

Non-Negotiable Service Standards

I believe that boundaries not clearly defined are painful. And I don't mean just for the employees but for both employees and leadership. How can employees stay within boundaries if they are not clearly defined for them in writing? Every organization should have clearly defined written job descriptions for every single position in the organization and employees should actually be the ones to keep job descriptions up to date.

Job descriptions are going to change over time. They are not created once and never touched again. They need to be updated on a regular basis, and who is better to keep them up to date than the employees themselves? The skill components are not the only elements to be kept current. In addition to updating skills that are required, the behavior component should also be continually updated. For example, is the telephone to be answered before the third ring or the fourth? If it is decided that the telephone must be answered in three rings, make sure that rule is in the job description of everyone who is responsible for answering the telephone. How long should it take before a customer coming through the front door is greeted? Is it going to be twenty seconds or thirty seconds? Whatever is decided, make sure it is in print and clearly understood.

I believe that if employees understand what their boundaries are, that will make it a much more comfortable work environment for everybody. I call those non-negotiable service standards. I think we need to call them "non-negotiable" so employees understand that these things are not up for negotiation. They are not options—they are things that every single employee is required to do. I even highly recommend organizations put them onto a single sheet of paper so they are clearly defined and easy to read, then have each employee sign, date them, and put them in his or her personnel file. If they are hidden inside of a policy and procedure manual, I guarantee that most employees aren't going to remember them because there is too much else to read and retain.

When I raised my son, I created dialogue with him about things that are negotiable and non-negotiable. When he would come home from school, the non-negotiable standard was that he would *always* do his homework before he played. So he knew that when he came home he wasn't going to try to argue or debate it—he knew what he had to do. However, if he wanted to ask, "Dad, I want to stay up until ten-thirty tonight because there is a special television program on airplanes that I want to watch," I would say, "You know what, that is negotiable and it's okay with me."

I think it's important to get employees involved *in* the process of change so that they don't feel like victims *of* the change. With that in mind, I think creating a customer service committee is a great tool to help organizations create and

sustain strong service cultures. You might gather about six or seven employees in a room on a monthly basis and meet for about two hours to talk about some of the things the organization can do to improve customer service. The committee's duties might include reviewing mystery shop results, employee satisfaction surveys, and customer satisfaction surveys. The goal would be to try to decide what they can do to help improve the customers' experience and get other employees involved in that process. You want to encourage innovation and out-of-the box thinking from this committee.

I think employees really have a lot of great ideas if leaders would develop a culture that would allow that kind of dialogue to occur. I also believe that employees who are challenged in their work—being pushed a little bit and stretched just a little bit beyond their boundaries—are happier employees in the long run.