

EFFECTIVE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT REQUIRES ENGAGED LEADERSHIP

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Driving a customer-centric focus is a continuous journey requiring commitment and collaboration.

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A large-scale cultural or transformational change—one that begins to effectively use the voice of the customer to drive business results—requires the full engagement of a leadership team if it is to be successfully managed. Few CEOs who enforce a command-and-control approach will be able to lead their organizations to new frontiers. When strategically guiding and empowering the executive level in new directions, today's leading organizations have shifted emphasis from the individual leader to collective leadership capabilities.

One reason for this shift is the complexity, interconnectedness and transparency of modern organizations; no one individual can accomplish much alone. "Leadership in an organization is more distributed, and hence change requires a more collective sense and a coordinated set of actions," write leadership experts Trina Soske and Jay Conger.

Winning the support and commitment of the leadership team requires an understanding that every executive comes with his or her own set of background experiences, priorities and overall perceptions. Choosing the right executive sponsor to oversee transformational change is as important as coaching and mentoring the entire leadership team throughout the process. The need for leadership engagement especially applies once a customer experience management program is implemented. The resulting ripple effect of change will very likely be met with some degree of resistance that will need to be strategically managed.

Whether you are a Chief Customer Experience

Officer or a mid-level manager responsible for leading a customer experience program, successful practitioners recognize the challenges associated with engaging a leadership team and to this end, will integrate an engagement strategy in order to ensure success.

Select and Train Your Executive Sponsor Wisely

Not every leader, regardless of how passionate he or she is about the customer, has what it takes to be a good executive sponsor. The selection and performance of an executive sponsor is critical to the customer experience project leader and team.

An effective executive sponsor must, first and foremost, have credibility with his or her peers, the courage to overcome resistance inherent in any transformational change, and the vision to effect change for the long term.

An executive sponsor is accountable to many stakeholders when sponsoring a large-scale transformational change, including the executive team, the project leader and team, and employees. Furthermore, the role of the executive sponsor changes as the implementation of a customer experience management program progresses. When customer experience management is in its **infancy**, an executive sponsor is responsible for:

- Creating strategic alignment and building leadership support in the C-suite by setting the vision and strategy for aligning the customer experience with the business strategy and goals.

- Acquiring the resources (people, time and money) needed for the project team to initiate an enterprise-wide change while sustaining the change for the long term.
- Creating awareness with employees about the need for change and the business opportunities to be realized by improving the customer experience. Engaging them as partners—making a personal commitment to customer experience improvements.

During the customer experience **design and development phase**, executive sponsors must:

- Build a coalition of sponsors and executive commitment by influencing key decision-makers and recruiting change advocates within the executive team. Continuity of sponsorship at the C-level is a must even as members of the leadership team come and go.
- Provide direct support to the project leader by removing roadblocks and overcoming obstacles. Customer experience must be a key measurement on the corporate agenda.
- Educate employees about the rationale for change, communicate the risks associated with not making a change, and provide answers to the question, "What will the future look like?"

During the **implementation phase** of a customer experience program, the executive sponsor needs to:

- Demonstrate continued commitment and manage resistance. Insist on "corporate patience" by setting realistic expectations with executives, at a minimum for a three- to five-year period.
- Demonstrate the endurance needed to see a long-term transformational change come to fruition and provide the political cover when needed to keep the initiative on track.
- Establish clear accountability at all levels of the organization.
- Reinforce and reward new behaviors. Set consequences for not changing. Communicate compelling stories that

reflect the new vision of the company and demonstrate the new behaviors that are valued by the organization.

Coach and Mentor the Entire Leadership Team

A leader's job is to align the organization around a clear and achievable vision, set priorities and be ruthless in pursuing his or her focus. We want our leaders to be passionate about the customer and believe that customers are a true asset to an organization that must be invested in and nurtured. An engaged leader typically has the following characteristics:

CORE BELIEF

An engaged leader is not only passionate about the voice of the customer but has a strongly held belief in "the case for" the customer. He or she inherently recognizes that improving the customer experience will improve employee engagement, business and financial results. The engaged leader takes personal ownership for the mission and has a clear picture of what can be accomplished—a vision of the future. Leaders who lack vision cannot inspire teams, motivate employees to change behavior, or work towards creating a new definition of company success.

In the *Harvard Business Review* article, "Building Your Company's Vision," authors James Collins and Jerry Porras write about the importance of having a vivid description of the future—a picture of what the future will look like when corporate goals are achieved. For some leaders, especially those in operational functions, seeing into the future is difficult.

Smart customer experience professionals create a glimpse of the future by creating "a day in the life of a customer in 2020" to help the leadership team make customer experience goals more vibrant, engaging and tangible.

EXTENSIVE COMMUNICATION

Today's leaders are relentless about communicating what's important, what progress has been made and which employees are exemplifying the behaviors needed for the new era of change. Telling and sharing convincing stories is a powerful way for an engaged leader to shape the culture, values and attitudes of an organization. Storytelling doesn't need a podium and microphone, but rather can be shared with employees in the elevator, in the lunchroom line-up and at the annual retreat.

Make it easier for the leadership team to use storytelling by developing a cadre of success stories or examples that showcase employees realizing the new vision of the customer experience. Develop a leader's guide to customer experience management with the talk track and presentation tools needed to reinforce consistent messages.

COMMITMENT TO THE GOAL

Engaged leaders are committed to the customer experience program for the long term. They push for the resources needed to invest in employee tools and training to improve the customer experience and are relentless in ensuring accountability across all levels of the organization. Engaged leaders have a bias for action and show their true commitment to customer experience when trade-offs are required or a long-term investment is necessary. They know the value of measurement and reinforce the need for a performance management framework that includes metrics related to improving customer perceptions about the customer experience.

Unfortunately, many executives don't want to be accountable for changing customer perceptions. In reality, perceptions are difficult to manage and change. Unlike revenues and profit, customer attitudes are considered soft data—harder to define and interpret. Customers can change their minds on a whim and will frequently contradict themselves. To make matters worse, perceptions don't need to be based on actual experiences but rather can be influenced by long-held belief systems dictated by trusted family or friends.

Successful customer experience professionals recognize that accountability for improving customer perceptions about their experiences is a must. For employees who are resistant to being accountable for customer perceptions, be sure to link customer attributes directly to operational metrics. This allows employees to monitor internal improvements and link them to the resulting impact on a customer's perception of quality.

Manage Leadership Resistance to Change

Resistance to change is a natural phenomenon for any organization driving long-term fundamental changes. It can manifest itself as a lack of leadership commitment or action, comments

behind the scenes that risk jeopardizing the integrity of a project lead or the program, or overt rebellious actions. The best strategy for managing resistance at the executive level is to understand the root cause of the resistance and then develop an action plan to deal with it. Here are common sources of resistance and how to address them:

LOSS OF POWER AND CONTROL

When change is being introduced, the change leader is perceived to be in control and hold much of the power over the new environment. Executives feel threatened by the loss of power in their own territory—an area of responsibility and power for which they have worked very hard to build and protect. It is important to recognize the importance of the roles and responsibilities of those affected by the change and include them in planning and management.

CHANGE CREATES UNCERTAINTY

Most people by nature prefer routine. We are creatures of habit which provides us with comfort and a feeling of being in control. Routine activities become automatic and enable us to be more proficient, competent and efficient in our actions. When too much change is introduced at once, the differences in how we are expected to perform our work tasks become distracting, time consuming and confusing. Change leaders need to define the change clearly with simple steps and timelines. They need to focus change on those areas that are essential to success.

LOSS OF FACE AND PRESTIGE

More often than not, an organizational change will impact methods and programs that one leader was responsible for designing and implementing—making their previous work obsolete or recognized as unsuccessful. If the reason for the change is not clearly articulated, leaders may become defensive and resist any new changes in order to save face and preserve their pride. Honouring the past and including those leaders most impacted by future changes in the new design will help to mitigate resistance.

MORE EFFORT

Change requires more work. Whether you are implementing a simple change or a massive enterprise-wide change, it requires

employees to do things differently, to learn new approaches, and often to double up on activities as the change process is being implemented. Avoid underestimating the time needed to manage this process. Smart customer experience professionals will develop an integrated rewards and incentives program to recognize employees for the extra effort and time required to implement the change.

All in all, customer experience management is a continuous journey. It requires the collaborative and collective efforts of the entire leadership team from program infancy to long after implementation has been launched. Selecting and training an executive sponsor and then coaching and mentoring the leadership team are integral to ensuring the success of a customer experience program. As changes are applied, managing resistance and other challenges will help align and engage the entire organization in placing the customer at the forefront of the business. •



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