The Use of Solutions Focus in Branded Customer Experience Implementation

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Introduction

Delivering a superior *'branded customer experience'* is a no longer optional. It is a strategic requirement of virtually all market driven organizations. Why? Because customers are becoming all-powerful. A speedier organizational response to their needs is therefore crucial, but it has become clear that reliance on the traditional top-down management approach in matrix service organizations slows down necessary change. Top-down mandates, operational planning and change management tools may help staff understand the *'what'* of desired outcomes, but the implementation – the *'how'* – can best happen through the organization's middle and front lines. It is here that a clear understanding of what the customer wants must be established. Only then can change happen immediately.

Having identified pockets of the organization where managers are keen to deliver the right customer experience, a Solutions Focus approach is highly effective in helping them build on existing – albeit unconscious – customer capabilities. By building small-step plans, establishing accountability among mid-lower level management and providing follow-through, immediate visible and sustainable change happens. Indeed, Solutions Focus can be used throughout the process – from project definition to the final outcomes review meeting.

In large consumer service organizations, it is the marketers' job to try and change customers' behaviour by making them more disposed to believe the advertising promise. All too often, 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 fact is, the brand has to address consumer behaviours that are constantly changing. As a result, the brand promises of many large service organizations are often ahead of their service delivery capabilities – the organization is advertising a service or attitude it cannot yet fully deliver. Meanwhile, front-line staff people see advertising that features idealized images of themselves that they would like to be able to offer, yet have neither the authority nor the support systems to make it happen. Interestingly, individual performance appraisal measures are now being set around customer experience and satisfaction. While management and staff are highly motivated to make the required changes they are uncertain how to go about it. 'What do I need to <u>do</u>?' is a question heard with increasing frequency. Defining the organization's brand promise, and helping to establish the branded customer experience is one thing; getting thousands of employees to deliver the promise is another.

Organizational responsiveness to customer needs requires new capabilities in customer listening and timely decision making, particularly at the front line. Many see the need to institutionalize branded customer experience management, but are wondering where to begin. So the question is, how does the organization shift to a customer-centric culture and embed it without a template to make it happen?

Many may think that this would require drastic action, but this article will illustrate one of the simpler ways that large service institutions can help their staff to live the branded customer experience. It will show how the use of Solutions Focus can help to create sustainable behaviour change towards customers, even when cross-functional goals are not easily aligned. Further, it will suggest that engaging functional departments to give them ownership of the approach is critical in speeding up strategic and operational decision-making, and show how collaborative cross-functional action plans can have immediate effect in modifying staff behaviour towards the customer. Finally it will illustrate how a 'follow-through' approach allows the teams to witness their own progress, thus leveraging the ripple effect of change both within and beyond the groups engaged in change.

Since solutions focus praxis involves asking a series of appropriate questions and carefully considering the clients' answers, the case methodology is partly statistical though mainly anecdotal. Conclusions have been drawn exclusively from client feedback, although the organizations cannot be named because of client confidentiality

Devolving decision making to the front line

As previously stated, there is often a gap between the definition of an organization's brand promise and establishing it in practice. In our view, there are two reasons for this: first, many matrix service organizations are struggling to find new ways of delivering customer experience promises. Second, traditional top-down management directives are not enough to change the culture and operating practices of matrix service organizations.

To expand on the first reason, today's customers are attaining a level of unprecedented power over organizations originally built around traditional production and sales models. Most products are now a commodity. The point of differentiation has become the customer experience, rather than the product itself which is largely undifferentiated. Understanding lies in the realization that the individual is engaged in the experience.[1] Power has therefore 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.

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[1] Laurence Bernstein (2006): *Experiential Branding,* The Bay Charles Consulting Company   www.baycharles.com strategy@baycharles.com
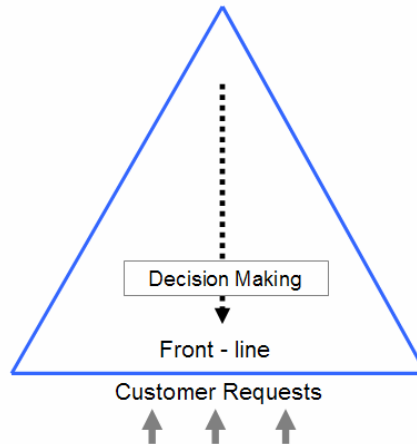
Exhibit #1. Decision making about customer issues has to move to the front-line:

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

Clearly, a speedier response to customer needs is crucial if an organization is to grow. But it has become clear to us that what slows down change in matrix service organizations is reliance on the traditional top-down management structure. Top-down strategy can provide only a general direction, so delivering services and products to fit the customers' needs calls out urgently for a fresh approach to internal collaboration. 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 strategies 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. This makes it very difficult for the manager to succeed in a traditional hierarchical firm that is beginning to 'de-silo' and struggling with cross-functional alignment. In an ideal future world, self-directed virtual teams may be set up to respond to customers' individual needs. Today, we know *what* we'd like to have happen. We're just not clear on *how* to make it happen.

Solutions Focus and amplifying change processes

Institutionalizing a firm's approach to the branded customer experience will not happen overnight. It takes time for an organization to develop an overall customer strategy, then to adjust its unique culture and processes around this. Top-down mandates, operational planning and change management tools can only help staff understand the *'what'* of desired outcomes. The implementation – the *'how'* – must come through an understanding of the general direction, together with an experience of what the customer wants and how to make change happen. This is especially true at the middle to lower levels of the organization. When functional groups and individuals in an organization experience how they can put the customer at the forefront of their thinking and have the power to do so, strategy comes to life. Several change management tools can be used to address the particular needs of an organization, and Solutions Focus is a useful way to leverage and amplify the effectiveness of those tools. For instance, many standard Prosci[2] and Kotter[3] change management tools can be used for a variety of purposes, such as:

- Creating change champions and leadership coalitions.

- Ensuring the intended change is clearly aligned with corporate imperatives and implementation needs. Ensuring change participants clearly understand what's in it for them within the context of departmental business goals,

- Creating core project planning teams involved in the change execution to share ownership of change management plans. Identifying the need of core project teams to communicate and collaborate with relevant parts of the organization.

- Creating mechanisms to enable collaboration and two-way communication.

- Managing resistance, by thinking through the change management activities early in the change process, then providing approaches that will mitigate resistance before it happens.

- Providing the knowledge and tools to help supervisors become effective coaches for change.

- Creating systems that will track adoption of the new approach. Building in reinforcement of success as part of the change.

- Gathering continuous feedback from those who are impacted by the change.

- Encouraging celebration of successes during implementation.

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[2] Prosci business process design and change management research

[3] Kotter Model for Leading Change

Solution Focus and the Roundtable

Recently, Solutions Focus has been used to amplify the Roundtable approach. When organizations' customers get together around 'the kitchen table', as it were, they are able to dramatize their stories and enter into the middle of the management planning process. [4]

It is worth noting that Roundtables can yield more than insights.

> The Roundtable is nothing more than a kitchen table conversation framed by a topic. There is a happy paradox about the seeming disorder of the kitchen table. A familiar, rambunctious part of daily life, the kitchen table is in fact a tightly structured, self-organizing forum. It has precise rules, known by all, that are easily followed.
>
> As a result, roundtable participants work together with next to no guidance to produce forceful narratives. This is important work. As Walter Fisher and other communications thinkers have shown, it is compelling stories 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 can amplify any one of these various approaches, particularly ownership of change implementation at the mid- front-line levels. Experience shows that Solutions Focus can be used successfully throughout the process: from project definition to the first core team meeting; from planning activities to follow-through discussions.

Solution Focus and Implementing Change

Once the overall customer strategy is clear, an effective way to start implementing change in an organization is by starting somewhere in the middle where front-line decision making is most influenced:

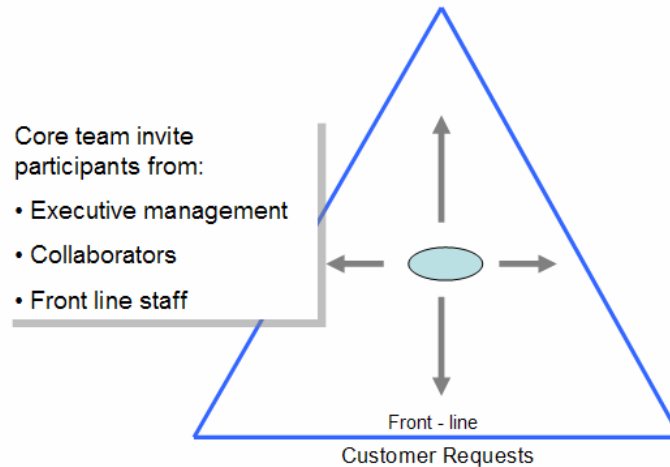[4] PostStone Roundtable, Kitchen Table model

Exhibit #2. Start in the middle of the organization's hierarchy:

The first task is to identify those pockets of the organization where managers are already keen to deliver the right customer experience. Solutions Focus helps them build on existing capabilities that they may or may not be aware of. In this way, customer-centric thinking is brought in early to the planning / decision-making process, and accelerates the progress of change.

Project leader and core teams for each functional group should be brought in at an early stage in the process. Among other things, they should be charged with recruiting a trusted group of cross-functional managers to act as collaborators, as well as some senior executives and front-line staff who will also participate in the main change activity. 'Executive to front-line' participation helps build collaborative, cross-functional change. Recently, a client agreed to bring these parties together in a Solutions Focus Roundtable planning session with customers. Having observed the interaction, a leader volunteered the following comments:

> *'We had a lot of big decision makers at the round table. I like seeing how they work through the various issues. We had a lot of other things too, but this was one thing that I found very helpful.'*

> *'Remember, our mandate was not to put just our 'big guns' in there, but also to include our sceptics. I think that's the piece that's worked out really nicely.'*

Solutions Focus and business goals

A starting point of the work is the recognition that changes will accelerate when built around a team's business goals and performance targets. Asking team leaders and the core team 'what's keeping you awake at night?' helps to clarify the areas where the group are customers for change. This helps highlight and resolve a specific business issue, such as listening more actively to customers. Using the client's tools, such as brand principles, is also essential. In a recent project a team member was to make the following comment:

'I think the round tables have really brought things to life for everyone. They've given us some tangible things to work on … specifically because they relate to customers.'

In designing the key change elements it is necessary to ensure that the activity is aligned with other similar organizational change. One participant praised the way that Solutions Focus Roundtables were used with customers in the planning sessions:

'It reinforces other cultural changes that we're doing here around the customer and the round tables. So, it's not just the icing on the cake. It really <u>is</u> the cake, aligning itself beautifully with what we're doing right across the country.'

Additionally, sustainability of the change outcomes must also be built into the process at this early stage, by having the core team develop sustainability ideas into their preferred future discussions.

Solutions Focus and building on existing capabilities

Under pressure to change an organization, leaders may not notice how much progress has already been achieved. Asked to describe what did not have to be changed, one solutions-focused Roundtable team leader made this comment:

'…it's about what we were already doing. It's reinforced the conviction that our people really <u>are</u> doing the right thing, and <u>are</u> going the extra mile. We hear about all the exceptions because we talk to 70,000 people a day, but we don't hear about ones that are going well.'

The solutions focus questioning tool is not only used to raise team consciousness about the issue in hand, it also generates some useful feedback for the team. For instance, questions like 'how do you see this process being useful to the customer / the team / the organization?' will elicit responses that clearly demonstrate the progress of the change process. Noting the use of the question 'where are we already living the branded customer experience?' a team member recently responded:

It fits in beautifully, because of the way that it builds on what's going well and what's working. It builds on those pieces. I loved the way we kept asking 'is there anything else?' 'What else?' [5]

There is another key element to bear in mind when working for change; that is to build accountability into mid- and front-line management change plans by creating a good number of fast-start, attainable, visible small-step change projects. The goal is to make the effectiveness

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[5] All comments taken from roundtable discussion with Canadian Banking Client, held March 9, 2006 on follow-through review of Solutions Focus Roundtables, held June and October, 2005

and sustainability of the change visible to participants and colleagues. This helps create ripple effects among those inside and close to the centre of activity. The ripple effect can also be used to leverage opportunities for the participating teams, as was noted in the following observation:

> *'The other thing that it did was to help us see how our coaching's changed … coaching team leaders is all about giving examples, making exceptions, making sure your commitment is to the customer.'*

Small-step change projects should be built around four criteria: first, they should result in outcomes the customer can see; second, the work should be completed within two weeks; third, it should require no incremental budget; and fourth, other parts of the organization don't have to change what they do. With these criteria in place, the plans become an invaluable tool. In the words of a department supervisor at a recent workshop:

> *'It helped them take accountability to the customer. Then they went out and delivered the message to all their peers.'*

Solutions Focus and follow-through

To make the work sustainable, the core teams should later review outcomes using more solutions focused questions, such as 'what's different?' 'How did you manage to do that?' Suppose you were to do more of that…?' This process not only helps the teams see that they are making substantial progress; it also encourages them to focus still more on the customer experience.

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 ensures that the influence reaches throughout the organization. The resultant culture change seems to be viral.
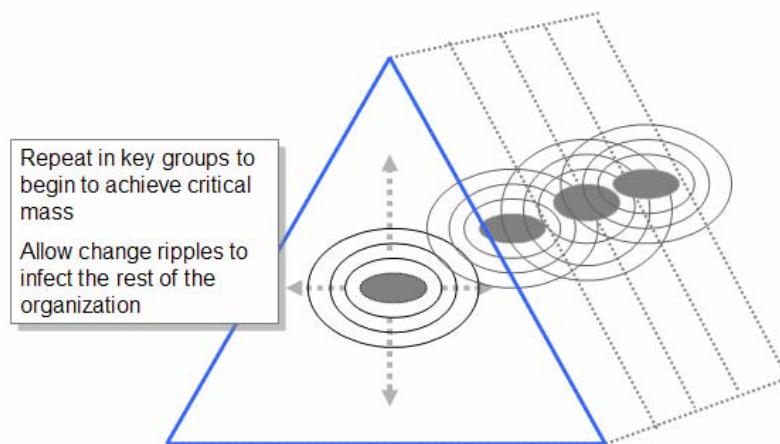

Exhibit #3. Creating change ripples in the organization:

In March 2006, a survey inviting employee feedback was conducted in the organization. When comparing the findings of the 504 employees in the "pilot" group with the 3,068 "control" employees in other regional groups, a statistically significant positive change was apparent in the pilot group in areas related to the client experience change project.

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Employee Opinion Survey

Most Favourable Category Scores Ranked by Difference from Benchmark:

Bank client vision and values	+ 6
Employee engagement	+ 6
External client focus supplement	+ 5

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Conclusion

More and more organizations recognize that today's customer is becoming all-powerful, and firms are searching for ways to respond more speedily to the need for a more customer-centric approach. However, it has been seen that even when the overall customer strategy is clear, the pace of change in traditional top-down matrix organisations is slow and cumbersome. More power is needed at the front-line to deal with customers. The ability to initiate change in behaviour appears to rest with mid- to low-level cross-functional teams of managers. It is at these levels that customer thinking can be incorporated into change planning and implementation.

The use of a solutions-focussed approach can facilitate leverage of a variety of change models, such as Roundtables, and speed up the implementation of internal organizational behaviours that reinforce customer-centric values. Building small-step plans, establishing collaboration accountability, and following through into mid-lower level management planning ensure the creation of immediate, visible, sustainable change. This approach has also been successfully applied in business-to-business organizations.

Maintaining a solutions focus throughout the implementation of branded customer experience can result in localized and swift dramatic shifts in organizational behaviours. This, in turn, leads to larger cultural, systemic change that is so crucial for organizations that must urgently respond to the changing needs of today's powerful customer.

Alan Kay of **The Glasgow Group** works with a range of companies to help their executives gain insights from the customers' perspective, and transform the organization's behaviour towards them.

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