A Customer Service Culture

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Abstract

With a constant replacement of ownership, government contractors at Creech AFB are inundated with administrative changes. During such transitional time and the months surrounding, customer service to the military organization disintegrates. Using the strategy, “Ten Commandments” from Jick and Peiperl (2011), this change implementation plan strives to build and strengthen a customer-driven culture through four initiatives: customer feedback surveys, using an internet communication tool, modifying schedules, and building a mentorship training program. While goals and objectives for each initiative differ, each are aimed at customer service enhancements such as improved communication, continuity, and increased job knowledge. Anticipated barriers including emotional resistance, fear of change, and user ability are combated by structured communication, negotiation, training and mind shifts. Leads are heavily dependent on cooperation, support, and professional feedback to ensure customer service becomes a priority and the change implementation is a success.

A Customer Service Culture

As world issues and intercontinental disputes evolve, so do the operational capacities that support their efforts. In such organizations, seeking transformational improvements are often found in product development, innovation, and enhancements. The government-contracting service industry is no different as it relies heavily on employee knowledge, dedication, continuity, and service. Combining the two aspects of war-fighting efforts and the human resource, it is obvious that government contracting plays a vital role. The level of service this industry provides can greatly affect budgets, operations, and casualties.

Government contracting consists of three parts: the contracting company, the on-site employees (internal organization), and the customer (the external organization). Contracts are awarded to a contracting company at a fixed price and a specific length, generally both driven by government funds. The contracting company consists of owners, managers, and overhead employees, of which can be very few people. This organization oversees the contract requirements and provides contractor HR support. On-site employees, referred to as “contractors,” are generally incumbents of previous contracts and perform services to the customer. Customers are generally government agencies, military units, or government programs. Contractors are responsible for fulfilling contract requirements and supporting the assigned customer. Often contractors work alongside the customer but have limitations on relationships and loyalty.

1. **Organization and Background**

The CAAS III contract, located at Creech Air Force Base (AFB) in Nevada, supports military drone operations. It has re-competed three times since 2009 thus resulting in having four separate owners. Contractors, including middle management, simply change shirts but remain in the same position. It is also important to note that most of the contractors are prior and recently-separated military that were also stationed at Creech AFB. During the transition time, contracting companies focus on orientating the employees into their company while middle managers are introducing new owners to drone operations (as they have little knowledge of specific operations themselves) – much like a merger. Contract requirements specify employees need little to no experience for their high-level positions. So when employees are replaced on contract, many new-hires have minimum job-specific training and customer-service experience. During the fiasco of converting employment and the months following, the most significant problem is of lack customer service and operational support to the military customer.

Drone contract support at Creech has four departments: scheduling, training, evaluation, and mission-support cell (intelligence) spread over seven units. Scheduling is responsible for building daily flying, simulation, and ground schedules. Schedulers must be cognizant of aircrew qualifications, hours, and availability. Training departments are responsible for ensuring all aircrew are up-to-date on training requirements and documentation. Evaluation departments ensure aircrew are 100% qualified in the missions they are flying. Finally, the mission-support cells debrief all aircrew after flights. They are responsible for tracking information that relates to any intelligence that pilots, sensors, and mission coordinators may observe during flight operations. Each unit has a Unit Lead responsible for relaying information, tracking performance, and handling low-level conflict from a variety of departments.

1. **Introduction to the conflict and Change**

During a contract re-compete and while the contract ownership is changing hands, customers are made a secondary priority. Contractors become inundated with company changes and are extremely distracted when they are personally affected by them. Analysis goes undetected, continuity decreases, and specific contractor duties get put to the back burner. Thus, this change implementation will focus on building a stabilized customer-service process that offers the military improved communication, stronger continuity, and increased contractor job knowledge. The vision of continuous operational support will bridge the gap of ownership changes while improving the reliability of the contractors. The change implementation will consist of the following four initiatives:

1. an initial survey from the customer to analyze the needs of the external organization
2. utilization of unused existing internet programs, “SharePoint,” for communication
3. modification of schedules for stronger continuity and
4. a mentorship training program.

With military-customer input, the change is to be bottom-up, led by the middle managers consisting of the site lead and the unit leads. Additionally, which such frequent changes in company ownership, this particular change implementation will focus on employees of the contract and not necessarily the specific organization that may currently pay them.

1. **Comparison of Strategies**

There are several implementation strategies to consider. When choosing the correct strategy it is important that it clearly outline steps necessary for implementation, be congruent with change goals, and be clearly understood by the facilitator. With this said, whether using one particular strategy or choosing from a range of techniques from various strategies, successful implementation can be possible (Jick & Peiperl, 2011). Take, for example, Jick and Peiperl’s (2011) Six Steps to Effective Change. Here steps such as, “developing a shared vision” and, “spread revitalization” can be helpful in facilitating transformation. However, change in the service industry needs to be both internally and externally focused. To add, when choosing an implementation strategy for modification to personnel, one must take careful consideration of the emotional reaction, resistance, and relationships during the change. The Six Steps fails to directly relate to such a consideration. Finally, the Six Steps emphasizes gatherings for communication. Jick and Peiperl (2011) suggest in their text, *Managing Change*, that conferences and meetings are poor implementation strategies. The same has been proven for the contractors of CAAS III as meetings, even masked as social gatherings, are rarely attended. Electronic communications such as e-mail, PowerPoint presentations, and instant messages are also rarely regarded as serious endeavors amongst government contracts, if they are even read.

Another strategy to consider is the four stages of “Transforming the Physiological Contract” (Jick & Peiperl, 2011, p.301). This strategy is very congruent with the human factor of government contracting but lacks real clarity for actual implementation. It specifies how employees should react but fails to address what should cause such reactions.

Finally, a more appropriate implementation strategy may be the “Ten Commandments of Implementing Change” (Jick & Peiperl, 2011, p. 214). These outline ten steps to successfully address both what should be implemented and the human emotion element necessary in the service industry. Benefits of this strategic approach include informal on-one-one discussion with contractors and a supportive leader structure – both vital to transformation with spread out government contractors. While each of the Ten Commandments is not executed in this change plan, this option most closely relates to the steps necessary for successful implementation.

1. **Implementation Plan**
2. **Objective or Goal**

The primary goal in executing change for the CAAS III contract is to develop a customer-service driven culture through the four outlined initiatives. The specific objective of the first imitative, delivering and analyzing customer surveys, is to retrieve honest and needed professional feedback from the customer. Often such suggestions or even complaints are taken to inappropriate personnel or up the chain to leadership when they could be handled at lower levels. For example, complaints of contractor working hours not meeting the needs of military operations can be resolved with Unit Leads, yet, are often directed to military leadership. Surveys can be distributed on a monthly, semi-annually, or annually basis to assess and prevent such conflict.

Specific goals for utilizing SharePoint is to improve communications from the customer to the contractors. Real-time feedback can lead to conflict prevention and management (Waters, 2000). Additionally, positive feedback can be received by Unit Leads, the Site Lead, and further communicated to the contract owner. Often varying schedules prevents the customer from providing constructive analysis to the contractors verbally. For example, schedules built by contractors during the day shift may have inadvertently but negatively impacted the swing shift but are not communicated because of schedules. Chasing rumors through several units is an ineffective process for conflict resolution. This plan should allow a streamlined outlet for message transmission and a shared vision between the internal and external organizations.

Specific objectives for the third initiative, schedule modification, relates to consistent continuity. Drone operations shift throughout the year and personnel must be prepared to support it. Thus, Schedulers, Training Managers, and Evaluation Managers will be expected to shift with operational hours. For example, summer heat prevents local drones to depart after 9 a.m. so these departments will be expected to support operations prior to preflight at 6 a.m. during the summer months. Additionally, intelligence contractors who shift 12-hour schedules will be given a fixed shift for continuity. Customers must be able to rely on consistent support thus future hiring will be based on shift needs.

Finally, goals of developing a mentorship program will provide the customer the most knowledgeable and reliable operational support. Many inexperienced contractors are unaware of the level of service to provide. They are given little training and report only bare minimums. For example, intelligence contractors fail to provide in-depth trend analysis yet they are compiling all of the data. The mentorship program will train contractors in vital trend detection as it is one of the largest benefits of drone utilization. Additionally, training will be provided and continued with existing employees as well as new-hires. Overall, the program will ensure contractors are constantly aware of the “big picture” of operations in order to provide elite customer service.

1. **Timeline**

Six weeks prior to implementing the change programs need to be prepared for use. The Site Lead will distribute and evaluate surveys to military personnel in order to “analyze the organization and its need for change” (Jick & Peiperl, 2011, p. 214). The surveys will specifically be asking for suggestions, improvements, and services that the customers feel need updating. Second, Unit Leads will be asked to develop a mentor guide for training new, existing, and inexperienced personnel. The mentor program will last four weeks and outline specific goals. Two weeks of the program will be dedicated to over-the-shoulder training while the last two weeks will focus on autonomy and feedback. Intelligence departments will focus on trend detection yet the other departments will hone in on attention to detail, regulations, and customer continuity. The Site Lead will meet with the Unit Leads every other week to check progress and allow Unit Leads to exchange training ideas, requirements, and further strengthen their leader role. During these meetings the Site Lead and Unit Leads should be made prepared for two-way communication, collaborative negotiation, and further communication skill development (Hocker & Wilmot, 2011). Third, a webpage dedicated to military-to-contract feedback will be developed in SharePoint and overseen by Unit Leads. It will allow for the external organization to provide suggestions, requests, complaints, and compliments in a professional manner. In looking for advice on effectively implementing change, it was suggested to disconnect from old routines (Jick & Peiperl, 2011) and remove old and ineffective systems (Jeanes, 2012). Thus, the SharePoint communication tool will minimize “hear-say” complaint habits and provide a formal system for conflict resolution. And finally, Unit Leads will modify schedules. Currently, many of the personnel are on rotating 12-hour shifts to provide 24-hour coverage. Several of these employees have offered to remain on the night shift for continuity but have been ignored because of distractions. New schedules will ensure the employees are on a fixed schedule with no shift changes and support operation needs.

In order to have an effective implementation, two weeks prior to the launching, the Leads will attempt to develop enabling structures and engage the employees in one-on-one communication with a three part strategy. The first step will be to identify key personnel as leaders or mentors to other lower-level employees. Leads will engage these individuals in one-on-one communication verbalizing the changes and their structured leadership role with both the employees (the internal organization) and the impact on the military customer. These key personnel will also become trainers in the mentor program further supporting their leader role. Second, the unit leads will engage each contractor of their unit offering one-on-one dialog and listening for new ideas or concerns. Hesitations should be noted as well for future re-engagement (Jick & Pieperl, 2011). Lastly, the third step will be to engage the military customer on the upcoming improvements. Communicating the status quo versus the vision of increased commitment to customer service will help outline the organization’s need for change. Leads will engage department heads (external organization) in such conversations and provide training in SharePoint. At the end of the six weeks, change will be launched: SharePoint will be available for use, new schedules will begin, and mentors will start training.

1. **Barriers**

One of the ongoing challenges contractors face has been their interactions with the military. As ex-military themselves, they find it difficult to separate their position as contractor and the military as the external customer. Often they try to form inappropriate alignments and cliques with military personnel, which becomes a conflict of interest for the contracting company. The change implementation may disengage such risky relationships and enable the growth of professional relationships. SharePoint, for example, will be the place to communicate thoughts so that conflict that can quickly get resolved by Unit Leads (thus preventing future issues).

Scheduling changes may also be met with some resistance. Contractors may be unwilling to work one specific schedule as the night schedule has been far less desired. Additionally, while the schedule modification is meant to offer more contractor continuity to the military customer, they may be less pleased with the contracting personnel working on their shift. This may cause unknown and unreported conflict as night shift presents a unique organizational culture (much like a college dormitory).

The utilization of SharePoint may present additional challenges to both the internal and external organization. Contractors, understandably, may be displeased with personal complaints being electronically posted for the masses to view. As a society, we are seeing far more conflicts advertised electronically (on Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and it often seems very one-sided. While SharePoint will not be a place to “hash out” conflict there will be solutions offered further in the next section of this plan. Another anticipated barrier to SharePoint will be user capability. Military customers will need to be properly trained and guided in the program in order for this particular part of the change to be effective.

Finally, the change implementation may be met with some resistance from the contractors as they may not want additional job training. There will always be some employees who feel as though they outperform their peers and may be in denial of needing additional training. The mentor program is not suggested to make employees feel inadequate in the status quo but to enhance their job knowledge and performance. Leads may be met with fear from employees who feel that if peers (both internal and external) see them receiving mentorship, it may be judged as remedial training.

1. **Conflict Resolution approach**

The most important aspect of conflict resolution for the change implementation will be embracing communication. Erica Waters Consulting (2000) suggests that “all employees, members, and clients are entitled to provide feedback both positive and negative on how the organization is performing.” This change specifically introduces new avenues for communication and feedback to foster an organizational culture change. Communicative expertise of the Site Lead and Unit Leads will be sought to facilitate conflict resolution.

Conflict Resolution specifically aimed at addressing scheduling-change resistance will use skills such as negotiation. For instance, it may be feasible to offer additional time off or night-schedule expiration (replaced by a new-hire when able) in exchange for a night-shift commitment. Additionally, Unit Leads may be able to sit night shift to address any potential conflict between contractors and the military customer. Again, future new-hires will be employed under such standard-schedule expectations.

Creative solutions can be found for issues arising over SharePoint communications. It is understandable that contractors do not want their mistakes on blast for other personnel to judge. Fortunately, the internet program is accommodating to privacy. Custom features include hiding names of whom may have posted and whom the post may address. SharePoint, used in the privacy settings, can be a great way for employees or leads to offer solutions without specifically humiliating an employee. Additionally, posts can be read by leads prior to making them public.

Finally, to address conflict resolution related to resistance of mentorship training, a sense of urgency may need to be used to implement the change. To be frank, the majority personnel of both the internal and external organization have seen only sand in their careers. We may be approaching new challenges - greener obstacles - as defensive units. Contractors need to be prepared to offer the most versatile and enriched support to the external military customer as possible. By approaching this training as “new knowledge” and not simply redundant information, employees may be more receptive to the change. New information may subside fear and denial and make employees feel like they are receiving first-hand intelligence. This sense of urgency is vital in generating contractor support in this change implementation (Jick & Peiperl, 2011).

1. **Measurements for Success and Anticipated Results**

Measurements for Success will be addressed with each change initiative. Success from military feedback surveys will be measured by simply receiving feedback. Any feedback, regardless of its nature can be viewed as a positive step in the change implementation. Any Thus, even complaints, can be used as a resource for conflict resolution, employee training, and improved customer service. Once the external customer realizes the benefits of providing such feedback, it will motivate future support in the initiative. Success for SharePoint utilization can be measured by trained individuals, actual use, and of course, resolving posted issues. Once the program becomes a trusted resource for communication and conflict resolution, more customers will be apt to use it. Reinforcing this option is important for further validation of customer-service enhancement (Jick & Peiperl, 2011). Measuring success of schedule modifications may be a lofty goal without a commitment to communication. Employees must be engaged to speak one-on-one with their leads about their feelings and emotions related to their schedule. Many have families, school, and social lives that will be affected by the change. Unit leads will measure success when 1. each shift is filled and 2. employees are satisfied with the negotiations presented for their shift. Finally, success for the mentorship program will be measured by goals attained. Since unit leads will set goals such as knowledge enhancement, job performance, and trend analysis, they can easily identify when these areas have been met. Each employee who completes the mentorship program will be celebrated.

Despite being met with some resistance, results of the change implementation are expected to be successful. Even if 95% of the change breaks down, the remaining 5% will have improved customer service: the ultimate goal. Additionally, it will take an ongoing commitment to customer service and change implementation for continued success. Each of the four initiatives requires evolving techniques and a strong leadership role. Ultimately, success will be dependent on each of these factors.

1. **Conclusion**

Addressing change in any organization takes preparation, planning, and cooperation. Through the use of Jick and Peiperl’s (2011) “Ten Commandments,” change implementation can be strategically implemented. By first analyzing the need for change, the Site Lead for the CAAS III contract can easily assess concentrated efforts. Developing a plan by clearly identifying a vision and goals will put a change implementation in the right direction. However it is the use of communication, supportive leadership, and a follow-through that will help make goals a reality. In addition, honesty, negotiation, and leadership can help combat barriers and facilitate conflict resolution. Change success can be determined when goals for each initiative are being met.

While there will always be unknown challenges (as operations are ever-changing), creating a customer-service driven culture is worth the risks. Value is said to be equal to the amount one party is willing to pay and the amount another is willing to accept. Government contractors must ensure their work performance and dedication to customer service remains vigilant in order for the customer to still value their presence. Serious endeavors lie ahead for our military missions. The teamwork suggested in this change initiative will become a vital aspect to successful operations.

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