

CULTURE POWER

"I want to speak to a Supervisor!" (Part 1 of 2)

By *Ron Kaufman*

A young man working for a Big Boss made an expensive mistake his first week on the job. At the end of the week the young man cleaned out his desk and packed his things to leave. The Big Boss asked, "What do you think you are doing now?"

"I'm leaving," said the young man. "I made such an expensive mistake; surely you don't want me coming back next week."

"Are you kidding?" exclaimed the Big Boss. "I just spent a small fortune educating you. You better come back next week and show me what you learned."

Does this make sense to you? if so, read on...

Have you ever asked a Frontline Staff for something special and been told, "Sorry, company policy. The answer is NO."? Ever asked to speak with the Supervisor and found the answer soon changed to YES?

When this happens (and it does all over the world) how do you feel about the company? Do you respect it more, or less? How do you feel about the Supervisor? Do you admire her use of authority, or feel pity for the Frontline Staff she over-ruled?

How do you think the staff member feels? (And whose rule was he following in the first place when he said "The answer is NO"?)

One Supervisor took this problem a step further and asked the following question: In our business, customers who get special treatment come back later and only want to speak with a Supervisor and no one else. These customers have lots of friends and tell everybody. I am afraid everyone will want the same special treatment. In the end we would have no need for Counter Clerks as the Supervisors will be serving all our customers! This might make the customers happy, and that is our ultimate goal, but it would be too much for our Supervisors to handle. We have plenty of other work to do! How can we solve this situation?

Here is my answer to this situation:

Companies should empower and support Frontline Staff to do what the Supervisor ultimately does, without having to check with the Supervisor each and every time. This means Staff must get enough training to KNOW what's right - and have enough authority to DO what's right.

It means Supervisors must trust their staff to do the right thing at the right time and not abuse the privilege. It also means Frontline Staff must learn the skills - and earn the trust.

This approach shifts the Supervisor into the role of educator and motivator, not controller and dominator. It's a huge change of mindset and culture in any organization. And, it's the right thing to do for two reasons:

One: The experience customers have with your company must be positive and uplifting, or else they won't come back. If your customer must reach a Supervisor to find satisfaction, more flexible competitors will take your customer away. If, however, you can please a customer, inspire a

customer, make a customer feel "Welcome" in a non-bureaucratic way, their desire to come back (and tell others) will grow. This is essential for successful business in a customer-centric world.

Two: The cost of staff doing robotic work (and referring every exception to the Supervisor) is too high to sustain. Customers get smarter every day. Smart companies provide self-service tools for most basic needs. Well-trained Frontline Staff help new customers get acquainted and assist repeat customers with special situations.

This makes sense and makes money.

The next time you need to go over the Frontline Staff to get what you want from a Supervisor, ask yourself if you would gladly go elsewhere if the Staff could simply say "yes" in the first place.

Key Learning Point: Give your Frontline Team the training and authority they need to take care of customers without constantly asking for approval. This will help you grow your business, please your customers and keep your best-serving staff.

Action Step: Make a complete list of everything your Frontline Staff CANNOT DO for customers without getting a Supervisor's permission. (Hint: ask your Frontline Staff to make the list.)

Now scrutinize the items one-by-one and do everything you can to make the list simpler and shorter. Where staff can be trained to decide for themselves, train them. Where guidelines are needed, provide them. If mistakes will be made, allow them. Over time, everyone can learn to do to what only the Supervisor once knew.

Empowerment is simple, really. Give good staff the authority to make a decision, and tell them to use their common sense. If they bring a situation they should handle up to you, turn it back to them. If they make a good decision, pat them on the back. If they make a bad decision, pat on the back for doing SOMETHING and then help them LEARN from the mistake. Then share the learning with others and watch your company culture grow.

Note: Leaving things as they are is NOT an option for success.

Your best staff will leave in frustration, your customers will leave for better service elsewhere, and you will be right where you were at the beginning, making all the decisions...alone.

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