

# The Price of Disengagement...and an Exercise

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I spent last Friday night in Detroit rather than home in Orlando due to an airline “mechanical”. The airline didn’t lose my business because of the broken part, but lost it later in the evening because of their robotic customer service.

We’ve all been there. First comes the announcement makes it clear you’ll miss your connection, then you scramble for a best-case back-up plan. Ultimately I chose to travel to Detroit which became the scene of multiple customer service crimes. Infraction #1 was a 42-minute wait in line for a hotel voucher. Next was the command-and-control manager who three times addressed the line to instruct us on how to behave when we ultimately reached the lone customer service representative at the end of our rainbow. The final infraction was that representative who insisted that I could not get my baggage for at least four hours even though after much discussion it somehow appeared 10 minutes later. And due to space concerns for this article I’ll omit the attitude of the desk attendant at the 1-star flophouse where I spent the night.

For sure, poor in-house processes contributed to this frustration chain as well as the overall mistrust airlines have created with their profiteering change fees. But the striking omission among all employees was they were clueless that my weekend had been halved due to their company’s fault. From the initial gate attendant to “command-and-control” to the “representative”, my fellow travelers and I were faceless bodies and these employees acted as though their only motivation was the crank in their backs. “I’m sorry” didn’t enter into their minds nor therefore pass through their lips because empathy and contrition weren’t part of their training nor their DNAs. They were so locked in routine that I was thankful their colleagues could at least fly the planes.

We can all tell similar stories but they become front-and-center when your own customers are doing the talking. And all CEOs face that iceberg metaphor that you only know the problems a customer writes about or tells you on a survey. Most of your employees’ actions that cost you customers are unknown to you.

The knee-jerk solution is usually training but I would argue it is hiring and coaching engaged employees. Acting with empathy comes easy for some and is foreign to others, and I suspect none of the three representatives I encountered can easily switch from their own needs to those of their customers. Programming the cranks in their backs to say "I'm sorry" would at best lead to their mouths saying those words while their bodies communicate the opposite.

Training is an easier solution because it is tangible, whereas employee engagement is hard to describe in behavioral terms. It's a "I'll know it when I see it" thing. But don't sell engagement short. One respected study provides a clear cause-and-effect formula that as your employees' engagement levels increase, so do your revenues. For some of you this is a multi-million dollar opportunity.

In my next article I'll tell you the very first thing you should do to improve employee engagement across your organizations, and it's a solution that only CEO's can initiate. But between now and then, consider if your executive team really "gets it" regarding engagement. Can they identify the specific behaviors that employees do that lead to more business? Are they aware of their own responses to good and bad service and how it changes their own buying choices?

One way to direct their focus is to ask them to carefully observe 3 interactions they have as customers with organizations other than your own. Ask them to note the attending employees' specific things they say and do as well as their own reactions to those behaviors. Would they want to interact with that employee again? And would they buy more or buy less? These interactions might take place in retail stores, professional offices, or with their doctors or brokers.

If they get stuck in Detroit on the same airline as I was flying, I can predict their results...!

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