

The Dividends of People-Skills by Kate Nasser, The People-Skills Coach

When you think of support center leadership and customer service delivery, you probably think about **soft skills**. Yet these skills are not weak, unimportant, or soft in any way. So, this year my plea to the support industry I continue to serve is *please don't call them soft skills!*

The phrase “soft skills” truly misses the boat. Phrases like “interpersonal skills,” “influencing skills,” or (my favorite) “people-skills” communicate their true value. Try this exercise. Picture yourself outside of work. It's Saturday morning and you are trying to order something or resolve a problem. You pick up the phone to call for assistance. What would WOW you? What would ensure your loyalty to that organization? What would make you want to tell everyone about that company's service? Now it's Monday morning. You call an internal department in your company for assistance. What would impress you? What would make you talk about their value? The answers vary slightly depending on your personality type and the severity of the problem. Yet study after study has shown that the answers always include how they interact with you and how they treat you. In other words, people-skills!

What are the dividends of people-skills?



Effective people-skills replace fear and avoidance of difficult situations with know-how that creates quality collaboration to serve the customer and bring success to the business.

Superior people-skills arouse creativity and innovation, which can reduce costs and increase customer loyalty. A leader's superior people-skills inspire team members' empathy and caring for the customer, without which customer service does not exist.

The list of people-skills includes:

- Communication and connecting
- Listening
- Interpretation of verbal and non-verbal cues
- Critical thinking
- Conflict resolution
- Negotiation
- Self-moderation of attitude and extremes
- Adaptability to change
- Ability to work with diverse personality types and cultures
- Leadership skills

Sometimes the list also includes public-speaking/presentation skills. These are very valuable and worthy of your attention. It is possible to deliver excellent customer service without them, but they are essential for long-term professional development.

Why is teamwork not on this list of people-skills?

Teamwork appears on every support center job description and, in fact, almost every job description in every organization. Unless you have found a business that never interacts with people, you must engage in teamwork. So why is it missing from this list? Teamwork is the outcome of the people-skills on this list. In fact, if your performance development plans (PDPs) say “work as a team to reach stated goals,” you have written something that your employees may not understand. Whether teamwork results from this PDP statement is purely up to chance. If, instead, you put clear examples in the PDP of how to use the people-skills on this list, you are taking smart, measurable steps toward developing effective teamwork. (You will notice here that my underlying focus for teamwork is on growth and change.)

In fact, the traditional definition of teamwork (e.g., people working together to reach a common goal) sounds logical,



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seems clear, and *does not work*. It falls short of a critical people-skills success factor for teamwork: adaptability to others and the ability to change and grow. Can you imagine team members, each with a different personality type, working completely from their own perspective and achieving a common success for your organization and customers? Not likely. Again, it's up to chance. For years, I have delivered team-building workshops to struggling teams, and while the source of the struggle varies, the solution has always been interpersonal growth.

In my recent article, “Teamwork Gems Create Startling Results,” I laid down a definition of teamwork that I have used for many years: “growth and change within people (team members) to achieve a common goal/success.” Put that definition in your PDPs and you will have a clearly stated call to action that tells employees what is expected of them as a team.¹

Why does communication top the list of people-skills?

Communication allows you to articulate your value to teammates, customers, and the business. It is the universal mechanism through which we achieve and by which the other people-skills come to life. You can be a great critical thinker, but your thoughts are of little value if you can't communicate them clearly. You can even be a good listener and a poor communicator. It's true!

Listening and communicating are essential to good customer service, like water and air are to life. Good listening delivers far better communication and connection. Yet, good listening without communication does not connect to anything and does not deliver great service. But, before anyone sends me a message on Twitter claiming this favors extroverts and minimizes the contributions of introverts, remember that communication is a broad term with room for many styles, and it includes both verbal and written forms. You must excel at both to deliver outstanding customer service. If you are delivering mostly phone-based service, you will still document customer requests and probably problem-solve with virtual teammates via e-mail, chat, or text. If you are delivering customer service via live chat or e-mail, you must use the same principles of great verbal communication, but with added clarity, since your tone of voice is missing.

Communication manages moments, helps solve problems, builds bonds, and spurs learning. Negotiation, conflict resolution, working with diverse teammates and customers, and leadership all require communication to materialize. That is why communication tops the list of people-skills.

**Open-ended to learn and discern,
closed-ended to confirm.**



A superior customer service and teamwork communicator:

- Verbalizes empathy instead of just feeling it
- Asks instead of assumes
- Speaks honestly, with tact and diplomacy
- Focuses on results instead of power
- Adapts to the customer's personality type and uses the customer's listening style
- Asks more open-ended questions (who, what, when, where, how) than closed-ended (yes/no)
- Connects through communication

If you have a frontline checklist, ask your team members the purpose of the checklist and how they use it? You may be surprised by the answers.

Beware: The checklist approach of many front-line service and support teams is producing just the opposite type of communicator. Closed-ended questions are dominating front-line communication and silencing the customer in the process.

The results of this are:

- Less rapport and connection between customers and the support center,
- Far less accurate information collected during diagnosis, and
- More do-overs, since the front line team members are not accurately seeing the customer's big picture on the first call. Do-overs lower customer satisfaction.

Oddly enough, checklists are often designed to ensure thoroughness and consistency. I have used checklists for many years. However, I never communicate from and through the checklist. I use it as a guide and I focus on communicating well with others, not on completing the checklist at the expense of a superior connection. Remember, customers are not following your checklist. A great communicator knows how to jump around to connect with the customer and still get to a positive result.

A great customer service leader must have trifocal vision.

- Inspiration
- Innovation
- Integration

This is a very demanding role, one made even more difficult in the last decade as companies have discounted the business value of customer service. High-level company executives often view customer service as an expense they want to minimize... until there is bad press. Then the squeaky wheel gets their attention.

True Story...

A global support organization in a major oil company was operating with great customer satisfaction ratings. Team morale was high and service was both empathetic and technically successful. Things were going well, despite stress from a global application rollout and changes in corporate direction. The leader's vision and skills were trifocal. She inspired people, yet had no problem speaking the truth and being firm on issues ranging from attendance through performance. Her abilities were recognized and she was tapped to lead a new team of two newly merged departments elsewhere in IT.

Another leader was put in place to head up the global support organization. He loved metrics. His decisions and communication were all based on data. He delegated to two team leaders and pressed them constantly for metric improvement. They then did the same to the team members. In two years, absenteeism skyrocketed, morale plummeted, and metrics like average hold time were abominable. The leader's boss asked an HR representative to interview the support center team members to get their perspectives. The HR report cited some of the worst conditions they had ever witnessed. I was then asked to weigh in. Through assessment and discussions with the metrics-driven leader, the solution in that case was clear to me: appoint a different support center leader, one who believed that inspiration was a key driver for success. The previous leader returned and turned it around in less than six months! The metrics-driven leader was put in charge of a department that needed to streamline its procedures and inventory. In that role, he was quite successful.

Recently, this trend has been reversing, as social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook have turned customer complaints into a global broadcast network of customer dissatisfaction! Additionally, companies like Zappos and Amazon have brought the value of customer service to the attention of the mainstream financial press.

Inspiration. A team's desire to walk in their customers' shoes, to connect and adapt to each customer, to show empathy, to care, to work as a team, and to find creative solutions is essential for overall customer service success. To achieve this level of commitment, leaders must inspire and build this as a culture. This is a people-skill that you can develop through learning and practice. Start by taking a personality indicator test to identify your source of inspiration. If you overlook it because you declare you are not a "cheerleader type," you will see the team's morale and service suffer. **Bottom line:** Develop the people-skill of inspiration or choose to lead a non-service team!

Innovation. You might not think of innovation as a people-skill. Yet, as a leader you either encourage or squelch innovative thinking. To be competitive in today's global economy, innovation is essential. A culture of empowered, innovative thinking in the support center and customer service departments can lead to lower operating costs, higher customer satisfaction, and breakthrough advances for the company based on customer feedback that you collect and process. **Bottom line:** Develop an inspired innovative team! There are exercises you and your staff can do to awaken and

trigger innovative thinking, boost morale, and attract new talent (when you have an open position). Consider taking the KAI (Kirton Adaptive Innovation) Index to identify your starting point for leading innovation and change.

Integration. Your ability to understand, connect to, and deliver value to the rest of the business is the third focus of a great leader. You must encourage your team to integrate their efforts with other service teams in the organization and the business. The most frequent complaint I hear from support center teams is that they experience a lack of support and cooperation from other tiers of support. You must break through the silos and build an integrated culture of customer support. How are your influencing and lobbying skills? Do you know how to connect well with other business leaders

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in your company or government agency? Integration with other support teams and with the other business departments fosters accurate and timely problem resolution. **Bottom line:** Customers don't care what department is supposed to fix their problem. They just want it fixed.

Are you wondering when you will find the time to develop and use trifocal vision while still managing the day-to-day operations of your support center or customer service center? Start by delegating operational tasks. Develop your team coordinator's ability to handle it. Coordinators are often closer to the daily operation than most leaders and can do this even if they don't supervise people. This empowers the people who are closer to the front line and develops your management bench. If you spot one that shows the beginnings of trifocal vision, start developing him or her into a leader!

Support centers and customer service centers use every people-skill as professional tools. Communication and connecting, listening, adapting to personality types, negotiation, conflict resolution, leading and adapting to change, the ability to thrive in a diverse workplace, and trifocal vision are as important as the technical or product knowledge you and your team deliver.

The dividend of all these people-skills is long-term success! 🌟

Inspiration. Innovation. Integration.



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About the Author

Kate Nasser's sessions at HDI's annual conferences and other customer service industry conferences are legendary. Her onsite team-building and customer service workshops are transformational. Over the last twenty years, her energy, true stories, and practical advice have inspired service and teamwork breakthroughs for tens of thousands. Her new training DVD, "Customer Service USA," examines the regional differences that make or

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