Tip of the Spear

by Matt Adams, P.E.

Years ago while I was part of a Facilities Management Evaluation Program team working on an APPA evaluation at Eastern Illinois University, the then-AVP for facilities, Ted Weidner, described his routine facility department current events presentation to the Faculty Senate. We questioned the frequency of these presentations and he told us that he presented at least annually and more often if they would receive him.

Intrigued by Ted's response at the time, we pressed him on the subject and he stated that one in his position could not "over communicate to the campus" the mission and message associated with the facility department. For the last ten years I have observed this to be true, time and again. In fact, what Ted called communication is much more than just presentations. It is all forms of outreach from the facility department to the campus stakeholders.

With respect to information and understanding in the institutional, or most any business setting, we have learned the dangers of inadequate communications. Specifically, when a customer is not informed, the default judgment or assessment of any given service relationship is negative. This is really just human nature. For plant operations, this is even more acute due to the vast array of sometimes technical services delivered.

First is the relatively poor understanding by customers of what services and to what levels we are entitled to. Checking our peer websites lately, many have begun to more clearly define the services of the plant department. While the Web is not enough by itself, providing specific descriptions of delivered services with the normal details, but in layman's terms, is a best practice.

Test yourself. Do your campus customers know specifically what maintenance repair and improvement services are available to them and who pays for various types of work requests? Do they understand what APPA level of housekeeping the general fund budget provides for their space? If the answer is no, you are at square one.

APPA has placed emphasis on customer service for years. Despite this, we as an industry are still missing some easy opportunities for improvement. Now I know that most of our peers are at least sensitive to customer service and the message that our actions "communicate" to the campus. However, with the stakes so high for upholding or improving our image as a service provider on campus, a formal review and subsequent policy and procedure addressing the "tip of the spear" is a great idea.

Why not identify and rank the duration, nature, and context of each routine plant employee and customer contact event? The most weighted are obvious contacts made by the work control desk, housekeepers, project managers, planner/estimators, etc. We are viewed by the campus most often with non-technical and subjective judgments of the interaction they have with our staff. Given this reality, it behooves us to respond in such a way to enhance the event, specifically in the eyes of our customers as opposed to ourselves. The good news of this customer satisfaction strategy is that it is simple and relatively intuitive. The bad news is that, despite this, very few of us are doing it. For example, if you have in fact made a formal inventory of the major customer contact events, what have you done with this data?

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It strikes me that there are some primary categories of customer interaction that can be identified and, therefore, improved. For example, at the work control desk the contacts might fall into the following categories: 1) service requests with an emotional element; 2) work requests with a financial element; 3) service requests with a time-planning element; and perhaps 4) status request with an information element. Now understand that most of us use the "one size fits all" approach to most of our customer-driven processes.

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Clearly there is room to design more effective communication procedures that respond more effectively to each of the aforementioned work control desk events. We should ask a focus group of customers if we have assembled the correct list. If so, what specifically is the response that best suits each event? We need to know from the customers what will make them satisfied and perhaps even feel good about this contact event with our staff and the physical plant. We have the ability as an organization to serve up virtually any information that the customer might want and we can, with some training, do it in a way that best suits their state of mind or expectations.

At this point in our internal review we should have identified the event list by service center. Next, we asked the customers to clearly tell us what information is needed from us to satisfy their needs. Then we formally list the "must-have" and the "nice-to-have" information that we collect from the customers. If you visualize this, we are assembling a service contact matrix and it has three or four columns so far.

The next column of information is perhaps the most important as it relates to meeting overall customers' expectations. Once again we query our focus group to specifically identify what are the top three to five characteristics of this interaction that are most important to the satisfactory resolution of the event. This exercise will take some fresh ideas. For example, we have the event; one service request with an emotional element from above. Previous research by our peers has shown that this type of request often requires a non-technical response; for example, take "empathy and concern." When someone has a strong reaction during a "hot/cold" call, the appropriate response might not have any technical elements. Customers might not care that we are in "shoulder" months. The fact remains that impassioned calls will come to our work control desk forever, and we can laugh them off and get a bad reputation on campus or proactively try to respond effectively to these customers. Moreover, we can respond in predetermined ways that are based on research and customer feedback. Seems like an easy win to me!

One might consider that this is way too "touchy-feely" for our business. However, we know that perception is reality and this is doubly true for our non-facilities savvy customers. In fact, there are already staff members that intuitively recognize the ideas being discussed here and apply some of the improved response we would hope for.

That is great! The next step is to consistently spread this to everyone that represents the "tip of the spear." This is done with defined policies, procedures, training, and measurements. It's just like any form of continuous improvement we undertake.