Implementing the Branded Customer Experience

What we do

The Glasgow Group helps large organizations implement their brand and customer experience (BCE) strategy. We work with functional teams to link organizational goals with what customers want and drive sustainable change in day-to-day activities of the business.

Introduction

Two of the more common and seemingly paradoxical forces at work in many large service organizations are: a) the drive to reduce costs and, b) pressure to give customers more service and options. While cost reduction models abound, creating a customer-driven strategy can be bedeviling. How do you retrofit a large structure around the nimbleness required deliver to a 'customer experience'?

Here the BCE presents an opportunity. Businesses like Starbucks have found significantly greater margins by delivering an enhanced customer experience - not just great coffee. In the Starbucks customer-centric organization, front-line staff and systems enable a unique customer experience every time - the way the customer wants it. Not only are the margins strong, they are maintained by customer-driven quality systems which reduce mistakes and inefficiency. In effect, customer focus becomes a margin enhancement investment strategy, not a cost.

Delivering a superior BCE is a strategic requirement of virtually all market-driven organizations. A speedier organizational response to customer needs is, therefore, crucial, but reliance on the traditional top-down management approach in matrix service organizations slows down necessary change. Staff may understand the 'what' of desired customer outcomes, but the implementation – the 'how' – is a daunting task. Too many barriers exist to make the business customer centric. For example, the marketer's job is to shift customers' attitude and behaviours by making them more disposed to believe the brand promise. But, marketers don't have the tools to help people in their own organizations reinforce or change their behaviour to match the promises of the brand message. The brand promise is a service or attitude the firm often cannot yet fully deliver. Front-line staff has neither the authority nor the support systems to make it happen.

As most products are now a commodity and the BCE has become the point of differentiation, power has effectively shifted from the producer to the consumer. So the organization has to become both closer to the customer and even nimbler in its responsiveness. As such, the power to act on customers' requests must devolve closer to the front line.
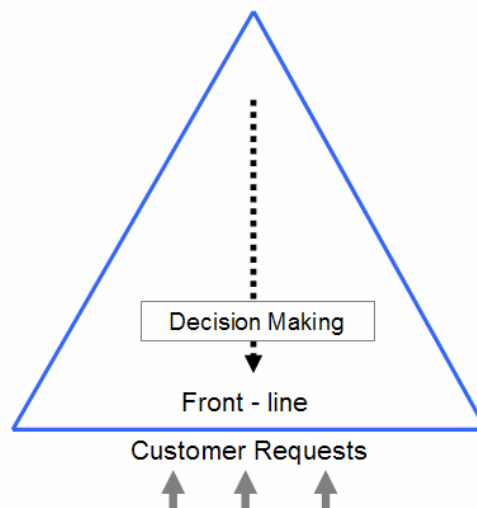
Decision making about customer issues has to move closer to the front-line:

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Many customer service requests require a consistent, effective response from a cross-section of the organization, involving complex cross-functional agreements and collaborative activities. In this respect, the management and departmental silo model stopped serving the customer some time ago.

In this case if change cannot rely on the traditional top-down management structure - it can provide only a general direction to staff - a fresh approach to internal collaboration is required. Possessing a wealth of knowledge about customer needs is just the start of the organization's shift to a differentiated branded customer experience capability. Creating customer-centric behaviour in a service organization can be conceptualized as four stages along a continuum:

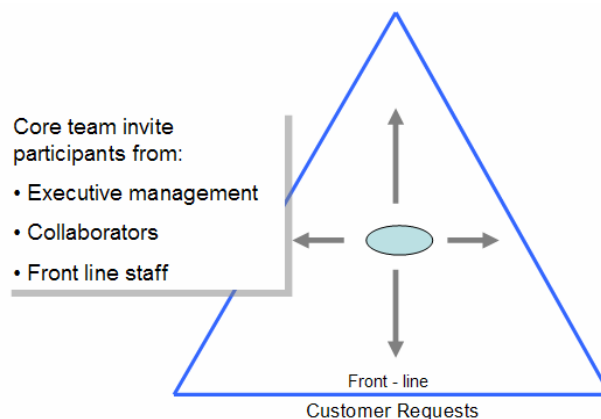| *Stage 1*	*Stage 2*	*Stage 3*	*Stage 4*
Knowledge ⟶	**Insight** ⟶	**Attitude** ⟶	**Behaviour**

Most organizations have the capabilities to reach Stage 2 and have developed tactics to produce the desired change around Stage 3. However, for many matrix organizations, Stage 4 seems to be the most difficult stage to implement. Creating action around Stages 3 and 4 requires collaboration between every function across the organization.

In an ideal future world, self-directed virtual teams may be set up to enhance responsiveness to customers' individual needs. Meanwhile, organizational responsiveness to customer needs requires new capabilities in customer listening and timely decision making, particularly at the front line. We believe it can best be enabled through the organization's middle and front lines.

Implementing Change – Which Strategy and Where?

With so many needs to be considered, choosing a BCE strategy can be vexing. An executive suite leader needs to ask 'What makes most sense for the customer?' then pick one strategy and acknowledge that it will: a) be challenged for incompleteness, and b) not easily fit every nook and cranny of the business. However, once the strategy decree is made change implementation can begin somewhere in the middle where front-line decision making is most influenced – the closer to the front line, the better:

Core team invite participants from:
- Executive management
- Collaborators
- Front line staff

Front - line
Customer Requests

Start in the middle of the organization's hierarchy:

The first task is to identify pockets of the organization where managers are already keen to deliver a BCE – they can often build on existing BCE capabilities that they may or may not be aware of. This accelerates the progress of change.

**T h e G l a s g o w G r o u p**

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A core team for each functional group should be brought in early to recruit cross-functional managers to act as collaborators, as well as some senior executives and front-line staff who want to participate in the main change activity. 'Executive to front-line' participation is critical to building collaborative, cross-functional change.

Change will accelerate when built around a team's business goals and performance targets and ensuring that the activity is aligned with other similar organizational change. Additionally, sustainability of the change outcomes must be built into the early processes.

A Sustainable Difference

To build sustainability and accountability into mid- and front-line management change plans you must create a good number of fast-start, attainable, visible small-step change projects. The goal is to make the change visible to participants and colleagues. This helps create ripple effects among those inside and close to the centre of activity.
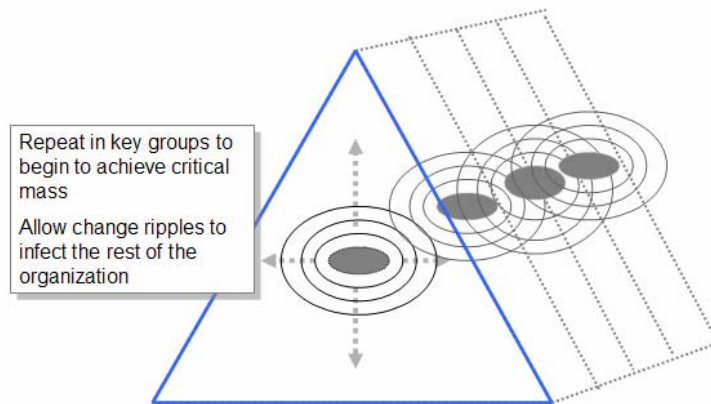
Creating change ripples in the organization:

Does the whole organization need to experience this approach? It appears that this is not the case. By working with select groups of functional teams in cross-functional planning sessions, the ripple effect it creates influences further change throughout the organization. The resulting culture change seems to be viral.

The Tools we Use

PostStone Roundtables create powerful conversations (the kind we see at the kitchen table), between customers and managers. Participants work together to produce forceful narratives that drive action toward the achievement of results. Compelling stories can provide emotional connection to organizational purpose, create common ground for shared discovery and joint action, make meaning visceral, spark new insights, provoke change and make information memorable.

Solutions Focus is a refreshing approach to change. It is centered on keeping things as simple as possible, doing what works and not much else. Most traditions of problem-solving invite you to dive straight into analysis of the problem. If we skip the analysis we can instead find out what's already working and how the people in the organization want things to be. We ask them to describe their preferred future, and help them identify the small first steps towards it. Unfailingly, by treating each case individually on its merits, we have found that organizations and teams make great immediate and visible progress towards sustainable change.

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The customer is becoming more and more powerful and exercising an increasingly strong influence on every organization. The Glasgow Group helps businesses leverage and align their strengths with customers' goals, thereby speeding up the kind of change that really matters. Doing what works for customers is powerful stuff!

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