



# “Customers, don’t come first...”

*...employees  
come first”,  
at least according to  
Richard Branson.  
NCFE, the North East-  
based awarding body,  
agree; and that goes  
to the heart of their  
strategy to improve  
the customer  
experience. We spoke  
to Hilary Whitaker,  
Service Excellence  
Manager, about  
NCFE’s approach to  
building customer  
satisfaction, starting  
with their internal  
culture and processes.*



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NCFE have seen tremendous gains in customer satisfaction in a very short time, leaping up The Leadership Factor's Customer Satisfaction League Table. How have they achieved so much so quickly? Hilary's answer is *"we take it seriously"*. Perhaps the biggest challenge for an organisation that wants to improve customer satisfaction is to ensure that all staff really want to improve. When people are happy with the status quo, it can be very difficult to motivate change. For NCFE, achieving cultural change was the first, and most important, step to meeting their targets for improvement.

### A strategic framework

There are many different models and frameworks which touch on the importance of having satisfied customers. Though they sometimes differ in detail, the gist of these models is usually very similar. NCFE have adopted the *"service excellence model"*, which follows much the same logic as the Value Profit Chain we have written about extensively in this magazine. It starts with the people, who are the ones who make the customers happy, and sees the relationships between the organisation and its customers as a virtuous circle.

others are profit making. Profit-making or not, income is still the ultimate test of success, but adopting this model shows an assumption that the best way to deliver increased income is to focus on satisfied employees and customers.

Targeting the organisation on both employee and customer satisfaction, as well as income, is crucial to a successful business in the long term. But which comes first? In principle it should be possible to start anywhere in a circular model. NCFE think that it makes sense to concentrate on employees first—it might not be enough on its own, but it's difficult to see how it would be possible to deliver great customer satisfaction without a base of satisfied and engaged employees.

“Customers don't come first. Employees come first. If employees are treated right then service will follow.”

Richard Branson

have been identified as crucial building blocks in the model.

- *Bringing solutions*
- *One team*
- *Developing people*
- *Inspiring leadership*
- *Exceptional customer service*

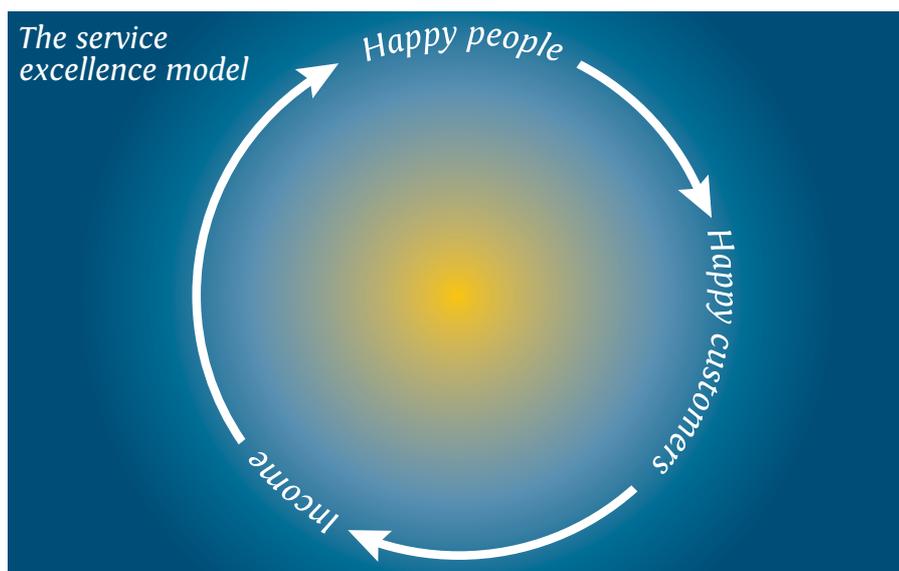
As well as driving the right behaviours with formal performance related reward, NCFE also appreciate the importance of celebration and informal rewards. When they achieved their customer satisfaction target, champagne and cheesecake was wheeled out to mark the occasion. Key milestones along the way to all their targets are celebrated in a similar way.

### Moving from survey results to action

The Chief Executive makes sure that the whole management team is there for the presentation of the customer survey results. After the presentation, Hilary picks out the key themes, and then everyone contributes in creating the action plan. Based on that, everyone in the organisation is told what's planned over the next year and what changes are in the pipeline. Importantly, these actions are now tied into the organisation's general operational plan, rather than leaving the customer satisfaction action plan as a separate entity. This is a key part of embedding customer satisfaction at the centre of the business, and sends a message that supports cultural change. Making sure that the customer survey is tied into the business planning cycle, and the action plan is integrated with wider strategic planning, makes sure that things really happen.

### Feeding back to staff

Hilary does a shorter version of the presentation to groups of staff, as well as communicating the key headlines. She uses the verbatim comments from customers to help illustrate the headlines, and to put some flesh on the bones of the numbers from the survey.



NCFE is a non-profit organisation operating in a strange marketplace—some competitors are also non-profit, whilst

A commitment to this model is reinforced by basing performance-related pay on values, reinforcing specific behaviours that

*continued* ▶



## Comments really make it come alive, so I'll put those in

In principle, it's the numbers that really matter, but in practice it is often more qualitative information such as comments, or video of real customers, that engages staff with the survey and makes them want to change. Comments are a useful reminder that at the other end of each customer questionnaire is a real person, and they help to bring about a customer-focused culture.

### Feeding back to customers

After that, NCFE go and tell customers what they're doing about the survey. For the last few years they've put it in a regular newsletter (now an e-bulletin) and also on the website. Hilary says that their customers respond better to electronic communication than to snail mail.

### Building the action plan

A lot of the negative feedback from customers is not a surprise. Many of the things that the survey suggested should be in the customer action plan were areas that NCFE had already planned to work on, which makes it easier to get buy in and suggests that the organisation is already on the right track.

Alongside the customer research, NCFE are mapping out their customer experience in order to understand better the customer journey. Hilary explains that it's all about putting yourself in the customer's shoes, trying to map out different customer interactions and identify the potential problem areas. The verbatim comments explaining low scores in the customer survey are a key part of that process.

Improving customer satisfaction is a sim-

ple job on paper—you just have to consistently to give customers what they say they want—but in practice doing that flawlessly every time is very difficult. Hilary comments wryly that "it sounds simple until you start doing it". I suspect this is the first sign of an organisation that is actually doing something to improve. Changing satisfaction tends to be harder, and to take longer, than you expect.

## It sounds simple, until you start doing it

### Breaking it down

NCFE, like many organisations, has a complex and diverse customer base. Each one of its "customers", say a college of further education, might have 10 departments offering a host of different qualifications and programmes managed by different people. That adds up to a lot of people who are in contact with NCFE on a regular basis.

The customer survey has to involve interviews with exam officers, principals, delivery staff, curriculum leaders and so on. When it comes to looking at customer priorities and choosing priorities for improvement, all these differences add up to different potential actions. A key part of NCFE's approach is to break down the results in order to understand "who is saying what". The priorities for improvement are not, and cannot be, the same for all customers or for all staff.

Each priority for improvement was broken down into a set of specific actions. "Being kept informed", for example, was tackled by a number of things that were designed to change crucial staff behaviours such as:

- A top tips sheet of how to deliver excellent customer service on the phone

- Pre-printed message pads, with all the things you should get from each customer (e.g. what's the best time to call them back?)
- A behavioural change always to check calendars before making a promise to a customer

The idea is that these are tools which help staff to get it right—but importantly they're all predicated on the idea that staff want to do a good job. In almost all cases this is a good assumption, but Hilary emphasises that there are two angles of attack when it comes to improvement. One is to make sure that all the processes and systems are in place. This is crucial, but it's never enough on its own. The other perspective has to be cultural – fundamentally you need good staff who are motivated and empowered to do their best for customers. The starting point is to make sure you have the right people.

Structuring the contact environment is a challenge that has as many attempted solutions as there are companies. NCFE's approach is to have a first line of contact, the Centre Support Team, which should be able to deal with any query. On the rare occasions when they can't, they know the right person to put the customer through to.

Each member of the Centre Support Team has their own individual allocation of customers, and they will do everything for that customer from centre approval through to certifications and support. This end-to-end approach is much more customer-focused than using specialists who are expert in each of the phases, passing the customer from one to the next, and it suggests a greater concern with customer satisfaction than with "bean-counting" internal efficiency. Customers are frequently crying out for a clear point of contact, and this is precisely what NCFE gives them—one place to go for all enquiries.

The obvious weakness with having a single point of contact is what do you do when that person is on holiday? NCFE operate a "buddy" system, which means that each member of staff has a buddy who is somewhat familiar with their contacts. This ought to bring them the best of both worlds.



Since everything starts with the employees, it's essential to know how satisfied they are. Staff who are dissatisfied can sometimes still be motivated to do a good job for customers, but usually not for long. The staff survey, using a matching methodology to the customer survey, achieved a 100% response rate, and is seen as a vital part of improving the customer satisfaction score.

## Conclusion

I think NCFE's successes can be attributed to getting two basic things right. Firstly they realised that change is all about the people within the organisation. That, in turn, entails three points of attack:

**1.**The culture—people must want to

deliver for customers, and be excited about the changes on the horizon. This is backed up by integrating the customer action plan with wider business planning and rewarding people for meeting satisfaction targets, both of which send staff an important message about what senior management see as important.

**2.**Focus on specific behaviours—getting the right people is important, but you also need to focus on specific actions that result in satisfied customers. This amounts to giving your people the tools to deliver for customers.

**3.**Processes—staff also need to know that the processes they are working within do support and reinforce their

work for customers. Processes can't satisfy customers, but they can certainly lead to dissatisfaction if they prevent your staff from delivering.

The other thing that NCFE got right was breaking down the results of the customer survey into specific action plans targeted at different types of customer, and owned by different members of staff. This goes hand in hand with integrating customer actions with other strategic planning, and is a sign of an organisation that is serious about change.

All in all, the NCFE story proves that rapid change in satisfaction is possible if you really put your mind to it. It's not easy, and you really have to mean it, but it can be done. **S**



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Hilary is Service Excellence Manager at NCFE. She's responsible for driving employee and customer engagement projects throughout the organisation using satisfaction data to identify areas for improvement. Outside of work, Hilary enjoys a passion for food and spending time with friends and young family.

*Loyalty scheme* – at the moment it's at my hairdressers – simply because they surprised me with a free haircut last week because I had enough points!