CHAPTER 9

Clients as Customers: A County Social Services Agency Listens to its Primary Constituency

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Introduction

This case study focuses on client satisfaction research conducted at Santa Clara County's Social Services Agency as part of a county-wide initiative to "enhance customer service." The initiative, entitled "County Service: Collaboration for Excellence" is notable for at least two reasons. First, the initiative brought a unique "customer service" perspective to public county services. Secondly, it took place during a time of budgetary strain and cutbacks, when the predominant value in most government agencies is survival and efforts at quality improvement are often deferred.

Background

As was the case with most county govern-ments in California, the late 1980s and early 1990s were challenging times for Santa Clara County, which was confronted with increased demand for services at a time of diminishing economic resources. Located in the southern Bay Area, Santa Clara is the fourth largest county in California with a population of about 1.5 million. During the 1960s and 1970s, the metropolitan area of San Jose, the largest city in Santa Clara County, grew rapidly and became known as the "Silicon Valley," a leading center for the computer and microchip industry in the U.S.

Although the booming economy of the Silicon Valley helped provide a high standard of living for some, it did not benefit all equally. Amidst the growth and prosperity, significant areas of poverty and social need continued to exist. By the early 1990s, a slow down in some sectors of the computer industry, combined with cuts in defense industries and competition from other technology centers in the U.S. and abroad, led to painful economic readjustments in the area.

Many middle class families were experiencing unemployment and increased economic insecurity. In 1990-91, an estimated 100,000 people received some form of public assistance in Santa Clara County and the county faced the prospect of even greater demand for services. The county faced the increasingly complex needs of its population at a time when crisis in state government, and a shifting and unpredictable local economy limited its financial resources.

While the demand for services was great, county administrators and political leaders also sensed that many community residents were dissatisfied with the quality of services. For Santa Clara County Executive Sally Reed, this was an issue that could not be deferred. "Even with fewer resources," she argued, "we know we can be courteous, we know we can be polite, we know we can be efficient and effective, and we know that we have a work force that we can be truly proud of."

This perspective was shared by the Director of Santa Clara's Social Services Agency. For him, creating a customer service ethic was an essential part of making services work and improving staff morale. He seized the county's "customer service" mandate as an opportunity to assess the need for change in his own agency. He noted that, while social service clients may be dependent on the agency for financial assistance, the agency is dependent on the clients for its existence. In his opinion, the interdependence between the agency and the users of its services entitles the service users to be treated as customers. While they may not have the choice to take their "business" elsewhere, he argues, these customers have a right to be treated as if they did have that choice.

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When the agency fails to hear its customers' concerns directly, he says, they will be heard indirectly when they vote, sue, move or protest in the press or in the streets. A continuing focus on customer satisfaction provides a necessary discipline for agencies with a monopoly on a particular service or governmental function and creates an incentive for consistent attention to quality improvement. A customer service approach also provides useful criteria for the agency to evaluate and understand itself better.

Assessing Customer Satisfaction

For the Director, it was especially troubling to hear complaints that a component of county social services—public assistance eligibility services—were an inhospitable and unhelpful environment for clients. "I got consistent feedback that welfare department people were rude, arrogant, etc," he said. Yet it was not clear whether these complaints were representative of all service users or just a vocal minority.

To get a better handle on this issue, he decided to systematically examine "customer satisfaction" with the agency. He brought in the private research firms Strategic Research Inc. and Hamlin Harkins, Inc. to "identify the satisfaction level of clients served by the agency and to provide input for setting up an on-going satisfaction measurement process." The research process that was conducted had three phases. First, preliminary interviews were conducted with selected "stakeholders" (staff and administrators) in the system to understand their perceptions of what were important priorities for the agency. Second, a group of college students was hired to play the role of customer and complete a mock application process and give their comments on the experience in a focus group. Third, client surveys were conducted by mail and in person with social service users as they left the agency. The results of this research included a range of client perspectives.

During the first phase of preliminary interviews with thirteen staff and administrators, agency personnel were asked to share their perceptions of an "ideal" agency, along with their views about current agency strengths and limitations. While they expressed satisfaction with the overall management and "general attitude" of the agency, there was also an interest in improving interactions with and responsiveness to clients.

As stakeholders, they placed a high priority on good management, adequate staff levels to handle caseloads, training and staff development and sufficient compensation. Their perceptions of qualities of an ideal agency with a customer service perspective, included: 1) responsive, 2) helpful, 3) effective, and 4) sensitive. The greatest gap between their assessment of current services and their vision of an ideal agency was in the areas of "helpful," "sensitive," and "responsive." Suggestions for ways to improve organizational functioning included increased staff training, more bilingual and bicultural staff, more computer equipment to reduce paperwork, and increased community liaison. Yet as useful as these responses were, they were still based on a perspective within the agency. The results were encouraging, especially the positive staff attitude toward the agency and the commitment to improving the quality of customer services. The Director hoped that the next two phases of the research would enhance the understanding of how customers viewed the agency.

Results from the focus group of college stu-dents seemed to confirm the director's worst fears. The students, who had been hired to go through an actual application process without telling staff that they were involved in a research test, had overwhelmingly negative reactions to the experience. He noted that "not a single redeeming thing was said in that focus group." Students pretending to be clients shared their observations about the un-friendly atmosphere of the lobbies, the un-pleasant staff attitudes, the intrusiveness of questions they had to answer, and the difficulty of getting assistance. Some students commented that the numerous bureaucratic signs and lists of rules and regulations posted in the lobby created an unpleasant and un-welcoming atmosphere. Others felt that staff were curt or rude to them. Some were also incredulous that, in order to get a small amount of financial assistance, they would be required to document all personal assets and might not be allowed to keep some possessions. Overall, the results of the student focus group painted a bleak picture of the agency, leading the Director to expect similarly negative results from the survey of service users.

Yet the customer satisfaction survey of actual clients revealed a much different perspective. A total of 3000 questionnaires were mailed to service users and 1200 responses were re-ceived, a respectable 40% response rate. In addition, 60 phone interviews were onducted. In general, these respondents were surprisingly positive about the Social Services Agency. Among the overall findings were the following:

Eligibility Worker:

- 91% of respondents said that their eligibility worker was willing or very willing to help them;

- 89% said that their eligibility worker took just enough time to hear their story; and
- 84% reported that their eligibility worker told them everything they needed to know about their case.

Personnel Attitude:

- 83% of respondents rated telephone receptionists as either good or very good;
- 87% rated office workers as good or very good;
- 90% rated their eligibility worker as good or very good.

Courtesy of Personnel:

- 78% of respondents reported being treated courteously by telephone receptionists;
- 77% reported being treated courteously by office workers;
- 83% reported being treated courteously by their eligibility worker.
- Waiting Time:
- 74% of continuing clients felt that the wait for their initial visit was not too long; and
- 45% of intake clients felt that the wait for their initial visit was either a little too long (20%) or much too long (25%).

While these results did not show a perfect record of customer satisfaction, neither did they reflect the pervasive dissatisfaction that might have been expected given the consistent complaints that had prompted the research and the negative reactions from the student focus group. While the Director found these results encouraging, he also thought that it was also important to examine the results in more depth. While the positive results could be used to give a morale boost to front line staff who had so often borne the brunt of complaints and criticism, it was also important to read "between the lines" to understand the implications of the findings. Why, for instance, had the results differed so significantly from those of the student focus group? One partial explanation could be found by comparing the responses of service users who had been on aid for less than six months to those who had been on aid for longer periods. In general, respondents who had been receiving aid for the shortest time were more critical and less satisfied with service than those who had been receiving welfare assistance for a longer time, although the differences were not profound. Among the responses showing this pattern were the following:

- 12% of respondents on aid for less than six months said that it was "very difficult" to get the information they needed from office receptionists compared to 6% of those on aid between six and twenty-four months and 5% of those on aid for those on aid more than two years.
- 14% of those receiving aid less than six months said it was "very difficult" to get information they needed from their eligibility worker compared to 12% of those on aid from 6-24 months and 6% of those receiving aid over two years.
- 18% of those on aid less than six months said it took "much too long" for them to get their first appointment with an eligibility worker, compared to 12% of those on aid from 6-24 months and 5% of those on aid more than two years.
- 14% of those on aid less than six months said that their eligibility worker was "not helpful at all" compared to 11% of those receiving aid for 6-24 months and 6% of those receiving aid for over two years.

While there were a few exceptions, this general pattern of declining rates of dissatisfaction showed up throughout the results. There was little reason to believe that these changes in customer satisfaction had much to do with changes in caseload sizes or changes in the waiting periods for first appointments since these had remained fairly consistent over the period covered in the study. Instead, it seemed that some changes were taking place in the way customers or clients were experiencing the services. A number of explanations were possible. It was possible, for instance, that clients and workers developed positive working relationships over time that made clients view the services and workers more positively. While this interpretation might explain the improved evaluation of eligibility workers with whom service users interacted on a regular basis, it did not seem to explain the improved evaluations of telephone receptionists and office workers, who were less likely to develop working relationships with clients due to frequent shift rotations. Furthermore, it was difficult to explain why clients who had been on aid the shortest time were the most dissatisfied with the waiting time for the initial visit.

A second possible explanation was that service users had developed greater knowledge of the system over time and were able to advocate more effectively for their own needs. According to this interpretation, people who had learned to "work the system" would be more satisfied with the services they received. Yet this explanation did not address the differences in satisfaction regarding the length of initial wait for services.

A third explanation was that client expectations about services had diminished over time, whereby increased familiarity and experiences with the system may lead to their decreased expectations of what was possible or changeable. For example, what was one considered rude behavior become more tolerable and even acceptable or what was once "much too long" to wait for service became a routine waiting period.

For the Director, the third explanation seemed most important from a customer service perspective because it raised the issue that the agency might be "training" its customers to accept lower quality service. Such an interpretation of "diminished expectations" could help to explain the difference between the student responses and the client survey results. The Director surmised that students brought a very middle-class perspective of entitlement in terms of what to expect from a government agency as reflected in their comments. People in serious financial difficulty, however, might be more grateful and less critical of any help as well as more experienced in accommodating hostile attitudes from people in authority (e.g., banks, utility companies, bill collectors and government agencies). In this context, an agency offering any assistance might be viewed as positive.

Even when they were somewhat dissatisfied, clients who depended on welfare assistance for survival might be hesitant to "bite the hand that feeds them" by being overly critical. As Santa Clara Supervisor Rod Diridon com-mented, "It is hard to get accurate data for public service. If people really need the service, they will usually be more positive than they really feel."

Considering the possibility of an inflated positive response, the Director felt that it would be important to examine small vari-ations in responses for information about possible improvements. Results seemed to indicate, for instance, that clients were less satisfied with receptionists than with eligibility workers. While 83% of respondents had rated the attitude of telephone receptionists as either good or very good, this number was some-what lower than the 90% who rated their eligibility worker as good or very good. Additionally, most respondents had rated receptionists as good while a much greater number had rated eligibility workers as very good. Examination of specific comments given by respondents showed that many clients had experienced difficulty in understanding and communicating with telephone receptionists, many of whom were Vietnamese and spoke with an accent.

Looking into the issue further, the Director also became aware that it was common practice in the clerical staff to assign the newest workers to telephone or office receptionist duties. Few experienced clerical workers wanted these responsibilities, which were seem as requiring few skills and were stressful. Yet these receptionists were also the first agency contact for most service users. To the Director, placing the workers who were the least knowledgeable about the agency as the first point of contact for clients was unacceptable, yet he understood the need for a sense of status and professional development in clerical work. To help address this issue, he and his staff developed a "clerical induction sequence" in which new staff were familiarized with agency and county services before being put in the positions requiring interaction with the public. A key ingredient of this induction process is a small desktop booklet entitled "50 Ways to Serve Our Customers" (*Figure 1*).

FIGURE 1
50 Ways to Serve Our Customers

I. In-Person Techniques
1. Make eye contact
2. Acknowledge customer's presence
3. Welcome the customer
4. Smile

II. General Techniques
5. Ask how you can help
6. Use a pleasant tone of voice
7. Use the customer's last name, address the individual as Ms. or Mr.
8. Be polite
9. Be helpful
10. Be patient
11. Exhibit customer empathy
12. Handle private matters confidentiality
13. Maintain the dignity of the customer
14. Wear name tags
15. Say "thank you"
16. Say "we"
17. When appropriate say "I made a mistake
18. Develop and practice listening skills
19. Give clear and concise explanations and directions
20. Verify customer's understanding
21. Respond quickly
22. Explain any delays
23. Focus on business issues
24. Be complete
25. Understand all procedures and policies
26. Where possible, do everything right the first time

III. Telephone Techniques
27. Speak clearly
28. Identify the office you represent and yourself
29. Give clear explanations to the caller
30. Do not put the caller on hold for longer than 2 minutes
31. Be knowledgeable about the individual you are transferring the calle
32. Use an answering machine after hc

IV. Personal Techniques
33. Be aware of the personal image yo project
34. Be appropriately groomed
35. Dress appropriately
36. Be aware of your personal hygiene

V. Physical Environment
37. Post clear and language-appropriat signs
38. Post hours of operation
39. Make clear and language-appropri brochures and information availabl
40. Provide comfortable and clean wai areas
41. Provide access to telephones,restr and wastebaskets
42. Provide kid-friendly areas
43. Provide a variety of reading, audio visual materials

VI. Employee Support Techniques
44. Exhibit teamwork
45. Have clear service goal
46. Recognize and publicize accomplishments
47. Make supervisors easily accessible dispute resolution
48. Promote customer feedback and publicize it
49. Ask for help when needed
50. Be proud of your work