewarding and whether strategies are successful and accepted by employees, organisations make use of research to acquire and interpret information regarding activities and outcomes (Heath, 1994).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Effective internal communication, leadership and employee issues seem to be three generic aspects of critical importance in the potential success of any organisation. This research attempt to give academic insight into the link between service quality initiatives and these three aspects and will attempt to underline the importance thereof with current results.

The problem that was investigated therefore surrounded the effects of communication, in terms of employee research and satisfaction as well as leadership development, on the success of a service quality programme.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this study was to determine whether or not service quality programmes are implemented successfully in the South African market. The secondary objective was to determine the antecedents of the decision to implement such programmes. Another objective (operational in nature) was to determine the initiatives chosen by the responding organisations to ensure success of their service quality programmes. The final objective was to determine whether the organisations under review focused on internal (communication, leadership development, employee research, etc.) or external (market-related aspects) initiatives in their service quality programmes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The target population for this study was based on companies that participated in the Business Transformation in South Africa Survey that was executed by a large South African Research Company. From this population, the sampling frame was identified as those respondents who had listed the implementation of a service quality programme as a platform for transformation. From this criteria organisations were identified and included into the sample. The research was thus done on a population with knowledge of the subject at hand, which contributed to the reliability of the results.

A self-completion questionnaire was mailed to the 140 identified organisations. The response rate to these questionnaires was 44.28%.

The statistical method that was used to test the hypotheses (to be identified in the following section) regarding communication aspects was the analyses of variance (ANOVA). This method is suitable for testing relatively small sample sizes.

GENERAL RESEARCH RESULTS

In this section the emphasis will only deal with findings regarding communication aspects tested in the service quality study.

Firstly, the research aimed to identify why the organisations under review implemented the service quality programmes. To measure the importance of various driving forces a bipolar, seven-point Likert scale was used. On this scale, 1 indicated that the aspect influenced the decision to implement a service quality programme to a low extent and 7 indicated a high extent of influence on the decision. The factor with the most significant influence on the decision to implement a service quality programme, is changing market needs. Other factors driving this decision were found to be inappropriate employee attitudes and productivity inefficiencies. Employee attitudes should be researched to identify the reason behind the skepticism. Employee research was stressed by Berry, Parasuraman and Zeithaml (1994) as one of the key elements in becoming a quality leader and will probably help to shed some light on the productivity problems as well.

Secondly, the research attempted to determine the importance as well as the performance on certain key service quality initiatives. The results represented in table I indicate the importance associated with a given initiative and the performance of that specific initiative as measured on a seven-point scale. Table I also contains the results of a gap measurement concerning the discrepancies between the importance and performance on certain initiatives. The direction of the gaps giving meaning to the result - a negative result indicates dissatisfaction, a result of zero indicates technical satisfaction and a positive result indicates higher levels of satisfaction. Table I lists all the initiatives tested as well as the results achieved.

TABLE I:

OVERALL RATING OF THE IMPORTANCE AND PERFORMANCE OF INITIATIVES USED IN THE SERVICE QUALITY PROGRAMMES

INITIATIVES	Importance	Performance	Gap
1. Service quality training	6.1	4.8	-1.3
2. Team-building	6	4.8	-1.2
3. Service quality performance tracking	6	4.6	-1.4
4. CS needs analysis	5.9	4.6	-1.3
5. Team-based action planning	5.8	4.8	-1.0
6. Information systems enhancements	5.8	4.3	-1.5
7. Service standards definition	5.8	4.6	-1.2
8. Internal communication programmes	5.7	4.3	-1.4
9. Service quality workshops	5.7	4.6	-1.1
10. Market trend & quantification	5.6	4.6	-1.0
11. Leadership development	5.6	4.3	-1.3
12. Performance management	5.5	4.4	-1.1
13. Technical skills training	5.5	4.9	-0.6
14. All-round Performance Appraisals	5.5	4.1	-1.4
15. Consumer data bases	5.4	4.1	-1.3
16. Reward incentivisation	5.2	4.3	-0.9
17. Acknowledgement programmes	4.9	4.0	-0.9
18. Key account manager	4.9	4.3	-0.6
19. Process efficiency analysis	4.9	4.0	-0.9
20. Logistics /Supply chain management	4.8	3.5	-1.3
21. International benchmarking	4.8	4	-0.8
22. Organisational restructuring	4.8	4.6	-0.2
23. Competency modeling	4.7	3.9	-0.9
24. Supplier partnership programme	4.6	3.4	-1.2
25. Call centres	4.6	3.6	-1.0
26. Cultural diversity management	4.4	3.4	-1.0
27. Activity-based costing	4.3	3.7	-0.6
28. Employee research	4	3.5	-0.5

*CS = Customer Satisfaction

Findings

Although a negative gap was found on all interventions the following gaps indicated particularly substandard performances: information systems enhancement, service quality performance tracking, internal communication, all-round performance appraisals, service quality training, customer needs analyses, leadership development, consumer databases and logistic/supply chain management.

A core problem experienced by the organisations appears to be internal customer, or employee issues. These issues represent the internal processes and functions within the organisations studied which dramatically affects the service rendered by the organisation.

In the light of the above mentioned it is interesting to note that employee research was rated as the least important initiative in the organisations, but that employee and internal problems also received the highest deviations in the gap analyses. It is therefore possible that organisations focusing more on employee research will have less problems in issues such as internal communication, team building and performance management. Managers should keep in mind that satisfied employees will more than likely satisfy customers.

A further issue strengthening this problem may be the substandard performance of leadership development. Employees may thus not receive the support and direction which true leaders are able to provide. People remain to be the strength of service intensive organisations and are definitely linked to customer satisfaction and retention.

The most alarming gap here is in leadership development. Although leadership is a challenging task in this ever-changing marketplace, with employee difficulties being accepted as the norm, it can make or break an organisation. As the literature clearly states, employees will perform to the standards set and achieved by their leaders. This gap was followed appropriately by internal communication that may be one of the main reasons behind the inadequacies of leadership. Organisations cannot expect to be successful if internal communications are ineffective and employees are frustrated by an environment in which they feel completely uninformed and without direction.

Thirdly, the research inquired as to what these organisations are planning to do next in their quest for service quality enhancement. The following communication aspects were mentioned.

COMMUNICATION ASPECTS TO BE ADDRESSED IN THE FUTURE

- Build a team spirit among employees.
- Recognition and reward programmes.
- Follow up on service quality course.
- Training and development of staff.
- Translate strategy into action.
- Empowerment and skill training.
- As employees are the company's greatest asset, training will be vital.
- Happy staff will reflect happy clients.
- Listen to what the customer wants and give intense training in those areas.

Most of the future programmes indicate a movement away from cosmetic approaches that have proved to be ineffective to market-driven and truly customer-oriented approaches by focussing on internal strengths.

HYPOTHESES TESTING

The results of the empirical testing of two of the hypotheses will be listed and discussed below. Only the hypotheses pertinent to the communication issues dealt with in this article will be addressed.

H_1 : The higher an organisation's perception of the importance of leadership development when implementing a service quality strategy the better the performance on the attribute (leadership development) will be.

Attributes used in testing this hypothesis: The importance assigned to leadership development was compared to the performance in leadership development as indicated on the questionnaire.

TABLE II:
TESTING OF HYPOTHESES 1 REGARDING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Leadership Development		
Development and performance	F	p
Leadership	4.815	0.001

There was a strong correlation between organisations that attached high levels of importance to leadership development and those that performed better on this attribute. It can therefore be accepted that the more organisations focus on the importance of

leadership development, the better the performance in this regard will be. This is supported by ANOVA where a significance level of $p=0,001$ was achieved. Hypothesis 1 was accordingly accepted on a 95% confidence level.

H₂: The more an organisation focuses on employee research in the implementation of a service quality strategy the better the performance on employee issues will be.

Attributes used in testing this hypothesis: The importance assigned to employee research was compared to the performance on employee issues (competency modeling, performance management, acknowledgement programmes, reward incentivisation, internal communication programmes and team building).

TABLE III:
TESTING OF HYPOTHESES 2 REGARDING EMPLOYEE RESEARCH AND EMPLOYEE ISSUES

Employee Issues (vs. Importance of Research)			
Employee research vs Employee issues		F	P
<i>Employee research vs Competency modeling</i>	3.875	2.646	0.049
<i>Employee research vs Performance management</i>	3.250		
<i>Employee research vs Acknowledgement programmes</i>	4.563		
<i>Employee research vs Reward incentivisation</i>	4.556		
<i>Employee research vs Internal communication programmes</i>	5.050		
<i>Employee research vs Team building</i>	4.708		

The ANOVA proved that the performance on employee issues will be higher if the organisation focuses on employee research as $p=0.049$. This hypothesis will thus be accepted on a 95% confidence level.

Main Findings Regarding the Hypotheses

The hypotheses relating to communication aspects led to the interesting conclusion that the organisations studied can be blamed for the below expectation performance of their leaders and employees. These hypotheses held that if these organisations focus more on leadership development they will achieve higher performance scores on this attribute. They also held that organisations should not experience as many employee problems if they invest in employee research. This also has a bearing on

organisation's tendency to neglect internal issues, which are of the utmost importance to the achievement of service quality excellence. Without internal strength the objective of being competitive cannot be realised and the changes made will inevitably seem to be no more than cosmetic changes resulting in decreased customer satisfaction.

It thus seems that the organisations in the study did not focus their efforts on internal issues but tried rather to solve service quality problems externally. Many service quality programmes are implemented due to pressure in the marketplace, and often organisations do not have the knowledge to implement it in the most effective way.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

The research results identified problems such as inappropriate employee attitudes and productivity inefficiencies along side of leadership development problems. These results indicate that these organisations are underestimating the importance of leadership development and do not understand that employees who are lacking the support and guidance of a strong leader corps cannot possibly be effective and motivated. Many a service quality author has emphasised the importance of leadership in the success of service quality implementation (Tanner, 1994; Bricknell, 1996; Coulson-Thomas, 1996 and Crosby, 1996).

The problems identified with internal communication may be one of the causes of the above mentioned problems. It is important that organisations should realise that the difference between white-collar thinking and blue-collar doing has diminished and organisations need the ideas of each and every employee. Employees that do not feel involved will also lack motivation and drive. Therefore employees should be empowered, encouraged, trained and supported to solve problems and to control quality.

It is interesting to note that the problems identified in the research appear to have a chain effect. For example the problems identified with inappropriate employee attitudes may lead to customer retention problems, problems in corporate culture realignment and the inability to enhance the quality of the service. All of these issues were identified in this research as problem areas.

From these results it seem that the problems experienced with employees are never-ending yet the finding of hypothesis 2 stated that organisations focusing on employee research will have better results in performance on employee issues. Organisations should thus determine where the main problem areas lie and address those issues. People tend to be more loyal if they are part of a united, focussed cause. Satisfied employees will then, most probably, lead to satisfied customers.

It is thus recommended that organisations look after internal customers before making unfair demands, as these people have a significant influence on the success of especially service organisations. The competitive power of a service organisation lies in the competency and satisfaction of the employees and therefore employees should be protected in order to retain customers in this increasingly competitive market.

LIMITATIONS

As with all projects of this nature, the study has some obvious limitations that warns against the generalisation of the findings.

- The first obvious limitation is the sample size. Although there were good reasons for such a small sample it would be interesting to repeat this research in the future when more South African organisations have implemented service quality programmes.
- Although the questionnaire was confidential, the sensitivity of the information required may have made some of the respondents reluctant to disclose confidential information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of factors identified in this study may be of benefit to researchers in the future.

- This study should be repeated when the South African economy has been subjected to more intense competition and more organisations have realised the benefits of investing in service quality.
- Simpler instruments for measuring service quality should be developed. Current instruments are complex and organisations often find it difficult to use them effectively.
- More research should be done on change management and change models, particularly in respect of the implementation of service quality programmes. Such models will be of great value to implementers of these programmes.

CONCLUSION

The research has proved resoundingly that the performance of service quality programmes has been below the expectations of the South African practitioners. Although this is concerning, one should keep in mind that life can only be understood backwards, but it has to be lived forwards. Therefore it is important that organisations adopt the philosophy of a learning organisation and use past experiences to improve and enhance future performance of the organisation. A focus on quality will increase the organisation's competitive advantage, if the goal of the organisation becomes ultimate quality

performance, based on knowledge of the underlying aspects that lead to service quality leadership.

Organisations should realise that quality is ultimately the provision of value in the eyes of increasingly value-conscious customers. Underlying the operations of every organisation - working like a spine or a cerebral cortex - is its value delivery system. An organisation's performance can be regarded as the direct result of how effectively the system is structured and managed (Swartz, 1994). This focus on internal issues, such as communication aspects will support external processes and give the organisation the ability to provide the customer with what was promised, as it is this that leads to customer retention and loyalty.

In conclusion, organisations should understand that change is a continuous process. The Hunters will distinguish themselves from the Hunted (Swartz, 1994) in the way they go beyond restructuring and mere programme implementation to continually transform themselves to maintain a strong competitive position.

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