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## The key to world-class customer service It's all about corporate culture

By Triche Guenin



Scenario: An employee makes a mistake or takes a risk that goes wrong. As a manager, you have a choice of how to deal with it. You can:

- reprimand the employee and note the issue in their personnel file OR
- view the experience as an opportunity - to learn from the error and share the lesson with others

Colleen Abdoulah, CEO/COB of WOW! Internet-Cable-Phone headquartered in Denver, chooses the latter, hands-down. She spoke recently at the Daniels School of Business University of Denver as part of the Voices of Experiences Speaker Series. Her mantra is "Leadership is about service to others." (Abdoulah was recently honored in *ColoradoBiz* magazine as a CEO of the Year finalist.)

Her belief is that by surrounding yourself with smart people you trust and who share your values, you (and/or the organization) can only get better. If they feel cared for, they'll do what's necessary to ensure the customer has a great experience.

This philosophy is proven in February's *Consumer Reports*, which recognizes WOW! with a clean sweep of Highest in Customer Satisfaction among high speed internet, residential telephone, and television service providers in the north central region, (right now the only region in the US they service) during 2009. This was all done while growing the business. In less than eight years (since 2002), WOW has doubled its number of employees and customers, now at 1300 and 466k, respectively.

Although excited about this latest accomplishment Abdoulah is more proud of how this award was achieved. She credits it totally to her employees with the caveat that by making them feel cared for, they, in turn "care" for the customer.

How does she show she "cares" for her people and role model the importance of the customer:

- Require that each management person "touches" customers each month. If they've not had the opportunity, they either spend two hours in a call center and man the phones or do a ride-along with a service technician.
- Enhance the culture by creating a WOW moment program - all employees are encouraged to recognize those customers/employees going beyond the norm. Some of the more unique WOW's are publicly recognized.
- Ensure that corporate values are clearly known by the employees and are enforced. Employees who violate these values are fired - it's non-negotiable. These values are inherent to interactions with all stakeholders: respect, integrity, accountability, and servanthood
- Share confidential information with employees. If you don't trust them - how can they be expected to do their jobs effectively?
- Spend \$1200-\$1500 annually per employee for continued development and training

Abdoulah recognizes that employees are an organization's most precious asset. So she makes sure the HR function reports directly to the CEO and is included in all strategic discussions. As a result, WOW's employee turnover is 20 percent annually, compared with 50 to 100 percent for most call centers.

Colleen incorporates her own personal beliefs into the organization. Some of her truths include the following concepts:

- It's simple, but not easy
- Operationalize the golden rule

She hopes to impart the following concepts to upcoming (and existing) leaders by embracing the strengths of both your male/female sides:

- Less ego and more humility
- Less pride and more laughter
- Less fear/intimidation and more loving attitude

WOW's philosophy is to "deliver an employee/customer experience that lives up to our name". When employees are asked to expand on what that means to them, their response is the following: "It's not what we do, it's how we do it: lead with courage, serve with heart, and celebrate with grace".

Abdoulah is very clear that should something happen to here, where she was no longer in a position to lead the organization, the culture could live on without her. That's a legacy as well as a competitive advantage.

And what an inspiration to upcoming leaders!

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