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# Let's Create a Service Souffle

*Stephen J. Bonczek and Steve Rosenthal*

## Internal Ingredients

- Develop value statements and distribute to each employee. Reinforce the message with posters and tangible imprinted items, e.g., pins or mugs.
- Ensure quality service by communicating through letters and newsletters pride in service already provided and stressing the importance of employee efforts to bring quality service to an all-time high.
- Enhance employee orientation and highlight the importance of public service with a video and personal discussions with high-ranking officials.
- Clarify the conditions of employment with employee handbooks.
- Provide an opportunity for employees to savor each other's company in a relaxed environment.
- Reward seasoned employees with a meaningful service award program, recognizing positive customer service.
- Provide awards for valued employee suggestions.
- Reduce costs for employees by providing a discount program similar to those in the private sector.
- Produce a sense of internal pride and self-respect with internal caring and liberal employee benefits.

## External Ingredients

- Advertise programs and services creatively through brochures, videos, television, etc.
- Once you have caught citizens' attention, demonstrate your service orientation through outreach.
- Develop modules to train employees in customer service—codify your citizens.
- Ignite citizen trust through task forces, doing things "with" people rather than "to" people.
- Protect the public with policies concerning issues such as drug testing, sexual harassment, and discrimination.
- Give citizens an opportunity to easily evaluate services at the point of service.

Visit any local government and the employees working there will tell you they do a fine job servicing the needs of their citizens. Visit any organization in the private sector and employees will tell you they do a fine job servicing the needs of their customers.

The reality is, however, that the level of customer satisfaction is at an all-time low. In particular, public confidence in the organizations that provide captive government services is eroding, and how to change negative citizen perceptions is often discussed.

How can the perceptions of both groups be so far apart? How can government employees believe that they effectively service their citizens and citizens believe bureaucrats and civil servants are rude, inefficient, and unresponsive to their needs? To understand both, one must gain understanding of the frustrations of those who work for government and those who require services from that government. Employees do not want to be referred to as public servants or to be told that the citizen is the boss and pays the public servants' salaries. Employees do not want to be abused for discussing a permit fee or for explaining why a citizen is not in compliance with an organizational rule or regulation. The list of frustrations municipal employees have in dealing with the public is endless.

There is another side to this situation. A government that ignores the needs of citizens or transfers them from one department to another, whether by telephone or in person, fosters in a negative opinion of the quality of the total organization. This is only one issue on a list of complaints that highlight the frustrations of a captive consumer base.

No matter where you live, there is a recipe for creating a culture of customer empathy to enhance the existing service attitude. This "service souffle" can create a positive customer/employee orientation throughout the organization. The recipe can infuse vitality into an organization and induce consumer awareness that invigorates both the user and the provider of services. It can feed any number of people, has tremendous opportunity for embellishment and substitution, and is totally

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cholesterol-free. It is the ultimate weight watcher's treat, as it can reduce the burden of an administrative organization or legislative body. It creates good will and a positive environment for establishing a partnership between the service provider and the service user or customer.

### **The Base**

A good base, as in most cooking, is essential for building your service soufflé. Form mission, goal, and value statements as an administrative team and submit to the legislative body for approval or for recognition.

The mixing of internal and external ingredients is critical to achieving successful results. The internal ingredients are those that enhance service delivery and reinforce the desire to serve citizens. The external ingredients are those that establish a more involved and informed citizenry about the mission and operation of their local government. External involvement is realized through task force plan-

ning groups and committees. Carefully blending the base, internal ingredients, and external components achieves a quality product—a high performing organization that is responsive to the needs of its customers.

### **The Final Mix**

In making a service soufflé, remember that mixing is most important. You cannot dwell on customer service training without meeting the needs of the employees within the organization. The aspect of making people feel they are important ingredients, and that their service actually matters, is key. Equally pivotal is the ability of management, from the core through the executive ranks, to portray this as more than a one-time partaking—as more than a rush to create change for change's sake, as more than form over substance. Only the employees and the citizens can judge whether your service soufflé is acceptable or deserves recognition, commendation, and awards. **PM**