

Expert Opinion

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A Shortcut to Customer Centricity

It's possible to create a customer-centric organization without using an employee assessment and competencies methodology.

A senior manager was recently appointed responsibility for transforming the culture of a team of 2,000 sales representatives from a product-driven to highly customer-centric. She used the following to conduct an organizational assessment to define the current and desired future states of "customer-centricity":

1. Converted this analysis into a list of 14 critical customer-centric "competencies"
2. Created an online individual "skills" assessment tool that examined each sales person's competencies and identified "areas needing improvement"
3. Developed a training program consisting primarily of short online courses and a few instructor-led courses designed to address the competencies needing improvement
4. Promised rewards to those who followed the program while "performance management" was implied for those who did not follow it

Many organizations use a similar methodology based on assessments and competencies as the standard approach for developing customer-centric environments.

However, significant recent advances in neuroscience research show that the core of this model—assessments and competency-focused training—may actually be detrimental to improving organizational performance. This new science demonstrates that, at the level of brain function, such "remedial models" of change produce undesirable results.

Instead, "affirmative" models of change are emerging that are far more effective at driving customer-centricity. Affirmative models rely on the development and proliferation of positive images of being customer-focused and have been used successfully by thousands of people in hundreds of companies.

Assessments wire negative neural patterns

Neuroscience research has shown that the most fundamental building block of learning is "neurons that fire together wire together." All learning is the development of linkages between neurons that occurs with frequent mental repetition.

Because most assessments are designed to identify individual and organizational deficits so they can be "fixed" (hence the term *remedial*), assessments drive repetition of what is being done wrong. This focus on what is being done wrong (i.e. something other than being customer-centric), packs neurons around the undesirable attitudes and behaviors, which makes them stronger and harder to change.

In addition, there is evidence that the negative feedback that typically accompanies assessments (i.e. the person is deficient in a competency area and is therefore obviously doing something wrong) can cause the release of neural chemicals associated with "fight or flight" behavior. This fear reaction generates still more resistance to change. From a neuroscience perspective, there is strong evidence that assessments about customer centricity have the undesirable effect of increasing resistance to being customer-focused.

Competencies miss passion

Similar issues exist with competency training. The basic premise of "competency training" is that all functions can be reduced to a defined set of capabilities that are discretely identified, completely described, and fully addressed through training or coaching.

However, work with positive deviants, as well as neuroscience research on motivation, indicates that having a strong "purpose" is the foundation for superior performance. "Purpose" is a commitment to achieving a significant social good, such as increased value for the customer, that is big and exciting enough to generate substantial passion.

Competency analyses and the resulting training, in contrast, tend to focus on what is observable and tangible, omitting purpose in general and specifically the passion associated with a commitment to achieving a social good for the customer. Competencies consistently miss the elements essential for customer centricity.

Affirmative change

Fortunately, this same neuroscience, in conjunction with other research and technology, has led to the development of excellent alternatives to assessments and competency training called Affirmative models of change that are particularly powerful in developing customer-centric environments.

Affirmative models define and continuously move toward a powerful, comprehensive, positive image of customer success that is particularly effective at improving performance. More specifically, in Affirmative Change:

- "Positive deviants" quickly and effectively define positive images of the desired focus on customers
- "Fair process" is used to increase participants' sense of honor and dignity by showing everyone that they too can be customer-centric positive deviants

- The neuroscience of positive visualization is used to guide the spoken, written, and team understanding and application of positive deviant knowledge, which drives the release of neurotransmitters associated with improved performance
- The notion of "neurons that fire together wire together" guides development and use of learning activities that promote long-term internalization

Affirmative change guides large numbers of people to adopt and display customer-centric attitudes and behaviors more quickly and effectively than was previously thought possible.

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