3-15-2005

Wake Up Your Call Center: Humanizing Your Interaction Hub

Rosanne D'Ausilio

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Customer Access Management
Jon Anton, Series Editor
Wake Up Your Call Center

Humanizing Your Interaction Hub

Rosanne D’Ausilio, Ph.D.

Third Edition

Ichor Business Books
An Imprint of Purdue University Press
West Lafayette, Indiana
I dedicate this book to the memory of my parents, Pearl and Jack Miller, who taught me at a very early age to go for my dreams, no matter what! The publication of this book is one of my dreams.

I want to acknowledge Jacqui Bishop, without whose editorial guidance this book would not have been written, and my proofreader and copy editor, Jennifer O’Neil. Additionally, my heartfelt thanks to Margaret Hunt, my managing editor.

Special thanks to my husband, Tony, my children, my grandchildren, and dear friends, who continually reminded me of my commitment, tenacity, and ability to complete this rewarding undertaking!
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Foreword

The leading challenge for today's call center managers is the training and motivation of excellent front-line CSRs. This wonderful book comes complete with many practical thoughts and techniques for individuals working with customers.

A timely feature of this third edition is its discussion of the changing requirements for customer service as a result of the explosion of e-commerce. This new, up-to-date material speaks volumes about the need to reinforce the human element in the equation. New ideas on managing stress, change, self-motivation, listening, quality service, and professionalism are key to the success of this book.

Obviously, this book was written by someone with substantial insights into the personal needs and aspirations of the many people now handling customers by multiple media. Professionals in front-line positions, as well as supervisors and managers, will enjoy reading and learning from this book.

Since the first edition of this book was published, I have spoken to many satisfied readers who have implemented Dr. D'Ausilio's techniques.

Jon Anton
Purdue University Center for
Customer-Driven Quality
Who Should Read This Book

You will find this book absolutely vital if you fall into one of these categories:

- Customer Service Representatives (CSRs)/Technical Support Reps (TSRs)
- Immediate Superiors and Higher Management
- Middle and Upper Management
- Team Leaders/Seniors/Supervisors

Customer Service Reps/Technical Support Reps

First and foremost, this book is written to support you, the CSR/TSR. Although the book is slanted toward those who deal with the public over the phone, you are a CSR/TSR if you interact in a service capacity with any external or internal customer, either over the phone or face-to-face.

You CSRs and TSRs are front-line employees. That means from the customers’ standpoint, the most telling evidence that your company will meet their needs shows up in the moment of truth when they first interact with you. To the customers, that first encounter often is the service and, therefore, the key to future business.

Not only are you in a critical position, being the first and often the only person who represents your organization to the customer, you are also under relentless and intensifying pressure to deliver the impossible: Customers expect to be made happy, no matter what! Expectations are rising as competition intensifies. Increasingly complex products and services require more and more expertise to support.

Immediate Superiors and Higher Management

If you are tuned in to the forefront of managerial development, you have drastically shifted the way you view CSRs and call centers. No longer do you consider a call center simply a cost center or CSRs as mindless drones and clones. No longer is CSR training the first casualty of a budget squeeze. Today you are beginning to view CSRs as part of your organization’s income-producing marketing strategies. You now understand that a well-trained CSR is a revenue-producer, and your call center operation is a profit center.

This shift in perspective may have compelled you to pick up this book. If so,
you're in luck. That same shift in perspective is what inspired me to write it and Purdue University Press to publish it.

Give this book to your CSRs so they have the tools they need for servicing your customers. Use it as a reference and resource. Support your front lines so they can support you.

We've made this book highly usable. The table of contents has already set the pace for what is to come. The index makes it fast and easy to find what you need—even while on the phone. The writing is conversational and humorous. We hope you enjoy it.
A Personal Note to the Reader

I was asked to write the first edition of this book as a result of an overwhelming response to a presentation I gave at Computer Telephony '97 which was entitled “Call Center Success Stories.” This presentation was one of the few that addressed the human side of business. We have lots of talk covering technical information and training, software, hardware, new systems—a whole new language in fact. But what about the people? They are too often dropped out of the picture as people, and I want to call this to your attention because we, the people, make the difference! One of the most powerful documents in the world, the U.S. Constitution, begins with “We, the people.” It is a very powerful, compelling statement.

In the call center business, in the service business, we, the people, serve people. Machines do not serve people. Machines are always people-driven. No matter how much machines may make our lives easier and more efficient, it is always so that we, the people, can serve people better.

For me service is always about relationships between people. Whether we’re doing business or handling our personal lives, one person is relating to another person. That is how we come alive, by exchanging ideas, learning, points of view, advice, you name it.

Throughout the book I use the abbreviation CSR to include customer service representatives, call center agents, customer care associates, technical support staff, help desk personnel, tele-service personnel, order takers, reservations agents, telemarketers—anyone who interacts in a service capacity with external or internal customers. I use these terms interchangeably because all of them are live humans serving live humans, and that is what counts.

People, humans, like to enjoy themselves, so I wrote this book so you could have fun as well as learn from it. My goal is to help you to see unprecedented opportunities—even in the worst scenarios of your life.

Your world may not change as a result of reading this book, but I hope the way in which you view it will. Even if some of what you read here you have heard before, I invite you to hear it as if for the first time. You are new and different today at this stage in your life from who you ever have been before, and, therefore, can hear differently than ever before. Maybe you’ll discover something you never knew before. Maybe the book will remind you of something you forgot you knew. Maybe being reminded that you know more than you thought you did will boost your confidence. Maybe you will be able to detach from some of the stress in your personal and/or professional life.
I have been taught that if you learn just one thing from each and every thing you do in life, whether it is reading a book, attending a workshop, a training, a course in school—you have won. Let this book be a contribution to your winning.

As the third edition of this book goes to press I’m already thinking about the next one. Before that one gets to press, I’d like to hear from you. Let me know what you especially liked and disliked, tell me about those techniques that have proven successful for you. Which are your favorites? Tell me what you would like to see added, or questions you would like answered in the next edition.

And I’d especially like to hear your favorite “war stories.”

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Read on and enjoy.
Introduction

The Noble CSR's Call to Excellence

This book is based on these premises: (1) the Customer Service Representative is a central figure in retaining current customers, and by word of mouth, winning potential and future ones; and (2) the key to equipping the CSR to achieve this goal is high-touch, soft-skills training.

The top company has three goals: (1) add value to each and every customer contact, (2) improve the call center's operational effectiveness, and (3) continually reduce costs. It is only through effective communication that everyone can be directed towards these goals. And the key to effective communication is training.

Let's look more closely at the what, why, and who of service in this country and the call center and CSR roles within that bigger picture.

The Service Imperative

As you know, competition is the most significant force heightening the demand for better customer service. This is because products and/or services in almost every area of our economy today differ from one another in only minor ways. What really makes the difference between them, what gives one company an edge over another,
is its relationship with the customer. Therefore customer experience becomes the next competitive advantage for companies in the twenty-first century.

Companies are responding to this fact of life by beefing up their customer service operations, and as the following statistics show, these operations are growing explosively. Service industries are arguably the most important sector of our economy. Today they account for 72% of GNP and 76% of employment in the United States (Fojt 1995), and their importance is growing.

Not only is the size of the customer service sector growing, but the options for delivering that service are proliferating.

At present, over 90% of customer contact takes place by phone. Over $100 billion was spent on call centers worldwide in 1995, and that figure is moving upward. The largest growth area is small call centers of 50 and fewer seats (Jainschigg 1997).

Over 10,000 toll-free customer service call centers offer support to external customers as well as an equal number of internal customers (Anton 1995), with over 3,400,000 CSRs employed.

In the first edition of this book, we reported that 15.6% of households used the World Wide Web in 1997, which was a 40.5% jump in four months. As of November 1998, one in five households was using the Web, and these users are an upscale group, as shown in the following graph. When net-based voice communication is commonplace, what now goes through the Web will be just a drop in the bucket.

More complex products, software, hardware, and broadening customer bases are forcing companies to re-evaluate how they do business, and highlight the need to see service as a highly strategic part of every organization. Service has become a key factor in purchase and re-purchase decisions and, therefore, directly impacts on
costs, revenues, and profits to the tune of millions. The traditional expense-based model of customer service has evolved into the revenue-generating model.

What does the future hold for the CSR? Even more customer service in ever more complex and challenging forms. It wasn't long ago that 95–98% of customer contact was via telephone. The folks at Real Market Research (Snapshot Survey 1998) expect a very significant change in how customers will contact you twelve months from now. Their numbers currently are 80% phone, 10% e-mail, 3% Web, and 7% other. Twelve months from now, they forecast only 65% phone, 12% e-mail, a whopping fivefold jump to 17% Web, and 6% other, as shown in the chart below.

According to Forrester Research (1998), customer contacts by e-mail will grow by more than 250% over the next three years. In 1996, only 15% of the population used e-mail at all, but that number is expected to reach 50% by 2001.

Why is this so important? CSRs will need to have more skills than ever before. Not only will they need to communicate over the phone, but with e-mail and Web use increasing, they will need written communication skills, including accurate spelling and grammar.

In 1993, 41% of all companies in the United States used call centers. In 1995, just two years later, the percentage had virtually doubled, to 81%.

Sixty thousand U.S. call centers today employ 3 million CSRs, who account for a $200 billion segment of total U.S. business and consumer telephone sales. It would take annual revenues of a company 11 times larger than General Motors, or 17 times larger than Microsoft, just to match the telephone and online sales that U.S. call centers helped achieve last year (LeFevre 1998)!
How Call Centers Answer the Service Imperative

A call center is not just a place. It is a set of functions. It is the process of selling to people who are not in the room with you; of serving their many varied needs. Its primary function is to create and keep customers (Dawson 1997).

Call center objectives can include:

1. Successful exchange of information
2. Quality service
3. Quality product
4. Manage change with ease/efficiency/productivity
5. Impact bottom line positively and profitably

Call center applications include, but are not limited to:

1. Customer service
2. Credit and collections
3. Catalog sales
4. Fund-raisers
5. Help desk
6. Order takers
7. Sales and marketing
8. Tech support
9. Telemarketing
10. Ticket sellers
11. Reservations
12. Remote and/or virtual offices plus your application(s)

Every CSR in every call center has the immense responsibility of presenting a positive image of your company, product, service, philosophy, and pulse in the first few moments of customer contact on the phone (or face to face). Customers derive their impressions from the first interaction and make decisions on those few moments.

Catch someone on the wrong day and customers can be lost one after another by a tone of voice, abruptness, an attitude, or being put on hold for an inordinate amount of time.

If you accept the premise that the call center’s primary function is to create and maintain customer relationships, the CSR’s role is critical to success. CSRs are valuable not only for creating and maintaining customer relationships, but also for their unique ability to:

1. Cross sell
2. Upsell
3. Build databases for future marketing use
4. Convert satisfied customers to loyal customers
5. Receive input from customers about product/service improvement to pass on to appropriate departments
6. Provide one-stop shopping

Challenges Facing Today’s CSRs

As a matter of record, CSRs make up one of the fastest growing and least appreciated segments of the U.S. labor force. Even as call centers proliferate in the service industries, interpersonal skills training—people skills—are relegated to the bottom of the pile. Far too many companies still think of front-line CSRs as mindless and disposable, rather than as economic resources. Only the most advanced companies have let go of the mind-set that service is merely a cost center, and recognized that when properly managed, service organizations are important revenue generators.

For instance, although 90% of corporate executives say that employees are the most important variable in their companies’ success, a Towers Perrin survey reported that in practice they rank people-related issues far below other business priorities. Executives agreed that improving employee performance would improve business results, and 73% even said their most important investment was people. However, people-related issues, such as training and compensation, consistently ranked at the bottom of the list (Executives rank ‘People’ 1995). Demands of American consumers for high-quality service are greater than ever. Businesses that ignore the new realities of customer satisfaction can jeopardize not only their future sales, but also their very survival. Companies can boost profits by almost 100% by retaining just 5% more of their customers (Reichheld 1990). Such gains result from the fact that for most companies, the cost of winning a new customer substantially exceeds the cost of retaining a present customer.

Sloppy service will become even more costly with video hookups—service with a smile will take on a whole new meaning. In the past (and maybe still today) you were separated from your customers by a telephone or computer. With video conferencing, television shopping, video kiosks, and websites, call center agent video possibilities are within our grasp. The call center becomes an electronic face-to-face business. Beyond improved product support, this technology allows for cross-sell and up-sell opportunities; coaching customers through a fix; presentation of product information; or negotiation of a sale. In short, one-stop shopping.

Service expertise will be even more important because of the visual aspect. Customers will notice if you are sitting up straight or slouching. They will observe your
eye contact and whether your head is held high. They will be able to see what you are wearing, at least from the waist up. This is similar to the TV news anchors who sit behind a desk and are seen by the entire nation from the waist up. They may be wearing jeans or cut-off shorts, but only what is seen matters. If you knew you were going to be seen, how would you carry yourself differently? Would you speak differently? Would you dress differently?

It makes sense to begin preparing now. Try pretending the customers you talk to daily can actually see you. If you do, you will hold yourself differently, sit up straighter, hold your head high. Your voice will have a different timbre and cadence. Your breathing will deepen and your thinking will become clearer.

Smiling, whether a customer can see you or not, will be reflected in your voice and sensed by a customer. A smile brings a smile in return. Likewise, a frown brings a frown in return. Already you are being given choices. Choose the smile.

By the same token, in these technologically advanced environments, your careful listening is critical when you have to manipulate numerous screens and/or explain complex information in simple terms.

In an article about “Call me” buttons on websites, it was noted that websites close sales less well than humans. You still need humans on the phone (Quickie Trends from CT EXPO 97. Computer Telephony April 97 issue, p. 16).

The Managerial H0perationa1 Imperative: Humanize Your Call Center

I recommend you humanize your call center by instituting the acronym H0PERATE.

Here’s what the letters stand for and what you want your call center personnel to absorb:

- Humanize
- Organize
- Personalize
- Empathize

HUMANIZE. Hardware and software are wonderful—we all use them daily. But don’t lose sight of the fact that it is the hardware, the software, and the people who use them that make up the system you are dealing with. The same applies to what goes on at your end. No hardware or software can empathize with a customer!

My favorite way to humanize is through the use of humor. If you can see the humor in a situation, then you can see it from a different perspective. Laughter is like changing a baby’s diaper—it doesn’t permanently solve any problems, but it makes things more acceptable for a while. And seven days without laughter makes
one weak! Humor also makes one smarter: studies have found that humor speeds the assimilation of information.

**ORGANIZE.** Start each shift with a clearing meeting (see chapter 9 on clearing meetings) so people can offload the distractions that need to be left behind before going on the phone or computer.

Organize your work area so there is a place for everything and everything is in its place. This reduces stress and upset, and obviously increases effectiveness and efficiency.

**PERSONALIZE.** So much of business is conducted in impersonal ways. This doesn't build loyalty. I recommend that you start creating relationships with your customers by using your name and that of the person you are interacting with. This keeps you present to the conversation and reduces upset, misunderstanding, and zoning out, and helps the customer feel as if he or she is more than an account number.

**EMPATHIZE.** Empathizing means putting yourself in the customers' shoes and seeing things from their viewpoint. You'll see more about this throughout this book.

Hope is the first half of the word hope-rate. There is hope for all of us if we stay human!

- **Rationalize**
- **Attitudinize**
- **Tonalize**
- **Exercise**

**RATIONALIZE.** Be sensible and sane—think things out. Treat customers, internal and external, in a clear, reasonable manner—reasonable meaning in a sensible, objective way.

**ATTITUDINIZE.** The way we hear a customer's requests depends a lot on our attitude toward customers in general and toward our work in particular. This means we need to be aware of, and take responsibility for, our perceptions, how we see things, how we hear things. Once we do this, then we can modify those attitudes in ways that serve both ourselves and the folks we talk to.

**TONALIZE.** Your tone of voice reflects your attitude. Your ability to respond declines as the customer's volume increases, but if you are able to stay in charge of your own tone of voice, you will find that it is you who sets the pace for the conversation.

**EXERCISE.** To help you make good choices and judgment calls, I highly recommend physical exercise. Sometimes the simple movement of standing while taking care of a customer, rather than sitting, moves the energy in a positive direction—especially after one of those calls from hell.
The word *exorcise* applies here too, meaning that it’s important to get rid of the energy from those calls that seem to linger and somehow bleed into the next conversation. Put those calls in a computer file and send it to the recycle bin or the trash.

The second half of the word *hope rate* is *rate*. That’s important because your CSRs rate, and you need to let them know that! Compliment them. But don’t just say, “You’re doing a good job.” Tell them specifically what it is that you liked, so that they really understand what won your approval and they can continue doing it. For example, “I really liked how you handled that customer. I especially liked how you paced your words when you were getting a little technical and then checked with him to see if he understood you. Keep up the good work.” Or “I heard your sincerity when that customer was so upset. You really defused her by hearing and repeating how upset you thought she was. Good for you.” Or “I liked your telling the customer what you could do, not what you couldn’t.”

This positive reinforcement is more important than you may think. As shown in the chart below, illness, long the chief cause of work absences, is losing ground to newer excuses: stress and “entitlement mentality” (that is, the feeling “I’ve worked my tail off; I deserve time off”). Want to reduce absences? Pay attention to employees’ emotional well-being.

By the same token, your reps don’t necessarily leave because they’ve received an offer with better pay. They may be switching to a new field that promises lower stress levels. This is to be expected. In fact, many people take entry-level positions to move into sales, managerial, and technical employment, according to Olsten Services (*Call Center Magazine*, April 1999, p. 56).
Notice that what workers would like to see on site in the future are amenities that reduce their stress.

**What Workers Want**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daycare</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Offices</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness Center</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Temp.</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concierge Services</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Care</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Virtual Offices = off-site workplaces; Control Temp. = ability to control office temperature; Concierge = on-site services such as a bank, cleaners, and the like. (Journal News, August 18, 1999)

**The Training Imperative**

A profitable workforce requires well-trained, knowledgeable, conscientious, service-competent employees who enjoy their service responsibilities. Training is crucial. Recent studies in service industries link increased training to decreased employee turnover. For instance, Ryder Truck Rental discovered that among employees who participated in training programs, the turnover rate was 19%. For employees who did not participate, the rate soared to 41%,
shown in the graph on page 9 (Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991, p. 76). Guest Quarters Suite Hotel’s Weaver (1994) reports their low turnover rate is one indication of employee satisfaction. Additionally, “but not surprising to us, there is a positive correlation between training, employee satisfaction and guest satisfaction” (p. 110).

The issue of turnover is huge. Research from Purdue University’s benchmark report cites turnover as one of the costliest elements of a call center’s operational budget. Note that the southwestern workforce appears to be somewhat more stable than its southeastern and northwestern counterparts (“The Purdue Page”).

### Average Turnover by Region of the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Average Turnover</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>35.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>33.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Central</td>
<td>29.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>26.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central</td>
<td>25.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>21.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why is training so important? Mainly because it has been disregarded for so long at every stage. The qualities that you seek in your front-line personnel—enthusiasm, empathy, and tolerance for stress—are not on the curriculum in most schools. There is no Listening 101 or Communication 202 on the roster. Somehow in the hierarchical management style, front-line workers weren’t encouraged to think about customers’ or co-workers’ needs. They just had to get the job done.

I want to emphasize here I am talking about “live training,” not computer-based training or multimedia-based training. A research analyst with the Gartner Group says traditional classroom training can never be fully replaced. Why? “Because the human interaction has much more impact than listening to someone’s voice over a computer” (Stein 1999).
Why do customers leave? According to Call Center Enterprises and the Forum Group, customers leave primarily because they don’t get what they want (see the chart below). Forty-five percent of those who leave do so because of poor service; another 20 percent because of lack of attention. That means 65 percent leave because you’ve done something wrong!

This is not surprising. Services are essentially intangible processes. Customers are frequently searching for cues to help determine a company’s capabilities. Often times the only cues available are from its front-line employees.

To the customer, people are inseparable from the services they provide. It is no wonder, then, that companies with superior people management invest heavily in training and retraining.

CSRs have moved up the value chain since call centers have become interaction hubs. From that hub they must comprehend a panoramic view of each customer. And they must make decisions on the fly without checking with another department or a supervisor or an administrator. Customers love this. Well-informed CSRs make it easier to secure customer loyalty.

And training has paid off: In companies such as 3M, Campbell Soup Company, and Metropolitan International, skills training improved customer service by 30%. “It’s not what you do that is distinguishable, but rather how you handle it that matters” (Front Line Quality, 1995, p. 16).

Further, it was found that listening to the consumer may increase repurchase intention even if the complaint is not resolved (Lapidus & Pinkerton, 1995). Firms
that develop a reputation for consistently remedying customer complaints are more likely to develop customer loyalty and, over time, may increase their market share (Blodgett et al. 1995). That is, it was not an initial failure to deliver service alone that caused dissatisfaction, but rather the employee's response to the failure (Bitner 1990, p. 80). A dissatisfied customer, once persuaded to stay, was more loyal and more valuable than before (Fornell & Wernerfelt 1987, p. 341).

To take full advantage of front-line employees' interactions with customers, however, a company must train them to listen effectively and to make the first attempts at amends when customers have had bad experiences. Companies that excel at managing front-line workers understand that excellent service is more than just a transaction. It is an experience, one that ought to satisfy the employee as well as the customer.

A vital part of interpersonal skills training is training in complaints. The complaint handling process presents an opportunity to solidify and strengthen relationships with customers, but only when responded to appropriately.

Consumer complaints are pervasive and pose a potentially serious problem in all industries. Tens of millions of consumers experience problems each year with a product or service, yet few complain to providers. In fact, 90% do not. But they do complain . . . to other people. Most tell nine people and 13% tell 20 people. Yet customers who have satisfying experiences only tell eight people.

If consumers feel satisfied with the way their questions are answered or their problems are resolved, they usually continue purchasing the product. TARP 1995 studies show that 80% of consumers who call with a complaint will purchase from the company again if their complaints are properly handled. Of those who don't repurchase, 68% say it's because the company demonstrated indifference about their decision. Out of ten complaining customers, seven will do business again if their complaints are resolved in their favor. If their problems are resolved on the spot, the number goes to 95% (Goodman et al. 1995).

These findings were also supported by a landmark study on consumer loyalty published in April 1996 by the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business (SOCAP), which featured research conducted by the Center for Client Retention. This study indicated a significant percentage of consumers surveyed would purchase more products than they had in the past if they were satisfied with the information they were provided and/or with how their inquiry or complaint was responded to.

More important, the study supports the idea that the call center is a profit center, not a cost center. It quantified “loyalty dollars” generated by consumer affairs departments, finding that the average CSR contributes more than $1.3 million per year
of lifetime consumer loyalty dollars and an average equivalent of almost $100 per contact. In a center of fifty CSRs, this equals more than $67 million per year.

Training is essential because skills required to handle upset customers are counterintuitive, that is, they go against natural instincts. When CSRs feel attacked, the instinct is to either fight or flee. If we want service providers to do something other than these actions—for instance, to empathize with the customer—we have to give them special training that embeds the alternative behavior and makes it second nature. Employees need appropriate coping and problem-solving skills to handle customers as well as their own personal feelings in these situations.

Despite knowing all this, most companies continue to train new hires as before. Feedback and experience confirm that most new hires are given a minimum of 24 hours of training before ever speaking to an actual customer. Most of this 24-hour training is content training, such as how to use the existing operating system, the software and hardware, the telephone, etc. Next in importance is the product(s) or service(s) that are being offered or supported. Then comes the procedures and protocol for the job. At the bottom of the list lie the people skills. It is assumed that if you can speak, you know how to relate to people. Bad assumption. Just as hard skills can and need to be taught, the same holds true for soft skills.

Overall, U.S. companies satisfied their customers less well in 1995 and 1996, and the stats are in for 1997. Services continue to top the list in terms of consumer dissatisfaction.

According to a Roper-Starch study conducted for the Prudential Insurance Company of America, customer service doesn’t make the grade. The grades earned by certain industries are, at best, mediocre. Financial services and mail order companies lead the class, receiving an “A” or “B” from 65% of the survey’s respondents who have ever contacted them. Airlines followed with 63%, while department stores and long distance companies are acceptable to just over half of the respondents (54%), followed by on-line services at 49%, cable TV at 45%, and fast food companies at 42%. State, local, and federal government agencies trail the pack, pleasing only 29% of those who have called.

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The front-runners are having problems, however. Here's the latest on the airlines, for example. The U.S. Department of Transportation compared the first six months of 1998 to the same period in 1999 and found complaints against U.S. airlines were up 79 percent. What generated the most complaints? No surprises here: 2,630 complaints concerned flight delays, cancellations, and misconnections.

However, the next-highest category was customer service, with 1,383 complaints, followed by problems with baggage, reservations/tickets/boarding, and refunds (Journal News, 19 September 1999).

The good news is that nearly 80% of call centers have formal training programs to ensure the best possible service from agents. A recent call center staffing survey was conducted for William Olsten Center for Workforce Strategies, an organization that conducts research and analyses on issues affecting workforce management and employees. The survey, reported in Call Center Magazine, found that of the 424 North American call center managers surveyed, 35% have formal career paths. On average, companies say their centers provide twenty-one days of training annually for employees, and 78% of managers provide this training through classroom instruction. When it comes to measuring overall performance, 75% of managers consider telephone customer service skills most important (Companies Placing Heavy Emphasis on Training, 1998).

However, although American businesses spend about 1% of their payroll costs on training, they will need—if they are to succeed in the next millennium in competitive industries—to spend closer to 3%, according to Steve Bates (1998). A new study by International Data Corporation reports that U.S. companies spent close to $300 million to train call center reps in 1999 (Customer Service Manager’s Letter 1999).

Moreover, not only will they need to devote more funds to this training, they will need to revise the way they approach training in a variety of ways. For example, they will need to replace “the customer is always right” with “we give our CSRs what they need before we give the customers what they need.” Well-treated CSRs are happy to treat customers in like manner.

And for the greatest impact, training should be approached as a continuous process, not an event. I suggest twelve to sixteen hours of live, soft-skills training per employee annually, distributed over three or four sessions to (1) minimize service disruptions, (2) keep employees aware of being high on management’s priority list, and (3) for training’s long-term effectiveness.

At the same time, soft skills should not be considered any less important to the success of any business than the hard, technical skills. When customers get emotional, and they do, only another person with a caring attitude and genuine concern can resolve the problem, issue, or concern. No software or hardware to date
has empathetic responsiveness programmed into its system. In fact, weakness in communication skills can often wipe out any advantage in hard skills.

Moreover, you can substantially boost your quality, productivity, and overall efficiency by providing soft-skills training, particularly in today’s highly competitive global economy. Hard-skills training is provided and practiced over and over again until it is a habit. The same needs to be said and done for soft skills. They need to be practiced over and over until they become instinctive.

Organizational Development

Organizational development used to mean developing people. Over the years, it has now come to mean layoffs as a result of downsizing, re-engineering, and the like. But this shift is counterproductive. It puts people at the bottom of the priority list. How can management say it is dedicated to the growth and development of people if at the first sign of financial difficulty it slashes everything related to people’s growth and development? Cutting staff size and training programs as the first response to bad financial news is a dead giveaway to the fact that management doesn’t understand the value of people to begin with. When times get tough, management that really believes in the human factor invests more in people—not less, because it knows it’s people who can change things!

The remainder of this book will take you through various topics, issues, and concerns that arise in the CSR’s interactions with customers.

The chapters are organized to make it easy to get practical help right away in dealing with the daily dilemmas and challenges you face. Here they are:

1. Mixed Messages: Darned if You Do, Darned if You Don’t examines six sets of important and conflicting guidelines that CSRs are urged in a variety of ways to follow.
2. Going, Going, Going—Gone South! addresses behaviors and habits that people develop to deal with the challenge of repetitive conversations, especially spacing out, crossing the eyes, and turning grumpy.
3. Not One More Call, Please! examines the causes and effects of job tension and offers ways to reduce stress through comic relief and relaxation.
5. Why Can’t You See What I’m Saying? offers approaches to look at communication in a whole new way.
6. *How Do I Deal with the Calls from Hell?* begins with “war stories,” an in-depth view of managing conflict and ends with the Serenity Prayer.

7. *ER in the Call Center* takes a closer look at the role of empathetic responsiveness in creating customer loyalty.

8. *Technical Support/Help Desk* directly addresses the tough jobs of TSRs and includes humor just for them.

9. *Thanks, You Made My Day!* includes those great calls and how to take them to the next level.

10. *Grab Bag of Additional Tidbits* contains a potpourri of things that don’t fit anywhere else, including Things to Do, Inspirational Shorties, the Onion or Artichoke and the Green Blood Theories, and Closing Thoughts.

11. *Change: Disaster or Opportunity?* This chapter addresses the subject of change. If there’s anything constant in the life of a CSR, it’s change.

12. *Looking Ahead: A Few E-ssentials about E-Commerce* looks ahead to a few “e-ssentials” about the web-based economy and its impact on the CSR.

At the end of the book we have a new collection of humor in *Appendix E: Easy Access to Sanity*—the title says it all.
Chapter 1

Mixed Messages
Darned if You Do, Darned if You Don’t!

How many of you were told that the quality of the interaction is what is of primary importance? Only to be followed with, “but hurry up!” Or, “Watch the clock and move the customer through the call quickly, but quality is paramount here!” Or, as an anonymous CSR told us, “We’re supposed to care deeply about customers, provided, of course, we care deeply about them at an incredible rate of speed!” Mixed messages are common in companies today and are extremely stressful.

Quality, Quality! But Hurry Up!!

Dealing with mixed or contradictory messages presents a real challenge. These messages are mixed, and that is crazy-making. We cannot serve two masters. It is not like there is something wrong with you! So let awareness be your first wake-up call.

What do you do with the fact that people are saying black and white at the same time? What do you do when there are people in queue beyond a reasonable
time, and you are in the middle of a call? When push comes to shove, what do you choose? First, there are no hard and fast rules here. You could:

1. Ask for guidance. Ask the question of someone who has the answer. You want to do a good job and take care of the customer, what do you do in this situation?

2. If your current call is long and it’s crunch time, ask the customer if you could call back when you can spend more time, and ask when would that be most convenient. Thank her for her understanding and patience, and then call her back as promised.

3. Take a one-minute break. Walk away. Drink a glass of water, brush your teeth, comb your hair, and come back refreshed.

Secondly, be well rested. Nothing prepares us for the day better than a good night’s sleep. Most of us don’t get enough rest. Each year 85% to 95% of all Americans experience some form of transient insomnia (just a few days). Every night, 30% of the population either find it difficult to fall asleep or wake in the middle of the night and can’t go back to sleep, and about 17% of these people consider insomnia a serious disruption in their lives.

Do any of you have pet fish at home? Time magazine (1998) reports that 55% of pet fish owners claim they have no trouble sleeping as opposed to only 21% of non-fish owners. Do you fit into either of these categories?

Even if you are not one of these statistics, you probably fall into the vast majority of people in industrialized countries who are sleep-deprived because they simply go to bed too late. How do you know if you had a good night’s sleep or slept long enough? By counting the number of hours you slept? NO. The test is this: When you wake up in the morning, do you feel invigorated, eager for your day to begin, ready for whatever is coming your way? If so, you probably had a good night’s sleep.

On the other hand, if you wake up and are dragging, so tired that you want to push the snooze button indefinitely, and you don’t know how you will ever get through this day . . . perhaps going to sleep an hour earlier would be a good start.

Third, be prepared. How? Know your responsibilities, your software, your hardware, and your telephone system as best you can. Know what to do when there is a problem, whom to contact, and where to get help as quickly as possible for whatever situation presents itself. Control those things that are controllable.

This includes developing and maintaining proficiency with your work station, your software programs, your screens, your equipment, and your keyboard. I remember when I first learned to type in junior high school, my eyes were constantly on the keys (today it’s keyboards). I would say over and over again A-S-D-F reach to G,
reach to H, then J-K-L-semicolon. As I practiced and my speed increased, my eyes remained on the paper, not on my fingers. Today the computer keyboard is an extension of my fingers. I bet yours is, too. What this means is as you become more practiced and experienced with your equipment, software, tools, and techniques, you have more attention available for the customer.

Fourth, remember to breathe deeply. When we get upset, the first thing that goes is our breathing. When we are in a stressful situation, we tend to breathe shallowly and even hold our breath. Being reminded to breathe allows us to relax in spite of ourselves. Further along you’ll find breathing techniques.

Finally, keep your wrap-up (after-call) time to a minimum. Make notes to the file while the customer is on the phone, as you go along, or as efficiently as possible when you are off the phone. Remember wrap-time and after-call keep you unavailable for the next incoming call or calls in queue. Watch your time.

All-In-One-Call Handling vs. No Power

The idea of all-in-one service is to handle the customer so well that a second call is unnecessary and nobody’s feathers get ruffled. However, when you lack the authority to be flexible with a customer, callbacks are inevitable—your hands are tied.

To provide all-in-one-call service, you must have authority to override policy. For example, if a customer wants to return something beyond the allotted return time, do you have the authority to extend the terms of the return? To waive charges for shipping and handling? To expedite orders to overnight delivery rather than two, three, or five days? To give rebates, refunds, or discounts because of service inconveniences? To make and take exceptions, to stretch or break the rules on occasion?

If you can answer yes to all or most of the above, then you have enough authority to close with the customer in one call.

However, if you are unable to answer yes to these questions, you may have to transfer the call, put a customer on hold and get permission, get back to the customer, or just say no. In today’s marketplace, this is not efficient or effective.

How do you handle a customer when you have no authority to go beyond the limits? You can tell the truth: “I hear your request and I would be happy to do what you are asking. However, it is beyond my job description. If you are willing to hold on for just a moment, I can (1) check with my supervisor and get permission to do what you are asking, (2) I can transfer you to a supervisor and she can help you, or (3) I can take your phone number and call you back within the hour.” Note: All of these options take time, yours, the customer’s, and the supervisor’s, making all three of you unavailable to other calls.
Follow the Script vs. Flow with the Customer

We all know scripts are important. However, I believe they are to be used only as guidelines. Do not read them to a customer. There is nothing more annoying for me, a customer, to receive a call that sounds like a script. I wait for the CSR to take a breath and ask her to please tell me, in her own words, what it is she is selling. I get more script. Even if I am interested in the product or service, this turns me off!

By all means, learn your scripts. Stay within the guidelines of what you can and cannot say, but say it in your own words. Start with including your name and the name of the customer, but then move on to being “human.” Personalize each of your calls. This helps to keep every call from sounding like every other call. For example:

- That’s an interesting name, Mr. Rubik. Did you design the Rubik’s Cube, or are you related to the person who did?
- What a great way to spell Rozan. It is very unusual.
- You have such a nice phone voice, are you on the radio?
- What kind of dog do I hear in the background?
- Is that a baby boy or girl I hear cooing?
- The softness in your voice is so soothing. I could listen to you all day. Thanks for taking my call!

What makes the difference in a telephone conversation is being human. Even if I don’t want the product or service, when the person speaks to me as a person, I am at least respectful enough to let her or him finish before I say whether I am or am not interested.

We Make No Exceptions vs. Egg on My Face

Policy and procedure are very clear at the XYZ Company. There are definite lines, never to be crossed! For instance, there are cut-off dates for shipments of orders. There are memos that circulate to both the Customer Service Department and the customers that say unless the order is in by 5 p.m. on Wednesday, it won’t be shipped on Friday. There are no exceptions to this rule! Weekly staff meetings reinforce this procedure.

You explain this slowly and clearly to your customer, who also has been told and sent memos regarding this policy. Then he tells you that you told him this last month, but your boss or your boss’s boss took his order on Thursday and it went out on Friday.
You look and feel like a jerk. You have egg on your face. You feel betrayed and angry, robbed of what little sense of usefulness you were allowed.

How do you recover? What can you do? Once again, you tell the truth and reframe it with something like:

I just found this out myself. You are very special to our company, Mike. An exception has been made in your case. This is most unusual. So yes, your order will ship on Friday. I’m sorry that I didn’t have the authority to approve this exception in the first place.

Empowerment vs. Override

The opposite of “We Make No Exceptions vs. Egg on My Face” is “Empowerment vs. Override.” The CSR believes he or she has the authority to make whatever deals appear appropriate at the moment. However, when the customer asks to speak to a supervisor, the supervisor and/or manager can override what the CSR said and give the customer less or even more.

This is a fact of life, and it will always happen occasionally. One way the supervisor can ease the pain is by explaining to the CSR her rationale for making the decision to override. That way, the CSR learns—and feels respected.

Team vs. Chosen (Special) Ones

How many of you are told you are a part of a team? And that the team is solid! That your jobs are easier because you are a united front. That the only way the center works is if you all work together as a team. And so on. Well, that’s on the one hand.

On the other hand, why do the “chosen” (special) ones get assigned special projects, get off the phone more often (without your knowing what they are doing), have exceptions made on days off, holidays off, shift work, weekend work?

Have you ever seen your teammates walking around when there are 20 calls in queue and you think they are not working? Maybe they’re on special assignment, maybe not, but how would you know?

And then there are the secrets. In many centers there are “chosen” ones who get to hear secrets. Sometimes the secrets are merely rumors; they’re later confirmed or denied, but only one by one, so that it seems you’re always the last to know.
Other times the secrets concern important changes, such as where the center is going in the future, what new configuration, equipment, software, procedures, etc. are coming.

If you answer yes to any of the above, the good and bad news is that you are not alone! And you are not crazy. These mixed messages are crazy making!

Are you a team or aren’t you a team? I hope you are, because

Together
Everyone
Achieves
More

What can you do? First of all, confirm to yourself that yes, you are receiving mixed messages. Next, refrain from talking about them with coworkers who cannot make a difference. That would be mere gossip. Take the issue to someone who can do something about it—your supervisor, manager, vice president, or whoever is next in the line of command. Be very responsible in expressing your concern about the concept of the team and your perception of the team. Speak using “I” statements so that you are not blaming, maiming, or attacking anyone. Focus on responsibly communicating your concern about what is going on in the call center. Your goal is to bring the conversation to a positive conclusion. In real life that doesn’t always happen, but if you don’t communicate what is upsetting to you, you’ll never know. And if you do communicate in a responsible way, you will influence how people respond to you. We cannot change other people, but communicating responsibly works, so go for it!
Chapter 2

Going, Going, Going—Gone South!

Very few people truly know how to listen. Here are two examples of what we do instead:

In our eagerness to serve, we pull out of a conversation by preparing for the answer before the other person has finished talking. We then wait for a pause and when the person takes a breath, we jump in to perhaps improve or remedy the situation.

We worry about being asked a question we can’t answer intelligently. If I don’t know the answer, will I be able to respond appropriately? What if I am asked a question I don’t know the answer to? What if I don’t understand the question? What if they find out that I’m new on the job/on the equipment/at this company? What if they get angry at me? What if I frustrate them? What if, what if?—you fill in the blank.

We are anywhere but listening to the other person. Our intentions are good. We want to give the best response we can, hopefully even the right answer. However, if we are not present to the conversation, the other person feels not heard, unimportant, ripped off, and the like. If there was no upset on their side to begin with, it now exists big time!

Notice that hearing and listening are not the same, even if you use the words interchangeably. Hearing is passive: it is a physiological process whereby auditory impressions are received by your ears and transmitted to your brain.

Listening is active. It is an activity that involves interpreting and understanding the significance of the sensory or hearing experience. The root word of listen is
“list,” which means to lean toward one side. Have you ever noticed how you lean in when someone is talking to you or vice versa? Even on the phone?

Choose to listen. The average rate of brain speed is about 200 words per minute. However, most of you can think about four times that speed, or 800 words per minute. This is when your mind wanders, going backwards into history or forward into the future.

Hellomynameisrosannehowmayihelpyou?

Having to say the same thing over and over again, you may tend to talk faster than normal. You know what you are saying, of course, but most customers are hearing it for the first time and it is not always clear.

Awareness Tips for Fast Talkers

Slowing down avoids having to repeat yourself and brings you into the conversation, instead of into a repetitious cycle. Here are some techniques to calm down, to slow down, to take care of yourself:

1. *Pace yourself.* Pause between words, especially key points you’re hoping will sink into the customer’s listening. Two-second pauses help to add emphasis to what you are saying.

2. Every 20 to 30 seconds, ask for a response with questions like:
   - Are you with me?
   - Do you understand what I am saying so far?
   - Am I answering your question?
   - Am I making myself clear?
   - Am I going too fast?
   - Am I going too slow?

3. Don’t say the same thing twice the same way unless the customer says she missed hearing what you said. Yes, repetition is useful. We all hear something the second time that we may have missed the first. But it is important to say it differently each time because the specific words we use may not register with this particular customer. For example:
   - A customer was calling for product information and asked about packaging the product with their company name. The CSR told her this was possible, but that they needed “camera-ready artwork.” The customer said she didn’t know what that was. The CSR repeated, “you know, camera-ready artwork” two more times. The customer got
frustrated and felt stupid. The CSR got frustrated as well. Perhaps he didn’t know what “camera-ready artwork” was either!

If he did (and he needed to) know, the CSR could have said something like, “camera-ready artwork is black and white, either film or glossy paper, clean and ready for reproduction. It is usually provided by a graphic designer, art department, or the like. A camera takes a picture of it, and from the resulting film, a plate is made that can be used over and over again.” Hear the difference?

4. Eliminate commonly repeated words or phrases that are nothing more than habits or fillers. “You know,” “Do you know what I mean?” “Okay,” “Basically speaking,” “In essence,” “To be honest.” The easiest way to eliminate these phrases is to be conscious of when you say them and be sure to exclude them from the next sentence, paragraph, or conversation. You might make a list of those you use to keep nearby so you can glance at it as a reminder of what not to say. This will ground you in the present, and make it easier to be conscious of your language.

5. Encourage the customer to give you enough information for you to help them. Say something like: “Tell me some more about this.” “Give me a bit more information if you will.” Or rephrase and ask for feedback to be sure you understand precisely what is being said. For example: “What I hear you saying is blah blah blah, did I get that right?” “If I heard you right, you need blah blah blah, am I correct so far?”

6. Use your name as well as the customer’s. “My name is Mary, how can I assist you today?” “Is there anything else I can do for you today, Ms. Miller?” At the conclusion, “Thank you for calling, Mr. Smith.”

Reminders to Breathe

Be aware of your breathing. Many times your breathing can give you clues to what’s going on with you before it causes problems. It can affect a call, since your breathing can be heard over the phone and through a headset. Sighing is a sign of frustration and stress. Yawning tells us there is too much carbon dioxide in the body. Holding your breath means some kind of discomfort is building that needs release.

Deep breathing helps to counteract this buildup, lowers your heart rate and blood pressure, and it is highly portable. You can use it at work, waiting in lines, and driving your car. Again, awareness is key. One way to channel your physical reaction to stress is to use deep breathing exercises, such as the following.
1. Take a deep breath through your nose and slowly release through your opened mouth (shaped as if you were going to whistle). Once more.

2. Visualize a bulbous thermometer. Sit with your back straight, feet flat on the floor, hands free. Imagine your spine is the thermometer and as you inhale, bring the red mercury swirling up to the top. On the exhale, push the red all the way down to the bottom, pushing all the air out of your lungs, as you see in the figure. Then breathe normally.

3. Breathe through the back of your throat. If you make a noise that sounds like you have asthma, then you know you’re doing it correctly.

4. Panting is another great way to release tension. Take 20 short, quick breaths followed by a deep breath at the end (any of the above).

5. Use blue dots. Go to any office supply store and buy small blue dots. Put the blue dot on the face of your watch, anywhere you want. Every time you look at your watch, as in the illustration, I want you to see this dot and breathe in any of the ways just described that is most comfortable to you.

   You may have to move this dot in a few months, a few weeks, a few days, a few hours, or a few minutes . . . because you will no longer see it on the face of your watch! Please feel free to be creative with these dots. Place them on the windshield of your car, the screen of your computer, the refrigerator, the mirror in the bathroom, you get the idea. Why blue? Because blue stimulates your endorphins.

6. Learn to meditate. Sitting quietly and breathing deeply is a form of meditation. I have a hard time sitting quietly, so my meditation takes the form of writing. Each morning upon arising, I write three pages of longhand in a spiral notebook. Julia Cameron calls these Morning Pages in her book The Artist’s Way. She recommends three pages of stream-of-consciousness writing. What is that? Whatever comes out on the page. Sometimes it reads like a “dear diary” entry. Sometimes it reflects a dream I had and I want to remember it so I quickly write it. Sometimes it’s a letter of complaint against whoever happens to be on my list that particular day. Whatever I write is offloaded from my head, even that which I didn’t know was on my mind to begin with. It’s the very best way I can start taking care of myself as soon as I wake up.

   What better time to take care of yourself than when you start your day? I used to wait until after my shower, my hair and my makeup were
done. Do you know what happened? I never did it. There were really good reasons why I should be doing other things. If I waited until I came downstairs, forget it. I even forgot! So first thing every morning, before I even get out of bed, I write three pages. I feel good about myself when I’m done because I did what I said I was going to do. And it feels great to offload whatever is on my mind, knowingly or otherwise. For me, it is the start of a peaceful day.

What Do I Do When I Don’t Know the Answer?

Do you ever get questions you can’t answer? Me, too. In your earnestness to please, you may want to give an immediate answer to people, even if you’re not sure it’s accurate. It’s a great temptation. Don’t do it.

Truth or Consequences

Just tell the truth. People want the truth and when they’ve failed to get it, they usually aren’t happy. I’m sure you’ve experienced this yourself.

Ignorance is a nuisance sometimes, but it’s not a sin. It’s okay to say, “that’s a good question and quite honestly, I do not know the answer. However, you can count on me to find it out and get back to you.” Or, “that’s a great question. I’d like to know the answer, too. My name is Rosanne and I’ll get back to you.” And then get back to them. Or have someone else get back to them: “Hello, my name is Joyce. Rosanne asked me to get back to you so that I could answer the question you asked and any other questions you might have.” How would you feel if someone took care of you like that?

If you want people to respond to you in a certain way, be sure to approach them in that same way. What do I mean by that? If I am sincere, honest, and attentive, usually I will be responded to in kind. Wayne Dyer, well-known author and New Age guru says, “When you have a choice between being right and being kind, choose being kind.”

Another expression I find helpful is “if you continue doing what you are doing, you will continue getting what you got.” Same stuff, different day! Not much fun.

There are times when we cannot help the customer, no matter what! This is not necessarily because we don’t have the answer. With some customers, sometimes you just can’t win, and the best path to take is to turn them over to someone else.

S.S.D.D. =
Same Stuff, Different Day!
Whatever the reason, it is okay to ask for help, to ask for assistance. Perhaps a co-worker can better serve this customer because of personality, because of a specific question, because of experience. If your co-workers are not available, request assistance from your supervisor, team leader, or manager.

*The Hold Button*

Putting people on hold is okay; how you do it is critical. Simply tell the customer what you are going to do: “I am going to put you on hold while I check blah blah blah; this may take a few moments, but I will be back.” If you keep the customer on hold longer than a minute, come back with, “I am still working on your request. I will be with you shortly.” In other words, service the customer as well as the account. A customer who knows what to expect will wait. If the customer is on hold too long, she assumes you’ve forgotten her and may well have an attitude when you return—if she hasn’t hung up.

A company called Prognostics does industry customer satisfaction research around the world. They say that customers who are on hold for one minute perceive they are on hold for one minute. However, customers who are on hold for two minutes perceive the wait time as three minutes. If the wait time is three minutes, the perception is five minutes; on hold for four minutes, the perception is nine minutes; on hold for five minutes, the perception is fifteen minutes. And if they are on hold for ten minutes, their perception is thirty minutes.

This distorted perception can cause a lot of conflict. Customers call and say, “I’ve been on hold for half an hour,” and the rep says, “No you haven’t. I have a light that comes on when you are on hold for ten minutes, and it hasn’t lit up yet!” Whoops! The bottom line is that when you have customers on hold for more than two minutes, their perception of response time drastically changes (Rose, 1998). And we all know that their perceptions impact their attitude from there on.

The same distortions apply when you are on an open line entering data and concentrating without speaking. Regardless of how conscientious and quick you are, remember to inform customers that you are working for their benefit: “I am looking up your account now.” “I am updating the record.” “I am reviewing your record.” “I am checking availability.”

Some new-hire training includes how to use pop-up screens and move comfortably between screens. These are all taught off the phone, so when the new hire gets on the phone, she often puts the customer on hold while she is checking the various screens. However, this runs the risk of disconnecting, keeping the customer on hold too long, and/or antagonizing the customer. This problem can be handled with a sim-
ple, “I'm looking at several screens. I am with you. Please bear with me. I am reading the previous notes. Our records indicate . . .”

Transferring Calls

If you have to put a customer on hold while you get help, tell her it may take a few minutes to connect her to a supervisor, manager, tech support, or help desk.

Use those few minutes to give clear, concise information to the supervisor/manager/technician. Nothing is more frustrating to both the customer and the supervisor/manager/technician than to have a customer passed on who then needs to start from the beginning! View transferring a call as a positive way to support the customer and yourself. It does not mean that you are incapable of handling the call, were in any way inappropriate with the customer, or are inept. Use your own good judgment and intuitive experience as to when to transfer and to whom. Then be responsible in making the transfer so that the receiving party has all the information needed for speaking comfortably to the customer. Good service means relieving the customer of having to repeat the same scenario again.

What Do I Do When I'm Spacing Out?

Have you ever had the experience of driving on the highway in the pouring rain, at low visibility, and in rush-hour traffic? Do you notice that you are very present, alert and aware because of possible dangers? But when there isn’t a lot of traffic, when the sun is shining and you are cruising along, I’m sure there are times when you don’t even remember having driven wherever you were going. You simply arrived. Mentally, you left your body and took yourself somewhere else while the boring part was happening.

Earth to Work Station

When you space out, where do you go? To a nice place, I hope. However, space travel during working hours can present problems, especially when you are (were) in conversation with a customer!

Why do we space out? Some of the reasons could be:

- I'm bored. I can do this task blindfolded!
- Something or someone distracted me.
- I am overloaded or overwhelmed—mentally, physically, and/or emotionally.
I am fatigued, overtired, or feeling under the weather.

I am feeling great, excited about later, tomorrow, next week, my vacation, and I'm there.

I don’t want to hear what my spouse/child/boss or even my customer has to say (especially if they raise their voices!).

I'm making my grocery/chore/things to do/reminders lists.

____________________________________ Feel free to fill in your favorite here.

Remember, the average rate of brain speed is about 200 words per minute, but most of us can think about four times that speed, or 800 words per minute. This is another reason your mind wanders, going backwards into history or forward into the future.

Bring yourself back to earth by doing any of the following simple exercises:

1. Drink a glass of cold water.
2. Go to the restroom and wash your hands.
3. Remember the past is a canceled check, the future is a promissory note, and the present is cash. Be cash!
4. Write or type yourself a welcome-back note!
5. Say out loud to yourself or anyone in ear shot, “I am back!”

Staying Present on the Phone

Remember what it is like driving a car on a rainy, foggy, humid, low-visibility night? You can see only as far as your headlights, and you make the whole trip that way. You don’t have to see where you’re going; you don’t have to see your destination or anything you pass along the way. You just have to be able to see a few feet ahead of you. Translated into customer service, don’t worry about the next call, or even the last call, for that matter. Just stay in the call you are in to its completion. This is a good principle for life too. Planning ahead is useful, but only as far as your headlights can see.

When you are on the phone with a customer, be on the phone with that customer. When you are talking to him, be present to the conversation. What do I mean by that? Staying present means being alert to what is going on in the here and now with you and others. It means being aware of the sensations in your body, the voice tones in your ears, the colors in your line of sight.
Above all, in your job it means listening—the active art. Here are some tips to help you stay present:

Before and/or between calls, being aware of your environment helps to keep you present:

1. Read a paragraph of a newspaper over and over (concentrating on just that one paragraph).
2. Touch/feel the fabric of your clothes, or various textures.
3. Repeat this simple sentence: “I am aware of,” look around the room, and name what you see. For instance, I am now aware of the computer screen. I am now aware of the green light on the printer. I am now aware of the red mouse pad next to the keyboard.

   Be sure to start each sentence with “I am now aware,” and you will be present. Why? Because you are directing your primary thought process, it is not directing you. You can push aside those niggling thoughts or daydreams or ought to’s, shoulds, don’t forgets, by being pro-active in your own behalf.
4. If thoughts persist, write them down. Offload what is on your mind that could take you away from the present.
5. Stand up (if you are sitting), relax your belly, bend your knees, rotate your pelvis, bring your chin up, head back, shoulders back, wide and down, arms loose at your side, and breathe deeply at least 10 times.
6. Sit down (if you are standing up) with feet flat on the floor, head straight ahead, shoulders down and take 10 deep breaths.
7. Smile as widely as you can. Smile from ear to ear. It’s easy: It takes 72 muscles to frown and only 4 to smile. Give service with a smile. It does get noticed, even by someone over the phone who can’t see you.

What Do I Do While the Customer Is Talking?

Customers are prepared with what they want to say when they finally get to you, yes? No. Not necessarily. They can go on for several minutes without taking a breath, trying their best to explain their situation quickly and in detail. Or they have been in queue for so long they are ranting and raving for about 20 seconds! All of a sudden, they realize they haven’t any evidence anyone is listening. If the silence is profound enough, they may even hang up. That’s rare. This is more typical:

   Mr. Jones called and was very friendly and pleasant. He was telling his reason for calling when all of a sudden he stopped abruptly, and in a very different tone said, “Hello, are you there?” The CSR never said a word during the entire conversa-
tion, and so he thought she wasn’t there, or at best wasn’t listening, and he was upset. She was there, she might even have been listening, but she didn’t communicate that she was listening.

**Non-verbal Attentiveness**

Customers are important. Therefore, it’s essential to acknowledge when they are speaking to you that you are listening to them. When they are talking, it could be as simple as uttering meaningless sounds, words, and phrases. People feel attended to, and that supports all relationships, professional and personal.

What is non-verbal attentiveness? Saying things like: “Oh,” “I see,” “Yes,” “Uh huh,” “Hm,” “Ah,” or “Okay.” This works at home as well, by the way. For example:

When my husband and I were first married, he would tell these wonderful stories about himself. When we were married five years, he was still telling the same stories over and over again. I guess I stopped listening 100%. He said my eyes would glaze over when he talked to me, and he didn’t like it. Why couldn’t I just let him tell the same story again? Now just because of a few uh-huhs, yes, okay, ohs, he knows I’m listening. Today when he tells his stories, he glows. He thinks I’m a terrific listener.

When you listen, both you and the other person win. But more than listening, you must communicate to people that you’re listening. People may think you’re not listening when you are, simply because they don’t hear a response. If I am listening to you but don’t make a sound, do you think I’m listening? Maybe and maybe not. You might say, “Are you still there?” “Of course I am,” I say, but there’s no way you could know that—until I say so.

And this kind of listening does more than simply get the technical job done. It strengthens the connection between the customer and your company. It says, people at this company care about my well being. To reinforce this impression, I recommend using good body language to improve the impressions of your communications over the phone. It works, even though you cannot see the customer or vice versa. So pay attention to your smiles, your gestures, and even your posture.

**Verbal Attentiveness**

Since you and I are in the service industry, let’s give the best service we can and really take care of people. This does not mean only take care of the issue, this means
take care of the person. Again, we are talking about relationships, one human interacting with another. As a matter of fact, there will be times when you cannot resolve the issue, problem, complaint, or whatever. But that doesn’t mean you can’t take care of the customer to his or her satisfaction.

In strengthening the personal bond with a customer, try making use of the silences, hesitations, and pauses in your conversations. I know you are probably looking something up, waiting for the computer to catch up, or making notes, but the customer may not. To eliminate any question in his mind, tell him what you are doing. For instance, “Please give me a moment to bring your account up.” “I am looking that information up now.” “I am waiting for the computer to come back on line.” “I am going to check another screen now, bear with me.” “It will take just a moment to enter this information.” “I am going to put you on hold but I’ll be right back.” “This will only take a moment. I won’t forget you.”

Another reason to tell people what you are doing is if they can’t hear you and don’t know what you’re doing, they make it up. When we make it up, we don’t make it up good, we make it up bad. For instance, if I hear only silence, I think I’m not being taken care of. I might react by saying, “What’s going on? What are you waiting for? Is there a problem here? Why isn’t this being handled more quickly?” My inner voices are saying I’m not important. I shouldn’t have called. I knew this wouldn’t get taken care of anyhow, and so on. I certainly am not feeding myself positive thoughts about how great I’m being taken care of. Why? Because 87% of self talk is negative.

When responding to a customer’s questions or request for assistance, tell her what you can do, not what you can’t do. “Thanks for calling, Mrs. Little. In answer to your question, I can do this, this, and that for you today.” If there is a problem, instead of saying, “There’s nothing I can do,” try, “Let’s look at our options here.” Instead of saying, “Your last name is what?” try, “Help me out with your last name, will you?” Can you hear that this is friendlier and more neutral?

Use the word “and” instead of “but” when you respond. “But” negates everything that came before it and sometimes even creates negative responses. “And” is neutral, more pleasant sounding. Instead of saying, “Your order is very important to me, but I’m very busy right now!” try saying, “Your order is very important to me, and I’m very busy right now. So what I will do for you is...”

Speak “with,” not “at,” your customer. I think we’ve all experienced the difference. The first is a conversation. The second is patronizing, condescending, critical, and judgmental.

It is also important to reinforce positive interactions with your customers, like:
You’re so pleasant, Mr. Peters. I always enjoy talking with you.

Your patience and understanding make it a pleasure to take care of you, Mrs. Jones.

Five Levels of Listening

Being aware of the various levels of listening can help you determine where you are and evaluate whether it is adequate. The following five levels of listening has been reprinted with permission from Paul W. Swets (from his book *The Art of Talking So That People Will Listen*). He has defined the levels of listening as follows:

- **Clichés** are phrases without much meaning, such as, “Hi, How are you? Fine. You? Nice day.” Small talk or minimal politeness exists here.
- **Facts** generally deal with external events. A good deal of conversation and listening is at this level.
- **Thoughts** represent one’s interpretation of events or facts.
- **Feelings—External Events** can be divided into two categories: (1) feelings about external events, and (2) feelings about one’s self. Both types can become intense. Because of their intensity, listening to feelings can be hard work and even threatening. If we respond the wrong way, we could be verbally attacked or could hurt someone in an already vulnerable position. Fearing a no-win situation, we may pull back and refuse to hear the deepest feelings of another. To the extent that we refuse to listen deeply, others are likely to refuse to listen to us.
- **Feelings—One’s Self**

How to Question Customers

1. Ask only one question at a time. That’s how many they’ll answer at a time.
2. Ask specific questions to get specific answers.
3. Speak firmly and confidently; don’t ramble.
4. Wait until they’ve answered your question before jumping in.
5. Don’t assume you know where they’re going—let them take you there.
6. Close the call reiterating what action they or you are to take, if any.

Listen, Acknowledge, Respond, Close

No matter which level of listening you are engaged in, you can use L.A.R.C. to keep yourself in tune. L.A.R.C. stands for Listen, Acknowledge, Respond, and Close. Listen to what is and is not being said. Acknowledge what or that you heard. Respond with the facts requested, and then Close.

Here are some simple closings:

Did that answer your question?

Is there anything else I can help you with today?

Thank you for calling, Mr. Smyth.

What Do I Do When I’ve Heard It All Before?

Some help-desk operations (as well as other applications) have virtually captive audiences. That is, they have the same customers calling in, week in and week out.

Constant Callers

Although calls are randomly distributed, in some businesses you can easily get the same customer more than once. Some days may even seem like instant replays of others.

Who are these callers? They are your customer base. And they are not calling to say hi. They call for a wide variety of reasons, including:

1. Placing or canceling orders
2. Checking on current/back orders
3. Inquiring about shipping/receiving
4. Arranging for billing adjustments/errors
5. Requesting technical support—hardware and/or software issues
6. Registering complaints
7. All of the above, and then some!

The challenge is to treat each call independently of what came before. Regardless
of how many times this customer calls with the same problem, you can listen for what is different this time. If nothing else, your perception of the call and the caller can shift. How can you make this person’s day? He is expecting the same answer he got last week. How can you say it differently? What if you surprise him by saying,

“Well, Mr. Jones, so nice to hear from you today. It’s been about a week. I thought you forgot about us.” Or,

“Were you on vacation? I haven’t heard from you lately. How can I assist you today?”

Be patient with your customers. It’s not easy when you hear the same thing over and over again, but it’s worth it. Be proactive; decide that for the next three calls you are going to be patient with the customers. Then notice how those calls went. Were they easier for you to handle? Were the customers surprised? Did they feel taken care of? Did the calls close in a timely fashion?

Most important, how did you feel after those calls? When I am being patient with a customer (or a boss/spouse/child/mother/father), I feel good about myself, and I am not as easy to hook. By that I mean that I maintain my own balanced perspective because I have chosen not to let anyone or anything bother me; rather, I have chosen to be patient. When you easily accomplish the three calls, increase it to six, and then twelve or more. Before you know it, patience has become a habit, your stress level has decreased, and you are looking forward to your being patient with your customers as a mastered skill instead of an ordeal. This is truly a win-win-win situation.

Complaints

Complaints, by definition, are about the past, not the future. We are powerless over the past; we have no choice about the past, because it has already happened. There is choice in the present, however. You do have the choice of how you are going to interpret the past and how you will treat your customer. I recommend you focus on establishing a relationship with the customer, rather than engaging in a tug of war that drains you both. And avoid judging or sounding as if you’re judging. When you are getting the facts, ask:

“Please tell me what happened . . . and then what happened, and then what happened next?”

Avoid questions like:
“What did you do?” Or, “You did what?” (These sound accusatory and tend to put the customer immediately on the defensive.)

I’m not saying this is easy. It is not easy. When you get the same calls over and over, it takes extra energy to listen to each word. Because you know, or think you know, what is coming next, you tend to pay minimal attention to what is currently being said. That comes across, and people don’t like it. People notice when they are being patronized or not listened to. I bet you can recall instances where you yourself sat on the other end of the phone and it happened to you.

None of us are very good at listening, especially to what is not being said. We weren’t taught to stay focused on the conversation or on what is being said only through the tone or cadence of the voice. But that is your challenge.

And there are rewards: New perspectives show up, people even show up when you can see things from a different perspective. And this happens by listening differently.

Here’s an exercise to help you do that. Please look at the picture on this page. It’s an old lady. A very old woman, say about 75 or 80, with a rather big nose and sad eyes. Right? Now flip the page and look at the next picture.

What if I said that this is a young woman in her mid-20s? With a feather in her hair, high cheekbones, one eye half closed, a choker necklace on her slim neck? Can you see it? (If not, stare at the mouth of the old lady and visualize it as...
the necklace of the young lady. Now draw your eyes up to what you thought was the old lady's left eye—that's actually the young lady's left ear.) Are you able to do this? Good for you! Stay with it until you get it. If you need help, see the two drawings at the end of this chapter.

Do you remember how sure you were that it was a young lady—or vice versa, that it was an old lady? Now you can see it from both sides. This very powerful exercise reminds us that the way we see things initially affects how we think and how we act. Our experiences influence how we perceive what we perceive. And you can be absolutely sure of your perceptions and be incorrect.

So much is this true that Wayne Dyer, the famous New Age guru, says, “When you believe it, you'll see it.” No, I didn’t get that backwards. If we don’t believe something, we’ll never see it!

For instance, the way you would interact with the young lady in the picture differs hugely from the way you would be with the old lady. It’s logical to assume that if we look and make incorrect assumptions about what’s there, we do the same thing with our ears! We listen and make assumptions based on what we think we heard.

The problem of misperception becomes even more difficult when we take a position based on those misperceptions that makes the customer wrong.
Hardening of the Attitudes

Brian Tracy, in *The Psychology of Achievement*, uses the term “Psycho-Sclerosis” to refer to hardening of the attitudes. What it means is that you are rigid and inflexible in your thinking. You do not want to change. This position is to be avoided at all costs, especially toward those whom you are called to serve. What are some of these attitudes that CSRs adopt toward the customer, the job, the boss and the company?

This customer doesn’t care about me!
This company doesn’t really care about me!
Some days I really hate this job!
I want to tell Mr. So-and-so to “lose this number”!

As we said earlier, change is inevitable. That means changing your attitude as well as your perceptions, and the place to start is with your attitude toward yourself and your own life.

Perhaps you have heard the expression “attitude of gratitude.” Just before going to sleep at night and/or when you first wake up in the morning, in that euphoric, hazy state, your mind is extremely susceptible to suggestions. This is the perfect time to make a gratitude list. It could start with “I am grateful to be alive.” “I am grateful for the beautiful sun shining through the window.” “I am grateful for my mother, my father, my sister, my brother, my significant other, my children, my grandchildren.” “I am grateful for my car running like a fine-tuned violin.”

Do this in whatever way works best for you. You can speak them or write your list. You can do this in the morning or in the evening. Or both. When you wake, you can be grateful for a good night’s sleep and a great day, and in the evening, you can confirm your gratefulness for the day. Some days it is easier than others, but there are always things we are grateful for. When all else fails, remember that you can be grateful for being a unique human on the planet!

After twenty-one days of consistent conditioning, your morning thank-you’s become a habit and you will find yourself looking forward to the way it makes you feel and prepares you for the day.

What Do I Do When I’ve Forgotten to Call the Customer Back?

I know I’m not alone in this one. Have you ever forgotten to call a customer back? Perhaps you lost the message or got involved in something else and just dropped it out. We are human, after all! How do we remedy this?
When the customer calls us back and reminds us that NO ONE called her back, here's what to do. Say, “I am so sorry that happened. My name is Rosanne and I will do whatever is within my power so we can complete this transaction on this call. And if that is not possible, you can count on me calling you back promptly,” in a firm, sincere, caring voice.

“Well, I was told that this shipment would be arriving by Monday and it’s Tuesday. I was counting on it arriving and made promises based on that. What kind of an outfit are you running there that you just say whatever I want to hear so you can get me off the phone? I’m fed up!”

Again respond with:

“I am sorry you had such a frustrating experience. I would be upset too, especially if I’d made commitments. Let me get to the bottom of this for you (acknowledge the customer’s feelings). Our records indicate that the shipment went out on Friday. You are in an area that receives three-day delivery. Therefore, your shipment will be there on Wednesday, as we do not count the day it shipped (the facts). I’m sorry if there was misinformation about this. I will be happy to trace it for you and call you back with the delivery signature. But I am confident that it will be delivered on Wednesday. Is there anything else I can help you with today? My name is Rosanne. Please call me at x 4747 if I can be of any service in the future” (closing).

Depending on the extent of the upset, you can say:

“If I or anyone at this company has offended you, I am truly sorry. It was not my intention to do so. Please let me see if we can remedy this situation to your satisfaction right now.”

If this doesn’t satisfy the customer, try this:

“If I were in your shoes, I would want to hang the person who gave you the misinformation by the fingernails, upside down, out a window on the 77th floor of a building. This, only after I had ripped the skin off his face first!”
Reframing Upset

To reframe is to alter the way something is put together, to create a new system. This is analogous to picture framing. Let’s say an original painting is in a 5 × 7 frame and always has been. To reframe it, you might mat the painting and place it in a larger oval frame.

A great habit to get into when you are upset is to ask yourself the following questions:

In 5 years how much will this matter?
In 3 years how much will this matter?
In 1 year how much will this matter?
In six months how much will this matter?
In three months how much will this matter?
How much will this matter at 5 P.M. today?

Allow yourself a different perspective. In Dead Poet’s Society, Robin Williams says that sometimes you have to stand on the desk to see things in a new way.

Here’s a story about perspectives. It takes place on a narrow, winding, two-lane coastal road in a quiet, rural farm town. Driver #1, speeding, came to a bend, just as another car came round the bend from the opposite direction. Driver #2 leaned out her window and yelled, “pig”! The first driver, insulted, yelled back “cow!” rounded the bend with a squeal of tires, and crashed into a pig! Get it? (You may have to read it a few times.) It’s all about perception again. His first impression was of an enemy. What he realized only later was that the other driver had been trying to help.

I encourage you to remember this story because it so powerfully illustrates what happens when you see things differently. Whenever you’re stuck with a point of view that makes you grumpy, consider some other possibilities besides the obvious. Say to yourself, “I can see this differently.”

The trick is to live outside the perceptual box you have created for yourself. How do you determine what that box is? Refer to the old lady/young lady on pages
37–38 (also peek ahead to page 69). Remember what you perceived the first time you saw these? You were certain they were one way or another. Maybe you think that you can’t do these kinds of activities, games, processes. Or you can do them, but not very well. Such thoughts are boxes we put around ourselves. Some boxes are bigger than others. Visualize a gigantic cardboard box (maybe your box is bigger or smaller than mine, which covers a number of states but doesn’t go beyond the continental United States yet). Now take a utility knife and open each of its seams; the four sides fall down, and you can walk outside your box and live in a new, bigger space. In this new space, all things are possible. There are no preconceived notions about people, places, things, and, most importantly, about you and your limitations. This is new territory where everyone can win!

Another way of reframing is to remember that many of your callers are living tough lives, full of troubles you know nothing about. I’m reminded of the story someone told me of being on a subway with a man and his children. These children were running and screaming and falling over people and the man was just staring into space. This person said to the man, “Don’t you think these children need more supervision?” “Oh, yes,” said the man, rousing himself. “I’m sorry for the upset. You see, we’ve all come from the hospital where their mother just died, and we are all in terrible shock.”

Now that our perspectives have changed, let’s go back to that relaxed state again, the perfect time for affirmations.

**Affirmations**

An affirmation is a positive statement that we say or write over and over, so that it drops into our subconscious, programming it to obtain for us whatever it is we want to be, do, or have. When you write affirmations, be as specific as you can, use the present tense, and use your own name to personalize what you say. Be sure there are no negatives in your affirmations. For example, “I’m not going to get upset” does not register in the subconscious, so what you will get is, “I’m going to get upset.” Better to say, “I, Rosanne, am calm and peaceful.” You do not have to believe it. You just need to say it. Say it at least five times. And then get on with your day.

Programming yourself for success is critically important, because what we think about, we become. Everything we are today is the result of everything we have thought to this moment in time. So the first thing we need to change is our beliefs about ourselves.

A very powerful affirmation I learned many years ago can be written, said in front of a mirror, by yourself or with a partner.

“I, (your name), DESERVE WHAT I WANT AND I CAN HAVE IT!”

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**Life is 10% what you make it and 90% how you take it!**

80% of success is showing up.

—Woody Allen
Then say (or write) (or your partner says):

“YES YOU DO, AND YES YOU CAN!”

Repeat these two sentence pairs at least six times as many times a day as you can. The more you say it, the more it becomes true. Do this with a friend, a family member, or a co-worker. Each time you say it, be sure to emphasize different syllables, as if each time you are saying it for the first time. Then switch and say whichever one you didn’t say the first time.

This is a great technique, and take notice that it leaves you smiling from ear to ear. It’s especially fun to do with a co-worker. Each time you pass him or her in the hallway, lunchroom, coffee area, or make eye contact across a room, you can say or mouth your affirmations. Sometimes a “high-5” is a reminder.

If you are writing affirmations, be specific, personalize them, and keep writing them. For example, “I, Rosanne, am a successful author.” I write this over and over again. Often when I first start out, I hear “Oh, yeah, are you #1 on the New York Times Best Seller List?” You too will notice your mind arguing with the affirmations, saying things like “Oh yeah? Fat chance!”

When you hear such thoughts, turn the paper over and write what you hear. Then turn the paper over and write the affirmation again. Continue this process until the little voices fade out. Then write the affirmation one more time. The book you’re holding in your hand is evidence that this corny-sounding process really works.

Some people set the tone for the day by reading inspirational or uplifting books (meditative or otherwise) in the morning. A page is enough—this is not about becoming an avid early-morning reader, but about taking quiet time for yourself before your day takes over, so to speak.

Looking in the mirror is a great way to do affirmations. While brushing your teeth, combing your hair, or shaving, look at yourself in the mirror, really see yourself, and say, “I feel terrific.” “I am great.” “I like me.” “Today is a great day.”

“I am well rested, I had the perfect amount of sleep” is one of my favorites. Now, I may have been up with the dog three times during the night and am so tired I can’t imagine how I will get through the day. However, when I say these
Affirmations work, whether you believe them or not.

Affirmations in the morning and then get on with my day, I forget about my tiredness. Before I know it, the day is over and I’m still okay. Remember, you don’t have to believe the affirmations for them to be effective. Just keep repeating them.

I call affirmations attitude adjustment exercises and refer to the morning as my attitude adjustment time. You are familiar with Happy Hour in the evening? This is Happy Hour in the morning, when we ready ourselves for a great day. Do these exercises daily, one day at a time.

Quieting the Mind

Quiet your mind so you can be present and available to the customer. Have you ever listened to your car radio on the way home from work and when you got there, you forgot to turn it off? In the morning you got into your car, put the key in the ignition, turned the key, and all of a sudden, the radio was blasting? Did someone come in the middle of the night and turn up the volume? Of course not. It sounds louder because your nighttime mind is busy with “stuff”—what we call “noise”—and the radio needs to be louder than the internal noise so that you can hear it. In the morning, when you’re calm and quiet of mind, that radio volume blasts at you. The goal is to have a quiet mind in either direction, regardless of the time of day, by adopting some of the skills contained in this book.
Chapter 3

Not One More Call, Please!
Handling Job Tension

Job tension can be defined as work overload, ambiguity, and conflict associated with job and work environment. Stress is the process through which people respond physically and mentally to stimuli, events, and conditions. There are two kinds of stress: (1) good stress, eustress, pregnant with happy events, and (2) bad stress, or distress, when a person feels out of control. Generally, when people talk about stress, they are talking about distress. For convenience and because it’s common usage, I will use the terms stress and distress interchangeably.

Stress has always been a part of the human condition—only the causes have changed. Let’s go back 30,000 years (just before I was born), to when we were hunters in the jungle. It was easy to see stress in the body then. When a ferocious saber-toothed tiger came into view, the body tensed. The hunter wanted to be sure his spear was sharp, he wanted to know where the other members of his tribe were (and that their spears were sharp), and that there wasn’t another tiger behind him. He received a physical signal to either run away or stay and fight. That is how he protected himself.

Today we have a complex civilization, so it is hard to identify the tigers, the threats. They are still here today, but in different forms. They are hiding in our offices, homes, schools, and highways. They may take smaller bites, but they also take many more of them. The original fight or flight is no longer possible in modern civilization. However, all the same protective responses occur when you feel your body is under attack. Unfortunately, there is no longer a clear-cut decision to either throw a spear or run away.

There’s not a job today that doesn’t have its share of stress. Stress was the occupational disease of the 90s and continues to escalate as we proceed into the 2000s.
45% of all managers suffer distress; 75% of all workers say their jobs cause them stress.

A report on the latest survey of agents in various industries said that 98% of agents experienced at least one stressful event daily, while 15% experienced five stressful events daily (“Agents and Stress”). Here’s how they rated the top four causes of stress:

- 47% said irate customers
- 15% said interruptions
- 7% said dumb customers
- 6% said personal situations

Agents report reacting to these stressful situations as follows:

- 28% feel anger and frustration
- 21% talk with someone who cares
- 15% take long walks
- 8% feel depressed

And a recent study showed that more heart attacks occur at 9 A.M. Monday mornings than at any other time!

The latest statistics from NIOSH (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health) are that 75% of employees believe modern workers have more on-the-job stress than the previous generation. One of the reasons for increased stress is
that work life is spilling over into home life. Cell phones, pagers, e-mail, faxback, and answering machines all make it possible to invade people's private time away from the office. Without a clear line between leaving the office at the office and coming home to home, employees enjoy less relief from the job, and unfinished tasks are always with us (Journal News, August 2, 1999).

Research identifies the CSR as one of the ten most stressful jobs in America, and rightly so. You are constantly being bombarded with one call after the other, from customers, many of whom specialize in unrealistic expectations. Your software and hardware change frequently. Sometimes it seems the team you work with is re-organized, re-engineered, downsized, rightsized, or reformatted almost daily. The typical company treats you like a drone on the one hand, and expects you to work service miracles on the other. One consequence of this disparity between role responsibility and acknowledgment and support for CSRs is job tension.

Factors Heightening Job Tension

Job tension is heightened by two major factors:

Rising Customer Expectations. Not only are you in a critical position, being the first and often the only contact between customers and your company, you are also under relentless and intensifying pressure to deliver the impossible: Customers expect to be made happy no matter what! As unrealistic as this standard may be, expectations serve as reference points in customer assessment of services performed.

Moreover, under the pressure of increasing competition, company advertisements promise excellent services, and when customers perceive those promises being broken, they often bombard you with expressions of frustration, impatience, hostility, and even rage. Naturally you have more difficulty handling these combative customers because your responsibility for providing courteous service conflicts with your natural inclination to strangle them slowly and with malice.

This conflict creates a major source of tension. As the conflict intensity and quantity increases, so does job tension. As job tension increases, both job performance and customer satisfaction diminish. This has cost companies dearly, and the problem is growing exponentially.
Corporate Changes. Two types of structural change are taking place in corporations, one dictated by the nature of the business, the other by trends in the financial world. For more than forty years, service companies successfully followed an industrial model that put the primary focus on mass production manufacturing processes and personnel and the least focus on those people who deliver service to customers. That model is obsolete today. Today's model puts front-line (customer-contact) workers first and designs elaborate business systems to support them. While these moves are positive for you, they are still changes and, therefore, create job tension.

Even greater job tension results from other kinds of corporate structural change that are less positive. In every industry today, companies are being bought, sold, merged, reorganized, down-sized, and re-engineered. Budget cuts, declining markets, introduction of new technologies is the rule rather than the exception. Foreign ownership is common. Overnight jobs can disappear, and/or they are reorganized out of existence.

The 40/40 Era is over—where we worked 40 hours a week for 40 years to retire on 40% of what we made—which wasn’t enough in the first place!

All these events evoke feelings of job insecurity, which heightens job tension. It will get even worse because the pace of change is accelerating by the minute.

Stress management techniques originated with the concept that we have the ability to take charge of many everyday stress-producing situations previously considered beyond our control.

The basic strategy for handling stress is to utilize different techniques that make you feel physically and mentally good. This sounds very simple and sometimes it is. Most of the time, it isn’t. It is very hard to feel emotionally secure when someone is screaming at you on the phone.

However, learning these techniques will not only help you on the job, it actually will improve the quality and well being of your entire life. The reason for this has to do with something called serotonin.
Nature’s Own Tranquilizer

Serotonin has been referred to as the body’s natural healer. It acts as a tranquilizer to soothe your cells. The latest evidence suggests it’s especially soothing to the cells in your body that make up your immune system. The immune system helps prevent everything from the common cold to cancer and other frightening diseases. The bottom line is that serotonin is a turbocharger for your immune system.

Serotonin is not produced constantly. In fact, many of us don’t produce enough of it. There is evidence that when you are feeling down and negative, your body reacts by rallying all its forces for some sort of conflict. Instead of reacting to good things, your body is tapping into its reserves of energy and strength to help you get through the “negative time.” As long as stress doesn’t continue for a prolonged period of time, your body will be able to replenish these reserves and maintain you in good health.

The problem today is that many of you have learned to live for long periods of time under great stress. Perhaps your bodies are constantly geared up for “conflict.”

Here’s what happens in this process: (1) You experience physical pleasure (a pat on the back, for instance), (2) the brain registers that good feeling and starts telling the rest of your body—your heart, your lungs, your kidneys, in fact, every cell of your body, to feel good, (3) then the total body communicates its good feelings to the brain, and (4) when your brain gets this message, it manufactures serotonin. This complex process happens automatically when you feel good. You don’t have to think about it. You don’t have to take a pill. It just happens naturally when you feel happy and peaceful.

To summarize, you are no longer in the jungle, but it still feels like it. That is not going to change. Further, it could get worse. How do you deal with all this? What can you do? There are many techniques, some of which I will list here. But what they all boil down to is helping yourself feel good mentally, physically, and emotionally. This works because of the way our body works.

Take a giant step backwards and look at your upset and think: I have choices here. First, I can laugh or cry. Either one will give you great release and relief from what is stored in your body as well as in your mind. Seriously, there are practical steps to take:

1. What are the facts? Do a reality check. Stick to the facts without projecting into the future or worrying about how long will this be in place, or whether your new co-worker has a revolving chair, will be gone tomorrow, and what about you. The fact is that the changes are intended for the best. That is to say, to make your work-life ultimately easier, to flow
more smoothly, to have you more comfortable at what you do, so that you
will do it better. Where you do have discomfort, be sure to ask questions of
the people who can give you the answers.

2. Are you creating the stress? Is there something that you could be doing
differently to relieve yourself of some of this stress? Are you taking on
issues that don't belong to you? Are you making people wrong?

3. Are you taking the very best care of yourself during these times? Are you
getting enough rest, eating properly, exercising? Sounds funny, but it makes
a great deal of difference. Some easy, non-threatening things to do are:
Walk when you can. It's great exercise. Use the stairs instead of an elevator
(especially when going down). Park the farthest away at the shopping mall
(instead of circling waiting for the closest spot). Return those shopping
carts to the grocery store. Do you do this now? And this one is primarily
for men, but women need to do it too: Get up to change the TV! Yes, let
go of that remote! (My husband sleeps with ours under his pillow!)

4. Talk to a trusted friend, relative, or co-worker. Get the frustration or upset
out into the open. This is for the purpose of getting it out of your system,
not necessarily looking for answers. Things seem much more powerful and
upsetting when they are kept inside. Once released into the air, they don't
have the control over you they did before.

5. Write about it. Journal the events as you see them. Neatness does not
count in this effort. You do not need to dot all your i's and cross all your
t's. This is not a pennmanship or grammar test but rather an opportunity to
pour out what is inside. Because that is where it goes. Inside. How do you
know? You feel it. You get headaches, hypertension, ulcers, pains in various
parts of the body. There is a physiological response that gets stuck in your
body. The emotional pain also grows. Today you are irritated. Next week
you're mad. The next month enraged. You go ballistic—whatever that
means for you. Then comes blow-up. In blow-up, it is very difficult to trace
back to the original event.

6. Smile. Yes, just smile. Especially when you don't want to. It's hard to feel
sad, depressed, frustrated, or downright yucky when you are smiling. It is
also infectious, so go ahead and smile. Try it right now. If you have a
mirror nearby, look at yourself smiling in the mirror.

7. Use humor. It's a powerful tool. If I can see the humor in a situation, then
I can see it from a different perspective. What does humor tell you about
me? That I feel good, that I'm comfortable, that I have choices. It's a great
way to handle day-to-day tension. When you find yourself getting really

A smile is the shortest distance between two people.
serious, red flag. You need some humor now. Laugh a lot. Kids laugh 400
times a day! How many times a day do you think adults laugh? [Answer:
15!] Were you close?

Comic Relief

To get you laughing right now, here are some nursery rhymes, Christmas carols, and
acronyms for call center diseases I find amusing. These are by Greg Levin, editor of
the Service Level Newsletter (Annapolis, Maryland), a monthly journal for incoming
call center professionals, and have been reprinted with his generous permission.

Nursery Rhymes

“Peter Peter Call Receiver”
Peter Peter Call Receiver
Was known to be a sales completer
What a shock when the news came through
He’s lost his job to a VRU.

“Hickory-ACDickory-Dock”
Hickory-dickory-dock
This rep forgot how to talk
A call came through
He knew not what to do
So he stuffed his phone in his sock.

“Three Calls in Queue”
(to the tune of “Three Blind Mice”)
Three calls in queue, three calls in queue
See how they hold, see how they hold
They’ll go to the next available rep
Who’ll answer them with such vigor and pep
If not, he’ll be thrown out onto the front step
Three calls in queue, three calls in queue.

Laughter is like
changing a
baby’s diaper—
it doesn’t
permanently
solve any
problems, but it
makes things
more acceptable
for a while.
“Little Manager Muffet”
Little Manager Muffet sat on her tuffet
Figuring out the best way to route calls
So she tried something gory
And to each lavatory
Added workstations to all of the stalls.

“Mary Had a Little Headset”
Mary had a little headset
With earfoam nice and soft
And even when she got off work
She never took it off.

“Little Rep Horner”
Little rep Horner took calls in a corner
With a talk time that was oh, so high
“It takes lots of time
To answer questions in rhyme
It’s not like pulling plums from a pie!”

“A Shell of a Rep”
Humpty Dumpty took incoming calls
Humpty Dumpty’s performance did fall
And all of the managers started to groan
“What do you expect from an egg on the phone?”

“There Was an Old Woman Who Coached Many Reps”
There was an old woman who worked 50 years
Coaching phone reps and receiving great cheers
Her final words show she was still in the game:
“Don’t forget to confirm the caller’s last name!”
Christmas Carols

“Hark, the Irate Caller Screams”
Hark, the irate caller screams
“Death to reps on all your teams!”
Man-a-ger tries to assuage
But can’t quell the caller’s rage
Caller hangs up in frustration
Manager takes a long vacation
She hates when callers feel so jaded
And wishes all was automated.

“Silent Night”
Silent night, low volume night
All is calm at e-ver-y site
Each rep takes about ¤ve calls an hour
Managers sleep inside their little tower
Forecast in heavenly peace
Forecast in heavenly peace.

Call Center Diseases

ACD. Angry Caller Disease . . . a condition common to telephone representatives resulting from over-the-counter phone contact with customers who have been waiting in queue for 20 minutes. Symptoms are usually detectable in the phone rep immediately after the call, and include slamming down headsets, swearing out loud, visible smoke from ears and nose, dizziness, and sometimes vomiting. (Hopefully when you ¤nish reading this book, you will have other, more positive options!)

CTI. Chronic Tookas In¶ammation . . . pain and swelling in the gluteus maximal region brought on by prolonged, uninterrupted sitting in ergonomically insensitive rep station chairs. Symptoms include statements by the victim such as: “Gosh, my butt hurts,” and “OSHA might be interested in hearing about this.” The latter reveals that the condition is more serious and demands immediate attention by management. Although painful, CTI is easily cured by either replacing the chair with a more ergonomically practical model, or by simply forcing your reps to stand up while a senior manager yells out, “Quit your griping. You don’t know what uncomfortable is—why, back when I was a rep . . .”
ASA. Anticipated Service Attack . . . an acute condition specific only to new phone reps preparing to take their very first call. Symptoms include restlessness, excessive perspiration, dizziness, nausea, and requests to sob in a corner. Often, phone reps will refuse to answer their first call, screaming such things as, “Don’t pick it up, it’s the Devil!” Such hysterics are common in ASA, and supervisors and managers should be supportive. Encouraging phone reps to picture their first caller naked may help to reduce nerves. However, if the phone rep continues to picture callers naked after being with the company two years or more, an entirely different disorder may be developing.

_Treatment for all these disorders:_ Regular reading of this book!

Comic relief is only one way to make yourself feel good. The mind is so powerful that thinking pleasant thoughts can create physiological changes. That is what makes some of my relaxation tricks work.

**Relaxation Tricks**

This is not a book on stress management, but I will share two of my favorite relaxation techniques because they are so powerful and so portable.

**Guided Visualization.** I heartily recommend using guided imagery or visualization tapes to train the mind and body to relax. After you listen to them for awhile, they become imprinted in your memory banks, so that you don’t even need a tape player to access them. They’re available any time you choose to flip the switch on your mind.

Visualization is simply the ability to form a clear, precise, mental picture of what you want to be, have, or do and to keep that picture in the mind. Visualization is really a window into your inner world and a way to view your own ideas, feelings, and interpretations. You sit or lie back, take a few deep breaths, put on a tape, and let the descriptions of beautiful, restful images take you away.

One of the places I like best is the ocean, so it’s not surprising that a guided meditation called Ocean Morning is my favorite. In it I wake up at a beach house with the sun shining through the window. I hear the ocean slapping against the shore and the seagulls in the background. As I relax I can actually feel the sun beating on me, warming my bones. In just a few minutes I am in a completely different state of mind.

It doesn’t take long to get value out of these exercises. At first you may get so relaxed you fall asleep, and that is a fine way to use them. Later, as you continue to
use them, you will find yourself relaxing and feeling energized at the same time. Do remember: these tapes are never to be used while you’re driving your car!

Managed Daydreaming. All our lives we’ve been told not to daydream, but the truth is that daydreaming is or can be a powerful practice to direct your thoughts and feelings in ways that serve you. Taking a break to dream about something you love as a way of refreshing your mind and body can lower your blood pressure, slow and deepen your breathing, and recharge your batteries.

STRESSED = DESSERTS spelled backwards

I know worrying must be effective because almost nothing I worried about ever happened.
—Will Rogers

Your imagination is your preview of life’s coming attractions.
—Albert Einstein
Chapter 4

Help! I’m Still Stressed Out!

The following is taken from the personal stress-management program by which I live my life. Its author, Michael Samuelson (National Center for Health Promotion), developer and provider of superb wellness programs, products, and services, has generously given permission to reprint these excerpts from the workbook entitled *Action Plans for Personal Stress Management, Turning Challenges into Opportunities* (1991) and the latest edition, entitled *Personal Stress Management . . . The Proven Way to a More Productive Lifestyle* (1995).

Unproductive Reactions to Stress

When faced with a stressor, how do you react? Do you fight? Do you flee? As previously mentioned, these are standard responses based on our human survival instincts. Since most situations require neither fighting nor fleeing, you might respond with one or more of the following four unproductive reactions to stress:

- **Fretting.** Worrying a problem to death is not an active response to stress. It just seems as if you are doing something.

- **Fuming.** It’s human to get angry—but that anger should be a catalyst for productive action. Silently fuming is only going to raise your blood pressure and your stress level.
Flailing. The desire to react to stress is counterproductive if you go off in all directions, getting you nowhere. Spinning your wheels is not the same as taking charge.

Freaking out. When you freak out, you’ve lost it completely. You are over the edge, out of control, and unable to attain, maintain, or regain control over the stressors in your life!

These four F-words don’t have to be the words that define you. Would you like to leave your days of fretting, fuming, flailing, and freaking out behind you? You have the power to choose to respond to stressors in a healthy and productive fashion if you are willing to adopt what Michael calls the Distress Resistant Formula.

**Distress-Resistant Formula**

Wouldn’t it be nice if somehow there were a magic pill that would protect us from all the dangers of everyday stress? Or perhaps a guardian angel who, with the wave of a wand, would ensure that we would emerge stronger from every challenge that we faced. How about some kind of recipe or secret formula that would insulate us from the destructive force of “things gone bad”?

Well, there is no magic pill, and to my knowledge, angels don’t have wands, but there may well be a formula and it’s no secret.

Okay, here it is. You mix equal parts of:

- Optimal Lifestyle
- Positive Attitude
- Structured Action

That’s it. It may sound simple, and in some respects it is. It’s easy to follow this formula when everything is going your way. The hard part of building your resistance to distress, however, is to remember and apply this formula when “tigers” are all around you and you are stressed out.

Let’s look at each of these ingredients.

**Optimal Lifestyle**

By optimal lifestyle, what do we mean? Eat tofu, drink only water, and exercise four hours a day? No, of course not. Individuals who are distress resistant have the following behavior patterns:

1. Never smoke or are former smokers. We all know that there is a direct
relationship between smoking and health, but did you know that the #1 reason why people return to smoking is stress? (Years ago the #1 reason was weight gain.)

2. Consume little or no caffeine.
3. Drink little or no alcohol.
4. Engage in active relaxation activities at least 15 minutes each day, such as reading, knitting, or another hobby. (Watching TV doesn’t count!)
5. Practice relaxation exercises daily.
6. Exercise aerobically at least 20 minutes a day, 3 days a week.
7. Consume no more than 30% of daily calories in the form of fat.
8. Include 20–30 grams of fiber daily.

Before you say that doing all of that, or avoiding all that, is impossible and takes all the fun out of life, remember two things:

1. Millions of people already live like this and actually enjoy it.
2. We are talking about an ideal formula. Any and all progress towards this ideal will have you feeling more comfortable, relaxed, and in control.

Look at the Optimal Lifestyle profile above. How close are you to the model? Here are your choices:

That’s me! Congratulations! You already know the benefit of optimal lifestyle. Keep it up. Continue to be a positive role model for your friends, family, and co-workers.

I’m getting close! That’s tremendous. Obviously you are being reinforced for the progress you have made. Feels good, doesn’t it?

Makes sense, but I’ve got some work to do. Understanding the value of a healthy lifestyle is the first step. Sounds like you have already made some positive strides.

I’m a long way off, but I’ll start now. It’s never too late to start. This may be a cliché, but it’s particularly true when it comes to health and lifestyle. You will be amazed at how motivating your first steps will be. Remember, however, to take them one at a time. Do things like reduce, rather than eliminate, behaviors like drinking alcohol and eating high fat foods. How about putting that salt shaker away? No need for all of that extra sodium in your diet. Try the smaller steps before you tackle the bigger ones. Early success strengthens you for tackling bigger items!

You must be kidding—that could never be me! Read the next section on attitude.
OPTIMAL LIFESTYLE PROFILE

✔ NEVER OR FORMER SMOKER

✔ CONSUME LITTLE/NO CAFFEINE

✔ CONSUME LITTLE/NO ALCOHOL

✔ 15 MIN. ACTIVE RELAXATION/DAY

✔ 20 MIN. AEROBIC EXERCISE 3/WEEK

✔ LOW FAT - HIGH FIBER DIET

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HOW CLOSE ARE YOU TO THE MODEL?

A) THAT’S ME!

B) I’M GETTING CLOSE!

C) MAKES SENSE, BUT I’VE GOT SOME WORK TO DO.

D) I’M A LONG WAY OFF BUT I’LL START NOW.

E) YOU MUST BE KIDDING, THAT COULD NEVER BE ME!

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What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson
Positive Attitude

We hear it all the time: “He’s got a bad attitude,” “If only you had a better attitude,” “I don’t like your attitude.” Sometimes we simply hear, “She has an attitude.” This last one suggests the person has some kind of horribly contagious disease! So, what is attitude?

An attitude starts out as nothing more than an opinion or feeling—sometimes good, sometimes bad. However, attitudes can quickly grow beyond a mere reaction to a person, an object, or an event and can become an entire approach to life.

If the attitude appears to benefit the person who holds it and is neutral or beneficial to society, it is called a positive attitude. If on the other hand, the attitude is harmful to the person, interferes with his goals, or is potentially harmful to society, it is called a negative attitude.

It’s difficult to keep negative attitudes out of our daily life. And quite frankly, you shouldn’t try to totally repress them. Feelings of anger, fear, disappointment, insecurity, revenge, and hostility are just as much a part of life as their positive counterparts.

The concern, however, is that negative feelings and attitudes, if left to grow unchecked, may result in negative actions; negative actions create negative consequences; negative consequences lead to negative attitudes; negative attitudes . . . well, you get the picture.

This is sometimes referred to as a self-fulfilling prophecy. This simply means that if you believe something strongly enough, good or bad, you will take any action necessary to make sure that it happens.

We can cause positive things to occur in our lives by learning to approach life with a positive attitude. For example, I might wake up Monday morning and say, “Oh, dear me, my schedule this week is so hectic. The weather report is doom and gloom. My house is a mess and the kids are getting on my nerves. The only thing that went off as planned was my alarm clock! This is going to be the worst week of my life.” Then it will be.

However, now I wake up Monday morning and say, “Wow, I have a busy

The ABC’s of Stress

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week. I like it busy because that means business and the time goes by quickly. This is going to be a great week.” And it will be. Why? Because I said so. It’s really as simple as that. You, too, have a choice as to how you view your week, your day, your job, and your family. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.

It really is as simple as: If you think you can, you can. If you think you can’t, you can’t. One of my favorite poems, called “Think,” gets the message across:

If you think you are beaten, you are
If you think you dare not, you don’t
If you like to win, but you think you can’t
It’s almost certain you won’t.

If you think you’ll lose, you’re lost
For out of this world we find;
Success begins with a person’s will.
It’s all in the state of mind.

If you think you are outclassed you are
You’ve got to think high to rise,
You’re got to be sure of yourself before
You can ever win a prize.

Life’s battles don’t always go
To the stronger or faster person,
But sooner or later the person who wins
Is the person who believes they can.
— Walter D. Wingle

Structured Action

Distress-resistant people take an active role in life. They don’t sit back and let things happen. They are too busy seeking solutions to problems and pursuing new challenges to feel victimized by people, objects, or events.

Action-oriented people avoid distress by following certain rules. Follow their lead and use these guidelines for structured action:

Stop feeling guilty. Guilt focuses on things in the past you can’t change. Accept your past mistakes as learning experiences. Forgive yourself as you would a good friend.
When you hear yourself saying, “If only I’d done that differently,” tell yourself that next time you will, and get on with your life. Ask yourself the following questions the next time you feel guilty:

Did I consciously do something to hurt someone?
Am I magnifying things?
Are my feelings and thoughts realistic?
Am I punishing myself?
How can I change next time?

**Be decisive.** In situations that call for action, the only bad decision is failing to make a decision! Carrying around indecision can be very tiring. It not only affects the issue at hand but also robs you of the energy necessary to take care of other parts of your life. When you need to make a decision, follow these steps:

Gather all the facts.
Set a deadline for deciding.
Make your decision.
Move on.

**Avoid being a perfectionist.** Perfectionists tend to get so bogged down in petty details and procedures, they lose sight of the objectives. They are too process-oriented, rather than results-oriented.

**Set priorities for yourself.** Everything can’t have top priority! Decide which tasks truly deserve your immediate attention and schedule accordingly. While you are at it, remember to schedule some down time for yourself. Complex machinery has regularly scheduled PM (preventative maintenance). During that time, the machine is taken off line, cleaned, oiled, and given replacement parts before it is returned to service. Before you break beyond repair and have to be scrapped, make sure you schedule your own PM.

**Stop procrastinating!** Procrastination can be an outgrowth of perfectionism and a producer of guilt. Procrastinators are afraid that they won’t do the job right. When procrastination is mixed with worry and indecision, it can bring everything to a grinding halt. Here are some ways to get over procrastination:

Break the task into small steps.
Do the worst—or the easiest—part first.
Do the task when your energy is highest—in the A.M. if you’re a morning person, for example.
Announce a commitment to someone.
Set a deadline.
Promise yourself a reward when you complete the job.

Praise yourself. If you do a good job, say so! You certainly don’t hesitate to say negative things to yourself when you slip, so praise yourself when you do something right! And reward yourself when the job is done. How about right now, for reading this book! Please put your right arm straight out in front of you. Now bring that right arm across your body and onto your left shoulder and pat yourself on the back! Thanks.

SIX RULES FOR AVOIDING DISTRESS

1. STOP FEELING GUILTY
2. BE DECISIVE
   - Gather All the Facts You Can
   - Set a Deadline for Deciding
   - Make Your Decision
   - Move On
3. AVOID BEING A PERFECTIONIST
4. SET PRIORITIES FOR YOURSELF
5. STOP PROCRASTINATING
   - Break a Task into Small Steps
   - Do the worst (or the Easiest) Part First
   - Announce a Commitment to Someone
   - Promise Yourself a Reward When Done
6. PRAISE YOURSELF

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Productive Responses to Stress

It is important to consider the influence of feelings on your life, because if we hold onto, deny, or avoid what we feel, it interferes with our lives. It's similar to driving. Did you ever find yourself driving around for 20 minutes or so only to discover that you have been driving with your parking brake on? You might feel foolish for not having noticed it earlier. Did you ever do that? I sure have.

In hindsight, perhaps you felt the motor straining against the brake. You know your car has the horsepower for good pickup, but you just didn’t pay close enough attention, and you let it struggle. However, as soon as you became aware of the problem, you immediately released the brake and the ride got better. It became easy and smooth, no pull, no tugs, no strain on your engine. I'm sure you all have had this experience at least once.

If you go through life unaware of your feelings or keeping them bottled up, it can slow you down and increase the wear and tear on you. As you learn to express and release your feelings appropriately, you also learn that you don’t lose control, you just move forward faster and with greater ease. It’s just like releasing the parking brake.

You cannot fight stress. You cannot flee from it. But you can learn to flow and change the way you feel by enlarging your perspective on a situation. Here’s how to react to stress in a productive and positive way:

Gather the facts. When you are faced with a stressful situation or perhaps you need to make a tough decision, step back for a minute. Gather all the facts you need to objectively analyze the problem or make the decision. Don’t act compulsively. Reserve judgment and action until you have all the information. Otherwise, your judgments may be distorted, causing confusion and wasted energy.

Assume accountability. Recognize your role in creating potentially distressful situations. Constantly blaming others will eventually alienate you from your friends, family, and co-workers. Refusing to accept accountability suggests you do not have control over your life, and this makes you vulnerable to distress.

Achieve and maintain physical fitness. When it comes to mental health, exercise and good nutrition are as close to a magic pill as we can come. Begin today. Get in shape and stay in shape.

Make a plan and do something! You can spend time in fruitless dreams and energy-draining complaints, or you can design a plan and take action. Gather your

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.
—Chinese proverb
facts and then make a plan of action. Of course, planning is not enough. Once you decide what to do, you must follow through!

Maintain perspective. What seems earth-shattering today may just be a small hitch when reviewed tomorrow. Step back and look at the whole picture. In the total scheme of things, what significance should be placed on one event or circumstance?

**FIVE PRODUCTIVE REACTIONS TO STRESS**

1. GATHER THE FACTS
2. ASSUME ACCOUNTABILITY
3. ACHIEVE & MAINTAIN PHYSICAL FITNESS
4. MAKE A PLAN & DO SOMETHING
5. MAINTAIN PERSPECTIVE

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Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles that one has overcome while trying to succeed.

—Booker T. Washington
DISTRESS RESISTANT FORMULA

MIX

EQUAL

PARTS OF:

• OPTIMAL LIFESTYLE

• POSITIVE ATTITUDE

• STRUCTURED ACTION

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Chapter 5

Why Can’t You See What I’m Saying?

Paul W. Swets, in his book *The Art of Talking So That People Will Listen*, says that to express our best selves, we first need to identify the real enemies to satisfying communication and then eliminate them. He has graciously given permission to reprint the following causes of communication breakdown and how to turn F-A-I-L-U-R-E into S-U-C-C-E-S-S:

Causes of Communication Breakdown

There are seven major causes of breakdowns in communications:

**Fear.** The focus here is on those fears which prevent you from being your best self and relating comfortably with other people.

**Assumptions.** These aid your mind in making sense of what you see and hear, and often the assumptions are correct. But they can cause communication breakdown when you trust them without question. When you listen to a customer, your brain is constantly making hundreds of assumptions. Each word, inflection, and tone of voice is interpreted, but not always...
as the speaker intended. To test the accuracy of your own assumptions, try to discover what the figure below signifies. Look at it from different viewpoints:

Do you see a three-letter word? Are you making the assumption that the letters are black or white? If you don't see a word immediately, this is probably because you are making a wrong assumption!

(Answer: The word is SEE... in white, not black letters.)

Insensitivity. Failure to accurately perceive the feelings of others is sometimes caused by an unwillingness to risk caring. Sometimes by preoccupation.

Labeling. Labels are attempts of the mind to create order out of chaos, and we are all experts at labeling. However, labeling another person can be disabling.

Uncertainty. Er, ah, well, maybe, I'm not sure, I guess so. Uncertainty, and these expressions, can become a habit and/or a safe way to avoid making a wrong decision by not making one at all.

Resentment. Resentment and bitterness feed upon themselves. They look for the worst in people and situations... and usually find it.

Egotism. No real respect for another person, no genuine interest in hearing the other person.

This all sounds pretty depressing. However, the good news is that failure can be a stepping stone to success if we learn from it. It can alert you to what should be avoided and point you in the right direction. You can turn communication failure into success by developing the following personal success qualities:
Self-awareness. Cultivate self-awareness by persistently asking yourself what you really think about an issue and why you hold that view.

Understanding. For real understanding, feedback is essential. By repeating what you think you heard and by asking for clarification, you can identify and correct misinterpretations and wrong assumptions. The skill of taking feedback can spare you hundreds, perhaps thousands of pointless arguments, explosions, and communication breakdowns.

Care for Others. When customers sense you do not really care about them, they stop listening. But when it is clear that you empathize with how they feel, they, in fact, do listen.

Control of Emotions. Some people think emotions such as anger, frustration, resentment, envy, and jealousy enter their minds, determine their thoughts, and dictate their conversations. Perhaps you think you are helpless against the power of your emotions. Emotions don’t just happen to you, as if they were external forces over which you had no control. They may be habits, but they start somewhere. Anger, for example, may be a habit, but it is also a choice.

Esteem of One’s Self. Self-esteem is not egotism, but ego strength.

Self-confidence. Self-confidence is the art of trusting and relying upon your inner resources in any situation, the willingness to take risks because you know you can face yourself without contempt if you fail, the courage to meet new situations and speak openly.

Sharing of One’s Self. Most people talk about themselves, but few share their deepest, real selves. Successful people find people to share with who are safe. It provides them with personal power. In sharing with others, they learn who they are.
Using Muscle Words

We need cooperation from others to get the things done that we want. An important skill is making requests in a way that invites other people to make commitments that honor those requests. The goal is to make requests and get responses that help you know where you stand.

First, when you make a request, be specific about time. “I need this report soon, can you do this?” doesn’t tell someone when you need it. They say, “Sure,” but that can mean any time. “Soon,” “right away,” “as soon as possible”—all these expressions have different meanings for different people. To me “as soon as possible” means “when I get around to it”; to someone else it means “yesterday.” We call these vague words “fat words.” Fat words are ambiguous and general.

Tell people your time frame using “muscle words.” Muscle words are specific and detailed. For example, you tell your manager, “I need to talk with you.” She says, “Catch me later.” Does it ever happen? No. But if you say, “I need to talk to you. It’ll take five to ten minutes. Can we meet before 2 p.m. today?” The response that you get might be “no,” but at least you know where you stand, and you can figure out what to do next. Sometimes we don’t ask the question because we’re afraid of the “no.” Yet if you aren’t specific when you ask, you surely won’t get what you want.

Use muscle words when making notes for the file or record. For example, if you offered two options to a customer and he was to get back to you, be specific in your notes about what and when. Then whoever gets that next call can clearly understand and reinforce your position. The customer will get consistency, and each of you will be supported. There is no opportunity for a customer to say, “Well, Mary told me last week she would make an exception in my case.” When records are clear, you can easily report, “Our records indicate that Mary offered you two options last week. Which one do you prefer?” Since each of you is an internal customer to the other, you are practicing good customer service and making one another’s job easier by keeping good, clear, concise, detailed notes.

Do not use good notes to make the customer wrong! Just tell the facts. With good notes any of you can assist any customer, and, just as important, no one can play one of you off against another.

Your notes also educate any field reps or outside sales people as to what is currently happening with any account. When you use muscle words in your records, you actually train other people to do likewise. Eliminate those callbacks from customers who think that if they call five minutes later, they’ll get a “better” rep who will give them what they want. With clarity and consistency, you make your job that much easier.
Speaking of notes, I suggest you keep a four-color pen (red, blue, green, and black) handy. Why? When you write in longhand—which we all still do, right?—use red ink for urgency. Blue ink represents those things that have time lines, such as appointments, budgets, expense reports, etc. If it’s due, write it in blue. Green ink is for your own thoughts about anything and everything. When you see green, you know you have added your two cents’ worth. Save black ink for main notes.

A second aspect of using muscle words when making requests is to make sure people know your conditions of satisfaction, the exact behaviors that will satisfy your request. At a training session I once asked the hotel to provide me with a pitcher of water and lemon, with the lemon in a separate dish. They said, “No problem.” The pitcher of water was there and next to it was a beautiful bowl of whole lemons—but no no knife! I learned I needed to be clearer. Next time I asked for water with one lemon cut into quarters in a separate dish, and I got exactly what I asked for.

Open and Closed Questions

When communicating with customers, it’s important to know there are two types of questions:

1. One-way, or closed, questions call for a yes or no answer or for specific facts, like account number, date, address. They are the kinds of questions you use to confirm your understanding that something is correct.
2. Two-way, or open, questions call for a person to offer his own understanding of a matter. You use these questions when you need more information. Typical open-ended questions ask the customer to “tell me more.”

Each of these types of questions has advantages and disadvantages. One-way questions are best used to:

1. get the facts,
2. bring the call to a close, and
3. control the call.

The disadvantages of one-way questioning are:

1. you have no way of confirming your understanding,
2. you are unable to ask clarifying questions, and
3. the customer doesn’t know if you are listening.
On the other hand, two-way questions are good for:

1. getting a more accurate picture of what the customer wants,
2. improving understanding, and
3. opening up thinking about alternatives.

However, open-ended questions can also have disadvantages:
1. the call takes longer,
2. the caller's conversation may drift from the issue at hand, and
3. you can lose control of the conversation.

Establishing Rapport . . . The Spirit of Service

To the extent that you can match another person's behavior, both verbally and non-verbally, you will mirror her experience and she will feel in synch with you. This mirroring is the essence of what is called rapport.

You relax in your conversations with people when you are consciously and/or unconsciously able to mirror back that you understand what they are saying. Rapport represents a common base from which communication can begin. The resultant feelings of trust, comfort, openness, and confidence produce cooperation.

Most rapport is built upon this sameness. Again, it is not so much what you say but how you say things that communicates this sameness. In good communication, each person gets the impression he is speaking the same language, on the same wavelength, on the same page, etc.

However, poor communication is the most frequently reported single major source of frustration in companies (Beech, Burns, & Sheffield 1983).

Learning the Language of Service

“. . . this need to communicate . . . in my view, lies at the very root of language” (Tomatis, 1990, p. 136). Tomatis went on to say: “Language, too, possesses a physical dimension. By causing vibrations in the surrounding air, language becomes a sort of invisible arm by which we can ‘touch’ the person listening to us in every sense of the term” (p. 137).

Experts say that you spend approximately 80% of each day communicating. Of that time, 45% is spent listening, 30% speaking, 16% reading, and 9% writing.
Additionally, communication is said to be 7% words, 38% tone of voice and 55% physiology or body language as represented in the chart below.

Since most CSRs don’t see their customers face to face, only the first two are important, but inflection and tone of voice have far more impact than the words. Because the customer cannot see you, how you say something exaggerates the positive and negative impressions of what you say enormously.

Listen to what your customer does and does not say. How it is said is much more important than the content. Is there a sharp tone to the customer’s voice? Sarcasm? Provocation? Antagonism? Is there a particular tone to your voice? Often you have a tone you are unaware of until someone points it out. My husband says sometimes I use a critical tone of voice he really doesn’t like. It’s my parent or teacher voice. My dog leaves the room when she hears it! She’s my red flag: when my dog leaves the room, I know I’m using that tone, whether I like it or not!

You take in information by using your senses as to what you see, hear, and feel. When you make initial contact with a person, he or she will probably be thinking in one of three main representational systems: visual, auditory, or kinesthetic (feeling sensation in the body). Research indicates everyone uses all three, but everyone has a favorite.

Communication is a learned behavior. If you learned negative patterns, you can release and replace them with positive ones. While it is true you cannot control how the customer talks to you, you can control your own response to that customer and greatly influence the course of the conversation.
For example, try mirroring the customer’s speaking pace. If you talk faster than the customer, the customer may feel rushed. If you speak too slowly, they could lose focus and think you less expert (people who speak more rapidly are often perceived as being more intelligent than those who speak more slowly).

Try matching their breathing, favorite phrases, or their vocabulary. Be careful not to do it too closely. If they think you’re mimicking or making fun of them, then all attempts to build rapport will fail. However, the sooner you find common ground with a customer, the sooner you will be able to communicate at a comfortable level, and the more efficient and effective the call resolution will be.

You can also match the customer’s volume of speaking. Have fun with this. Matching another person’s way of speaking in your conversations can be a game you might want to try at home to begin with before trying it on your customers.

**Whom Are You Talking To?**

Part of what helps to establish rapport is to be aware of whom you are talking to. Keep in mind that customers often have a predominant intention, and if you are aware of what it could be, you can often identify it early and head off potential misunderstandings. Here are some of the fears, biases, and intentions CSRs commonly encounter:

- I’m afraid of being taken advantage of.
- I’m afraid I might have made a mistake.
- I don’t feel able to control the situation.
- I want to win/dominant/overpower.
- My question/complaint/concern is not important.
- I’m not going to be understood.
- I can’t win with a big company like yours; the deck is stacked against me.
- I’m wasting my time and probably yours, too.
- You’re going to win and, therefore, I’m going to lose.

No matter what the customer’s attitude or fear, learning to identify and match his main representational or processing system can be very useful.

With this in mind, determine your own as well as the customer’s preferred mode of absorbing information, and pay particular attention to what you say. You can identify preferred modes by noting which phrases you most often use in conversations. Here is a sample list for each of the three main channels of communication.
Visual Processing
If you are a visual person, you use words or phrases like:

- It appears to me that
- It looks like
- In light of the circumstances
- A bird’s eye view
- You can plainly see
- Imagine if you will

Appropriate responses to customers who are visual could include:

- I see your viewpoint
- I’ve got the picture
- Is that clear?
- Let me show you

Auditory Processing
If you are an auditory person, you use words or phrases like:

- I hear what you’re saying
- That sounds good
- Listen to this
- Pay attention to

Responses could be any of the following:

- Let’s talk about it
- That was loud and clear
- I’m tuned in
- That was clear as a bell

Kinesthetic Processing
The kinesthetic person uses gut and intuition to make decisions. If you are in this category, you would use the following words and phrases:

- It feels like
- This is a pain in the neck
Let's start from scratch
Come to grips with

Responses could be:

Let me walk you through this
Hang in there
We'll get this handled

When in doubt, use all three and you can’t go wrong. For example:

“I heard what you said (auditory) and I see your point of view (visual). I would the same way in your circumstances.” (kinesthetic)

What Language Are You Speaking?

Another way to build rapport is offered by Transactional Analysis (TA), which uses a simple but powerful model to help analyze what people do and say to one another. In his book I’m Okay, You’re Okay, Thomas Harris explains how people interact in three different expressions, regardless of their age: Parent, Adult, and Child. He calls each of these expressions an ego state, a collection of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Both you and your customer can assume any of these roles, as shown in the figure below.

**TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS**

![Transactional Analysis Diagram]

YOU

CUSTOMER
In the Parent ego state resides the attitudes and behaviors you learned from external sources, primarily parents.

The Adult ego state lives in current reality and is the objective gatherer of information. This is where intelligence, adaptability, and computing dispassionately live.

The Child ego state contains your early experiences, responses, and attitudes developed toward the world, yourself, and others.

A complementary transaction occurs when a message sent from a specific state gets the predicted response from a specific state in the other person. For example, a customer calls with:

“I am interested in receiving information from an ad I saw in the XYZ Magazine” (Adult)

“Thank you for calling. We will be happy to take care of this for you. Let me take down your information…” (Adult)

This is Adult to Adult, as shown in this figure.

It also can work as follows:

“I’m so angry. This is the third time I’m calling. I could throw this phone out the window I’m so mad!” (Child)

“I’m so sorry to hear that. Something has made you so angry you’d throw the phone out the window? Is that how it is?” (Adult)
The figure below represents this Child-to-Adult, Adult-to-Child dialogue.

YOU

CUSTOMER

The above examples are the expected responses that were appropriate to the stimulus. Of course, we all know that this does not always happen. A crossed transaction occurs when an unexpected response occurs. Perhaps an inappropriate state is activated, and the lines of transacting are crossed. For example, a customer calls with:

“Can you help me? I was supposed to receive a credit this week, and so far it hasn’t arrived.” (Adult)

“I told you that when I got it, you would get it! You shouldn’t be calling me again.” (Parent)

The figure on the next page shows how Adult spoke as if to Adult, but Parent answered as if to Child.

Quite often the way the customer expresses his or her personality invites you to respond a specific way. For example, if the customer sounds parental, you may feel urged to respond as a child. Parental communication can be loving and nurturing or demanding, scolding, and authoritarian. When you hear a lot of shoulds, you are hearing a Parent ego state. Maybe you have had a customer yelling at you with a critical, judgmental tone of voice.

Child mode can be spontaneous, lively, and creative. But also the Child wants to be the center of attention and have no responsibility. Sometimes you’ll have a customer yelling in a way that sounds more like a 9-year-old having a tantrum. Does this sound like any of your customers?
In using this TA model, aim at having adult-to-adult conversations. Adult expression is non-defensive and honest, and treats the listener with consideration and respect. There may be differences, but they don’t present obstacles, simply items to be understood and addressed.

Don’t get caught up in what is being said, but more how it is said. To determine what is going on, ask yourself these questions:

How does my communication affect the way the customer is responding to me?

How does the customer’s communication influence the way I respond to him or her?

Am I being Parent? Does my language include “should,” “shouldn’t,” “always,” “never”?

Am I being Child? Am I using “I want,” “I need,” “I wish,” “I won’t,” or “I can’t”?

Am I being Adult? Respectful, open, assertive, and sensitive to the customer?

Another way to look at ourselves is through our Inner Family, as presented here with permission from Jacqui Bishop and Mary Grunte from their book, *How to Love Yourself When You Don’t Know How: Healing All Your Inner Children*. What do they mean by the Inner Family?

“Inner” refers to what exists in your internal awareness, as opposed to what exists outside the body and seen by others. “Family” refers to patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that resemble a family structure of personalities and interactions.
You may not have thought of having an Inner Family in just these terms. However, I am sure you can identify words and/or phrases that run through your brain to tell you how you are thinking, feeling, and acting—or should—in response to what's going on in your life.

When you listen carefully to the words and phrases, they begin to sound as if they are coming from particular personalities with distinct characters. As you continue to observe, it becomes clear that some of these characters sound adult, while others sound childlike. Moreover, these patterns of internal communication—both negative and positive—recall your own upbringing.

Who are the Inner Children? They are one or more young personalities we all have inside us. They are similar to outer children—loving, curious, full of emotion, intelligent, and complete. They differ from outer children in that:

- They share a physical body with an adult being—you.
- They are caught in a time warp: even though the body they inhabit is fully grown, they still think they're physically small.
- When threatened, they revert to behaviors related to unhappy events from early in their lives and recreate the sense of helplessness, rage, and fear those original events evoked.

Who is the Grownup? This is the part of you that has responsibility for carrying out all the functions of a legal adult—doing your job, driving a car, caring for yourself and your family—but most of all, caring for yourself.

To get a sense of your Inner Grownup, recall the last time you felt in control of a situation, full of energy, open, unafraid, caring, and clear about what needed to happen for you and others. If you are having trouble finding such a memory, not to worry. That doesn’t mean you don’t have an Inner Grownup. Everyone has one somewhere. It does mean that the Grownup may be underdeveloped and/or has failed to assume responsibility.

Sometimes the one in the driver’s seat isn’t the Grownup at all, but one of the Inner Children, and during those times, you will find yourself either behaving or feeling young.

For example, I often speed on the highway. Maybe it’s my teenager who loves to drive fast. But the reality is that if I get stopped and get a ticket, the teenager doesn’t get the ticket, my Grownup does! And my Grownup is responsible, not the Inner Kids, for everything that I do in the world, no matter who’s in the driver’s seat.

So when you encounter your own Inner Children wanting to take over a phone call, put your hand on your heart or belly and silently tell them that:
answering telephones isn’t their job, it’s yours, and you, the Inner Grownup, will take care of it.

Look at yourself and then your customer and use these systems to give you a frameworkrove communication skills. Practice, have fun with them, until thinking about them becomes automatic.

Jukebox

All this talk about activating various parts of ourselves or our history reminds me of an old-fashioned jukebox. You select a record title and push the button. The inner works of the jukebox retrieve that particular record. You can even watch it happen through the glass dome cover. It places the record on the player, the needle drops, and the song begins.

Customer service is like a jukebox. Through your interaction, an old “record” is activated, a button has been pushed. Maybe the customer’s tone of voice reminds you of a stern schoolteacher or a parent or sibling. That record begins to play and you are gone. No longer present to yourself or the customer, you are being pulled by your history toward that old event or feeling.

The first step back to the present is awareness. If you are aware about something, you can assert control over it. Without awareness, it stays in the unconscious or subconscious and you are at the mercy of whatever is happening. To strengthen your awareness, pay attention to your feelings. If you begin to feel antagonistic, take a moment, breathe, and look to see if it’s something in the present that bothers you or something ancient. Then choose where to stay—in the present or in the past.

The second step is to implement choices. Yes, you can always go to that old record and react, rather than respond. I encourage you to use the tools in this book to learn to make better choices.
How do you know when you’ve made a better choice? When the button gets pushed and your inner workings go for that particular record, your works come back either empty or with a blank tape. You have chosen to stay present and not go historical! Congratulations!

Making Good Communication a Habit

Good communicators need to be aware of their habits. Here’s some good information on habits, printed with permission from Earnest Larsen and Jeanette Goodstein’s book, *Who's Driving Your Bus?*

Nearly all of what you do—as much as 98%—results from habit, not from choice. Habits operate outside of the conscious mind, where choices are made.

Whatever you do regularly becomes a habit; what you practice you become good at.

Habits are living things, and like all living things, they fight to the death to stay alive. Once established, habits exist independently in our subconscious.

Habits do not exist in isolation from one another; they are systemic, that is, they form interrelated patterns, and those patterns join together to form large sets or systems.

If you want to change how you feel, you must change how you act, because if nothing changes, nothing changes. Change means doing something new; it means growth. It means taking risks, like coloring outside the lines that we have drawn for ourselves, lines that have boxed us in and stifled us. So give yourself a break and color outside the lines!

And then keep at it until acting in a new, more effective manner becomes as comfortable as acting in a self-defeating manner used to be. Put these new thoughts, attitudes and techniques to use as an experiment. Give each new way of thinking enough time to start to see them produce results. My experience tells me that people will interact with you differently.

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*Time invested in improving ourselves cuts down on time wasted in disapproving of others.*

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*You can’t make a place for yourself in the sun if you keep sitting in the shade of the family tree.*
Chapter 6

How Do I Deal with the Calls from Hell?

What are “calls from Hell?” There are three main types:

1. *It’s a Catch-22.* No matter what you recommend or offer to the customer, it doesn’t work. And finally, when you may at last have a solution, you accidentally cut him off and when you try to get him back, the operator tells you that number is no longer in service!

2. *You Feel Powerless to Help.* The customer has been truly done wrong, has paid a huge price, and there’s nothing you can do about it even though you want to, and she is justifiably furious.


When you get those calls from hell (notice I said “when,” not “if,” as these calls are part and parcel of the job), you want to defuse the situation as soon as possible. How? Simply, to let the customer rant for a bit and then to say something like, “I hear how upset you are. I would be upset if I were in your shoes, too.” “I see how angry you are.”

War Stories

I entitled this chapter “Calls from Hell” because I know every call center has them—they’re the war stories that people repeat over and over for a good laugh or a good cry. Unfortunately, the best ones I had could not be used because the company
names were too central to the stories. So I’m collecting new stories. If you have one, please send it in—or call me and I’ll take it down over the phone for the next edition.

Nobody knows about calls from hell like technical support reps (TSRs). Remember playing “telephone” as a kid, where you whisper from person to person around a room full of people? The final message had nothing to do with the original. That gives you an inkling of how customers tend to explain things to TSRs and what kind of hilarity and hysteria that can cause. For more on this, be sure to read chapter 7.

The following stories are rather tame, but they’ll serve to illustrate some points.

I called the XYZ Company and the menu said, “If you know your party’s extension, please press 1.” I pressed 1 and was prompted to “enter the five-digit extension number now.” I did as told, but somehow it didn’t take. The message kept going on and on as if I had never entered the numbers. So I pressed redial, called again, and this time pressed any number to get connected to a person. The person asked how he could help me. I said I was trying to reach extension 54321 and was unable to do so. He said, “Well, you have to call the 800 number, press 1, and enter the extension number.” I said I had done that, but that it hadn’t worked and could he please transfer me. He said, “It works for me all the time!” Oh really, I thought, this is a fine way to treat a customer! Just make me wrong. Like I am too inept to follow directions and enter a five-digit number when instructed. I responded once again with, “I tried it and it didn’t work for me. Would you please transfer me?” He said he would try, and as luck would have it, it worked. However, as relieved as I was to get transferred, I was angry!

What could he have done? Simply said:

“I’m sorry you experienced difficulty. I will be glad to transfer you. I’m sorry for any inconvenience. Have a nice day!”

When a customer is very upset, usually he wants you to hear his upset even more than he wants you to resolve whatever concern or issue he is presenting. Perhaps the issue cannot even be resolved, but you do have the ability to defuse his upset. Hearing the customer is half the battle.

Suppose you have a customer who is ranting and raving, just going off on you. Hold the earpiece away from your ear and sit there quietly until the customer takes
a breath and seems to have stopped the tirade. Then respond with a neutral tone and say seriously and sincerely, “Is there more?” Now sometimes there is, and she will say “You bet there is more,” and on she goes. Again, when there is a pause, ask “Anything else?” Ultimately she will run down, at which point respond with something like, “Wow. I hear how frustrated and angry you are. I am sorry this has upset you so much. Let’s see what we can do to straighten this out once and for all.”

By asking customers if there is more they want to add, you take them by surprise. It is the last thing they expect. They expect you to do battle with them, in which case the best they can hope for is the chance to vent their frustration. Because you won’t meet them on a battleground, except with a white flag, it literally disarms them. Having laid down weapons, you can now move onto a more productive interaction.

What about those people who have called, once, twice, perhaps three or more times and feel like they got the runaround—lots of reasons, but no results?

I called my telephone company because there was an error on my bill. A service charge was included that should have been waived for the first year. I listened to the first menu, followed directions, and was connected to the second menu. I proceeded to push the next button and was asked to input my phone number, area code first. I did as instructed. There was a ringing and a recording that said, “All our representatives are busy helping other customers. Please leave your name and number and someone will get back to you within four working days.”

Four working days I thought to myself! That is totally unacceptable! By the way, at this writing it is a month since then, and there still is no call back. In my opinion, this is an outrageous, unacceptable way to do business.

So what did I do? First, when I paid my bill, I deducted the incorrect charge. And then I told about 20 people!

When a customer finally gets a human, a win-win response to a scenario such as the above would be:

“If I or anyone at this company has offended you, I am truly sorry. It was not, and is not, my intention to do so. Let me see if we can remedy this situation to your satisfaction right now, Ms. Perkins. And again, I am truly sorry you had such an unacceptable experience.”
And keep it simple. Remember K.I.S.S.

Then there is the situation in which you extend yourself only to end up with egg on your face, despite your best intentions. Here’s an example.

The XYZ Company has a very caring CSR. She noticed two PO’s from a customer on the same day. When she checked shipping and handling charges, she found that if they were combined, she could save the customer money. So she put the two PO’s on one order, feeling pretty good about herself and how she took care of the customer.

Her manager found out what she had done and hit the roof. The customer had these two PO’s for a reason!

What could she have done?

First, she could have asked her manager if it was okay to combine the two orders. The manager could then have said, “It’s a great idea. However, you need to check with the customer. Tell them just what you told me, that if they combined the orders, they would save X amount of money in shipping charges. Would they like you to do this?” Then the customer has the choice of saying yes or no. Their two PO’s may have been for two different stores; to keep their products separate, or for any number of reasons.

Do not take it upon yourself to act in your customers’ behalf unless you have knowledge and information or direction from them to do so. What may start out as good intentions can backfire. If, in fact, the customer has no problem with these orders being combined, you have improved customer relations and probably converted a customer from satisfied to loyal!

Occasionally upset customers use inappropriate language and even use curse words at you. What can you do? First, remember, it is not your job to suffer abuse from anyone, let alone a customer! Reply to them in a way that invites them back into Adult:

“Excuse me, I really want to help you. However, I find it very difficult to hear what you are saying when you use language like that. I’d appreciate your explaining the situation to me in a way that lets me stay with you so we can handle your problem, Mr. Taylor.”
Others from the Field

Thanks so much for all your responses to my requests for stories of real-life calls. What follows is the best of yours representing the good, the bad, and the ugly. Names and recognizable references have been altered to protect the innocent and not-so-innocent. The stories come from a variety of industries.

Office Supplies

My most recent experience involved getting quotes for office supplies for a major training session I was putting on. Since I didn’t have a catalog, I took pains to be very clear (speaking in muscle words) with each rep I contacted, letting them know precisely how much of what kind of product I wanted. I got quotes and the next day called back the most competitive supplier, eager to give them my order and get on with my day.

However, it turned out that the person I’d spoken with, whose name I neglected to get, had made some errors. This rep said yes, they could match one of my prices, but forget about the other one. When I pressed her, she said she would take it to the powers-that-be at corporate headquarters and get back to me before day’s end. Fair enough. In the meantime, I called the other vendors to verify their prices. The rep left a message on my voice mail saying that the best they could do was meet the first price, but not the second. I didn’t like that message, so I called to speak directly to the rep. We went around a few times about the prices.

To make a long story short, the rep said, “The price that other rep quoted you was wrong. No question about it. Corporate told me to not give you this price. However, they did not speak to you on the phone, so they don’t have a sense of you or your company. I have spoken to you more than once, and you know what? I am going to go out on a limb and take it upon myself to give it to you for what you were originally quoted.”

I was surprised. Somewhere along the line, she had changed her mind. I received my order the next day and was/am a very satisfied customer. You can be sure I’ll do business with that company again.

My guess is that the rep had “empowerment.” That is to say, corporate may have said, “We want you to hold the line on these prices. However, you’re the one in conversation with this customer, so it’s really your call.” She decided to exercise her authority. I believe she made a great choice, not because it’s me per se but because she thought about and heard the customer. I’ve told many people about this company and my conversation!
Cosmetics

A woman purchased an expensive lipliner at an upscale cosmetics boutique. It resembled a fountain pen in that it had a cap that snapped in place. The salesperson was extremely courteous and pleasant. On the receipt, he wrote his name and number in case he could ever be of assistance in the future.

About a month later, the cap was constantly loose and coming off. Not long after, it flipped off and got lost.

Finding the receipt, the customer called the store and asked for the pleasant salesperson. He was unavailable at the time, and whoever answered asked if he could be of help. She told him her tale of woe, asking if perhaps there were any extra caps available. No, there were no extra caps, but would she hold on, please? The store manager came on the line, apologized for the woman's experience, and said he would send her a new lipliner. Beyond that, he would notify his inventory manager to be sure there were no other faulty caps! Not surprisingly, that woman has gone out of her way to buy at that boutique ever since.

Insurance/Medical

This story comes from the military. It's complicated and requires a little background: It used to be that military personnel went to a military hospital and received treatment. Because that proved too costly, a new policy was put in place that required one to go to a civilian doctor and then send claims to a contractor who handled the reimbursement. As the process was very slow, actually receiving payment involved speaking to a claims department call center five, six, seven, or more calls to get claims paid.

Having set the background, here is the story our informant related, in his own words:

I once made the mistake of being honest. The contractor mistakenly sent the check to me instead of the doctor. No problem. I endorsed the check over to the doctor. Big mistake! I should have deposited and spent it. The contractor works on the assumption that all patients and doctors are crooks. If you don't act in a way that fulfills their expectations, it messes everything up. I received a letter saying they mistakenly paid me and were going to recoup the money from me. The tone of the letter was that it was my fault they sent me the check and that I was a crook because I received it.

I wrote saying I had given the money to the doctor. The call center said they wouldn't recoup from me and then proceeded to recoup on the claims I
submitted over the following three months. When I called the center again, they assured me they wouldn’t recoup from me.

It turns out they issued a check to the doctor after I had already paid the doctor. The doctor’s secretary called, worried that the FBI was going to come get her for receiving a check after already being paid by me. I suggested they mail the check back. Big mistake! That’s being honest. They wanted a canceled check in the doctor’s name to make it easier if they ever wanted to audit the doctor. So they sent yet another check to the doctor. Finally I received a check to reimburse me for the recoupments.

This is actually a very abbreviated version of the story I was told, which took pages and pages and involved many people. And there’s yet another story—same system, more runaround, but space doesn’t permit me to include it.

Retail

World-class customer service is more hope than reality. The following is more typical:

A customer entering a retail shoe store noticed two salespeople. One was helping a customer, while the other was staring out the window. The customer found a shoe he liked, showed it to the available salesperson, who took the shoe and returned shortly with a box, unopened, and handed it to the customer. The customer tried on the shoes, liked them, carried them to the register, where the salesperson rang up the sale.

What do you notice? There was no conversation at all between the salesperson and the customer! Why is this so important? Because that salesperson passed up the opportunity to begin building a loyal customer relationship.

Lest you despair over the quality of customer service, let me share with you the message I found on my pillow in an Iowa hotel room.

To Our Guests

In ancient times there was a prayer for “The Stranger Within Our Gates”

Because this hotel is a human institution to serve people, and not solely a money making organization, we hope that God will grant you peace and rest while you are under our roof.

May this room and hotel be your second home. May those you love be near you in thoughts and dreams. Even though we may not get to know you, we hope that you will be comfortable and happy as if you were in your own house.

May the business that brought you our way prosper. May every call you make and every message you receive add to your joy. When you leave, may your journey be safe.

We are all travelers. From “birth till death” we travel between the eternities. May these days be pleasant for you, profitable for society, helpful for those you meet, and a joy to those who know and love you best.

(Author unknown; reprinted with permission from John Q. Hammons)
Conflict Management

Some conflicts are hardly noticeable as they ebb and flow through our daily encounters. Others grow into intense disputes that spawn interpersonal tragedies. In his book *Managing Differences*, Dan Dana lists three levels of conflict:

- **BLIP**
- **CLASH**
- **CRISIS**

**The Blip**

Blips are inevitable. For most people, few days spent in intensely interdependent interaction with other people are entirely free of minor annoyances. However, blips pose no threat to the relationship, nor do they produce disharmony that breaks down teamwork.

For example, suppose a co-worker used your coffee cup to water plants in the office and you asked her to use something else, and the next day she was using your coffee cup again. If you are otherwise cordial and cooperative, this annoyance probably can be handled by reminding the person of your request or wishes.

However, sometimes reminders don’t work and the situation deteriorates. As blips accumulate and tension mounts, communication breaks down, sometimes despite your best efforts. How do you know when the line between a blip and a clash has been crossed? Indications are:

- repeated disputes about the same issue, perhaps spread over days/weeks;
- arguing over an increasing number of issues;
- feeling less cooperative toward the other person;
- feeling less trusting of the other person’s sincere good will;
- remaining angry at the other person for a longer period, perhaps hours/days; and
- beginning to privately question the value of the relationship.

You are then headed toward a clash.

**The Clash**

Clashes threaten the form of the basic relationship, but do not end a relationship. For example, your co-worker on a team project made a number of mistakes that you had to work overtime to correct. When confronted, he shrugs it off, dismissing your complaints as unimportant. Your resentment grows because you are unable to get him to acknowledge your needs.
In responding to a clash, it’s important to avoid some common pitfalls. Hunters in the jungle fight or flee, but these are not suitable strategies here. So don’t walk away, hang up, or otherwise terminate contact as a retaliatory tactic.

Nor does it work to use threats, intimidation, or coercion to pressure the other person to comply with your wishes. These are power plays—where one person tries to impose a one-sided solution.

The Crisis

A clash has escalated to a crisis when:

- you have decided to terminate the relationship;
- you fear that the other will terminate the relationship; or
- you sense the relationship is unhealthy, and fear that you are vulnerable to emotional harm by remaining in it.

For example, your boss rates you “unsatisfactory” in your latest performance appraisal. Believing the evaluation to be unfair, you attempt to speak to him, only to be told it is a closed issue. Your resentment about not being given an opportunity to rebut the negative appraisal is eroding your loyalty to your employer.

If you want to save your job—or your self-respect—a conciliatory gesture is needed here, a behavior that signals a shift in attitude from me-against-you to us-against-the-problem. Usually the gesture is verbal, but it doesn’t have to be. Its major purpose is to demonstrate your desire and willingness to resolve the conflict in a mutually acceptable way.

It feels risky to express any conciliatory gesture, because making it exposes one to further rejection. Even so, no crisis can be resolved satisfactorily without taking that risk.

Forms of conciliatory gestures are:

- apologizing;
- expressing regret for one’s past behavior;
- conceding on a contested issue;
- offering a compromise;
- expressing empathy;
- recognizing the legitimacy of the other’s point of view;
- revealing one’s own underlying needs/emotional issues;
- disclosing one’s thoughts, feelings, motives, and past history as they pertain to the conflict;
- asking for honest feedback;
expressing positive feelings for the other—such as affection, admiration, respect; accepting personal responsibility for part of the problem; and initiating a search for win-win solutions.

We all experience conflict in our lives, simply because no two people are alike, and we interact with one another. Our uniqueness guarantees that there will be conflict. Knowing how to handle conflict doesn’t decrease the number of times conflict occurs. Why not? Because conflict is a part of all our relationships, personal and professional, and the workplace is no exception. Since we all have our personal values, experiences, beliefs, and perceptions, there is always the chance that our values will clash with someone else’s.

All conflict is simply difference. For instance, the customer wants one thing, you want another. You may even both want the same thing, but not at the same time. My husband and I both like Chinese food, but we don’t always want to have it on the same day. Every encounter with someone whose views, desires, and needs differ from yours has the potential for friction, wasted time, and bruised feelings.

The big problem we have with conflict is that very few of us were taught to think win/win. Most of us think win/lose. One of us is going to win, and one of us is going to lose.

It results from competitive conditioning: In my family, my parents compared me with my sister and I went on to do the same with my children. If my sister got a better grade than I did, she got rewarded and I didn’t. She won. I lost. In school, if I got an A and someone else got a C, I thought I was the better person. I win, they lose. Sports continues the conditioning. We were all trained to win for the team. When we win, the other team loses. When we look at our careers or politics, someone wins and someone loses. In law, there are two sides, and they go up against one another, and one wins, another loses.

What this conditioning does is blind us to opportunities to collaborate, to cooperate for an optimum solution. As it turns out, the collaborative approach is useful more often than not. According to Deutsch (1994), most conflicts are mixed-motive conflicts in which the parties involved have both cooperative and competitive interests. (Cooperative is associated with high concern for self and other, whereas competitive is associated with high concern for self and low concern for other.)

In today’s world, you often find yourself in a competitive situation with customers. It feels like a tug of war, or like one person is pushing up against another. What happens? Absolutely nothing, except you both get tired. But no one gets anywhere.
In fact, the more you respond in kind, the more you fuel the customer’s upset. A shouting match can go on for days and get absolutely nowhere.

If someone raises her voice to you, the automatic reaction is for you to raise your voice back in defense. Let’s say a customer is calling and saying:

“I have just received my part. This is the second time it was shipped to me, and it still doesn’t work. What is the matter with you people? Can’t you make a decent piece of equipment? I can’t believe you’re still in business with the way you operate!!!”

Your first response might be to defend yourself, your company, and its products with something like:

“I have been working here for 10 years and our products are terrific. I don’t know what you are complaining about. We have never had a problem with this item before!!”

This sets up the customer to retort:

“Oh yeah, well this isn’t the first time this has happened, etc., etc.”

No one wins. And it takes a lot of energy to calm yourself and then the customer down.

Now your initial reaction (kill mode) will still be there, and some people are so obnoxious that you will want to rip the skin off their faces (a common feeling)!

Breathe, look beyond your first reaction, and focus on the result you want (service the customer, keep your job, maintain balance, and have win/win situations in all circumstances of your professional and personal life). What path will get it for you with the least expenditure of time and energy? Not doing battle, that’s for sure! On the contrary, when you refuse to respond in kind, the customer has no one to argue with, and you can now move into a more productive conversation.
Until the customer has finished carrying on, he can’t hear facts, or requests for account numbers, PO numbers, or the like. This too will refuel the customer. However, if you remain calm and wait, most will run out of steam fairly quickly.

Patience is necessary here. Don’t be afraid customers will go on for days. It doesn’t happen and if you try to stop them too soon, they will get refueled and start all over. Your listening is sharp enough to hear the build-up and catch them as they are about to come down the other side. At this point, they are ready to let you help them.

Now you can ask your questions, feed them the facts, in a calm, paced voice, using their name as well as yours in the conversation. I think you can see this takes much less energy than it would to fight with the customer and get nowhere except for bruised feelings on both sides of the telephone.

C.A.R.E.

Care for your customers, so you both experience winning. That is to say, you both walk away feeling good about yourselves and the interaction, and everyone wins, including your company. Contrary to what most people believe, a win-win is possible, even without a resolution to the problem or complaint. What most customers want to know is that you did the absolute best you could.

The acronym C.A.R.E. means:

C  cooperate . . . co = with. To work together; unite to produce a result.

It is possible to handle a conflict where you and the customer stand side by side to face an issue or problem, rather than opposing one another with the problem separating you.

If a customer is upset, hear the upset and acknowledge that you hear it, and then move on to a more productive interaction. “I hear how upset you are.” “I’m sorry you are so upset.” “Thank you for taking the time to call us with your upset.” “Now let’s see what we can do to assist you in this matter.” “May I have your account number please?” “Our records indicate that . . .”

A  Agree with . . . have a good effect on.

When you agree with whatever a customer is saying, usually it’s what she least expects. “I hear how upset you are. I would be upset too if I were in your shoes, Mrs. Jones.” This doesn’t mean you are saying she is right! It means that you can see it from her point of view and in doing so, you might feel the same way.

R  rephrase . . . re = once more. Phrase = combination of words. Say in a new or different way.
Simply tell the person what she's saying. Give her back her words. “If I understand what you are saying, Mrs. Jones, this is the second time you have called, your bill is still $300 off, and so far no credit has come through. Am I correct so far?” The response you get will amaze you. Customers do not expect to be heard.

Rephrasing is also a great way to call an error to a customer’s attention. Give him back what he said.

“Let me see if I have this right. Today is June 1st and you are ordering 150 of Item #X to be delivered by December 15th to your New Jersey location. Is this correct, Mr. Roy?”

“Did I say December 15th? My goodness. Thank you. We need this order by July 15th!”

Often the person will see his error without any prompting. Why? Because he heard it phrased differently by another person, you, without your using any judgmental or critical language. If you think the error remains unnoticed, repeat that part again. “This is for December 15th? Is that right?” If no correction comes from the customer, ship the item for December 15th.

Empathize . . . The ability to put oneself in another person’s shoes and see things from that person’s point of view.

Rosalind Dymond (1949) aptly described it as “... the imaginative transposing of oneself into the thinking feeling and acting of another and so structuring the world as he does.” For example:

“Wow, Mrs. Jones, I can see (or hear) what you’re saying. I would feel exactly the same way if it happened to me.” Again, you are not saying she is right. You are acknowledging what she has said and that you can see it from her point of view.

Empathy is truly one of the most fundamental qualities needed to succeed in customer service and a very high form of listening. When you listen empathetically, you are listening with the intention to understand. Steven Covey, in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, calls this: Seek first to understand, then to be understood.

Here's a true story in which the CSR did a great job:

I had my car repaired at a station that I trust and have been using for about nine years. I am on the road daily, keeping numerous appointments and timelines and rely heavily on my car. I leave the station with assurance that my
car has been repaired, road tested, re-tested, and is in tip-top shape. This is
good. I am very pleased and confident in my choice of stations. One time,
however, I was on the road no more than ten minutes when the car started
putt-putting and was not going up a slight incline in the road. I pulled into the
nearest gas station and called. In a very high, loud voice, I said, “This is Mrs.
D’Ausilio. I just paid you $800 to fix my car. And I’m calling you because I am
stuck. Do you know how many people depend on my being on time? I use my
car in business and must be where I say I am going to be in a timely fashion. I
gave you $800 and now I have trouble. I trusted you and now look what
happened. How could you do this to me? What is wrong with you!!!!”

Very softly, he said, “You’re really upset, Mrs. D.”

“Upset,” I said, “You bet I am. I was on my way to an appointment and
now I can’t get there. I have to call and cancel and hopefully reschedule. You
had my car for two days, and it cost me so much money and here I am stuck!”

He said, “Wow, you’re really upset, Mrs. D.”

With that, I gave up. I knew he heard me, really heard my upset, and I was
defused. “Yes,” I said, calmer now, “I am upset. So what are you going to do
about it?”

He said, “I will send a tow truck to bring the car in and we will fix it. In
the meantime, I personally am coming to see what I can do. I will be there in
about 10 minutes. And Mrs. D., I am sorry for any inconvenience this caused
you. We will find what is wrong and remedy it for you once and for all.”

He heard me, he acknowledged hearing me, he heard my upset, he acknowl-
edged my upset. I didn’t need to go on and on any longer and we could then move
to a solution. Had he argued with me and said, “Mrs. D., we did everything we could
for that car. We road tested it and fixed this, that and the other thing,” or said this
in a defensive or argumentative tone, I would have been fueled with more anger and
would still be blasting him!

Don’t confuse empathy with sympathy. Someone once said (author unknown)
that “empathy is placing oneself in the other person’s shoes, but sympathy is putting
them on and feeling the pinch.”

Complaining customers want you to feel the pinch they are feeling. Consider
the customer who clearly believes that no matter what you say, it won’t help and he
won’t get what he needs. Well, remember he initiated the call. Somewhere a part of
him still hopes to be well taken care of. You have the opportunity with each call to
turn these people around. As Clint Eastwood would say, Make Their Day! Give
them empathetic responsiveness.
Sometimes customers’ expectations stay negative throughout the conversation. Why? Because they are committed to being right no matter what. When this happens, keep feeding back to them what it is you heard, put yourself in their shoes, and ultimately, in spite of themselves, they will move into a more productive conversation.

Is this easy? No. However, bear in mind that customer expectations are low. They do not expect to be taken care of well. So you don’t have to do a lot to make a difference.

Take responsibility for your communication. When you do so, you are more productive and feel better about yourself.

A little bit of quality will always make ’em smile;
A little bit of courtesy will ring ’em in a mile;
A little bit of friendliness will tickle ’em, it’s plain—
And a little bit of service will bring ’em in again.

Avoid shaming, blaming, justifying, and personalizing. To shame someone is certainly a lose/lose situation. You don’t feel good about yourself, and the customer walks away feeling lousy too.

Laying blame doesn’t resolve anything either and is win/lose. When you make it the customer’s fault, it may feel like you have a momentary win, but you lose the customer.

Justifying behavior that is inappropriate is lose/lose. It’s like burying yourself in a conversation. You get deeper and deeper and can’t seem to get out. We’ve all had those!

Marshall Thurber, of MetaQuality, Inc., shows how behaviors that don’t lead to win/win are not productive. Waste can be defined simply as anything that does not add value.

To avoid blaming, I recommend a win/win method called neutralizing the conversation. This means avoiding using the pronoun “you” or implying the customer caused the problem.

Instead of:

Responsibility
Shame ]
Lay Blame ] = Waste
Justify ]
“You forgot to enclose the check!”

You could say:

“The check appears to have inadvertently been omitted from your order.”

The first sentence leaves no room for the possibility that the check could have been lost, stolen, misposted, or misplaced, and puts blame on the customer. Your objective is to communicate that the payment or the paperwork is missing, not to assign responsibility or make a customer feel stupid.

The second is a no-fault approach which suggests that an abstract third party may have forgotten to enclose the check. Go for the result you are looking for without making the customer wrong.

W. Edwards Deming, the American who helped create Japan’s quality-conscious productive industrial system after World War II, is famous for his theories. I don’t want to get too technical here, but I do want to talk about two that stand out and are applicable. One is to aim for perfection, not for an acceptable error rate.

If we go for an acceptable error rate—an acceptable percentage of dissatisfied customers—then we are bound to have that percentage of dissatisfied customers.

The second theory is that 85% of everything that happens in any situation is determined in the first 15%. If something is not working, that means the problem is in the first 15%. What does this look like?

Let’s imagine, if you will, an archer aiming for a bull’s eye. The path the arrow takes is fixed by the archer in that moment of release. In mid-air the arrow’s course has already been decided by how it was sent forth by the archer. See the illustration.

How does this apply to customer service? If 85% of the impact of what you do is determined in the first 15% of the process, ask yourself, how did this call begin? What happened right in the beginning that determined how the call went?

Then ask yourself, “What would have been possible if I had been more conscious in those first few sentences?” Can you see the possibility of the outcome being different? If in the first 15 seconds I
had been able to really hear the customer's concern, I could have responded appropriately and probably in less time.

It pays to direct particularly close attention to those first few sentences. They will tell you everything you need to know. That doesn't mean you don't or won't have to ask other questions if the information isn't clear. It does mean that the tone of voice, any upset, concern, frustration, fear, or disappointment will show up in those first words out of the customer's mouth and yours. How you handle these will determine the course of the remainder of the conversation!

**Undercommit, Overperform**

If you know a letter will be generated and/or a product sent to a customer in seven to ten days, tell the customer two weeks. When she receives it before the fourteenth day, you are a hero. If you tell her seven to ten days and it isn’t there on the tenth day, her reaction may range from mild frustration to a full-blown “What kind of an operation are you running anyhow!”

I’ve noticed that airlines use this strategy. My itinerary says my flight takes two hours. After I am up in the air, the pilot comes on, introduces himself, and says something like, “Welcome, ladies and gentleman, my name is Captain Kirk, and I am happy you are flying with us today. We have good news for you. Our flying time today is only 1 hour and 32 minutes.” I say to myself, “YES, I will be arriving early, perfect!” The key words here are “flying time.” This does not include taxiing on the runway for takeoffs or landings. When you add another fifteen minutes on either end, what do you have? My original two-hour flight!

And here’s the thing: Even though I know this, each time I hear the captain tell us how lucky we are today, I get excited and am so glad I took this specific flight and this particular airline.

**Ask Five Great Problem-Solving Questions**

Here are five very simple problem-solving questions from Tony Robbins, the nation's expert in the psychology of peak performance and personal, professional, and organizational “turnaround.” The following excerpt is from his 30 Day Personal Power Series on Tape (© Anthony Robbins. Reprinted with permission. 800/445-8183).

I encourage you to use these questions each time an issue or problem arises, personal or professional.
1. What’s great about this or what’s good about this? If your first response is “nothing,” modify the question to what could be great about this? Then make yourself answer the question.

2. What’s not perfect yet? What does the question presuppose? That it’s going to be perfect. It changes your state of mind immediately.

3. What am I willing to do to make it the way I want it? Listen to the presupposition here. The assumption is I am willing to do something about it and that I can. What a great way to look at the world! It makes you focus on solutions, rather than problems.

4. What am I no longer willing to do in order to have things the way I want them? (give up complaining about them?).

5. Most important: How can I do what’s necessary to get this job done, and enjoy the process? This is a critical question. (When you ask a good question, your brain tends to give you a good answer.)

Jot down these questions, and then apply them to a problem or a challenge you are currently facing. Run through all five questions, writing down the answers. Solve your problem and maybe you will find a new opportunity for more fun.

Measuring the Financial Cost of Organizational Conflict

Unmanaged employee conflict is perhaps the largest reducible cost in organizations today—and probably the least recognized. It is estimated that over 65% of performance problems result from strained relationships between employees—not from deficits in individual employees’ skill or motivation.

Interdependent workplace relationships are a fertile soil from which conflict can sprout. Organizations are lush gardens hosting many flourishing varieties of this annoying and resource-sapping weed.

Now let’s look at how this weed saps financial health and vitality. Use the worksheet on page 106 to calculate the strictly financial costs that a particular conflict incurs, aside from its impact on quality of worklife and job satisfaction.

Worksheet Instructions

First, identify one conflict that is very familiar to you, either by having been a participant or a close observer. It may be a conflict that is still current or one that
happened in the past. Jot down a key word or phrase to help you stay targeted on that particular conflict.

The "cost factors" listed on the worksheet refer to the primary ways that conflict incurs financial costs. Not all cost factors are relevant to every conflict, but every conflict incurs cost by several of these means. Analyze your targeted conflict by asking yourself, with regard to each cost factor in turn, “Did/does the conflict I am analyzing have the effect of . . . ?” If you answer yes, calculate its dollar cost in the ways suggested, and enter your estimate in the space provided. When you are completed, add the column to derive an estimated total cost.

**Factor 1: Wasted Time**

Invariably, conflict distracts employees from otherwise productive use of their time. A classic management study by Kenneth W. Thomas and W. H. Schmidt revealed that up to 30% of a typical manager’s time is spent dealing with conflict. A more current study of practicing managers by Carol Watson and Richard Hoffman showed that 42% of their time is spent reaching agreements with others when conflicts occur.

Estimate the amount of time wasted by each person who is/was affected by the team conflict. Then calculate the financial cost as a fraction of monthly or annual salary or wage, including the value of insurance and other fringe benefits (typically at least 50% of gross salary).

For example, let’s say each of four employees wasted 40 hours during a six-month period because conflict disrupted their work. And let’s say the annual salary of each employee is $40,000. Forty hours is one week of work time, which is one-fifty-second of one year’s salary. A year’s salary is generally about two-thirds of total compensation. So the dollar value of the four employees’ wasted time is $4,615.38.

**Factor 2: Reduced Decision Quality**

Decisions made under conditions of conflict are always inferior to decisions made when cooperation prevails. This is true for two reasons. First, we know that good decisions must be based on an optimum quantity and quality of objective information. If information is withheld or distorted by those who are depended upon to provide it (which nearly always happens when information providers are in conflict with the decision maker), then the decision cannot be the best one possible.

Second, if conflict is present between people who share decision-making authority, as in the case of team-based decisions, the resulting decisions are likely to be contaminated by the power struggles between those people. A precise estimate of
cost is probably impossible. But ask yourself, “What opportunities were lost by poor decisions that were affected by this conflict, and what might have been gained if a better decision had been made?”

Considering these influences on decisions made by the people affected by your target conflict, estimate their cost and put the figure on the line provided. Place a conservative (i.e., on the low side of the range of its potential financial impact) figure there, even though the actual cost may be highly variable and very uncertain. I suggest 50% of the dollar impact of decisions that were made while the conflict was going on (e.g., estimate $2,500 if a team was disputing whether to purchase a $5,000 piece of equipment.)

**Factor 3: Loss of Skilled Employees**

Organizations invest in employees’ skills by paying a premium salary upon hiring and by providing training thereafter. Exit interviews, which ascertain reasons for terminations, reveal that chronic unresolved conflict acts as a decisive factor in at least 50% of all such departures.

Conflict accounts for up to 90% of involuntary departures, with the probable exception of staff reductions due to downsizing and restructuring. Raytheon Corporation determined that replacing an engineer costs 150% of his/her total annual compensation. This determination was reached by accounting for lost productivity, recruiting fees, interviewing time, staffing department employee salaries, orientation and retraining costs, etc. So replacing an employee whose annual salary is $40,000 incurs a cost of $90,000. If one or more employees departed at least partially because of the conflict you are analyzing, include the cost to your organization on the worksheet.

For example, using conservative estimates, let’s say that one employee voluntarily resigned, and that his/her decision to leave was only 50% due to the conflict. Using Raytheon’s figures, the dollar cost of this factor is half of $90,000, or $45,000.

**Factor 4: Restructuring**

Often, workflow is redesigned in an attempt to reduce the amount of interaction required between employees in conflict. Unfortunately, the restructured work is usually less efficient than the original design, which would have been satisfactory if the conflicting employees had been able to work together. As with factor 2 above, it is impossible to calculate the resulting inefficiency precisely, but your subjective assessment will give a reasonable estimate. Again, be sure to enter a conservative (low side) figure
on your worksheet. A guideline would be 10% of the combined salaries of the employees whose relationship was restructured for the time the restructuring was in effect. Example: Estimate $8,000 if four employees, each of whom is paid $40,000 annually, were reassigned to different task groups for a six-month period—i.e., $40,000 \times 4 \div 10 \div 2$. The rationale for this estimate is that the financial value of employees (i.e., “human resources”) to an employer for performing specified work is, by definition, roughly equivalent to their salaries. If that work must later be restructured to control interpersonal conflict, the redesigned work relationship is probably not the most efficient allocation of the human resources.

**Factor 5: Sabotage/Theft/Damage**

Studies reveal a direct correlation between prevalence of employee conflict and the amount of damage and theft of inventory and equipment. And covert sabotage of work processes and of management’s efforts usually occurs when employees are angry at their employer. Much of the cost incurred by this factor is hidden from management’s view, excused as accidental or inadvertent errors. This cost is almost certainly greater than you may realize. Again, enter a conservative figure on the worksheet. A reasonable guideline would be 10% of the acquisition cost of equipment, tools, and supplies that conflicted employees use in performing their jobs. Example: the cost is $2,500 if an operator of a $20,000 machine in a manufacturing environment is angry toward his/her supervisor ($2,000 for careless operation and maintenance of the machine, plus $500 for unnecessary scrap and waste of raw materials).

**Factor 6: Lowered Job Motivation**

From time to time, most employees experience erosion of job motivation due to the stress of trying to get along with a “difficult person.” As a baseline figure, use the productivity that would have occurred had there been no conflict. Then estimate a percentage decline of that productivity. Multiply that percentage times the dollar value of the total compensation of the person(s) affected to derive a figure for factor 6.

For example, let’s say that the productivity of three employees was eroded by 20% for a period of three months. Using figures similar to those above, the three employees’ total compensation was 3 \times 60,000, or $180,000. Since one-fourth of this amount ($45,000) was earned during the three-month period, the conflict cost the organization $9,000.
Factor 7: Lost Work Time

Absenteeism has been shown to correlate with job stress, especially the stress associated with anger toward co-workers. This stress, combined with disregard for how one's absence impacts others, leads to employees' choosing to take time off—sometimes excused as a sick day. Moreover, medical science has determined that nearly every physical illness and injury, from viral infections to cancer to workplace accidents, is partially psychogenic—that is, they are caused in part by psychological or emotional conditions. The portion of lost work time that has resulted from your targeted conflict is largely hidden from your direct view, with the possible exception of your own absences. Still, you can arrive at an estimate by prorating daily or monthly compensation. Again, be sure to enter a conservative estimate on your worksheet. A good guideline is 10% of annual salaries of employees in conflict. Example: the cost is $18,000 if all six members of a department, each of whom is paid $25,000 annually, are in ongoing conflict with their supervisor, who is paid $30,000, throughout the year, i.e., \((25,000 \times 6) \times 10\) + \((30,000 \div 10)\).

Factor 8: Health Costs

As mentioned under factor 7, illnesses and injuries requiring medical attention are partially psychogenic, and conflict contributes to their psychogenesis. Since the rate of claims affects the premium paid by an employer to its insurer, insurance is an indirect cost of workplace conflict. Estimate the percentage of the psychogenic component of medical problems that have occurred while your targeted conflict has gone on, and multiply this percentage by the premium increase imposed by your organization's insurer.

Admittedly, this psychogenic component is difficult to ascertain, and you may not be privy to the insurance costs of your employer. So enter a conservative figure based on your knowledge of these matters. A shortcut is to enter 10% of the number you have entered for factor 6, “lowered job motivation,” since the stress that results in reduced productivity is also related to our physical health.

What Is the Total Cost?

Now add the figures in each of the eight cost factors to derive an estimated total cost of your targeted conflict. Remember, this accounts for the cost of just one conflict—how many others have occurred in your organization if you extend your estimate over the period of a year?

By repeating the analysis for other conflicts, or by multiplying the resulting figure by the number of conflicts that have occurred, we gain fuller appreciation of conflict as an expensive organizational process.
Conflict Cost Estimation Worksheet

Key word/phrase to identify a conflict: __________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COST FACTORS</th>
<th>ESTIMATED COST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Wasted time</td>
<td>$ __________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—salary/benefits per hour/day (150%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reduced decision quality</td>
<td>$ __________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—any decision made by you and/or others, independently or jointly, affected by the conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Loss of skilled employees</td>
<td>$ __________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—cost of loss of human resource (150% of total annual compensation)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Restructuring</td>
<td>$ __________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—inefficiency of work redesigned to accommodate conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sabotage/theft/damage</td>
<td>$ __________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—equipment, work processes, reputations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Lowered job motivation</td>
<td>$ __________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—reduced performance/productivity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—% reduction times salary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Lost work time</td>
<td>$ __________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—number of days lost at prorated daily salary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Health costs</td>
<td>$ __________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—stress related</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—insurance premiums linked to rate of claims</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL COST</td>
<td>$ __________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This instrument is adapted from chapter 3 of Daniel Dana, Managing Differences: How to Build Better Relationships at Work and Home, revised second edition (MTI Publications, 1997; http://www.mediationworks.com/; e-mail: mti@mediationworks.com; phone: 913–341–2888). Reprinted with permission.
Nine Ways to Reframe

Another useful list of alternatives for managing conflict that I very much like is Dr. Herbert Kindler’s Nine Approaches. He was kind (no pun intended) to allow me to include his material. Here are his alternatives:

Maintain. By delaying or avoiding, you are actually protecting the status quo. This is an interim strategy that buys time. It is very useful when you need to collect information, cool off, deal with higher priorities, or enlist allies.

Smooth. You focus exclusively on the benefits of your ideas, without even mentioning the alternatives. This is a form of persuasion that is useful when you want your preferences to prevail, or don’t have time for a full-scale discussion.

Dominate. When you hold the greater power and insist upon and impose your ideas. This is useful when speed is vital to human safety; when confidentiality precludes divulging relevant information, or after other approaches result in a stalemate.

Decide by Rule. Here joint agreement is used based on an objective criterion or rule as the basis for choosing among alternatives. Use this method when you want to be impartial and decisive action is needed.

Coexist. When two people agree to go their separate ways for a mutually agreed-upon period of time. This is when no other agreement can be reached.

Bargain. Mutual agreement where you settle on what should be given or done by each person. This is useful when more can be gained from an exchange, compromise agreement, or trade than by not reaching any agreement at all.

Yield. You let the other person’s point of view prevail. When the issue is important to the other person and minor to you, or you have more to gain by not resisting.

Release. Give up control within limits that are comfortable and appropriate for you. In other words, encourage the other person to resolve the issue and specify limits or conditions. This could apply when you are in a power position and there is low risk of irreversible loss.

Collaborate. All participants state their desires and concerns so that, working together cooperatively, you find a resolution that is responsive to the concerns of all parties.
## Nine Approaches to Managing Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant</th>
<th>Collaborative</th>
<th>Non-Dominant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Do it my way.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Let's work together</strong></td>
<td><strong>Try it. You'll like it.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DOMINATE</strong></td>
<td><strong>COLLABORATE</strong></td>
<td><strong>SMOOTH</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You direct, control, or resist.</td>
<td>You problem-solve together to reach a win-win resolution.</td>
<td>You accentuate similarities and downplay differences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Let's make a deal.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Let's agree to disagree.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Let's be fair.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BARGAIN</strong></td>
<td><strong>COEXIST</strong></td>
<td><strong>DECIDE BY RULE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You trade, take turn, or split the difference.</td>
<td>You pursue differences independently.</td>
<td>Objective rules determine how differences will be handled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I'll go along.</strong></td>
<td><strong>It's yours to do.</strong></td>
<td><strong>I'll go along.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>YIELD</strong></td>
<td><strong>RELEASE</strong></td>
<td><strong>YIELD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You adapt, accommodate, give in, or agree.</td>
<td>You release control within agreed-upon limits.</td>
<td>You postpone confronting differences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Firm Viewpoint Flexible**

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Your effectiveness in dealing with conflict depends on making choices of one or more of these nine possibilities. Most people use or overuse one or two habitual styles, and neglect the others.

After-Call Processes

When there are lots of calls in queue and you need to take one call right after another, it’s important that you do not take the last call into the next call. To keep from doing so, you need a way to complete the previous call, bring it to closure.

The following suggestions take only a moment of your time yet can have lasting impact. The purpose is to treat each call as if it were the first one of the day. If you start your day with a call from hell, use any of the following techniques to get rid of it, let it go, and allow yourself to move on.

1. Toss the call in the garbage (figuratively, of course).
2. Tell someone about it (get it off your chest).
3. Write the name of the person or company and put it in a helium balloon and send it off (visually, of course).
4. Visualize a shredder and put the conversation in a paper shredder.
5. Deep breathe and on the exhale blow it away.
7. Go on a mental trip to the ocean/mountain/fishing and in a few moments relax and feel good again.
8. Ask yourself these questions: Is this a good person just having a bad (hair) day? Or, is this an evil person having a normal day?

This works in many ways. You can use it with your customers, your co-workers, and you can do a self-analysis. After all, we all have good days and bad days.

You know if what you are doing is working by how it feels. How does it feel? If you feel good about yourself and the conversation you had with the customer, the chances are you’re on the right track. If you feel lousy, perhaps you need to review your interactions.
Serenity Prayer

This is a great prayer to start and end your day, every day, and it is portable. Use it in the car, on the way to and from work, between calls, on good days and bad. If I am stuck in traffic (which for me is a big upset), whenever I say the Serenity Prayer, it brings me peace. The important word in that sentence is “whenever.” The more you say it, the more you remember to say it, the more peace it can bring you.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change
(the customer, my boss, my [fill in the blank]),
The courage to change the things I can
(myself, my attitude, my perceptions),
And the wisdom to know the difference!
Chapter 7

ER in the Call Center

Building solid relationships with your customers is the key to evoking their loyalty to your product and/or service. When you make dealing with you easy on your customers the first time, it becomes natural for them to think of you the next time—and the next time and the next time.

Why Is ER So Important?

Human beings need human beings. We know this need for each other has been met when we feel a sense of connection. The ingredient that produces that sense of connection is ER—empathetic response, putting ourselves in someone else’s shoes and seeing something from his or her point of view. Customers remember empathetic responses and they return for more of the same.

That is why, although you have already read about it in various sections of this book, I have assigned empathy its own chapter. No matter how sophisticated your systems are today, nothing replaces empathy for generating customer loyalty and positive conversations about your company. Access to empathy is one of the two main reasons why it is important for a customer to have the option to talk to a human, a live operator. The first reason is that people are smart and machines are dumb. Although they generate faster and more consistently than humans, even the most sophisticated machines can’t begin to compete with the intelligence of the live human mind. They can’t accommodate the unexpected. Humans want to know they can call for human creativity to help them with their difficulties.
Seventy to 90% of what happens with customers is driven by human nature and has nothing to do with technology, according to Paul Anderson (Customer Care for 2000, January 2000).

The second reason why live CSRs are so important is that they can hear, understand, and empathize with the customer's situation. Humans can communicate to customers that they are not alone against an unfeeling system. They have an ally, a friend, in a position to help.

Since being human is so critical, it's very important to keep from becoming mechanical. When that human is interacting with you, your own humanness needs to come forth.

The path is empathy. It sounds simple, and quite honestly, it is. The challenge is to remember to empathize in the moment of contact. It is all too common for service providers to go on automatic. Let’s step outside the CSR world to see what the result is.

There are lots of situations that parallel your own. Take, for example, going to the emergency room or your doctor's office. First, you wait to see the doctor (similar to the queue for the customer). You tell the doctor why you came for an appointment (your customer tells you the reason for the call). The doctor gives you instructions, perhaps a bandage, a splint, a shot, or a prescription—whatever is needed to solve your problem. Yet, you walk away feeling dissatisfied. What's missing? Did the doctor regard you as a diagnosis instead of as a human? Did he fail to meet your eyes? Was he impatient, condescending, or bored? If so, then what he left out was empathy. There was no ER (empathetic responsiveness) in the ER (emergency room). We even say, “That doctor gave me the prescription, but he had no bedside manner. I think I’ll change doctors.”

I found a highly respected pediatrician after my first child, Kevin, was born. This doctor was said to be the best. We all want only the best for our firstborn, right? But each time we went to the doctor's office, Kevin cried and cried. I thought that was what babies always did at doctors' offices. What did I know? This doctor treated us like a number in a bakery, but I kept going because he was said to be “a good doctor.”

One day I said to myself, “I don’t like this doctor. He doesn’t remember me or Kevin from one time to the next. Kevin cries every time we go. I’m going to ask around and change doctors.” I asked friends and neighbors, and my question was not only, “Is he or she a good physician?” but also and especially, “Does he or she like and respect children?”

After I had my second child, I found a doctor whose practice was closed to new patients. Since my children were in good health, I asked if he would make an
exception and take them on as patients. He agreed. In the eighteen years he cared for my kids, neither ever cried when they went to see him. He acknowledged they were persons, albeit little ones, and then took care of them. This was great customer service. I became very loyal and took every opportunity to speak highly of him to others.

It’s the same in the CSR world: In call centers the customer presents the problem, you present the solution, and between those two events in a high-quality call is another factor—empathy—that gives life to the process. You, as the CSR, have the opportunity to breathe life into the call and thus demonstrate to the customers that you and your company are invested in their satisfaction. It doesn’t even matter if the doctor—or you—has the perfect solution. When empathy is missing, there’s almost always a cost.

Here’s another example that might sound familiar. It happens to the best of us at some time or other.

A customer called CSR Kim with a problem. Kim, a good listener, heard the problem, knew exactly how to solve the problem, and told the customer she was already doing so. However, the customer wouldn’t stop repeating his story. He retold it again and again. Why? Because he wasn’t getting what he really wanted—what he really wanted was someone to hear that he had suffered frustration, fear, or ________ (fill in the blank) and tell him she was sorry it happened, she could understand why he felt that way, and she wanted to make it better. Whether the feeling is fear, panic, anger, or even sadness, the customer usually won’t go any further in the conversation until it is acknowledged. Once the upset is acknowledged, you can easily move into the solution.

Basically, customers want you to care about them. And when they don’t think you do, they’ll let you know. Once you know the signals, they’re easy to pick up. Here are some of the main ones to listen for:

- repeats his story over and over;
- voice rises in volume;
- voice rises in pitch;
- speaks faster and faster;
- moves from calm to upset;
- speaks angrily, is rude, crude, surly;
- says “You’re not hearing me”; and
- wants to be transferred to your supervisor.
How Do I Supply ER?

By now we’ve heard that the customer wants empathy. How do we supply it? For something so simple, we certainly have trouble with it. We are a nation of fixers, and we rush first to the remedies. We need to remember that remedies are more effective and calls are shorter when we handle the emotional needs first.

Communicating that you care is something you probably already do instinctively at some level. I encourage you to acknowledge and take ownership of it if you don’t already. But we can always improve, and one way to make sure you supply the ER is to HOP to it. In that split second before speaking, when you run through your mental checklist, program yourself to say:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>H</th>
<th>How would I feel in the customer’s place?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Oh no, I cannot believe that happened to you!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Poor you! I’m so sorry that happened to you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is empathetic responsiveness at its best.

Notice I am not suggesting you agree with the customer’s viewpoint. The way customers see things could be dead wrong. This is not about the truth here. This is about saying that you can appreciate how the customer must feel, given the way they see the problem or issue. Do your best to put yourself in their shoes and see things from their point of view. I recommend keeping HOP on a Post-it Note next to your work station to use as a reference until you internalize this simple habit.

All calls fall into one of four categories:

- **Request**—I want you to do something for me (Send literature, change my address).
- **Question**—I want an answer (How do I ship my product safely?).
- **Problem**—I want a specific situation cleared up (I have no electricity).
- **Complaint**—I don’t like the way your company operates when ______ (fill in the blank) (Your shipments are always a week late, what gives?).

Let’s look at two of these calls with and without empathy:

**Problem**

Customer #1: I received this month’s statement and my payment doesn’t appear on it.

Don’t: May I have your account number?

Do: Oh no, I am sorry that happened to you. Let’s see what we can do about this. May I have your account number?
Complaint

Customer #2: I can’t believe you people. I have called five times already. I just got my statement and still there is no entry of my payment!

Don’t: May I have your account number?

Do: I hear your frustration. I would feel the same way if that happened to me. Thanks for taking the time to call us again. Let’s see if we can’t take care of this once and for all for you. May I have your account number?

What about those times when you just don’t want to be empathetic? Maybe it has been the day from hell, and there is not one gram of empathy left in you for one more customer. It happens to all of us. When it happens to you, try these techniques for taking care of yourself:

• Tell yourself you have only 2 hours and 34 minutes (or whatever) until the end of your shift.
• Breathe deeply 10 times, exhaling completely between breaths.
• Talk to a coworker.
• Instead of fighting or resisting, acknowledge what you are feeling in the moment. Then choose to take the next call empathetically.
• Go to a Quiet Room (or create one).
• Tell yourself a joke or refer to Appendix E.
• Move around; jump up and down, stretch.
• Remember all those times you have been empathetic. You deserve a pat on the back for all that kindness and patience. Acknowledge yourself for that. Some tips on how to acknowledge yourself:

Put your right arm straight out in front of you; then put your right hand on your left shoulder and pat yourself on the back. Share your good calls with coworkers, friends, relatives. Keep a running count of your empathetic calls.

Have you ever had calls that didn’t go well no matter what you did? Or calls that, by your own observation, you didn’t handle as well as you’d have liked? Here are some strategies to increase your skills over time:
• Write down the calls in “he said, she said” format. Then ask people you work with to read it and tell you how they would handle the calls. Be sure to ask more than one person so you collect a variety of options. You don’t have to adopt what doesn’t suit you: take what you like and leave the rest.

• Play the empathy game at home. It’s a great way to support your family and have them support you.

Taking Empathy Home

Taking empathy home will give you a master’s degree in empathetic responsiveness and make your home a haven of well-being. For example, when I was on vacation recently, the film wouldn’t automatically advance in my camera. Instead of my husband saying “Well, if you had bought a better camera, this wouldn’t have happened,” he said, “Oh, you must be so frustrated. I know how much you wanted to take pictures here.” I felt really understood and cared for. That doesn’t mean that he didn’t want to respond in the first way, or that he hasn’t said those exact words in the past. But his long-term goal is a great relationship with me (with an internal/external customer, friend, family member, or significant other), and so he works on being empathetically responsive to me. (And there was a happy ending. It turned out that the film was faulty. The next roll of film went in perfectly, and I was able to take my pictures.)

Responding empathetically takes training and lots of practice, no kidding. If my automatic response to my husband is critical, judgmental, or corrective—that is, if I insist on being a fixer—I will totally miss the upset behind his words, and the conversation is doomed. The world won’t feel as safe to either of us as it did prior to the interaction. Can anyone identify? I bet you can!

When someone feels a lack of empathy, the conversation bogs down. Each person wants to get as far away as possible. But when empathy is present in the interaction, the conversation flows, you are fully present, and each of you walks away feeling good about yourself and about the interaction. Those are the interactions that make your life worthwhile.

I’m sure you probably already empathize in many/most of your calls; otherwise, you would be burned out, stressed out, and probably would be changing careers. Take ownership and pat yourself on the back for the good job you do, expand on it, and make a contribution to your own life as well as the customer’s.
Chapter 8

Technical Support/Help Desks

Service jobs in the technology sector jumped 47% during the last five years, according to the Congressional Joint Economic Committee—more than double the growth rate in total service jobs (Leibovich 1999).

*Information Week* and *Business Week* recently conducted a survey to gauge the impact e-business is having. It concluded, among other things, that e-business is forcing IT departments to re-engineer all their systems, the protocols surrounding them, and the responsibilities and skill levels of all workers. Of sites surveyed, 80% said new skills requirements burden employees, 73% said that e-business has necessitated additional employee training, and 55% said e-business has forced employees to take on more responsibilities (Dalton 1999). Given all this, tech support reps are doing an amazing job.

A Special Tribute to Technical Support

If I wore hats, I'd have to take them all off to you who work in technical support and on help desks. I can't think of any other single group that requires such vast amounts of product and/or technical expertise, sometimes to the exclusion of soft skills. After all, you are in a problem related business. People who call you are not calling to say “hi,” to tell you what a great product you have or what a great job you do. Nor are the calls simple. Many require extensive diagnosis and even mind reading, it seems.

And the job has become more demanding because of the way the customer mix has changed over the last several years. In the beginning, your customer was a "techie" who understood your language and could collaborate and follow the logic of your technical resolution to the problem. Today, however, the average customer is
more often a layman—even a techno-dummy, unable to keep pace with you or even speak the same language. Even more demanding, they are frustrated by the complexity of the problems they bring you. You need not only technical expertise, but skills to deal with their frustration, upset, anger, fear, and the like. Unfortunately, your training seldom equips you to deal with customer feelings.

This reminds me of a patient who goes to the doctor and is told in very long, multisyllable words what is wrong. Does the patient understand? No. Even though they both speak English, there is still a language barrier. The doctor needs to speak to the listening of the patient, that is, find a common language that will be understood. If he were speaking to another doctor, they would be on the same wave length, having had similar schooling and training and familiarity with medical jargon. Not so with the average patient. The skill that allows the doctor (and you) to communicate clearly in the patient's (or customer's) language is called a soft skill.

Why are they called soft skills? Because they empower you to respond appropriately on the level of feelings. What do soft skills help you do? Hear the customer's frustration of something not working, of feeling stupid or foolish, without taking it personally; the customer's fear of not doing it right; or the urgency to have something up and running—yesterday.

Soft skills are what the CSR uses so that the customer and the CSR walk away with a “win” as a result of the conversation. Soft skills also protect you from getting burned out after just one call! After all, it is difficult explaining something to someone who truly doesn’t understand your language. And it’s tough to walk people through the same problem over and over, waiting interminably while they reboot the computer, ask the same questions over and over, answer other calls, etc.

To illustrate how hampered tech support people are by the lack of soft skills, let me tell you about something that happened to me a few years ago.

I was having trouble installing my modem and I called technical support to have them walk me through it. At that time, Windows 95 was new and they were getting lots of calls for help with modem installations. The technician guiding me was very good at giving direction as to what to do next, what was on my screen, etc. However, his patronizing and condescending tone of voice made me feel like there was something wrong with me, and that I should have been able to do this installation on my own.

As if anyone with half a brain could do so! He made no conversation, no small talk, didn't use my name. Just the facts, ma'am. Even though I got the information I was looking for, I formed a very poor impression of the company.

What could he have done? Several things. If he had had soft skills, he could
have made good use of the time we spent waiting for the next screen to come up. He could have made some conversation to make contact with me. For example:

    This will take just a few minutes. Are you with me?

    We are almost complete. You will be up and running in no time.

    Tell me what you have on your screen now, Rosanne. Good, you are doing just fine.

    This installation is a little tricky. You were smart to call and ask for help.

    Thanks for keeping up with me. It makes my job so much easier.

Can you sense how these remarks would have eased the tension and created a relationship of one human conversing with another?

    Anytime we have to ask for help from someone, we tend to be super-sensitive as to how we are treated. Perhaps in another lifetime I could be a modem installer, but in this one, I struggled with it even though I am computer literate, able to follow directions, and have installed a number of boards.

    This CSR and others I spoke with at this company all acted as if they were superior to me. I doubt they intended to put me down or even knew how they sounded. Technical training, I'm sure, was paramount there. What I do know is the company had no interpersonal-skills training in place. All the technical training and expertise in the world is of little use if you have no customers!

    Furthermore, technical training needs to go beyond your product, hardware, or software. For example, it is quite possible that to provide me with product X, you will need to help me first with product Y. Therefore, your training needs to be wide-range. Now, Y training may not be what you are supporting, but the knowledge is necessary in order for you to do your jobs responsibly.

Another modem story at the same company:

    Again I was having trouble installing my modem. This time they told me the modem was fine, that the problem was with the operating system: Windows 95, that was the problem. They couldn’t help me. I then called Windows 95 for support. My 30 days' free support had expired, but I called Microsoft anyway. I paid money to be assured this was not anything to do with Windows 95. The problem needed to be handled by the modem manufacturer. The next day I called the manufacturer again. This time I got lucky. A different CSR was kind enough to walk me through the installation. There were also adjustments that were required in Windows 95, and he talked me through them with ease.
Why couldn't that have happened the first time? Was this just a lazy technician who didn't want to, didn't know how to, or didn't like to have to go through the entire process? Someone who didn't want to have to deal with Windows 95? Was his expertise in a different operating system? That's anyone's guess.

While this particular company only manufactures internal modems, it is responsible for its installation in an operating system. The package directions specifically include Windows 95 installation. This is what I mean by product X and Y, X being the modem and Y being Windows 95. Had they helped me the first time, I certainly wouldn't have had my upset in the second conversation, or any need for a second conversation, not to mention the additional cost of calls, time, and down time with no modem!

What's the point here? Courtesy and respect. Sometimes it pays to go outside the lines to support a customer, even if you think it is not in your job description!

Courtesy and respect call to mind an experience I had ten years ago:

When I moved into my present house, the kitchen appliances were all fairly new. The previous owner had one drawer where she kept all the manuals for these appliances. I read the information regarding setting the GE Self-Cleaning Oven. I thought I followed the cleaning directions properly. However, five hours later, my oven was still cooking! It was 3:00 in the morning and I had no idea how to turn it off. I tried turning all the knobs, to no avail. I got out the manual again and there was an 800 number, available 24 hours. I called and very apologetically asked for help in turning off the cleaning mechanism. The CSR asked for my model number (which I gave her) and proceeded to tell me what to do. She was pleasant, friendly and told me how common this problem was, and how to shut it off. She thanked me for calling and suggested I call back with any additional questions, any time.

I couldn't wait for my husband to wake in the morning so I could tell him what happened during the night. Today there are many seven-days-a-week, twenty-four-hours-a-day operations, but this was ten years ago, and I am still talking about my oven, GE, and the great service I got.

In a recent survey of current help desk practices, approximately 300 senior-level help desk managers reported that the two areas most urgently in need of improvements are help desk tools (25%) and training 25%; management support ranked third at 13% (Companies Placing Heavy Emphasis on Training, 1998).
Tech Support Humor: Why We Should Feel Sorry for Tech Support People

We’ve already had some comic relief for CSRs. What follows are some believe-it-or-not real calls to tickle the TSR’s funny bone. And if you like those, be sure to read “Software Incompatibilities” in appendix D.

A woman called the Canon help desk with a problem with her printer. The tech asked her if she was “running it under Windows.” The woman responded, “No, my desk is next to the door. But that is a good point. The man sitting in the cubicle next to me is under a window, and his is working fine.”

Tech Support: “How much free space do you have on your hard drive?”
Customer: “Well, my wife likes to get up there on that Internet, and she downloaded ten hours of free space. Is that enough?”

Tech Support: “OK Bob, let’s press the control and escape keys at the same time. That brings up a task list in the middle of the screen. Now type the letter ‘P’ to bring up the Program Manager.”
Bob: “I don’t have a ‘P.’”
Tech Support: “On your keyboard, Bob.”
Bob: “What do you mean?”
Tech Support: “‘P’ on your keyboard, Bob.”
Bob: “I’m not going to do that!”

Customer: “I’d like a mouse mat, please.”
Salesperson: “Certainly sir, we’ve got a large variety.”
Customer: “But will they be compatible with my computer?”

I once received a fax with a note on the bottom to fax the document back to the sender when I was finished with it, because he needed to keep it.

Customer: “Can you copy the Internet for me on this diskette?”

I work for a local ISP. Frequently we receive phone calls that go something like this: Customer: “Hi. Is this the Internet?”

Some people pay for their online services with checks made payable to “The Internet.”
Customer: “So that’ll get me connected to the Internet, right?”
Tech Support: “Yeah.”
Customer: “And that’s the latest version of the Internet, right?”
Tech Support: “Uhh . . . uh . . . uh . . . yeah.”

Tech Support: “All right . . . now double-click on the file manager icon.”
Customer: “That’s why I hate this Windows—because of the icons. I’m a Protestant, and I don’t believe in icons.”
Tech Support: “Well, that’s just an industry term, sir. I don’t believe it was meant to—”
Customer: “I don’t care about any ‘industry terms.’ I don’t believe in icons.”
Tech Support: “Well . . . why don’t you click on the ‘little picture’ of a file cabinet . . . is ‘little picture’ OK?”
Customer: [click]

Customer: “My computer crashed!”
Tech Support: “It crashed?”
Customer: “Yeah, it won’t let me play my game.”
Tech Support: “All right, hit control-alt-delete to reboot.”
Customer: “No, it didn’t crash—it crashed.”
Tech Support: “Huh?”
Customer: “I crashed my game. That’s what I said before. I crashed my spaceship, and now it doesn’t work.”
Tech Support: “Click on ‘File,’ then ‘New Game.’”
Customer: [pause] “Wow! How’d you learn to do that?”

Take heart and read the howlers someone e-mailed to me:

**Technically Challenged**

1. Compaq is considering changing the command “Press Any Key” to “Press Return Key” because of the flood of calls asking where the “Any” key is.
2. AST technical support had a caller complaining that her mouse was hard to control with the dust cover on. The cover turned out to be the plastic bag the mouse was packaged in.
3. Another AST customer was asked to send a copy of her defective diskettes. A few days later a letter arrived from the customer along with photocopies of the floppies.
4. A Dell technician advised his customer to put his troubled floppy back in the drive and close the door. The customer asked the tech to hold on and was heard putting the phone down, getting up and crossing the room to close the door to his room.

5. Another Dell customer called to say he couldn’t get his computer to fax anything. After 40 minutes of troubleshooting, the technician discovered the man was trying to fax a piece of paper by holding it in front of the monitor screen and hitting the “send” key.

6. Yet another Dell customer called to complain that his keyboard no longer worked. He had cleaned it by filling up his tub with soap and water and soaking the keyboard for a day, then removing all the keys and washing them individually.

7. A Dell technician received a call from a customer who was enraged because his computer had told him he was “bad and an invalid.” The tech explained that the computer’s “bad command” and “invalid” responses shouldn’t be taken personally.

8. A confused caller to IBM was having troubles printing documents. He told the technician that the computer had said it “couldn’t find printer.” The user had also tried turning the computer screen to face the printer, but his computer still couldn’t “see” the printer.

9. An exasperated caller to Dell Computer tech support couldn’t get her new Dell computer to turn on. After ensuring the computer was plugged in, the technician asked her what happened when she pushed the power button. Her response: “I pushed and pushed on this foot pedal and nothing happens.” The “foot pedal” turned out to be the computer’s mouse.

10. Another customer called Compaq tech support to say her brand-new computer wouldn’t work. She said she unpacked the unit, plugged it in, and sat there for 20 minutes waiting for something to happen. When asked what happened when she pressed the power switch, she asked, “What power switch?”

11. Another IBM customer had troubles installing software and rang for support. “I put in the first disk, and that was OK. It said to put in the second disk, I had some problems with the disk. When it said to put in the third disk, I couldn’t even fit it in . . .” The user hadn’t realized that “Insert Disk 2” meant to remove Disk 1 first.

12. In a similar incident, a customer had followed the instructions for installing software. The instructions said to remove the disk from its cover and insert into the drive. The user had physically removed the casing of the disk and wondered why there were problems.
13. True story from a Novell NetWire SysOp:

Caller: “Hello, is this tech support?”
Tech: “Yes, it is. How may I help you?”
Caller: “The cup holder on my PC is broken and I am within my warranty period. How do I go about getting that fixed?”
Tech: “I’m sorry, but did you say cup holder?”
Caller: “Yes, it’s attached to the front of my computer.”
Tech: “Please excuse me. If I seem a bit stumped, it’s because I am. Did you receive this as part of a promotion at a trade show? How did you get this cup holder? Does it have any trademark on it?”
Caller: “It came with my computer. I don’t know anything about a promotion. It just has ‘4X’ on it.”

At this point, the Tech Rep had to mute the caller because he couldn’t stand it. He was laughing too hard. The caller had been using the load drawer of the CD-ROM drive as a cup holder and snapped it off of the drive!
Chapter 9

Thanks, You Made My Day!

So far, I have spoken about situations you may encounter that are mostly negative. It would be remiss to not speak of the positives, because there are many. For example, this may have been your experience:

Compliments—To the Next Level

Customers are often grateful and say so.

“Thank you so much for all your assistance.”
“You really helped me.”
“I want to compliment you on the job you did for me!”

How do you respond? “Thank you.” “Thanks for taking the time to say that.” Or, “You’re welcome.”

I invite you to take it one step further. Ask for more:

“Thank you, what did I specifically do that you liked?”
“What was it that had you take the time to tell me this?”
“Was there something special I did this time?”

The reason for this is to reinforce what you are already doing that is working so well. So well, in fact, that customers go out of their way to comment to you. In this way, you can continue to do it, but be conscious of it more. You want to get the information from your customers (internal and external). Customers certainly get de-
tailed when they are complaining. Encourage them to give you this positive feedback. It feels great to get a compliment. It’s wonderful to be able to thank the person, ask for more, and really know what she was complimenting. This can’t help but make you feel good about yourself, about the customer, about the interaction, again win-win. Take that into your next call!

Conversely, giving compliments feels great too. When a customer makes your day, say so, and be specific from your side, too. You make a contribution to the other person as well as yourself, and it costs you nothing.

Great Calls—Share, Share, Share

I’m sure you all have stories of those great calls, the ones that made your day. Everything went perfectly from the very beginning. You and the customer were on the same wave length. Perhaps you had a humorous exchange. Your listening was acute, and your response was right on. You really helped the customer. She thanked you profusely for doing such a good job, for taking such great care of her. You felt great. You knew, even before she said so, that you had done a great job!

Remember having that feeling? Can you recreate it right now? See how it feels in your body. Pretty good, I would bet. Maybe you are smiling right now just thinking about it. Ask yourself these questions:

What was different about that call?

How long did that feeling last?

How can you recreate the feeling?

What was different about the call was not the customer. The customer is a variable, but you, yourself, the person sitting in your chair, are the common element!

CSR = you = Great Call
CSR + x = Great Call
x = Customer
John + CSR = Great Call
CSR + Ms. Hunt = Great Call

You were right there with the customer, listening attentively, and responding accordingly. Your attitude was positive and it was reflected in the call, and perhaps even acknowledged by you and the customer.
Did you give the feeling away to the next customer? By that I mean, when you are feeling good, you get to choose how long that feeling lasts. You can take it into your next call or you can conveniently forget it, especially if the next customer is the dreaded call from hell. You have a choice here. You can choose to keep the positive feeling with you for the next call, for the next half dozen calls, for the entire day if you like. Or you can assign responsibility for feeling good to the customer and take no responsibility for your participation in the interaction. But if you do that, then when you hang up with the customer, the good feelings go with the customer and don’t stay.

Choose to feel good about it and take it into your next call, regardless of who that next customer is. You can decide whether to allow someone to upset you or not. I’m sure you have had the experience of having something bother you one day, and when the same thing occurs the next day, it doesn’t bother you. Yes? What was the difference? Maybe you made a poor choice the day you let it bother you. Some days we make good choices, and some days we make poor choices.

“How important is this?” is a good question to ask yourself. Not only for the upset, but for the good feeling too. You then have a choice as to what to do with the feeling, where to put it. You can choose to let go of the negative ones (if you so desire) and opt for the good feelings. Again, the good news is that you have a choice. The bad news is that you have a choice. Commit to making good choices in your own behalf, one call at a time, one day at a time.

There’s a saying that what you focus on expands. If you focus on the problem, the problem expands. If you focus on the solution, the solution expands. If you focus on good feelings, the good feelings expand. If you focus on the upset, the upset expands. You have the choice. Which will you choose? Start right now by making good choices in your own behalf.

How can you recreate the good feeling? Remember the conversation. Share it with friends, family, and co-workers. You share all your war stories. It’s just as important to share your wins. It makes them more real for you and reinforces the memory. When a really upsetting call happens, you can remember the good call and neutralize the feelings.

Clearing Meetings

The purpose of clearing meetings is to have people available for their responsibilities without any residue from home, the previous call, an interaction in the break room, or a shopping list in their heads. You can hold a clearing meeting with one person or hundreds of people.
There are lots of things you could be doing, should be doing, need to be doing, should have done, could have done, ought to have done, while you are here. The fact is, you are here, and none of those things can be done right now. What we are going to do is get rid of them. This could be the dog that ate your best shoes, the kids who weren’t ready for school when you were about to leave, the person who cut you off on the highway, the loaf of bread or quart of milk you need to remember to bring home today, the person who __________ (fill in the blank). I invite you to visualize any one of the following and send those thoughts there. Letting go of these thoughts isn’t about being irresponsible. You can retrieve any or all of them later.

Here are some visualizations you can use. Send your distractions to any one of the following receptacles and leave them there until you’re ready to deal with them:

- **Balloon** Blow one up and put your name on it with a magic marker.
- **Dumpster** Visualize a large dumpster (a big garbage container used on construction sites for debris). A regular trash can also works.
- **Wastebasket** Put a wastebasket in the center aisle and send your “stuff” there.
- **Computer** Visualize deleting a file and watch it go to the recycle bin. In order to completely get rid of it, empty the recycle bin.
- **Paper Shredder** Visualize a paper shredder and send your unwanted, unnecessary thoughts there.
- **Brown Bag** Write your niggling thoughts on strips of paper and put them in the bag.

Talk to your co-workers about what you need to leave outside your work station before the day begins. If you need to remember to bring something home or stop at the store, you might write a reminder note. Some people use their eyeglass case for such notes. I always use my left hand outside jacket pocket. I check it just before leaving work, getting off a train, bus or plane or at worst, before I turn the corner onto my street.

You can also use notes for people (or animals) who may have upset you before you arrived at work—the person who cut you off on the highway, the dog who ran out the door just as you were leaving, the paper boy who forgot to leave the paper or even worse, left a wet one, your significant other, who looked at you wrong, the ele-
vator you missed after running late this morning. There is absolutely nothing you can do about these things once you are at work, so give them up. Put them in a waste basket or on a shelf. You can pick them up later and take them home with you if you want. But for now, your job is being the best you you can be on the phone with the customer.

It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

—Theodore Roosevelt
Chapter 10

Grab Bag of Additional Tidbits

In this chapter are miscellaneous suggestions that don't fit perfectly anywhere else and that I hope you find useful.

Things to Do

Do Something Else

A good operating procedure that allows people and companies to grow and develop is when what you do doesn’t work, you do something else. Otherwise, you are working under the definition of insanity—that is, you are doing the same thing over and over again, expecting the results to be different!

Pre-recording Your Voice

You answer the phone hundreds or even thousands of times a day. Instead of repeating your name over and over and over again, use your technology to the fullest. Pre-record your name and a short message for playback when connected to the customer:

“Hello, my name is Rosanne, how may I help you today?”

This can save anywhere from 8–19 words per call. Note that announcements of 8–9 words are the most popular, according to a survey by the Center for Customer-Driven Quality at Purdue University, as shown in the chart on the next page.
Multiply the number of words times your total calls per day and you can see the advantages. In addition, it gives you time to catch your breath. You don’t speak until customers have finished their opening statement. Figure out how long that is and it gives you a different perspective for “talk time.” These seconds are the perfect times to use the techniques learned in this book. Sit up straight, smile, breathe, sip some water, look at your list of over-used jargon, smile, smile, smile.
Programming Positive Reminders

Program reminders into your software. Have them pop up in a corner of the screen every 5–10 minutes. They could say B-R-E-A-T-H-E, S-M-I-L-E, R-E-L-A-X, P-E-A-C-E or any words that reinforce your well being, such as TODAY IS A GREAT DAY! Be sure they don’t take over the screen or interfere with your assisting a customer, because if they do, you won’t use them! Rather, have them join you and the customer. You can share them if you like. “I just got a reminder to S-M-I-L-E on my screen, can you ‘hear’ my smile?”

\[ \text{B - R - E - A - T - H - E} \]

Raising Confidence

Everyone can use a confidence-raiser. Here’s an easy one. Stand in front of the mirror and say out loud five times: “I LIKE ME, I REALLY LIKE ME, AND I KNOW YOU LIKE ME, TOO” Smile at yourself. Really smile, showing teeth, stand tall and straight. Do this morning, noon, and night. In fact, anytime you come in contact with a mirror, have that be your trigger to repeat these sentences to yourself. Notice how your day progresses as a result.

\[ \text{R - E - L - A - X} \]

Inspirational Shorties

Sometimes it is enough to read a paragraph or two from a book and get an attitude shift, a touch of inspiration, a chuckle, or just what you need at the moment. Often it is sufficient to give you the strength and courage to go into the next moment. I offer the following for these purposes.

\[ \text{S - M - I - L - E} \]

Wrinkles should merely indicate where smiles have been.
—Mark Twain
Motivational

The ten most powerful two-letter words are: IF IT IS TO BE ME, IT IS UP TO ME! Post this in conspicuous places at work and home.

Viewing Life

Life is like a two-humped camel. Some days are wonderful and you are on the top, others you feel on the downside. Remember there is momentum, like on a roller coaster. You don’t have to remain in the downside. “This too shall pass” helps to reinforce that after you are down, the only way to go is up!

The phrase “What you live with you learn; what you learn you practice; what you practice you become; and what you become has consequences” helps me. It is repeated in many books by Earnie Larsen, nationally known author/lecturer of motivational self-help books and tapes. (For more information call 1-800-635-4780.)

Accomplishment

There are four steps to accomplishment:

1. Plan purposefully.
2. Prepare prayerfully.
3. Proceed positively.
4. Pursue persistently.

Thinking of Yourself

What someone else thinks of you is none of your business. However, what you think of you is important. It is what you think of yourself that is projected in your conversations with customers, co-workers, family members, and significant others. You are at choice here!
Onion or Artichoke Theory

Is your center an onion or an artichoke?

We have all heard that life is like an onion. We peel off the layers, one by one, until we get to the center. But what is in the center of an onion? You’re right: Nothing!

However, when you peel an artichoke, leaf by leaf, what is in the center? Yes, you’re right again. It’s the heart. When you work in a call center, your challenge is to operate as the heart of your company. Because of your frequent contact with customers, internal and external, you have the opportunity to humanize the conversation every moment.

Green Blood Theory

If you were to see someone spilling red blood, you would immediately check out the situation, make the person comfortable, call 911, or whatever is appropriate to the moment. This goes without saying. All egos are put aside and emergency measures are taken. Okay, but what if you saw green blood?

Green blood spills when people are in pain and hurting, but not hurting enough to go to the emergency room. We can make it up why they are in pain.
Suffice it to say, when you hear customers ranting and raving, it is likely they are spilling green blood.

What do you do? Respond to what you hear behind the words. Don’t worry about getting engaged, but rather give them what they actually want—which, in most instances, is to be heard. That’s really what we all want when we get down to it. Is this easy? No. Sometimes when people are depressed, immobilized by fear, ranting, or at opposite ends of the spectrum, they want reassurance that they are being seen and heard, but not for what, at first glance, they appear to be presenting, but rather what is behind the facade. It could be a voice that says, “Help, hear me please, I’m in pain and I want someone to know!” It could be a voice that is defensive because the person doesn’t want you to know he is in pain.

However, don’t get caught up in right and wrong. The goal here is early recognition of green blood. Then use the various techniques in this book to save yourself time, energy, and emotion.

Please refer to Appendix A for Jerry’s story about choices. Feel free to copy it and post it.

Then read Appendix B about double G.O.D. trucks. These boosters are count-on-able, they make me feel good! I hope they do the same for you.

Closing Thoughts

So many improvements to hardware and software are happening on what feels like almost a daily basis. Soon enough, there will no longer be keyboards, but the ability to speak to the computer. Electronic face-to-face business will be commonplace. Interfacing will be smooth, quick, and easy.

However, the soft-skills, high-touch human driving the hardware and software will be more, not less, important. As long as we humans are human, these skills will continue to form the bedrock of our interactions. The more we use them, the brighter our future will appear.

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*Man is still the most extraordinary computer of all.*

—John F. Kennedy

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One machine can do the work of fifty ordinary men. No machine can do the work of one extraordinary man.

—Elbert Hubbard
Chapter 11

Change

Disaster or Opportunity?

If anything is constant in the life of a CSR, it's change. The more your company catches on to how pivotal your role is, the truer that will be. On the one hand, change represents growth, innovation, and opportunity. On the other, threat, disorientation, and upheaval. The specific changes may relate to reorganization, downsizing, job redefinition, a physical move, or a shifting market, layoffs, etc. Responses to change can be excitement, relief, and/or pleasure, on the plus side; or confusion, worry, anger, dislocation, numbness, and stress. All of these reactions are normal and what is to be expected. There is nothing wrong with reacting this way, particularly in the beginning.

It only becomes a problem when the negative problems persist, when people complain, resist, delay, draw battle lines, and bad-mouth others. How do we keep the feelings from persisting? We acknowledge the existence of whatever feelings are present. In other words, we talk about how we feel, and then let those feelings go.

But we don't tend to do that naturally. Instead, people tend to focus only on technical issues because they are more predictable and therefore more comfortable. We feel more secure with planning, budgeting, and staffing. We're pretty confident that we can do the new job, learn the new system, hardware, software, policy, whatever. The intellect is much more manageable than feelings. We reason, we understand, then we deal with it. But we don't know a lot of ways to deal with emotional upset, and the most pressing issues concerning change are human or emotional.

How do we talk about how we feel? First, we acknowledge we are leaving one place for another. We need to say good-bye to what was, close the door on it, and then say hello to what is. Otherwise, we drag what was into what is, productivity goes down, and absenteeism goes up. Imagine hooking your foot around a chair and
dragging it with you as you try to put yourself into a new chair, as in the illustration. It’s exhausting, and it holds you back from experiencing the good of the new.

The Transition of Change

It is vital to your sense of well-being and to your health to learn to dance with change instead of fearing, resenting, and resisting it. Perhaps big changes are going on in your company. Welcome or not, change is inevitable and undeniable. Nothing stays the same for any period of time.

However, change can be an energizing part of life. As we realize we are not helpless, we continually grow and change in the direction of our dominant thoughts and beliefs. Dancing with change is an inside job, not an outside job. If you believe you can change, you can. You’re always right. If you believe you’ll never be able to change, you’ll never be able to change.

Part of the way successful people get that way is they consciously choose to change and grow, rather than to be passive and just react to what happens to them. They first identify what they want and then look at how they need to change to get it. Then they address and work through the false beliefs they hold about change, learn to understand how change really works, and discover some powerful processes for initiating and managing change in themselves and their situations.

Addressing Myths about Change

Self-changers are readily able to assess their stages of change, but they must counter myths that keep them from freeing themselves from self-defeating behaviors:
Myth 1: Self-change is simple. It is not simple!
Myth 2: It just takes willpower. What is willpower? The technical definition is a belief in your abilities to change behavior, and the decision to act on that belief. The second, more sweeping definition is that willpower represents every single technique, every effort under the sun, you can use in order to change. This is circular reasoning. Self-changers do use willpower in the first, pure sense of the word, yet it is only one of nine change processes. This one is called commitment.
Myth 3: I’ve tried everything—nothing works! The key question is not whether a particular process works, but whether you used it frequently enough and at the right times.
Myth 4: People don’t really change. Not so!

The first step along the journey of change begins with knowing what stage you are in. In change, as in many other aspects of life, timing is everything. You apply different processes to your problems at different stages of change.

Six Stages of Change

Dr. James O. Prochaska, director of the Cancer Prevention Research Center and professor of clinical and health psychology at the University of Rhode Island, is one of the developers of the Transtheoretical Model of therapy and behavior change and the author of several books and over 100 articles. He has graciously given permission to reproduce the following from his latest book, Changing for Good. This work describes principles of change hitherto unknown. It matches the process of change to the needs of individuals at each stage of change and works in harmony with how people change naturally.

There are six well-defined stages of change through which self-changers move. However, you can recycle several times (see the pattern of change in the figure on the next page).

1. Precontemplation. The writer G. K. Chesterton might have been describing precontemplators when he said, “It isn’t that they can’t see the solution. It is that they can’t see the problem.” Precontemplators have no intention of changing their behavior and deny having a problem. Precontemplation can be defined as not changing!
2. Contemplation. Here you acknowledge you have a problem and begin to think seriously about solving it, yet not right away (but within the next six
months). You know your destination, even how to get there, but you are not quite ready to go yet.

3. **Preparation.** You plan to take action and begin setting dates.

4. **Action.** This is where changes in behavior actually take place, and others can see them. This stage is very busy and requires the greatest commitment of time and energy.

5. **Maintenance.** Change never ends with action. Maintenance is critically important to prevent lapses and relapses.

6. **Termination.** This is the ultimate goal for all changes. Old behaviors never return; you have complete confidence that you can cope.

Most successful self-changers follow the same road for every problem or issue. They do not try to skip stages. A key to successful change for any given problem is knowing what stage you are in. Although nearly all change begins with precontemplation, only the most successful reaches termination.

It is important to point out there is no such thing as failure. Failure is simply a mental interpretation we put onto a change that takes us somewhere other than where we want to go.

Change occurs on a continuum. Sometimes we leap, sometimes we crawl, and sometimes we seem to slip back. However, so long as we continue to visualize (con-
positive change in a way that looks positive to us and to believe it will happen, that change will occur. This focus is required at all six stages of change.

Next we will look at the change processes that are useful in these stages.

Nine Critical Change Processes

There are nine change strategies that assist us in altering our chosen directions.

1. Consciousness-raising means increasing the amount of information available to you and improving the likelihood of your making intelligent decisions.
2. Social liberation. Any new alternatives that the external environment can give you to begin or continue your change efforts. This could come from family, friends, co-workers.
3. Emotional arousal parallels consciousness raising, but works on a deeper-feeling level. Also known as dramatic release or catharsis, it is a significant, often sudden emotional experience that adds joy, excitement, or hope to the prospect of achieving your desired change.
4. Self-reevaluation. Reappraisal of your change effort and an assessment of who you might be once you have achieved it.
5. Commitment means choosing to change and accepting full responsibility for doing so. It is an acknowledgment that you are the only one who is able to respond, speak, and act for yourself. To reinforce commitment, you first make a private commitment to yourself. Then you make a public commitment to others.
6. Countering. Substituting healthy responses for unhealthy ones is counter-conditioning or countering. Almost any healthy activity can be an effective countering technique, such as relaxation, affirmations, positive self-talk.
7. Environment control is outwardly oriented: it involves restructuring your environment to lower the probability that your plans will be thwarted. An example is removing high-risk cues (a dieter might rid her house of fattening foods).
8. Rewards can include self-praise or public acknowledgment.
9. Helping relationships including caring, supportive co-workers, family members, and friends.
I find it so very interesting that the Chinese word and symbol for crisis and opportunity, shown below, are identical. Literally translated, “crisis is an opportunity riding the dangerous wind.” Change your perspective and view crises as opportunities.

危機

No one welcomes change except a wet baby!
A Few Essentials about E-Commerce

No book on the call center would be complete without a word about e-commerce and how it is likely to affect the customer service industry.

For most of the last century, customer service was delivered by mail, over the phone, or in person. Customers didn’t have many choices, and even when they did, switching to competitors was cumbersome. Today, face to face, snail mail, and phone are only three of many possible points of contact for any given interaction. Now there are fax, e-mail, and Internet-based services such as Web callback, text chat, and voice-over Internet protocol (VOIP). This diversity of communication options has enormous implications for the CSR world, as you undoubtedly know. With all the options the Internet brings, competition is literally a click away. The rate of change is dizzying, and the new challenges facing CSRs are formidable. So are the opportunities.

This chapter can’t cover e-commerce adequately—that would take an entire book—but I do want to offer an eagle’s-eye view of e-commerce and its opportunities, look specifically at what challenges and opportunities CSRs face, and give a few simple tools for dealing with them. Rather than being a threat, this brave new world of e-commerce calls you forth into new exciting learning, which will keep you growing, alive, and aware.
As you can see from the above charts, changes in customer contact are significant, and the pace of change is accelerating. In 1997, 97% of all customer service interactions took place over the phone. By 2003 telephone contacts are projected to plummet to a mere 5%, with Web-based communications taking up the slack to the tune of 56%.

The Enormous World of E-Commerce

The Web offers businesses a great way to increase sales, expand geographically, and shift customer interaction to a less expensive medium. So enormous is the potential of the Web that research firms trying to predict its size in dollars are having a tough time of it. International Data Corporation predicts that by 2003, the amount of commerce conducted from websites will top $1 trillion, and the number of people who purchase products from websites will jump to more than 183 million in 2003, a six-fold increase from the 1998 figure of 31 million (“Internet Commerce Will Rocket”). The more conservative research firm of Dataquest predicted overall business-to-consumer e-commerce in the United States would grow from $20.5 billion in 1999 to $147 billion in 2003 (Dataquest’s Holiday E-Commerce Predictions). Jupiter Communications predicts consumers will spend $14.9 billion
online in 1999 and that figure will soar to $78 billion by 2003 ("Online Shopping Boom"). A study by Cisco Systems attributed $101 billion of revenues to e-commerce in 1998 (Anderson 1999). Dr. James Canton, Executive Director of the Institute for Global Futures and author of *TechnoFutures*, predicts $2.3 trillion by 2003, mostly business to business (Canton 2000).

Given these estimates, it is no wonder that online service is such a priority among companies that sell products or services from their websites. Forrester Research reported that for 1998 U.S. companies’ tab for online customer service tools was $26 million; in 1999, U.S. companies spent $70 million, almost triple the previous year’s figure, and it’s projected that $658 million will be spent on these products in 2002. International Data Corporation expects the Internet customer service and support software industry to grow from $44 million in 1998 to $2 billion by 2003 (Carr 1999).

According to Datamonitor’s research study of late November 1999, of the estimated 69,500 call centers in the United States, only 8% were web-enabled. However, they predict by 2003, 40% of them will be online ("Readerboard").

No matter how we cut it, e-commerce is huge and growing at an extraordinary rate. However, up to this point and for the foreseeable future, that growth is uncomfortable.

**The E-Growing Pains**

The current state of Web technology has made business faster only when it’s simple. It hasn’t done anything to speed up problem solving. And it still presents formidable challenges to the prospective buyer, especially in transactions with many choices, such as purchasing airline tickets. Very few websites are glitch-free, and all buyers need to get turned off is a service problem that pops up before they’re even finished ordering. Overall, online customer service leaves much to be desired. Some people say it stinks. Most selling websites are cumbersome, full of contradictions, dead ends, and misinformation. Moreover, customers report missing the human component that is so critical. This is partly because companies, having invested so much in Web technology to save money, are reluctant to turn around and spend it on CSR support. They are already paying a price for that decision, and the price tag will get heftier in the future. Even after website design has evolved past its current primitive stage, back-and-forth live communication will still be required. Virtual environments do not create virtual customers. Twenty-five years from now, customers will still be human beings, and still be driven by human desires and needs. Except for the
simplest transactions, customers will want to know they can reach a live person who can sort out the snafus, just as they enjoy the “zero out” option available with the interactive voice response, allowing callers to move from the automated menu to a live operator for assistance. Amazon.com has learned this. They employ hundreds of traditional CSRs using phone lines to help customers with questions that cannot be dealt with online.

This notion is underscored by research conducted at Purdue University that indicates that “most web surfers will not actually move from information ‘grazing’ to purchasing a product without being able to talk to a human being” (Anton 1999). However, Datamonitor, a research firm, reports that fewer than 1% of websites offer customers the choice of communication with live agents (“Readerboard”).

Of the various ways in which one-to-one communication can take place, the most promising seems to be e-mail. Many companies are using e-mail to dramatically change the way they communicate with customers. According to a study by Business Communications, the total number of e-mail messages should grow 42% annually from 1998 to 2003. That means the estimated 78 trillion messages that were sent worldwide in 1998 would exceed 450 trillion by 2003 (“E-Mail Grows into the Millennium”). Business Intelligence Associates claims that the market for chat and e-mail customer service products—less than $100 million in 1998—will grow to $650 million in 2000. By 2002, only two years later, they predict about 50% of all Internet shopping sites will use live, text-based chat to augment customer service (Ragsdale 1999). For this reason, CSRs will continue to be crucial resources in both selling and servicing customers. As long as creating a solid base of loyal customers is still the name of the game, the ability of a company to provide live contact by phone, e-mail, or a medium yet to be created—the human connection—will remain important.

But what will using these new media require of the CSR? And can CSRs rise to the challenge?

The E-Challenge to CSRs: Tell It Like It Is!

Web callback, live text chat, media blending, and VOIP are just a few of the options currently available. Undoubtedly there will be more, and you’ll need to master them. First and foremost, that will demand that CSRs become adept at communicating in text form as well as voice. For many of you, that presents difficulties. All one has to say is “write” and you freeze, your eyes cross, and you turn pale. You’re the ones who know spelling and grammar. Those of you who feel shaky on spelling and
grammar start to hyperventilate, cry, or run off over the horizon like a Loony Toons cartoon character.

Many CSRs are poorly prepared to deliver text-based service because they are missing basic language skills. When speaking, our inflection, pauses, and pronunciation make up for grammatical mistakes, but e-mail, faxes, and text-based chat are much less forgiving. Being great on the telephone doesn’t necessarily translate into the written word.

The rest of this chapter notes some common mistakes and some of the funny communications that result.

Whether it’s via e-mail, faxback, or VOIP, “agent training, more than any other factor, determines the success of a Web-enabled contact center,” says Ronald Ball (Ball 1999). I couldn’t agree more. He may have been alluding to technology, and I don’t disagree, but let’s not forget the people and the skills necessary to interact with them!

Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, in an article in the New York Times, claimed that one out of six Americans is functionally illiterate. Call center consultants are quick to agree that educational quality is slipping, and agents have serious problems in this area. For example, many articulate CSRs confuse spelling of the following word groups:

To, Two, Too

To—I am going to send you a credit, Mrs. Smith.
Two—It will arrive in two (2) weeks.
Too—Included will be a letter of apology too (also).

They’re, there, their

There—There is a credit on your statement, Mrs. Smith.
Their—Their website differs from ours.
They’re—They’re (they are) sending you the update today.

Your, you’re

Your—Your account shows a past due balance.
You’re—You’re (you are) absolutely correct!

Other spelling booby traps

Way vs. weigh—Which way do I go to weigh myself?
No vs. know—I know the answer is no.
Here vs. hear—Can you hear me from here?
Our—Our account is not past due.
Hour—At what hour will the manager return?

Its—The dog wagged its tail (the tail belonging to it)
It's—It's (It is) a crying shame we don't learn to spell early.

Lay—Can you lay the book down over there? (“Lay” always has a
direct object—that is, a noun or pronoun following the verb)
Lie—I'm tired and want to lie down for a while. (“Lie” never has a
direct object)

You get the picture.

I recently received an e-mail wherein a journalist said, “Please ‘some’ up your
closing remarks” (“sum” up).

There are plenty of other spelling problems. Here’s a jingle formulated to help
us remember when to put the “i” first and when to put the “e” first

“i” before “e”
except after “c”
or when heard as an “a”
as in “neighbor” and “weigh.”

When I get a letter or e-mail rampant with spelling errors and grammatical mis-
takes, I don’t want to do business with that company. I assume they are sloppy, and I
don’t want them to be sloppy with me. Every computer today has a spell checker, a
grammar checker, and a thesaurus. While they go a long way toward reducing errors,
you’re far from being perfect, and you can’t rely solely on them. For example, they
can’t catch a misspelled word if the misspelling spells another word accurately. They
frequently object to sentences that are perfectly fine. Bottom line: they’re still ma-
chines, and that makes them dumb. Fast, but dumb.

Your first three sentences are just as important in an e-mail as they are on the
telephone. Based on them, the customer forms an opinion—perhaps a judgment—
about you, your company, and maybe all companies in your industry. The person
doing live text chat had better communicate appropriately. Not only are poor word
usage and incorrect punctuation irritating, they can also alter the meaning of a sen-
tence. For example, double negatives cancel each other out. “At the moment we do
not happen to have no bananas” means you’ve got bananas. And the wrong informa-
tion can be costly!
Commas

Here are the most basic rules for using commas.

Use a comma to:
1. Separate elements in a series—three or more—including the last two.
   “I will send you a letter, a credit, and a coupon toward your next order.”
2. Connect two independent clauses.
   “I am sending you a letter, but your credit won’t appear until next month.”
3. Set off introductory elements.
   “While your credit won’t appear until next month, I will send you a letter today to confirm it.”
4. Set off parenthetical elements—those parts of a sentence that can be removed without changing the essential meaning of the sentence.
   “My letter, which will go out at the close of the business day, should reach you within three days.”
5. To avoid confusion.
6. To add emphasis—the same way you pause at important points when you’re speaking.

Verbs

Simply put, singular subjects (like she, the dog) need singular verbs (has, wants); plural subjects (they, the cats) need plural verbs (are, eat). Note that anyone, everyone, someone, no one, and nobody are always singular. Also singular are neither and either.

Some verbs cause special problems because they have irregular forms. Normally, we form a past tense by adding -ed or -d to the verb—fax, faxed; e-mail, e-mailed.

We’ve all heard children say I readed instead of I read, I goed instead of I went.

Unfortunately, there are no hard and fast rules to help us with irregular verbs. But paying attention to how other people use irregular verbs and reading what you write—carefully—can help you avoid some of these mistakes.

Try to avoid the passive voice in your writing (as well as speaking). Be active in your verbs! Passive statements allow you to leave out who is taking the action. Therefore, no responsibility is assigned or taken, as in “the letter will be sent.” A better alternative is: “I will send the letter.”
Quotation Marks

The incorrect use of quotation marks can send an unintentionally humorous message. As the term suggests, quotation marks are most often used when you're quoting someone:

Dr. Smith said, “I must have it by Friday.”

Quotation marks are sometimes used with slang (preferably for humorous effect), but you do not need to use quotation marks with everyday expressions. Finally, quotation marks are used to indicate irony or sarcasm (which we’d express by adding “so-called” or by changing our tone of voice when speaking, as in “Oh, yes, he’s a real ‘genius’” (meaning he’s far from being a genius). Of course, irony and sarcasm have no place in any type of business communication.

Some people try to use quotation marks to indicate emphasis, but this is incorrect. My local library has a sign posted by the checkout:

10¢ fine per day on all “overdue” books.

What they’re communicating to me is that they don’t believe there really is such a thing as an overdue book, or that someone’s just saying the book is overdue. I don’t think that’s what they meant to say. So if you feel the need to stress a particular word, it is best to underline it.

Other Pointers

When employing the written word, clarity is king. You don’t want to leave anything open to misinterpretation. When you’re speaking to another person, you can use your tone of voice to clarify that your intentions are friendly. But a poorly written letter can give offense where none is intended. Avoid using:

- exclamation points
- words in all caps
- jargon or slang
- straight form letters
When your communication is a form letter, be sure to personalize it—at the very least at the open and close. Otherwise, the letter has no value to the customer, and she will go where she can get personalized service—to your competition.

Finally, think about what you're really trying to say. Do you move logically from one thought to another? If you don’t, the results can be embarrassing. Consider, for example, the following sentences, which are excerpts from real letters sent to landlords:

The toilet is blocked and we cannot bathe the children until it is cleared.

This is to let you know that there is a smell coming from the man next door.

The toilet seat is cracked: where do I stand?

I am writing on behalf of my sink, which is running away from the wall.

I request your permission to remove my drawers in the kitchen.

Our lavatory seat is broken in half and is now in three pieces.

Will you please send someone to mend our cracked sidewalk? Yesterday my wife tripped on it and is now pregnant.

Our kitchen floor is very damp, we have two children and would like a third, so will you please send someone to do something about it?

Will you please send a man to look at my water, it is a funny color and not fit to drink.

Could you please send someone to fix our bath tap? My wife got her toe stuck in it and it is very uncomfortable for us.

The following are actual signs seen across the country. While most of them aren’t grammatically incorrect, they are ambiguous or contradictory. See if you can express them more clearly yourself.

At a Santa Fe gas station: “We will sell gasoline to anyone in a glass container.”
In a New York restaurant: “Customers who consider our waitresses uncivil ought to see the manager.”

On the wall of a Baltimore estate: “Trespassers will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law—Sisters of Mercy.”

On a long-established New Mexico dry cleaner’s: “38 years on the same spot.”

In a Los Angeles dance hall: “Good clean dancing every night but Sunday.”

In a Florida maternity ward: “No children allowed.”

In a New York drugstore: “We dispense with accuracy.”

In the offices of a loan company: “Ask about our plans for owning your home.”

In a New York medical building: “Mental Health Prevention Center.”

On a New York convalescent home: “For the sick and tired of the Episcopal Church.”

On a Maine shop: “Our motto is to give our customers the lowest possible prices and workmanship.”

At a number of military bases: “Restricted to unauthorized personnel.”

On a display of “I love you only” Valentine cards: “Now available in multi-packs.”

In the window of a Kentucky appliance store: “Don’t kill your wife. Let our washing machine do the dirty work.”

In a funeral parlor: “Ask about our layaway plan.”

In a clothing store: “Wonderful bargains for men with 16 and 17 necks.”

In a Tacoma, Washington, men’s clothing store: “15 men’s wool suits, $10. They won’t last an hour!”
On a shopping mall marquee: “Archery Tournament—Ears pierced.”

Outside a country shop: “We buy junk and sell antiques.”

In the window of an Oregon store: “Why go elsewhere and be cheated when you can come here?”

In a Maine restaurant: “Open 7 days a week and weekends.”

On a radiator repair garage: “Best place to take a leak.”

In the vestry of a New England church: “Will the last person to leave please see that the perpetual light is extinguished.”

In a Pennsylvania cemetery: “Persons are prohibited from picking flowers from any but their own graves.”

On the grounds of a public school: “No trespassing without permission.”

On a Tennessee highway: “When this sign is under water, this road is impassable.”

Similarly, in front of a New Hampshire car wash: “If you can’t read this, it’s time to wash your car.”

And apparently, somewhere in England in an open field otherwise untouched by human presence, there is a sign that says, “Do not throw stones at this sign.”

While these are certainly humorous, the people writing them were very serious; they’re a good reminder of how important it is to really read what we write.
Appendix A

Jerry’s Story

Jerry was the kind of guy you love to hate. He was always in a good mood, always had something positive to say. If you asked him how he was doing he would reply, “If I were any better, I would be twins!”

He was a unique manager because he had several waiters who had followed him around from restaurant to restaurant. The reason the waiters followed Jerry was because of his attitude. He was a natural motivator. If an employee had a bad day, he was there telling the employee how to look on the positive side of the situation.

Seeing this style made me curious and so one day I went up to Jerry and said, “I don’t get it! You can’t be a positive person all the time. How do you do it?”

Jerry replied, “Each morning I wake up and say to myself, Jerry you have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or you can choose to be in a bad mood. I choose to be in a good mood. Each time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or I can choose to learn from it. I choose to learn from it. Every time someone comes to me complaining, I can choose to accept their complaining or I can point out the positive side of life. I choose the positive side of life.”

“Yeah, right, it’s not that easy,” I protested. “Yes it is,” Jerry said. “Life is all about choices. When you cut away all the junk every situation is a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people will affect your mood. You choose to be in a good or bad mood. The bottom line: It’s your choice how you live life.”

Soon thereafter I left the restaurant industry and lost touch with Jerry. But I often thought about him whenever I made a choice about life instead of reacting to it. Several years went by and I heard Jerry did something you never do in the restaurant business: He left the back door open one morning and was held up at gunpoint by three armed robbers. While trying to open the safe, his hand was shaking from nervousness and slipped off the combination. The robbers panicked and shot him. Luckily, he was found relatively soon and rushed to the local trauma center.

After 18 hours of surgery and weeks of intensive care, Jerry was released from the hospital with fragments of the bullets still in his body. I saw him about six months later. When I asked him how he was, he replied, “If I were any better, I’d be twins. Want to see my scars?” I said no, but did ask him what went through his mind when the robbery took place.
“The first thing that went through my mind was that I should have locked the
back door,” he said. “Then as I lay on the floor, I remembered I had two choices: I
could choose to live or I could choose to die. I chose to live.”

“Weren’t you scared? Did you lose consciousness?” I asked. Jerry continued,
“The paramedics were great. They kept telling me I was going to be fine. When they
wheeled me into the emergency room and I saw the expressions on the faces of the
doctors and nurses, I got really scared. In their eyes, I read, ‘he’s a dead man.’ I knew
I needed to take action.”

“What did you do?” I asked. “Well, there was a big, burly nurse shouting ques-
tions at me,” said Jerry. “She asked me if I were allergic to anything. ‘Yes,’ I replied
to her. The doctor and the nurses stopped working, waiting for my reply. I took a
deep breath and yelled, ‘Bullets!’ Over their laughter, I told them, “I am choosing to
live. Operate on me as if I am alive, not dead.”

Jerry lived, thanks to the skill of his doctors, but also because of his amazing
attitude. I learned from him that every day we have the choice to live fully.
Attitude, after all, is everything.

You now have two choices also:

1. Remember this story and tell it to all your friends, families, and co-workers,
or

2. Forget it! But I hope you choose #1.
Appendix B

Double G.O.D. Trucks

This is my favorite story. There is a trucking company on the Eastern seaboard called Guaranteed Overnight Delivery. Its initials are G.O.D. While I don’t think of myself as a particularly religious person, I am spiritual. I do believe there is something larger than life as I know it and it makes me feel safe.

When you see one of these trucks, all that shows on the side of the truck are these three big letters: GOD. You can’t see the periods in between and I tell myself they are bringing me a message. Sometimes I am behind one, and I am following God. Or God is leading the way. Other times, I am alongside God. Many times God drives a tad too slow for me and I pass and now I am in front. When I look in my rear-view mirror, I see that God is watching out for my behind.

At night, just above the cab in the front of the truck is the sign GOD all lit up. You can’t read or even see the sides after dark. Actually, you can hardly even see the truck, but coming toward you is this light saying GOD. I love it!

I can’t lose with this one. It always makes me feel better and reinforces that I
am not alone. The message I get is that there is someone out there who cares about me, and I yell out a big, “YES,” smile from ear to ear, and take the feeling with me into my day or evening. On rather bad days, I admit I look for the trucks to cheer me up!

For my birthday, my friend Janice had the picture reproduced and framed, matted in red, and included the following:

Every day on your road to happiness, peace, and love,
May a double G.O.D. truck pass your way.

It is hung to the left of my computer, and I look at it at least ten times a day. If you have these trucks where you live, watch for them and remember my story! If you don’t, use this story and the picture to remind you.
Appendix C

Memory Joggers

Remember:

- To breathe deeply
- To listen care-fully
- Response-ability
- I am now aware of . . .
- “I deserve to have it all!”
- K.I.S.S.
- S.S.D.D.
- SO-SO
- C.A.R.E.
- Trust the process.
- This too shall pass.
- Cow/pig story
- Old lady/young lady
- S-E-E
- IF IT IS TO BE, IT IS UP TO ME.
- 55 smiles per hour
- T.E.A.M.
- Jerry's Story
- G.O.D. trucks
- The largest room in the world is the room for improvement.
- Have a nice day . . . unless you have other plans!
Appendix D

Software Incompatibilities

Installation and Support of New Software

I'm currently running the latest version of GirlFriend, and I've been having some problems lately. I've been running the same version of DrinkingBuddies 1.0 forever as my primary application, and all the GirlFriend releases I've tried have conflicted with it. I hear that DrinkingBuddies runs fine as long as GirlFriend is run in background mode and the sound is turned off. Unfortunately, I can't find the switch to turn the sound off. Therefore, I have to run both of them separately.

GirlFriend also seems to have a problem co-existing with my Golf program, often trying to abort Golf with some sort of timing incompatibility. On a positive note, DrinkingBuddies and Golf seem to have no incompatibilities whatsoever. I probably should have stayed with GirlFriend 1.0, but I thought I might see better performance from GirlFriend 2.0.

After months of conflicts and other problems, I consulted a friend who has experience with GirlFriend 2.0. He said I probably didn't have enough cache to run GirlFriend 2.0, and eventually it would require a Token Ring to run properly. He was right—as soon as I purged my cache, and realized that no one in their right mind is installing new Token Rings, GirlFriend 2.0 uninstalled itself. Shortly after that, I installed GirlFriend 3.0 beta. Unfortunately there was a bug in the program, and the first time I used it, it gave me a virus. I had to clean out my whole system and shut down for a while. I very cautiously upgraded to GirlFriend 4.0.

This time I used an SCSI probe first and also installed a virus protection program. It worked okay for a while until I discovered that GirlFriend 1.0 was still in my system. I tried running GirlFriend 1.0 again with GirlFriend 4.0 still installed, but GirlFriend 4.0 has a feature I didn't know about that automatically senses the presence of any other version of GirlFriend and communicates with it in some way. This results in the immediate removal of both versions. The version I have now works pretty well, but there are still some problems. Like all versions of GirlFriend, it is written in some obscure language I can't understand, much less reprogram.

Frankly I think there is too much attention paid to the look and feel rather that the desired functionality. Also, to get the best connections with your hardware, you usually have to use gold-plated contacts. And I've never liked how GirlFriend is "object-oriented."

A year ago, a friend of mine upgraded his version of GirlFriend to
GirlFriendPlus 1.0, which is a Terminate and Stay Resident version of GirlFriend. He discovered that GirlFriendPlus 1.0 expires within a year if you don't upgrade to Fiancée 1.0, so he did. Soon after that, he had to upgrade to Wife 1.0, which he describes as a huge resource hog. It has taken up all his space . . . he can't load anything else.

One of the primary reasons he decided to go with Wife 1.0 was because it supposedly came bundled with a feature called FreeSexPlus. Well, it turns out the resource requirements of Wife 1.0 sometimes prohibit access to FreeSexPlus . . . particularly the new Plug-Ins he wanted to try. On top of that, Wife 1.0 must be running in a well warmed-up system before he can do anything. Although he did not ask for it, Wife 1.0 came with MotherInLaw, which has an automatic pop-up feature he can't turn off.

I told him to try installing Mistress 1.0, but he said he heard if you try running it without first uninstalling Wife 1.0, Wife 1.0 will delete MSMoney files before uninstalling itself. Then Mistress 1.0 won't install because of insufficient resources. Damn software! You can't do with it and you can't do without it.
Appendix E

Easy Access to Sanity

Twenty Proverbs for the Millennium

Home is where you hang your @.
The e-mail of the species is more deadly than the mail.
A journey of a thousand sites begins with a single click.
You can’t teach a new mouse old clicks.
Great groups from little icons grow.
Speak softly and carry a cellular phone.
C:\ is the root of all directories.
Oh, what a tangled website we weave when first we practice.
Pentium wise, pen and paper foolish.
The modem is the message.
Too many clicks spoil the browse.
The geek shall inherit the earth.
There’s no place like http://www.home.com
Don’t byte off more than you can view.
Fax is stranger than fiction.
What boots up must come down.
Windows will never cease.
Virtual reality is its own reward.
Modulation in all things.
Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him to use the Net
and he won’t bother you for weeks.
Life before Computers

An application was for employment,
A program was a TV show,
A cursor used profanity,
A keyboard was a piano.

Memory was something that you lost with age,
A CD was a bank account,
And if you had a 3½” floppy . . .
you hoped nobody found out!

Compress was something you did to the garbage,
Not something you did to a file.
And if you unzipped anything in public,
You’d be in jail for a while!

Log on was adding wood to the fire,
Hard drive was a long trip on the road,
A mouse pad was where a mouse lived,
And a backup happened to your commode!

Cut you did with a pocket knife,
Paste you did with glue,
A web was a spider’s home,
And a virus was the flu!

I guess I’ll stick to my pad and paper
And the memory in my head.
I hear nobody’s been killed in a computer crash;
They simply wish they were dead!
Signs That You’ve Had Too Much of Modern Technology

You try to enter your password on the microwave.
You now think of three espressos as “getting wasted.”
You haven’t played solitaire with a real deck of cards in years.
You have a list of 15 phone numbers to reach your family of 3.
You e-mail your son in his room to tell him that dinner is ready, and he e-mails you back “What’s for dinner?”
Your daughter sells Girl Scout Cookies via her website.
You chat several times a day with a stranger from South Africa, but you haven’t spoken to your next-door neighbor yet this year.
You didn’t give your valentine a card this year, but you posted one for your e-mail buddies via a Web page.
Every commercial on television has a website address at the bottom of the screen.
You buy a computer and a week later it is out of date and now sells for half the price you paid.
The concept of using real money, instead of credit or debit, to make a purchase is foreign to you.
Your reason for not staying in touch with family is that they do not have e-mail addresses.
You consider 2nd day air delivery painfully slow.
Your idea of being organized is multiple-colored Post-it Notes.
You hear most of your jokes via e-mail instead of in person.
Your daughter just bought a CD of all the records your college roommate used to play.
You check the ingredients on a can of chicken noodle soup to see if it contains echinacea.
Your grandmother clogs up your e-mail inbox, asking you to send her a JPEG file of your newborn so she can create a screen saver.
You pull up in your own driveway and use your cell phone to see if anyone is home.
Words We Should Have in the English Language

Aquadextrous (ak wa deks’ trus)
Possessing the ability to turn the bathtub faucet on and off with your toes.

Carperpetuation (kar’ pur pet u a shun)
The act, when vacuuming, of running over a string or a piece of lint at least a dozen times, reaching over and picking it up, examining it, then putting it back down to give the vacuum one more chance.

Disconfect (dis kon fekt’)
To sterilize the piece of candy you dropped on the floor by blowing on it, assuming this will somehow remove all the germs.

Elbonics (el bon’ iks)
The actions of two people maneuvering for one armrest in a movie theater.

Frust (frust)
The small line of debris that refuses to be swept onto the dust pan and keeps backing a person across the room until he finally decides to give up and sweep it under the rug.

Lactomangulation (lak’ to man gyu lay’ shun)
Manhandling the “open here” spout on a milk container so badly that one has to resort to the “illegal” side.

Peppier (pehp ee ay’)
The waiter at a fancy restaurant whose sole purpose seems to be walking around asking diners if they want ground pepper.

Phonesia (fo nee’ zhuh)
The affliction of dialing a phone number and forgetting whom you were calling just as they answer.

Pupkus (pup’ kus)
The moist residue left on a window after a dog presses its nose to it.

Telecrastination (tel e kras tin ay’ shun)
The act of always letting the phone ring at least twice before you pick it up, even when you’re only six inches away.
Some Punny Foolishness

If Yoko Ono married Sonny Bono, she’d be Yoko Ono Bono.
If Dolly Parton married Salvador Dali, she’d be Dolly Dali.
If Bo Derek married Don Ho, she’d be Bo Ho.
If Ella Fitzgerald married Darth Vader, she’d be Ella Vador.
If Oprah Winfrey married Depak Chopra, she’d be Oprah Chopra.
If Cat Stevens married Snoop Doggy Dogg, he’d be Cat Doggy Dogg.
If Olivia Newton-John married Wayne Newton, then divorced him to marry Elton John, she’d be Olivia Newton-John Newton John.
If Sondra Locke married Elliott Ness, then divorced him to marry Herman Munster, she’d become Sondra Locke Ness Munster.
If Bea Arthur married Sting, she’d be Bea Sting.
If Tuesday Weld married Hal March III, she’d be Tuesday March 3.
If Liv Ullman married Judge Lance Ito, then divorced him and married Jerry Mathers, she’d be Liv Ito Beaver.
If Snoop Doggy Dogg married Winnie the Pooh, he’d be Snoop Doggy Dogg Pooh.
How about a baseball marriage? If Boog Powell married Felipe Alou, he’d be Boog Alou.
Nog (Related to Quark on Star Trek: Deep Space Nine) has no other name, so he uses it twice when getting a marriage license. If he married Howard Hughes, and then Pamela Dare, he’d be Nog Nog Hughes Dare.
If Jack Handy (SNL writer) married Andy Capp, then married Jack Paar, then moved on to Stephen King, he’d be Jack Handy Capp Paar King.
If Ivana Trump married, in succession, Orson Bean (actor), King Oscar (of Norway), Louis B. Mayer (of MGM), and Norbert Wiener (mathematician), she would be Ivana Bean Oscar Mayer Wiener.
Tators

Some people are very bossy and like to tell others what to do, but don't want to soil their own hands. They are called . . . Dick Tators.

Some people never seem motivated to participate, but are just content to watch while others do the work. They are called . . . Speck Tators.

Some people never do anything to help, but are gifted at finding fault with the way others do the work. They are called . . . Comment Tators.

Some people are always looking to cause problems by asking others to agree with them. It is too hot or too cold, too sour or too sweet. They are called . . . Agie Tators.

There are those who say they will help, but somehow just never get around to actually doing the promised help. They are called . . . Hezzie Tators.

Some people can put up a front and pretend to be someone they are not. They are called . . . Emma Tators.

Then there are those who love and do what they say they will. They are always prepared to stop whatever they are doing and lend a helping hand. They bring real sunshine into the lives of others. They are called . . . Sweet Tators.

Then some of these people that are commonly known as tators have children. They are called . . . Tator Tots.
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