



Performance Development Solutions for the 21st Century Workforce

What Does It Mean To Be Customer Focused?

Let's be clear right from the start. This is **not** some clever marketing ploy to give you all of the soft and fuzzy reasons why Brand X, Y **OR** Z is the greatest thing since sliced bread and ten thousand reasons why you should drop what you're doing and hire them. It **is** an effort to honestly explore the beneficial characteristics that define "**Customer Focus**".

To avoid confusion, we are not talking about **What** the provider delivers but **How** they provide that delivery. The premise is this; what characteristics or attributes are necessary in any given provider to deliver the maximum benefit to any given customer in any given situation? Does the provider even consider these issues? Clearly, the relative importance or value of these characteristics will vary depending upon the type of product or service to be provided. But, at the same time the ability to perform in any of these areas should be indicative of the provider's relative value in delivering their product or service.

Let's take a stab at putting some meat on these bones.

Being Customer Focused means understanding the customer's *Business* -

The supply chain in the commercial world **assists** the customer's business cycle and processes. Meaning that if the supply system is flawed it will have adverse effects to that business. Products or services that are not well suited to that customer's business will not deliver value. It is unlikely that any customer would pursue a purchase that they did not at least perceive had some application or fit with their business, but often that fit is assumed to be there.

If we are talking about a piece of equipment, then the fit should be determined by the engineering requirements. For example, a pump with given performance characteristics can be utilized in any application in any business that requires those characteristics. The pump does not need to understand the customer's business but the provider does need to understand what application the customer wants to use the pump for. Mismatching the pump's characteristics with the application may gain a sale for the provider but it will not provide the right solution for the customer. It is also probable, since the results were not positive, that the provider will not see any more sales from that customer.

The same is true for the provision of services. The provider has an *obligation* to understand the customer's business, how it functions and what the customer is trying to achieve. Some individuals try to simplify this as direct experience in that business, which, while it has value, is not necessarily a stand alone need. In the case of the pump, its characteristics are a match for the physics of several different applications. *Physics* are the same across the planet from one business to the next. So, having direct past experience in a given business is not as critical as being able to demonstrate an understanding of that business and how the *physics* of the situation apply.

Being Customer Focused means understanding the customer's *Organization* -

Does the customer have a top-down, bottom-up, matrixed, or self-directed organization? What functional areas are included? Are portions of the site organizations shared with or driven by the corporate organization? How are decisions made? What are the established priorities? What is the review and approval process?

Providers should understand the organization and its structure if they intend to communicate effectively. Especially when it involves technical delivery, providers need to be attuned to the technical management within the organization to ensure that they understand and are meeting the technical need.



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Being Customer Focused means understanding the customer's *Strategic Goals* -

As noted above, suppliers in any market assist their customers in operating their businesses. Since marketplaces are constantly evolving, businesses must also evolve to grow, and sometimes, just to survive. Customers plan their own evolution setting goals and objectives to drive their organizations forward. Whether the business does this formally through strategic planning or informally as a matter of course is not as important as whether they include their support structure in the process. Do the providers to the business attempt to help with strategic goals? Do they even consider their role in helping you achieve those goals? Have they asked you what they can do to help? *Have you asked them?*

Providers who are Customer Focused monitor your strategic goals to ensure that they adapt as necessary to help you meet those goals.

Being Customer Focused means understanding the customer's *Culture* -

Individuals display behaviors and the collective behavior of a group of individuals represents their culture. Businesses have cultures of their own, sometimes with as many variants as they have organizational sections. Cultures are neither positive nor negative per se; they are a fact of life. While organization charts indicate the structure of the business, the culture(s) dictates how the business functions. The behaviors employed by the culture are often the driving forces behind how the business operates.

Consider an organization that has enjoyed good historical growth, stability and success when their world is drastically changed by some factor. Regardless of how well the company adapts to this change strategically through planning, it is their culture that has to implement those plans. Different cultures with different behaviors will have different levels of success in moving forward with those plans.

Providers also have cultures and also have to evolve. Since we are all in the same food chain so to speak, your ability and your providers' ability to adapt are interconnected.

Being Customer Focused means understanding the customer's *Wants* -

The customer wants what the customer wants, but do they know the alternatives? Sometimes, what the customer wants is information so they can make an informed decision. Often their choices are limited to what is being offered by the provider. Some providers limit their response to what they want to sell. Being Customer Focused means taking the time to listen to what the customer wants and responding as completely as possible, offering options and alternatives for the customer's consideration. It also means, when appropriate, telling the customer honestly that what you provide would not be the right fit at the moment.

Being Customer Focused means understanding the customer's *Needs* -

As human beings, there is sometimes a difference between what we want versus what we actually need. In business, what we want may be the state of the art or the newest version because it appeals to our senses. But the technical aspects of what we want has to be balanced against the commercial aspects of what we can afford and what value is provided. A simple example of this is the rapid advance in computing technology. It is almost certain that any computer that you purchase today will be outpaced by new machines within a few months. But the equipment that you purchased will continue to present value for many years. You may *want* the newest and the best but you don't *need* it.

A Customer Focused provider will start your discussions by asking you all of the ways in which you intend to use the product or service. After they have, together with you, defined all of the intended uses or expected outcomes, that provider would then present the appropriate alternatives that meet those needs and avoid solutions that would be excessive.



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Being Customer Focused means understanding what the customer *Says* to them -

Customer focused providers are good listeners. They don't worry about how they will be perceived if they ask questions. They ask those questions to be sure that they understand what the customer is trying to tell them. The customer is trying to communicate a message and it is the provider's *obligation* to ensure that that message is understood.

This means more than listening when the customer speaks. It means proactively *asking* the customer for feedback. Does the provider ask for feedback from the customer before, during, and after the work? Does the provider conduct periodic surveys to gain feedback from their customers and non customer industry members? Do they listen to what the customers tell them to improve their operations?

Being Customer Focused means understanding how to *Satisfy* the customer's need -

If the focus is on the customer then the provider must be able to understand the customer's need and relate that need to how the product or service will address it. They must also be able to quantify to some extent how well it will satisfy that need. Simply stating that their product or service is the best doesn't satisfy this particular item, as that is a claim without substance. Being able to explain how the need will be met includes an explanation of the details involved and discussion of the outcomes or results. That in turn requires some dialogue of the entire effort to describe all aspects and how those outcomes and results will be accomplished. The ability to go to that level of detail provides the clarity necessary to judge the actual value presented.

Being Customer Focused means understanding the customer's (and the provider's) *Limitations* -

This is the real world and as much as we may want things to be perfect, the fact is that they aren't. Customers and providers have limitations. Customers' limitations typically are related to schedule, budget, resource assignment, or resident expertise. Providers' limitations are typically related to available personnel or parts. A Customer Focused provider recognizes the realities of these limitations, addresses them openly, and works with the customer to overcome them in a manner that minimizes impact on the organization and achieves the desired results.

Being Customer Focused means finding the match that provides the greatest *Value* -

Customer Focused providers seek to provide value that meets a defined need. They look beyond putting bodies in slots or selling their quota of widgets. They want to exceed the customer's expectations because it is the best and most accurate measure of their performance. In providing real value to their customers they receive value in return by creating documented performance and referrals. By truly focusing on what is good for the customer these providers are focusing on building and improving their own businesses as well.

Being Customer Focused means being *Responsive* -

When a need for outside help arises, it is generally because of an event that drives an organization beyond its capabilities from either a resource or expertise standpoint. These are not situations that allow people to get it done *when they can get to it*. In situations like this the provider must recognize the immediacy of the need and respond with a sense of urgency that indicates that they now embrace the problem as their own.

Putting all of this together does not spell some convenient acronym. But it does point out that being Customer Focused involves a lot of different thoughts and approaches besides just completing some transaction. Customer Focused does not mean focusing on how many customers you have, although that is part of it. Being Customer Focused does not mean how much you have sold each of those customers, although that is also part of it.

Being Customer Focused is an attitude and practice that places the customer and the provider in a partnership to achieve positive results. The number of customers you have and how often they call you back is a function of how well you focus on achieving results for your customers.