

The Science of Service
Six Essential Elements for
Creating a Culture of Service

In the Public Sector

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Preface

A Public Servant is Born

I didn't grow up daydreaming about being a government employee. Did you? I ask that question all the time; almost no one says yes. Personally, I wanted to be a killer whale trainer at SeaWorld but life took me down a different road. And I'm so glad it did!

Years ago, during my last semester of (undergraduate) college, one of my professors sat me down for a chat. There was an intern position available with the county government of San Diego and she thought it would be a good fit for me. "I know the people who work there; they're really great. And I think you'll find the work interesting."

With a shrug and a smile, I gladly accepted her offer to write a recommendation for me. Then, I went out and bought my first suit.

A few weeks later, working away as an intern, I realized my professor was right. These people were great.

I found myself surrounded by people who came to work every day to improve other people's quality of life. From food inspectors to directors of public health programs for children to air and water safety managers – these people had dedicated their careers to helping our communities in ways that, if done correctly, would go completely unnoticed. I was really moved by that.

That summer internship opened my eyes to a whole new "big picture." By the time I started graduate school in the fall, I had a completely different career goal than I did just a few

short months before. I had embraced the County's motto, "The Noblest Motive is the Public Good," as my own.

Trained on The Front Line

My first nine years of government work were spent as a Hazardous Materials Specialist and then an Environmental Health Specialist with the County of San Diego. I served as a public liaison for customer concerns and complaints. Part of my job was to "translate" technical information such as a Health Risk Assessment's cancer data into terms that a) people relate to, and b) would not cause an irate reaction. I was also involved in several projects that included facilitating contentious public meetings.

This information is relevant for one reason only: The tips and techniques in this book are far more than academic concepts; they are grounded in real-life, front-line experiences with customers – cranky customers. I assure you, these ideas have been tested and proven many times over.

The County recognized my efforts and results with our "customers," and when the first countywide customer service program was launched in 1998, I was hired as the Customer Service Manager.

Because the job had not previously existed, I asked, "What would you like me to do on my first day?"

The response was, "You have to figure that out." Oh. Then my new boss smiled and said, "Be a star, Wendi."

The Jerk Who Changed My Life

Soon after I started that job, I traveled to a five-day conference in San Francisco for customer service professionals from around the world. I took so many pages of notes that my head was spinning but I was so excited to hear keynote speeches from visionary leaders like Mrs. Fields, Tom Peters and Stephen Covey.

As I made my way through the conference, I noticed something interesting: I couldn't find anyone else who worked in the government sector. Everyone I spoke to represented a private company. Looking through the list of attendees, I noticed a few government representatives – but there were over 1,500 people at the conference! Where were all the public employees?

Over lunch that day, it all became clear.

I was sitting with a group of eight people, all strangers to each other, and we took turns introducing ourselves. Feeling proud to represent the fine work of government employees, I was looking forward to my turn. When the time came, I sat up straight and said, "Hi. I'm Wendi and I'm the Customer Service Manager for the County of San Diego."

The man sitting next to me snorted and smirked, saying, "Customer service in government? Isn't that an oxymoron?"

Everyone at the table had a good laugh; I gulped, trying hard not to look angry. I looked down and held my tongue but underneath my carefully controlled exterior, I was burning with retorts that would make any New Yorker blush. Who was he to talk so condescendingly about the hardworking, dedicated employees I had come to respect and admire? I was proud of my choice to serve my community, and the caliber of dedication, intelligence and hard work I saw from my peers. I was insulted.

Looking back, I was probably a bit naïve. We have all heard people say:

- ▶ "government slackers"
- ▶ "they can't get a real job"
- ▶ "not smart enough to work in private industry"

The bad reputation of government workers has even worked its way into the English language. Think about the word "bureaucrat." Is it a positive or negative word? Once upon a time, not too long ago, it was a neutral noun for a person who worked in a government infrastructure. Today, common

definitions include:

- ▶ An official who works by fixed routine without exercising intelligent judgment (Dictionary.com)
- ▶ Someone who works in or controls a bureaucracy. The term is often used negatively to describe a petty, narrow-minded person. (*American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*)
- ▶ An official in a bureaucracy, especially one who follows a routine in a mechanical, unimaginative way, insisting on proper forms, petty rules, etc. (*Webster's New World Dictionary*)

Public servants today work under the shadow of a very old reputation for bad service – even the ones hired yesterday. That's a lot to overcome before you even say hello to your first customer.

Whether or not we come across like narrow-minded bureaucrats is largely up to us.

The truth is: we do work within a bureaucracy – that is, an organizational structure with procedures, protocols, and regulations to manage activity in large organizations – but whether or not we come across like narrow-minded bureaucrats is largely up to us.

As much of a jerk as that man was, I'm so thankful for his comment because he opened my eyes to a purpose. That day, I vowed to do everything I could, one person at a time, to change this poor perception of government employees. It became my mission to prove that truly extraordinary customer service could be the vehicle for that change.

Figuring it Out

Within two weeks of becoming the first Customer Service Manager, I was asked to submit an action plan including tasks and timelines for accomplishments over the next 12 months. I would be evaluated at the end of this 12-month period based on how well I achieved the goals I set.

My first thought was, “Ok Wendi, sink or swim. You wanted this. Start swimming.”

It seemed like a good bit of research was in order so I set out to figure out who was known for great customer service – and why. Off to the bookstore I went (this was B.G. – before Google).

I spent many hours pouring through books about the finest service known to private business (because there weren’t any on customer service in government). Also tremendously helpful were several studies that originated from then-Vice President Al Gore’s movement to reinvent government.

After a couple of weeks of simmering all of the concepts down to the common denominators, the formula for great customer service (the Six Essential Elements) became crystal clear to me.

In the following chapters, I will be sharing the highlights of this research and the lessons that almost 20 years in government have taught me.

Fundamental Philosophy

In the wise words of Archimedes, “If you give me a lever and a place to stand, I can move the world.” I have my place to stand: I believe in the value of public service, and that great customer service leaves an impression.

Until recently, I thought the lever had to be the backing of strong executive sponsorship – the kind of sponsorship where the sponsor not only believes in your project but gives you full support in making things happen. It’s great if you have it; and make no mistake, it does make life easier. But I don’t believe it’s mission-critical anymore. In fact, I know it’s not. The lever is YOU. You are both the belief and the action. If you make the decision, you make it happen.

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The decision to make a great impression on every person, every day, is entirely up to you. Understand that every time you answer the phone, you are the whole organization to that customer. The impression you leave will become a lasting impression of the entire organization and of government in general. All of these impressions, of all the people in the community,

become the reputation of the organization.

That's means you have a huge responsibility. Fortunately, it's also a huge opportunity.

Thank you for being a champion of great service in government. It's not an easy role. As a public servant, you will come up against some very daunting obstacles including but not limited to: difficult customers, poor public perception, negative media stories, complicated politics, lack of budget and resources, uncooperative coworkers and bosses who may not share your vision.

Do what you can. Every person, every day, every contact makes a difference. Change what you can and you will certainly leave the world a better place.

About

Wendi Pomerance Brick

In 1998, Wendi became the County of San Diego's first Customer Service Manager. She was responsible for developing the nationally-recognized Customer Service Center which has been used as a model for other government organizations around the United States. This program included an aggressive training program during which thousands of the 17,000 person workforce were trained.

The Customer Service Center was awarded two NACo (National Association of Counties) Achievement Awards, and in 2003, Wendi was a finalist in the *San Diego Business Journal's* annual "Women Who Mean Business."

It was in 2003 that Wendi formed Customer Service Advantage, Inc. to provide customer service improvement training and consultation to other organizations. With her expertise in customer service in government, working with a diverse workforce and working within unionized environments driven by rules and regulations, Wendi's unique approach to training and creating a customer-focused culture was in demand.

In November 2006, Wendi became the City of San Diego's Director of the Department of Customer Services. The department was responsible for many programs in this organization of 10,000 including citywide training and developing and deploying customer satisfaction surveys.

CSA, Inc. has been in operation since 2003, and incorporated in 2009. Wendi now focuses her efforts as the full-time President and Chief Executive Officer.

The Mission of CSA, Inc. is to “Maximize the experience of our customers’ customers.” CSA, Inc. tailors its approach to customer service for government organizations, educational institutions, non-profit organizations and private businesses. CSA, Inc. offers customer service training, process improvement workshops, customer satisfaction survey development and customer service best practices gap analyses.