

The value of commitment... (and, how to collect your money on time!)

By David Shaked

Part 1: the value of commitment

At a recent visit to India, I visited a branch of a fast-growing ISP (internet service provider). Their customer base grew from 5000 to 150,000 in about two years! This is the sort of growth I have seen everywhere I went to in India.

I asked the branch manager what enabled this huge growth. What was working SO WELL that made it all happen? I was given a 'list of key success factors' - response rate, clear communication by customer service reps, service levels and good quality technology. I asked for a story that explained the growth and again received lots of data and indicators.

We went around in circles for a few minutes until I asked the branch manager to tell me about a customer experience he remembered personally that was his best. This time, the story came out very easily! It was a great story about a customer who was keen on getting connected to the internet and his journey throughout all the different departments in the company.

Mouli Chandra from Potentia¹ who was with me at the meeting commented that throughout the story, the key theme he heard was around commitment to the customer. Although he didn't know a lot about Appreciative Inquiry, his deep listening and analysis skills helped him make that observation. The Branch manager agreed that commitment is indeed the most important contributor to his (and the branch success). He then followed on, without any prompting, sharing a story that showed his commitment to one of his employees. It was a very inspiring leadership story!

He was wondering how to apply these new insights to his 'complaint resolution process' and to growing his subscribers' base even further. I asked him, what do you want to be committed to and what do you want your team to be committed to in that regard? 'Resolving complaints quickly and reducing the ratio of complaints to customers' was his response. I asked what outcome would be even better. He responded "having no complaints". We continued the conversations a bit further and landed a topic for inquiry - "perfect connections". This topic applies at multiple levels:

- 1) The technical level (process) of connecting a customer to the internet.
- 2) Customers' interactions with service representatives with the multiple relevant business processes.

¹ Potentia is a leading OD and HR consultancy in India offering consultancy, training, facilitation and HR system support across India, South East Asia and the Middle East.

- 3) Internal conversations the service representatives hold with the technical team and the process of installing a new connection or fixing an existing one.
- 4) It also applies to conversations between employees and managers and internal management processes.

Of course, “perfect connections” would cover his concerns around complaints and then some more. What an inspiring topic!

Once we had a topic in mind, I suggested we could inquire about and map the multiple processes around the above types of ‘perfect connections’. What enables them? What exactly happens when they occur? What would make them even better or more frequent? Etc.

More about this later...

Take away points from this story:

- 1) Is it possible to eliminate/reduce your performance problems by focusing on success?
- 2) How much emphasis do we put on quantitative data collection? Could stories inform us of existing wisdom and insights we could tap on?
- 3) What is the essence of your success? What enables your organisational processes to perform well? Is it ‘key success factors’ such as technology, know-how or price competitiveness or is it positive human interactions?
- 4) How do good processes and positive, useful and productive conversations interlink in your organisation? Do you focus on processes and ignore the human interactions around it? What do you need to inquire into in order to generate even more success?

“Great processes serve the vital connections between people - not the other way around”

Part 2: Collecting payments on time

Later on, the branch manager asked for my advice on how to improve the payment collection process in Area X. He explained that payments for internet services were collected by visiting each and every subscriber once a month rather than online or through credit cards/direct debits/sending a cheque as many of us are used to. The team responsible for the area was simply underperforming. Their target was 400 collections per person each week (can you imagine, visiting 400 properties every week to collect payments?).

I asked the manager if the process works well elsewhere in his part of town. He said that yes, in area Y, his collectors are very efficient. I asked what can be learned from it that would apply to area X. The branch manager responded that they have already tried to implement the 'best practices' from area Y back to area X and that the situation still did not improve much. He provided many reasons why it didn't work (primarily because of the different geography and density of subscribers). I then asked if there was anyone in the team serving area X who is already operating at, or close to, the desired level of performance. This seemed to generate more reflection and a few new ideas. It turned out, that two members of the team seemed to perform at a good level. My third and final question was around those who were deemed not to perform well. I asked the manager, if any of the underperforming team members had previously experienced a period of higher level of performance in the past? Was there a particular week when one of them performed well? Were there certain days of the week when they were able to perform particularly well? These questions seemed to create another breakthrough with my branch manager. He started coming up with lots of ideas and questions he wanted to ask the team members...

Take away points from this story:

- 1) When you want to improve a particular process, where do you start and what are you seeking to understand in depth? Do you focus on analysing the underperforming parts or do you focus on the better performing parts?
- 2) Which route of analysis could give you more useful ideas for actions you could take?
- 3) Which analysis would encourage the employees involved to contribute their time, energy and wisdom towards improvement?

About the author:



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