

**Development of a Training Program for Frontline Service Employees'
Improvement of Student Services**

by

Debbie S. Persaud

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Development of a Training Program for Frontline Service Employees'
Improvement of Student Services in a Vocational Educational Center

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Debbie S. Persaud

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the
Fischler School of Education and Human Services
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Nova Southeastern University
2005

Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Debbie S. Persaud under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Fischler School of Education and Human Services and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

Elizabeth Brennan, EdD
Committee Chair

Date

Gloria Wolfson, EdD
Committee Member

Date

Maryellen Maher, PhD
Executive Dean for Research and Planning

Date

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Abstract

Development of a Training Program for Frontline Service Employees' Improvement of Student Services in a Vocational Educational Center. Persaud, Debbie S., 2005: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Fischler School of Education and Human Services. Vocational School/Student Services/Customer Services/Quality Control/Client Satisfaction

Frontline employees represent the bloodline of an organization. This applied dissertation focused on development of a training program to improve skills necessary for quality student-customer service.

Six research questions were answered. First, what skills are required to enhance customer service satisfaction? Second, what are employees' perception of attitudes and expectations relative to delivery of goods and services? Third, what action is required to improve employees' performance to effect customer satisfaction? Fourth, what content--knowledge, skills, and procedures--are necessary for inclusion in the training plan? Fifth, how can training best be structured and developed to improve the necessary skills? Sixth, how and by whom should the plan be implemented, and if implemented, how should it be evaluated? The development problem-solving methodology was used to answer the research questions. Additionally, a Frontline Service Employees' Perceived Training Needs Survey was administered to gather information relative to the recommended training program. The research questions were answered through procedures that involved formative and summative committees' examination of the program content, format, design, and evaluation method. The final project was a recommended frontline service employees training program.

Conclusions drawn from the study revealed the following: (a) a training program should be implemented to enhance skills required for better student-customer services within the organization; (b) a training program for frontline employees should include skills pertaining to active listening, trust and rapport, telephone etiquette, problem-solving and conflict resolution, and clear understanding and knowledge of the organization's policies and procedures; (c) trainees should have the choice and flexibility of mode of instruction and location of training; and (d) an evaluation plan should be established posttraining to ensure that quality and program objectives are continuously being met. The recommended training program was submitted to the leaders of the organization who have the authority to approve its implementation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The problem that was addressed in this study was the lack of consistency, continuity, and transmission of information to clients (prospective and enrolled students) by the student service department at Robert Morgan Educational Center (RMEC). RMEC is a vocational school located in South Dade County, Florida. This vocational facility was designated to serve postsecondary and shared-time high school students from surrounding senior high schools. Shared-time can be defined as students with dual enrollment within the school system participating in selective subjects not offered at home school. There is a very diverse and multicultural population attending this educational center. It enrolled approximately 2,500 high school and adult students in 1995. The students who enrolled for classes were high school dropouts seeking a second chance to get a high school diploma; mature students making sacrifices to work and study by attending classes in the evening to enhance a career, build a career, or develop a profession; or newly arrived immigrants wanting to learn English as a second language. The goal of RMEC was to satisfy the community's educational needs by providing students with the required classes and programs to train as licensed practical nurses, nurse assistants, medical assistants, dental assistants, dental hygienists, motor mechanics, welders, commercial art technicians, hair dressers, cosmetologists, web designers, and computer application technicians and to learn English as a second language.

For this community to be served efficiently, student services must include a staff that is capable of rendering services adequately and appropriately to current and potential students, parents, and families. Education is the business of this institution. Therefore, customer service must be competitive and readily available. Characteristics of the staff include that of being extremely polite, understanding, courteous, a good listener, patient,

a responsive communicator, and most importantly, a human being for on the other side of the counter is usually another human being referred to as a student. As stated in the current RMEC (2001b) *Students' Handbook*, the organization's mission and culture are proactive in meeting the needs of the students, parents, and the community. According to the Vice Principal, the student services department is the most important department at RMEC. The student services department is comprised of a staff of approximately 50-60 people. This department is a part of the organization where first impressions are portrayed, created, and practiced. Key figures, such as student counselors, academic advisors, financial aid officers, career specialists, and guidance counselors should collaboratively be representatives of the organization to demonstrate what the organization stands for in business. Excellent delivery of educational services must be available to the young and old of any origin, race, color, culture, and creed. In keeping with the vision and mission of the organization, performance of its employees should embrace the capability to its fullest to sustain and enhance RMEC's vision and mission, which is "to impart knowledge, service, and skills that will facilitate the acquisition of those qualities essential to successful global employment, a productive and prosperous life" (RMEC, 2001b, p. 2).

Nature of the Problem

Specifically, the problem at RMEC dealt with the quality of communication of information provided to clients. The degree of client satisfaction was recognized by RMEC administrators through reports attesting to the quality of customer service encountered at RMEC. Specifically, depth, breadth, timeliness, and the manner in which information was made available and delivered had been noted as in need of improvement. The concept of a *customer service encounter* is defined as the moment of interaction

between the customer and business representative of the organization that results in a positive or negative perception of the customer (Young, 2002). This interaction was inherently a communication process because it involved creating, transmitting, receiving, and correctly interpreting messages between a source and a receiver (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). Employees literally are connected to the lifeblood of the organization. Hearing and responding to customers' needs is essential to services rendered (Jacobson, 2000).

The student service department of RMEC is an area where impressions should be created to reflect the credibility and reputation of the educational institution. Employees of this department should be key players in the delivery of goods and services with warm and welcoming behaviors and attitudes to captivate students' interest to enhance the desire to enroll for their studies at RMEC. Prospective students who come in contact with employees of the student service department should be able to develop feelings that this is an organization that treats people with care and respect. However, this was not the case at RMEC. In discussions with administrative personnel (names withheld for confidentiality), organizational data showed that employees' delivery of services to prospective students generated little or no further inquiry or follow-up from some prospective students and de-enrollment of others due to poor customer service relationships.

The student service department of this educational center was responsible for the delivery of appropriate and accurate information to first-time customers and students seeking to attend classes to obtain an education. However, as was noted from the researcher's review and compilation of written agendas distributed at recent faculty meetings and as was anecdotally noted after multiple discussions held among the faculty and staff, the faculty and administration were concerned with poor communication, inept

behaviors, and uncooperative attitudes shown by frontline service employees. These were barriers to the delivery of satisfactory student-customer service and likely contributed to diminished effectiveness of the student services department. The resulting outcomes included dissatisfied students seeking better service elsewhere. RMEC needed to improve delivery of student-customer services, increase clients' satisfaction in order to attract new customers (students), and retain current students from leaving. The objective of effective student-customer service at RMEC was to satisfy students to such a positive level that they would choose to start and finish their educational programs at RMEC.

Adult students who called for initial information or called back for verification of information complained more than 50% of the time about the quality of responses and information given to them by student services. This information was obtained by this writer from informal discussions and interviews with department heads and members of the faculty during which anecdotal notes were kept by the researcher. The program's administrator added to this information during informal discussions and noted that faculty members were frequently approached by students for information, asked to clarify certain types of information, and required to provide needs that should have been serviced by one or more of the student service functions. Because individual faculty members did not have the knowledge needed to respond effectively to students' needs, there was a demonstration of dissatisfaction with respect to the communication of information and attitude of delivery of service. The administrator also indicated that there was no systematic or regular ongoing training program established for student services employees whose roles and responsibilities included customer service and interactive encounters with students.

Finding and nurturing human talent is a key ingredient to long-term

organizational success. The research done by Van der Werff (1999) supported RMEC's need for employees' training. This study recommended that organizations invest in training and professional development on an ongoing basis. Van der Werff noted that "a factory door can be locked at night and the business assets protected, but a human mind cannot be. Indeed, the assets all walk out the door at night" (p. 1). Service providers and the customer must interact with each other for the process to be successful. Jacobson (2000) advised that, without continuous teaching and learning, an organization could get locked down into patterns of behavior that would hasten its decline.

It was further learned from the administrator that the employee attrition rate within the student services department was approximately 30% per year with a steady increase over the past 3 years. This turnover rate among student service employees, coupled with no definite induction program, orientation, or professional development or training, created a loss of organizational effectiveness. Information that should have been known to the student services department included things such as policies, procedures, and expectations. These were bits of information that clients sought on a daily basis and that should have been communicated clearly, accurately, and in a timely manner. The quality of service determines how well the customer perceives an experience compared with what the customer expects (Bell, 2001).

The situation of less than effective client satisfaction at RMEC produced a negative effect on both current and prospective students. Failure to assess determining factors resulted in decreased enrollment, deterioration of RMEC's reputation, and dissolution of several of the vocational programs that were offered by RMEC in recent years. No one single determining factor could be found to explain employees' behavior and performance. This was translated into cost and inefficiency for customers and the

organization and frustration for the community as a whole.

Robbins (2001) wrote that to communicate effectively, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others. Organizations can exceed customers' expectations by focusing on being customer friendly, enabling employee commitment to customer service, and promoting and expecting effective student-customer dialogue. Inappropriate methods of communication can denote rudeness, uncaring attitudes, and a sense of coldness to others.

The targeted population for this study was a group of employees from the student services department of the targeted vocational school. The population consisted of approximately 40 frontline service employees including clerks, receptionists, registrar personnel, student counselors, academic advisors, accounting clerks, financial aid officers, telephone operators, and testing room personnel. The targeted group included both day and evening staff. The researcher's role in this learning and teaching institution was that of a health science educator. There were frequent daily communication encounters with student service department members relative to prospective students, classroom visits, program information, and overall general student service concerns. The administration of the targeted vocational school gave verbal support for the development of the project and agreed to work closely with the researcher to enable and effect the outcomes of a successful study.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this study was to develop a comprehensive plan to improve the quality and skills among student service employees by focusing upon understanding the relationship of effective communication skills and quality of service. A comprehensive

training plan and professional development program were designed to improve the level of quality of student services at RMEC. Anton and Perkins (2002) concurred that quality can be defined as performance to the standard expected by the customer and good service quality will be driven by customers' needs. This study also examined performance gaps within the organization's situation with respect to customer service and satisfaction. *Customer satisfaction* can be defined as a state of mind that a customer has about an organization when his or her expectations have been met or exceeded for requested services (Anton & Perkins).

Plans and recommendations were developed by which employees would be able to close the performance gaps between the current conditions and those needed with respect to student services. The plan was designed to improve employees' skills, knowledge, and competencies with respect to customer dialogue. Communication determines the quality of service and expectations of the customer relative to the need for information. Customers analyze and evaluate information concerning service delivery, provider's behavior, competency of skills, and outcome of encounter (Johnson & Zinklam, 1991; Lewis, 2003). The plan and recommendations were designed so that eventually, when enacted by the school officials, the staff of the student services department will be equipped through a series of planned training sessions with the knowledge and skills, strategies, and procedures associated with the newly created values and techniques of interpersonal and communication skills.

Background and Significance of the Problem

Student services rendered in an educational institution are areas in which impressions are created that reflect its persona, credibility, and hospitality to customers. Organizations must realize the key to success is to link customer satisfaction to particular

behaviors and link these behaviors to the “bottom line” of the value of student-customer service. Any strategy that fails to include customers as central to the organization will place the organization at a competitive disadvantage (Jenkins, 1999). The student services department included key players in generating and demonstrating a welcoming and warm invitation to the goods and services the organization has to offer to its immediate and far off constituents (Kouzes & Posner, 2003b). Competitive advantages lie in a workforce of capable employees to deliver high-value service to customers. Relative factors to affect the strength of employee-customer relativity are training tools, procedures, and rules necessary to deliver good service (Keiningham, 2003).

The quality of service extended to the public is representative of the organization’s integrity and validity. The quantity of service as well as the quality of service should reflect the organization’s values. The organizational values include care and commitment to the community in the delivery of educational services. Employees of the organization must show respect for the people and what better way to do this but to treat all customers with respect. In molding behaviors and attitudes, our culture and tradition teach that visitors to our home must be served with the best there is to offer with care, respect, honesty, and warmth. It is not the why the visitor came in the first place, but it is how the visitor felt on leaving. The impression should be a lasting one that will encourage and motivate the visitor to want to return for more of the same courteous treatment or generous service. Bell (2001) made note that “customer service today is the one element that can set companies apart from their competitors and lay the foundation for a strong tomorrow” (p. 1).

Unfortunately, some reports showed that the level of customer service in the United States is crumbling. “Excellent customer service starts with the people at the top

of the organization,” said Mattox (2003, p. 1). The development and enhancement of human capital skills and performance will help the organization determine and develop adequate human resources to improve its overall effectiveness and strength and should contribute to its competitiveness within the global vocational school marketplace (Argyris, 1997).

The objective of the RMEC student service department and its leaders should be focused on developing a learning environment that would establish behaviors, attitudes, performance, and expectations representative of the culture and values of the organization (Schein, 2004). “When a company’s leaders stress the importance of customer service and practice what they preach, it permeates the organization and translates into operational programs,” said Bell (2001, p. 1). However, top leaders alone cannot accomplish this commitment of excellent customer service. It will take highly motivated and trained employees on the front line to deliver exceptional service. Commitment can be achieved when employees are totally focused on meeting students’ needs. Employees who are trained to know who their customers are and how to exceed expectations provide excellent student service (Bell). The organization had no systematic means by which to develop and ensure that student services would be rendered with an approach commensurate with its mission. Leaders develop the culture and climate of an organization. Together, leaders and staff can create and apply a school or organizational environment, which can be measured by the effectiveness of its delivery of goods and services (Schein, 2004).

Jacobson (2000) stated that, as employees more clearly understand how the organizational systems need to collaborate to provide value to customers, they would also discover the need to improve their learning and their ability to fulfill their roles within the

organization. Effective leaders should lead through commitment to obtaining the organization's mission, vision, and goals. Effective educational leadership should be viewed as a guiding force in helping its staff in the shared decision-making processes. In addition, leaders should enable the staff to exhibit the established mission of serving the information needs of students, purporting the values of the school, and maintaining a positive image and reputation of the organization (Schein, 2004). The organization must understand that its reputation is at stake with every customer and every service offered. As noted by Bell (2001), "customer service is what distinguishes your company from the competition" (p.1).

Customer dialogue requires information exchange by both parties in the communicative process and is the means by which we know what the customer wants and needs. The communication process between the service provider and customer can improve service quality especially when effective two-way interactions exist between the two parties. Ineffective communication within the organization creates confusion, mistrust, and inconsistency and reflects on overall service performance. Poorly informed or misinformed employees may perform their jobs inadequately, affecting customers' service (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000).

The targeted organization (RMEC) did not provide nor did it have a plan, written or otherwise, for the training and development of expertise with respect to student services. People must have the knowledge and abilities to perform their tasks and live up to their promises and expectations in serving the community. Students who desire to attend a learning facility that is convenient to home and work and is conducive to a learning environment may seek the service of competitor schools if their needs go unmet and they are not appropriately serviced. Failing to provide adequately for the wants and

needs of students may have contributed to severely decreased student enrollment. Quality and customer service have become clear and deliberate corporate and managerial values needed to satisfy the needs of constituents successfully (Kouzes & Posner, 2003b). As of 2003, only about 7 different vocational programs of study were offered at RMEC in contrast to more than 50 educational programs in 1997. This determination was made through direct evaluation and review of RMEC brochures and data.

Research Questions

The answers to several questions were important to improve the quality of customer-student service. The research questions were as follows:

1. What skills were required to enhance customer service satisfaction?
2. What were employees' competencies (strengths), needs (weaknesses), and perceptions of attitudes and expectations relative to delivery of goods and services?
3. What action was required to improve employees' performance to affect customer satisfaction?
4. What content--knowledge, skills, and procedures--were necessary for inclusion in the training plan?
5. How could training best be structured and developed to improve the necessary skills?
6. How and by whom should the plan be implemented, and if implemented, how should it be evaluated?

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are defined for this study:

1. *Communication*. Information sharing, information management, listening skills, perceived information flow, dialogue effectiveness, message content, and message

consistency are defined as communication (Sonnenberg, 1999).

2. *Competency*. Parry (2000) defined competency as a cluster of related knowledge, skills, and attitudes that affects a major part of one's job function, role, or responsibility that correlates with performance on the job, which can be measured against well-accepted standards.

3. *Customer service*. Howardell (2001) defined customer service as the ability of an organization to constantly and consistently give the customer what they want and need.

4. *Customer satisfaction*. Zemke and Woods (1999) defined customer satisfaction as a psychological state encompassing an emotional reaction in response to a favorable experience with a product or service encounter.

5. *Phatic type of speech*. Merriam-Webster (1999) defined phatic speech as "relating to, or being speech used for social or emotive purposes rather than for communicating information" (p. 871).

6. *Quality of service*. This term was defined as a mixture of how well a delivered service meets the customer expectations (L. Berry, Bennett, & Brown, 1999).

7. *Shared-time*. The term is defined as students with dual enrollment within the school system participating in selective subjects not offered at home school (RMEC Student's Handbook, 2001).

8. *Student retention*. As stated by Moxley, Dumbrigue, and Najor-Durack (2001), student retention is keeping students in school to complete their course of study versus dropping out prematurely for a number of reasons.

9. *Training program*. This was an educational session designed and implemented to achieve specific learning outcomes through a series of training activities (Towle,

1999).

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

A review of the literature contributes to the building of theories sensitive to the researcher's needs to develop a feasible and valuable methodological plan for change. The literature also supplements and helps in research gathered in the field, assists the researcher in generating questions for the targeted population, guides the researcher into areas not otherwise considered for study, and provides additional validation of the researcher's development of the plan (Creswell, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1999).

The review begins with an overview of customer service and its importance in education. The review is then followed by a discussion about communication and interpersonal styles of behavior relative to customer service satisfaction. Identification of performance gaps, which can present as barriers to good customer service, is presented next, and finally research questions raised by the literature review are posed. Although specific literature relative to student service employees and students as customers is not readily available, there is literature available that relates to frontline employees and the outcomes of customer service satisfaction. These outcomes are based upon student enrollment, retention, or attrition. The literature review refers to the efforts of organizations to improve retention and, therefore, identifies frontline employees, faculty, and staff as key agents of retention and enrollment. Interpersonal styles of communication necessary to affect satisfactory customer service are then discussed. The purpose of the study is to discover effective communication processes and behaviors in the delivery of quality student-customer service satisfaction.

Overview of Customer Service

Customer service can be defined as a provider extending courteous service,

friendly service and generating open lines of communication. Such service can lead to trust and credibility for the customer, employee, and eventually the organization. The initial experience can lead further to the development of a relationship and bond between the provider and customer. Success in an organization depends on satisfying customers with a product, service, or both (Lewis, 2003).

Industries worldwide are continually conducting marketing and psychological studies in efforts to improve customer service. With the echoes of consumers' dissatisfaction of services, Howardell (2001) wrote, "Customers are revolting! They are demanding more for less, and want world class products and services" (p. 1). The myth of customer loyalty is a thing of the past, and organizations must seek new ways to be closer to their customers by providing great customer service.

The focused question of almost every company's CEO is, what really is customer service, and what can be done to improve it? Customer service, as defined by Howardell (2001), is the ability of an organization to give constantly and consistently the customers what they want and need. Without question, organizations must be able to give customers what they need; if not, they will find it elsewhere. Auto makers have long realized that customers have taken over the management of the world's car business and that decisions are no longer being made on the 14th floor but are being made, instead, by the end customers who buy and use their products (Ludvigsen, 1996; Wirth-Felman, 1999). Just the same, health care providers no longer take customers for granted (Institute of Medicine, 2001).

Listening to the consumer is one role of patient satisfaction. A review of simple rules of the 21st century health care systems shows that "care must be customized according to the patient's needs and values" (Institute of Medicine, 2001, p. 67).

Conclusions from the review of literature are many, but key points made worthy of note are that patient satisfaction is the patient's reaction to salient aspects of his or her service experience (Pascoe, 1983, 2002). For example, characteristics of providers or organizations that result in more "personal care" are associated with higher levels of satisfaction. Good communication skills, empathy, and caring appear to be the strongest predictors for patients' evaluation of service received. Patient satisfaction with rare exception is positively related to accessibility, availability, and convenience of care (Newsome & Wright, 1999).

There is definitely a strong demand for a competitive edge in the business of education. Customer satisfaction is the important goal of any educational business, no matter if they are for profit, nonprofit, industrial, or an educational organization (Prawatrungruang, 2003).

In the banking business, the focus is to satisfy customers. Strategies have changed in that there is no longer room to keep customers waiting for service or to tolerate disgruntled and rude employees. Dissatisfied customers do not hesitate to make complaints or to change their banking business to other friendlier banking organizations. Long-term customers of banks are often served on a first-name basis. Customer service must be delivered as expected by customers. The customer-provider relationship becomes one of loyalty; for example, the employee of the bank recognizes, when a phone call is made by a customer to the bank, the voice of the caller without asking for a name. The feeling of smiling faces and doing the best to help satisfy the customer can be felt on the other end of the phone. Voice without physical appearance can convey all kinds of feelings--impatience, disbelief, even anger (Lewis, 2003).

Organizations realize the importance of customer service to the business for

successful outcomes. Regardless of the type of business, customer service is a key element to success or failure. Buchanan (2001) wrote that organizations do not fail because of outsiders; it is their own employees who produce barriers that drive their customers away and put them out of business. Buchanan also discussed that employees do this because they do not know any better because of the mistaken belief about human nature. He stated that to change this thinking would require leaders of organizations to find a way to turn the hearts and minds of their employees to accomplish the set goals of employers by devotion to the needs of student-customers. Teaching employees how to give better customer service must be established, and why they should be interested in doing so is even more critical.

Customer service starts with a clear vision of the customer using the product or service. Employees' commitment to customer service begins when that vision is communicated to and understood by everyone in the organization. There must be no distorted thinking at the macro level, of the importance of customer service satisfaction, and the frequent failures to deliver customer service at the micro level, which is the actual service encountered (Jenkins, 1999). An example would be frontline employees who are in direct contact with students seeking answers to important questions relative to needs, albeit educational needs, health care, or other disciplines. Multiple studies in business and communication journals revealed that approximately 10-30% of interactions between service providers and recipients result in negative outcomes. Recommendations made by Larkin and Larkin (2003) included organizations that wish to improve customer services should communicate measurable results to employees, increase power to frontline supervisors, reward employees for good services, and help employees to generate their own techniques for improving services.