

# PROVIDING EXCELLENT INTERNAL CUSTOMER SERVICE

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## **Key requirements for outstanding internal customer service**

The foundation for outstanding internal customer service is excellent interdepartmental communication and cooperation. Dialogue between internal customers and internal providers (or vendors) must include agreements about the following topics:



**1. Clear expectations.** An internal provider of service is responsible for setting clear guidelines about what internal customers can reasonably expect. Some organizations implement Service Level Agreements (SLAs) defining what internal customers can expect from internal service providers. Even without formal SLAs, internal customer service can be exceptional IF the internal service provider has clarified to internal customers what expectations are reasonable. Customer also must communicate expectations regarding timeline and quality *in advance of request*. Last minute requests are typically due to poor planning on the part of the internal customer. Expecting the internal provider to 'hijack' priorities to meet unreasonable needs is inappropriate, and should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, with involvement by upper management. At no time should this become the norm, or the internal customer will become 'trained' to expect the unrealistic.

**2. Customer Responsibilities.** To meet expectations, internal provider of service is responsible for clarifying what is needed from the internal customer, and also clarifying service provider processes and timelines necessary to meet quality requirements of customers. The phrase "Help me help you" from the movie "Jerry Maguire" applies here.

In order to provide the best customer service, internal providers need the cooperation of customers in allowing enough lead time and providing information and materials necessary to fulfill customer request. This is a communication responsibility of the internal service provider to let the customer know 'what I need from you in order to meet your request is ....' It's essential to have an understanding with customers about realistic timelines and quality expectations. Internal providers who find they're constantly working on customer 'emergencies' must clarify to customers the strain this causes to provider. Constant emergencies diminish provider's ability to give good service to all internal customers, and create a stressful working environment (not to mention interdepartmental animosity).

**3. Service Provider Responsibilities.** Most internal customer service problems are a result of the 'silo' mentality where people and departments work in isolation, consider only their own priorities, and think others are sitting around twiddling their thumbs with nothing to do until an internal customer screams "Jump!" in a last minute panic.

This is sure to guarantee lower levels of quality, resentment from provider, and a reputation for lack of professionalism on part of customer. Customers must take responsibility for understanding how their request fits into overall workflow of organization and internal service provider's workflow.

Internal service providers are responsible for explaining their workflow, so the customer will understand he or she isn't the only priority.

**4. Negotiated Priorities.** While most customer priorities are 'urgent - must have right away' this is counterproductive to any process. A clear communication between internal customers and service providers is essential. With internal customer service, most customers believe the provider should intuitively understand priorities because they all work for the same organization. This is false! A discussion about priorities must be part of the expectation-setting talk.

#### ***TIPS for internal customer service providers***

**1. Always know your customers' expectations, and be a part of their expectation setting.** If they have false or unrealistic expectations, explain your workflow, priorities, processes and timelines in providing top quality service for them.

**2. To help your customers utilize your services better, explain how they can be 'good customers.'** Be explicit about what you need from them in order to meet their needs. Define timelines and quality levels. Let them know what they can expect from you. As an internal provider, tactfully tell the customers how they fit into your workload, and listen to their delivery needs. Negotiate delivery dates and quality levels.

**3. Always keep customers informed on project progress.** Nobody likes to be blindsided by delays or last minute requests for additional information.

**4. Get out of your 'silo'.** Take a break with co-workers from another part of your organization. Talk to them during lunch about what's happening in their department. We all work so hard we can become myopic, lack perspective and be ignorant about how other functions operate.

**5. Open your vision to the big picture.** When talking to co-workers from other departments, develop an understanding of how the whole organization works. How does your contribution fit into the big picture? What do other departments need from you to meet their goals? Think outside your function and department, and think holistically.

#### ***TIPS for internal customers***

**1. Discuss your expectations with your service provider.** Make sure your expectations regarding timelines and quality levels are realistic. Ask your internal service provider what you must provide so they can meet your needs. Ask what their process is, and understand what is involved in delivering your request on time, and meeting your quality standards.

**2. Use effective time management practices.** Once you understand your service provider's process, develop your time line for delivering the request. Certainly 'emergencies' happen, and service providers can be pressured to meet tight deadlines. However, customers who consistently expect providers to 'bend the rules' to meet emergency deadlines strain their service providers and disrupt everyone's priorities. Customers who operate in 'emergency' mode have a negative impact on the workflow as a whole, and cheat others who have planned more realistically.

**3. Provide all information needed to fill your request.** In your original request, include sufficient information to allow the provider to adequately estimate the time and resources needed. Be prepared to provide additional information requested by the provider.

**4. Always be professional.** Honor the provider's priorities, workflow, and processes. Do not expect 'exceptions' to the rule, especially if poor planning has created your urgency. If your work were delayed due to another customer's 'crisis', how would it impact your goals?