

Building A Service-Oriented Business Culture

When you think of customer service in your department, you likely think of front-line roles such as accounts receivable and collections professionals who interact with clients daily. However, *every* position in accounting and finance requires a service mindset. Your employees may not only deal with external customers such as those buying your firm's products or services or vendors supporting your organization, but also internal clients including coworkers and managers. If your team strives to exceed expectations when assisting these audiences, they're enhancing your group's reputation and contributions, which can play a role in your company's success.

Building a service-oriented business culture goes beyond just telling people to do their best when helping others. It takes a comprehensive strategy that includes the following steps:

Hiring service-minded staff

Quality service begins with having the right people on your team. When recruiting, look for signs that individuals share your commitment to going above and beyond when helping internal and external customers. As you evaluate resumes, take note of quantifiable results. For instance, did the candidate recommend a new process at a previous employer that made work easier for everyone in the department?

Also, consider the applicant's entire employment background. A college job at a retail store or as a receptionist might not seem relevant to accounting or finance, but it may have allowed the person to develop valuable service skills working with the public. Inquire more about this experience when interviewing.

Additionally, pay attention to how well candidates follow your instructions for applying for your openings. For example, if you state in the job posting that both a resume and a cover letter are required, but only receive a resume from an applicant, it could indicate the person is careless or doesn't want to conform to others' policies – and that the individual isn't likely to exceed expectations when it comes to service.

Reinforcing goals

As a manager, you need to foster a customer-service mindset within your group. Talk to employees about how they can make a difference in their roles and the importance of how they explain issues to clients or colleagues during challenging situations. For instance, perhaps there has been a delay in getting key financial figures to a department that are necessary for budget planning. Rather than telling a contact, "We've been so busy, the earliest I can get that to you is Tuesday next week," a better approach might be: "I am so sorry for the delay. I realize this is creating difficulty for you, but I want to give you accurate data. I expect to have the file to you next Tuesday." The message is the same, but the way the information is conveyed expresses empathy, which can soften bad news.

Encourage staff to think of solutions when they encounter difficulty with internal or external customers. What can they do to not just resolve the situation but also leave a positive impression? Perhaps a vendor is complaining that your company hasn't paid an invoice promptly. Rather than simply investigating the situation, an employee might take that step but then give the vendor a timeline for when a check will arrive and follow up personally to make sure the check has been received.

Keep in mind that employees in accounting and finance will likely need clarification as to who constitutes a client and why service is so important. Let them know that even individuals who seem to have no direct relation to your line of business – such as the caterer dropping off lunch during a meeting or a copy machine repairperson – could be valuable contacts who might recommend your firm to others they know. The way your staff interacts with them could make a notable impact on your company's reputation, especially in this digital age where opinions can spread quickly.

Providing training

Some people on your team will naturally provide superior customer service, but others may benefit from training to take their abilities to the next level. Consider conducting role-plays with common scenarios likely to arise in your group. Also invest in seminars, online courses, webinars, podcasts and other educational opportunities when necessary. If budgets are limited, you might have employees within the company who are known for excellent customer service lead informal or formal training sessions.

Finally, be sure to reinforce your service culture by offering recognition to those exemplifying your values. Publicize examples of top-notch customer service in your company newsletter, intranet or break room. Also encourage staff to share stories about coworkers who have gone the extra mile when working with people within and outside the organization. An annual award can further highlight the best behavior.

Note: Robert Half has produced a *Small Business Series* that highlights ways companies can increase productivity and profits. The latest report, [*Go The Extra Mile: Building a Service-Oriented Small Business*](#), provides further information about creating a service culture.

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