

Pointing the finger at bad customer service

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Basil Fawlty gives Polly a dressing down after surprise renovations to his hotel.

Photo: YouTube

In the past month, there have been several high-profile cases of bad customer service, such as the notorious Gasp email exchange. But even though a survey released this week revealed most people blame young retail assistants for the decline in service, perhaps it's their bosses who bear most of the responsibility.

Kym Illman is the author of *The Future is Customer Service*. I asked him for the top three managerial behaviours that get in the way of great service.

1. Inappropriate procedures: Employees are forced to follow procedures "that are designed for the benefit of the business, not for the customer".

Examples abound. It's the call centre operator that asks redundant questions just because they're in the script. Or it's the retail assistant that tries to "cross-sell" customers even though they're in a rush. Or it's the airline that refuses to upgrade frequent flyers even when business class seats are vacant.

And when switched-on employees point out procedural flaws, many managers are reluctant to make the change. Why? Because "it's not company policy."

2. Poor hiring decisions: Managers make the mistake of employing people who "clearly have no passion for serving customers and when they discover an existing employee is unsuited to serving, they fail to act quickly and decisively, resulting in other staff thinking that behaviour is acceptable."

This often occurs for two reasons.

The first – in relation to recruitment – is that many managers have a bias for technical aptitude. The computer store owner loves to hire the IT geek, and the insurance boss prefers to hire the commerce graduate, without realising it's easier to train a customer service whiz on technical stuff than it is to train a technical genius on customer service. Ideally, both qualities are preferred, but when it comes to customer service, one candidate has the edge.

The second – in relation to poor-performing employees – is that Australian bosses tend to have a high rate of avoidance leadership. This means plenty of them shy away from giving negative feedback because they don't want to offend or upset anyone. But that avoidance behaviour sends an implicit message to the poor performers: keep doing what you're doing.

3. They don't lead by example: Employees are usually influenced by their leaders. If their leaders don't view customer service as a priority, there's little chance employees will follow.

Similar comments were made by Janet McColl-Kennedy, a professor of marketing at the University of Queensland. She told me that a culture of customer service is driven by leaders who model excellent customer service themselves, only they do it "with their staff throughout the entire organisation, co-creating value with them, remembering that every encounter matters".

In effect, engaged employees are more likely to provide engaging customer service. That was backed up a few years ago by Towers Perrin, a consulting firm, which surveyed 90,000 people around the world. The findings revealed that 72 per cent of engaged employees believe they have a positive impact on customers. The results were completely reversed for disengaged employees: only 27 per cent thought they could provide great service.

There's a fabulous scene in *Fawlty Towers* where Basil Fawlty returns from a trip, furious that terrible renovations were made to the hotel. First he blames Polly because he left her in charge. Then he blames Manuel for not doing his job. And then it becomes obvious: he's the only one at fault.

He was the one that hired the wrong people. He was the one that gave vague instructions. And he was the one that didn't train his staff properly. Sometimes, there's a little bit of Basil Fawlty in all of us.