

# Customer as Boss

*Go from leader- to customer-centric.*



by Chip R. Bell and John R. Patterson

WHEN ORGANIZATIONS ARE LED BY charismatic, demanding or memorable leaders, the focus often turns to compliance, obedience, or obsession with the leader's way, style and vision.

Centering on customers takes leaders who are more interested in excellence than ego. It takes a total alteration in agenda, attitude, and action. To make the shift, employ three strategies.

**1. Customers in the boardroom.** Make the customer's presence come alive in operations. Invite customers to attend meetings normally reserved for employees and to participate in the design of products and services. Get feedback from customers on processes that determine their experience. Leaders need to model listening to customers.

- At MBNA, senior executives spend four hours a month on the phones monitoring customer calls. It is not just about what they learn; it is about what they signal as top priority. Modeling also means paying attention to what customers see and feel. When managers assist customers in a busy time, they communicate customer-centric.

- eBay invites 12 users every 60 days to participate in its *Voice of the Customer* program. These people visit departments to talk about ways to improve service. Then, every month for six months, they reassemble to explore emerging issues and make major service enhancements.

- Duke Energy has used a *Boards of Customers* program in the regions they serve. Experienced customers volunteer time each quarter to act as sounding boards for new products and services. They became a key conduit for feedback and service improvement.

**2. Leaders in the customer's world.** Customer-centric leaders hunt for genuine encounters with customers. They

spend time in the field and on the floor where the action is lively, not in carefully contrived meetings where the action is limp. It is one thing to read static customer satisfaction reports and quite another to spend time in the field gathering first-hand research. The latter can have a far greater impact on leaders' perception of service quality.

- When John Longstreet was GM of the Harvey Hotel in Plano, Texas, he invited guests to his office for "secret" assignments that included "call house-keeping at 3 a.m. and request 20 towels," "ask room service for something not on the menu," or "break a glass in the restaurant and report what happens." The guest received a room rate discount, and John got first-hand information on his service processes.

- Roberto Herencia, president of Banco Popular North America, invited his key leaders to join him for a day of shopping the bank's competition. Each leader was directed to make specific

requests, assuming the personality of an irate, uninformed, or demanding customer. They learned ways to boost service quality.

**3. Customers on the dashboard.** By giving direction, alteration, maintenance, and early warning, dashboards provide part of the guidance system needed to traverse the market-

place. Whatever is on the dashboard proclaims the priority. If the dashboard is silent regarding customers, employees rightly question its significance. The dashboard encompasses the actions of leaders when tough decisions are required. When leaders take a shortcut that improves the bottom line but hurts service quality, employees learn what really matters.

Customer-centric leaders are not just customer advocates—they are stewards of a culture that relentlessly pursues positive experiences for customers. *Stewardship* means staying the course until new behaviors are imbedded—and remaining vigilant for anything that imperils customer-focus.

When customers spot organizations that operate on their behalf, they reward them with their loyalty and money. Leaders need to keep the spotlight on customers, since they can fire anybody in the company. LE

Chip Bell is founder of The Chip Bell Group and John Patterson is president of Progressive Insights. They are coauthors of Customer Loyalty Guaranteed! Create, Lead and Sustain Remarkable Customer Service. Visit [www.chipbell.com](http://www.chipbell.com).

**ACTION:** Make the customer the boss.