

The quality of customer service in today's organization depends not only on the people who actually meet the customer, but on the support people behind the scenes. In their new book, *Service America! Doing Business in the New Economy*, Ron Zemke and Karl Albrecht point to "moments of truth" for the business enterprise as "any time a customer interacts with the people or the systems that deliver the service." Most often, these moments of truth are made or broken by support personnel—secretaries, accounting clerks, data entry personnel, credit representatives, shippers and receivers, and technicians.

The support shortage

Although employers are becoming more and more dependent upon their support personnel, employers are also finding it increasingly difficult to motivate and retain these people. Consider the facts:

■ Despite a surplus of candidates in the managerial ranks, there is a growing *shortage* of support people. Today's service-obsessed business climate has created many more support jobs, while the population's Baby Bust—the drop in birth rate after 1960—has shrunk the candidate pool. According to one source, there are 3 million new entry-level jobs created each year, with only 1.5 million young people available to fill them.

■ This shortage has caused a sharp escalation in the cost of support people. This year, salaries at the support staff level have been running 20 percent above last year, compared to a 4 to 5 percent increase for managers.

■ The competitive emphasis on customer service, coupled with the growing complexity of office technology, has placed much higher demands on today's support staff than were ever experienced by their predecessors. We need and expect them to do more. Consider that the secretary you hire this year will need a higher level of computer competency than a mid-level manager needed seven or eight years ago. Yet, as a group, entry-level workers today are *less* well educated than the Baby Boomers who preceded them. That means that employers must invest top dollars not only for compensation, but for training.

■ Because most of the output from a support job is intangible, the quality of that

output is subject less to management's direction than to the employee's individual discretion. Perry Pascarella describes the situation in his book, *The New Achievers*: "An increasing percentage of our work force—even in non-management, non-

professional ranks—is able to set its own pace, determine the details of carrying out its work, and even neglect certain details or modes of good behavior. At the same time, workers are often subjected to heavily controlled management systems. They



Support Your

If organizations want to keep their support developing this dwindling

By BUCK BLESSING

Blessing is co-founder and partner of Blessing/White, Inc., of Princeton, New Jersey.

may have to meet certain standards for attendance, completion of paperwork, sales or production, and other responsibilities. Yet, they may be able to do so without really attending to the quality of the product or service. While the systems may give manage-

ment an illusion of control, the worker has latitude for falling short of a quality job from the point of view of the customer or the next person in the process. The more a job involves service... the less it is truly controllable."

Studies by Yankelovich and Immerwahr of the Public Agenda Foundation¹ document that today's young work force is motivated not just by dollar compensation but by the opportunity to make decisions on the job and to grow. But in many cases, the young support staffer's sense of direction is clouded by unrealistic expectations of rapid career advancement coupled with the frustrating perception that the present job holds no opportunities for improvement. The employee's exasperated question is, "What's in this for me?"

The support staff shortage has led to the following additional problems:

■ *Support Staff Turnover.* Just when you get a support person trained and up to speed, earning a premium dollar all the while, another company offers premium dollar and then some. The individual quits and leaves.

■ *Support Staff Plays Dead.* Worse than support staffers who quit and leave are those who quit and stay. They don't accept responsibility. They won't take any initiative. They're not part of the team.

■ *Competitive Edge Grows Dull.* The organization's service response is sluggish. "Moments of truth"—those molecules that form the image of quality among the customer base—keep breaking like a succession of bubbles.

■ *Nothing Seems to Help.* Companies have tried internal motivation campaigns, slogans, seminars on the importance of service, and courses in good manners for customer-contact employees. Most likely, each effort was followed by a brief period in which fewer moment-of-truth bubbles were broken; then it was back to business as usual.

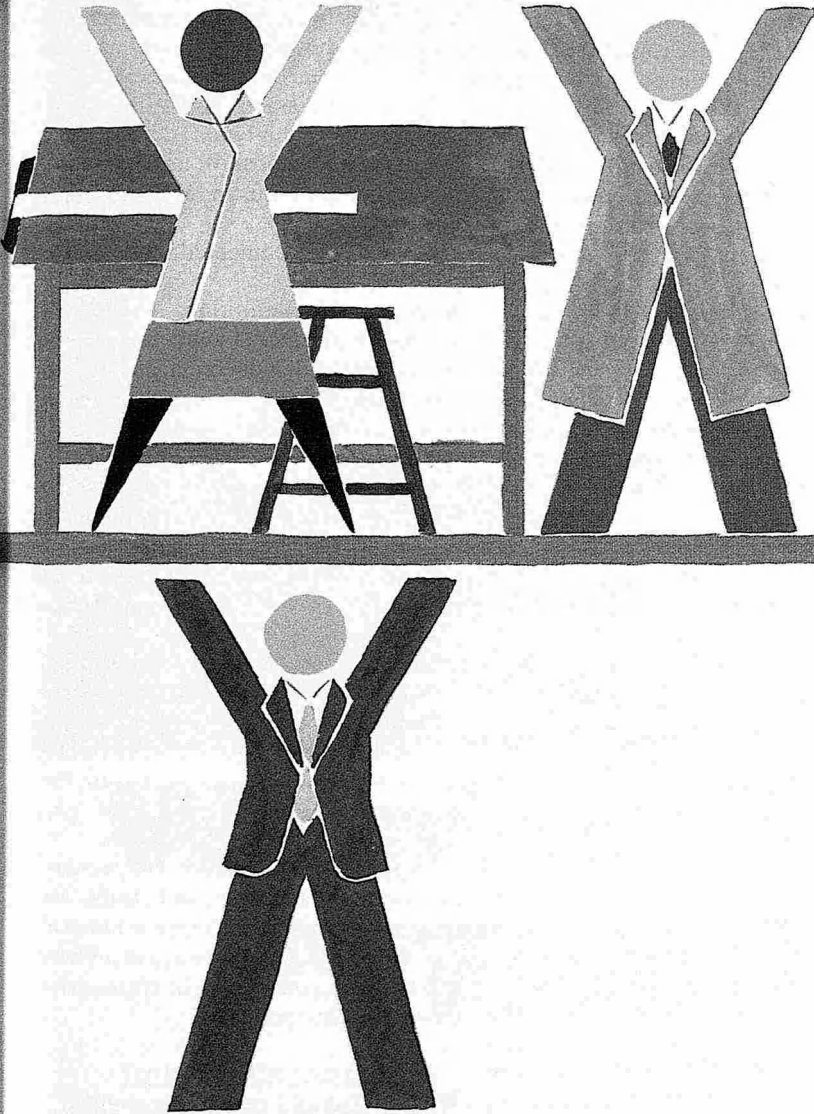
The *Service America!* authors are empathetic when they say, "Service management is not (just) smile training. It is a commitment to service throughout the entire organization."

Yes, it is easier said than done, but it *can* be done. And it is your support staff who will accomplish this goal for you.

Unlocking support staff motivation

The first and most obvious obstacle in motivating support staff is the reality of career promotions for non-exempt support staff. There aren't many available. While the built-in message of most organization charts is, "Success lies somewhere up the ladder," the fine print reveals, "There's really room for fewer than 5 percent of you up here."

Weighing this against the impatient expectations of most young support workers,



Support Staff

employees, they'll have to begin motivating and building an invaluable human resource.

it becomes evident that the first step management had better take in any program of motivation is to tell employees the truth. A December 1985 *Fortune* article, "Resurrecting Corporate Loyalty," states the employee's point of view: "I will give the organization intensity of effort, providing the organization in return is fair to me—in particular, that it doesn't con me about opportunity where there no longer is any." In other words, don't dangle illusory carrots. Build a program that taps potential energy and growth within the present support-level job.

The support-level job can be made highly satisfying, challenging, and productive. Management must build into that job four things:

■ **Mastery.** The difference between the mechanic and the craftsman is the difference between the mandatory effort required for maintenance and the additional discretionary effort that aims to make things better. (Consider that the intangible output of the support staff job allows more room for discretion than any blue-collar position.) However, in order to be a craftsman, a man or woman must have the sense of mastering skills that are personally and professionally important. In

which they have invested sweat."

At the higher management ranks, the trend is to what Gifford Pinchot III calls "intrapreneuring"—the assumption of an autonomous project-management role for new product development or start-up ventures within the existing corporate structure. Secretaries and technicians don't manage product development, but they *can* be autonomous "managers" of their own work. When people come to see their jobs in this way, three important benefits appear: the hunger for individual autonomy is satisfied, and the support staff job becomes intrinsically more motivating; the employee's perspective broadens to perceive many more opportunities to grow within the current position; and each employee realizes that, ultimately, the initiative to develop rests personally and individually with him or her. What's needed is a process that will open employees' (and managers') eyes to this potential.

■ **Relationship.** In motivating support staff to provide superior service, the importance of direct communication between employee and immediate supervisor cannot be overemphasized. General Electric Company has published a study (in the March 1984 issue of *World of Work*) in

ing the "superior" hat, the employee is tense about the impact of the review on compensation, and the discussion is putting both parties under pressure?

What if each support employee had the opportunity to take charge of a special meeting with the supervisor, devoted solely to that employee's on-the-job growth? The meeting wouldn't cover promotion or salary issues but would put manager and employee in the role of associates who are exploring avenues within the current job to develop the assets of the individual employee. Does this type of development discussion have a positive impact on the morale, performance, and tenure of support staff?

Absolutely! Documented studies prove it.

■ **Change.** By definition, the words *development* and *growth* imply that change occurs. But in what direction, and is it the best direction? The young, entry-level people who make up most support staffs are certainly eager for change but often are at a loss to articulate specifically how and where. A motivation and development program that neglects this issue is building an impressive-looking ship in which the employee can sail but is providing no compass with which to navigate.

Therefore, the final key component of a successful program is a process by which an individual can clarify exactly what makes work satisfying to him or her—that is, personal values compared to the characteristics of the job. That way, changes are desirable and positive.

Together, the four factors of mastery, autonomy, relationship, and change can make an impressive difference in how well your support staff is motivated to perform and how competitively your organization delivers quality service.

Consider that the secretary you hire this year will need a higher level of computer competency than a mid-level manager needed seven or eight years ago

other words, a person needs to see the opportunity to build upon individual strengths and use those strengths to grow.

■ **Autonomy.** In studies of what motivates today's work force, the need to feel in charge of one's work life tops the list. States demographic researcher Daniel Yankelovich, "People assume that one way to beat the system is (if not) to be one's boss, (then) at least forge an arrangement with one's employer to enjoy autonomy and a stake in the business."

This "stake" does not have to be financial, beyond the obvious prerequisite of competitive salary. As Pascarella states in *The New Achievers*: "A worker who feels he or she is alive and growing on the job is more likely to feel an owner of the company than an underutilized worker with a share of stock. People want to make a contribution, to do something worthwhile, to be part of something significant. They are not so concerned with owning a small share of the company as with owning 100 percent of themselves and the jobs into

which 80,000 GE employees were surveyed on the types of communication they had with their supervisors and on their general job satisfaction. Of the employees who cited good communication with the boss in five out of five selected areas, 90 percent reported overall satisfaction with their jobs. Of those workers who did not perceive good communication in any of the five areas, only 30 percent said they were satisfied with their jobs.

An employee who can honestly say "My boss understands me and understands my needs, strengths, and weaknesses," will have a satisfying working relationship with his or her immediate supervisor and will, therefore, be happier on the job. But the question is "How does this come about?"

Many organizations rely on the performance review meeting for this purpose. But the annual appraisal session is the one place where you can be sure that meaningful working relationships *won't* be built. How can they, when the manager is wear-

References

1. Yankelovich, D. and J. Immerwahr. *Putting the Work Ethic to Work: A Public Agenda Report on Restoring America's Corporate Vitality*. New York: The Public Agenda Foundation, 1983.