



October 23, 2008

The first rule of training is to be a good example

Ed Brenegar

Question: Do you have any insights that I can use in my customer-service training program to remind workers that their co-workers are their first customers and the consumers we service are second. I want them to understand that if we are treating each other with disdain, it's surely going to flow down to our customers. I want to find a way to get that across so they will get it.

Answer: When there is interpersonal conflict within the business, then the customer is viewed more negatively. In this sense, the problem is not one of training, but of leadership.

Good training works for three reasons.

First, the people being trained are prepared to receive it. They are open to learning how to improve their performance.

Second, the training must be relevant to the real-life context of their work. If you are trying to train people to treat one another as their No. 1 customers — with the belief that improving staff interaction will make the difference with external customers — then you can't simply say, "Here's how to do customer service."

Third, every good speaker or presenter must make the case for the material they are presenting. Simply saying, "We are our No. 1 customers!" is not sufficient if it doesn't address the deeper issues that affect what happens in the workplace.

For example, if the company's leadership treats employees with disdain, then no amount of training or lecturing about customer service will help them "get it." They already "get" that they are not the No. 1 customers of their company.

Effective training is relevant to the person, addresses their real-world context in the company and is validated by how the company's leadership embodies the training program's values and approach. This is why issues of behavior in a company start at the top and filter down through the employees.

As a trainer, you need to be the embodiment of the program's principles. Don't treat the material as just a set of abstract ideas to convey. Treat your trainees as your No. 1 customers. Remember, in any educational context, "More is caught than taught."

Keep focused on the goals of training. Remember that you are the living example of the idea that your co-workers are your first customers. Encourage the employees who are doing the right things in the right way. By being an example to them, you will begin to make a difference. They will be able to translate your course material into practical advice for the real situations that they encounter every day. Their success will be your success too.

This is the opinion of Ed Brenegar, president of the Community of Leadership, a leadership development and transition planning consultancy. He writes the Leading Questions blog at <http://edbrenegar.typepad.com>. Send questions to him at ed@edbrenegar.com.