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AS WE LIVE AND WORK

Building Relationships Boosts Company Morale

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"We give great phone. If someone calls and no one responds after three rings, every phone in the company rings automatically. That sends a powerful message to everyone. We value your business. Our goal is to serve our customers, not to frustrate them."

-- Successful entrepreneur running an \$8 million company

The lifeblood of every business is to attract, develop, satisfy and retain customers. In times characterized by transient relationships, reduced loyalty and heavy competition, it's tricky to make this goal a reality. The problem is further compounded by the restructuring of the workplace, where economics dictates the workload and individuals are required to do the work of two or three people. That makes it a tough environment to be pleasant, efficient and effective. It's therefore not surprising that the lament of those manning the fort and dealing directly with customers often feel like the line in Jim Lindy's book, "Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way," that reads: "We are the uninformed, working for the inaccessible, doing the impossible, for the ungrateful."

Yet there are a number of companies that have capitalized on the transformation of work styles and work structures. They have developed a competitive edge by dedicating themselves to forming strong relationships with their customers and vendors.

What do they do?

First, they understand that valued employees, treated fairly and respectfully, will treat their customers well. This eliminates a "we vs. they" culture and instead creates an "us" environment, in which reciprocity between employee and customer is the key ingredient.

This is demonstrated by a short vignette of a CEO that gave a quick and effective response to an overworked and valued employee: At 11 a.m. midweek, the CEO of a food service company noted that one of his top customer-relations people lacked her usual zip. He approached her and asked what was wrong. She gave him a direct, honest answer: "I'm bushed." Without batting an eyelash, he replied, "Go home, rest up and go out for dinner on me." And then, with a twinkle in his eye, he said, " ... and if you don't do it, I'll fire you." The

next day she was charged up and rested, and explained to us: "Now you know why I'd do anything for him and our customers."

Companies that genuinely buy into building long-term customer relations are developing advisory boards in which customers periodically meet with company management to provide feedback. This is not just a PR gimmick. It is a strong commitment continually reviewed by the company. Such action has the enormous potential of creating a strategic alliance that builds trust, facilitates communication and helps zero in on the needs of both the customer and the company.

Companies that are dedicated to building long-term customer relations have the equivalent of good corporate self-esteem. That means they have pride in their people and product, offer good value and don't create unrealistic expectations. They are good at listening to what their customers need. As a result, they are able to more effectively manage uncertainty -- a critical determinant that promotes confidence in their transactions.

Companies with good corporate self-esteem provide their workers with a high degree of autonomy, invest in training and learn from their mistakes. They treat their customers with respect and are direct in their communication. They ask intelligent questions and don't oversell. They don't bad-mouth competitors or share information about other customers, because they recognize that what's good for the goose is good for the gander.

They send out legible and accurate invoices and make use of a moral and ethical compass, which may mean they are prepared to lose a customer if the relationship becomes excessively unreasonable. And they work hard to strive for excellence, which they translate as not a one-time event but as a sustained habit.

Clearly, no single organization hits the jackpot on all of these points. But the success rate of building high-quality customer relations is enhanced if many of these variables are adhered to carefully, consistently and conscientiously.

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