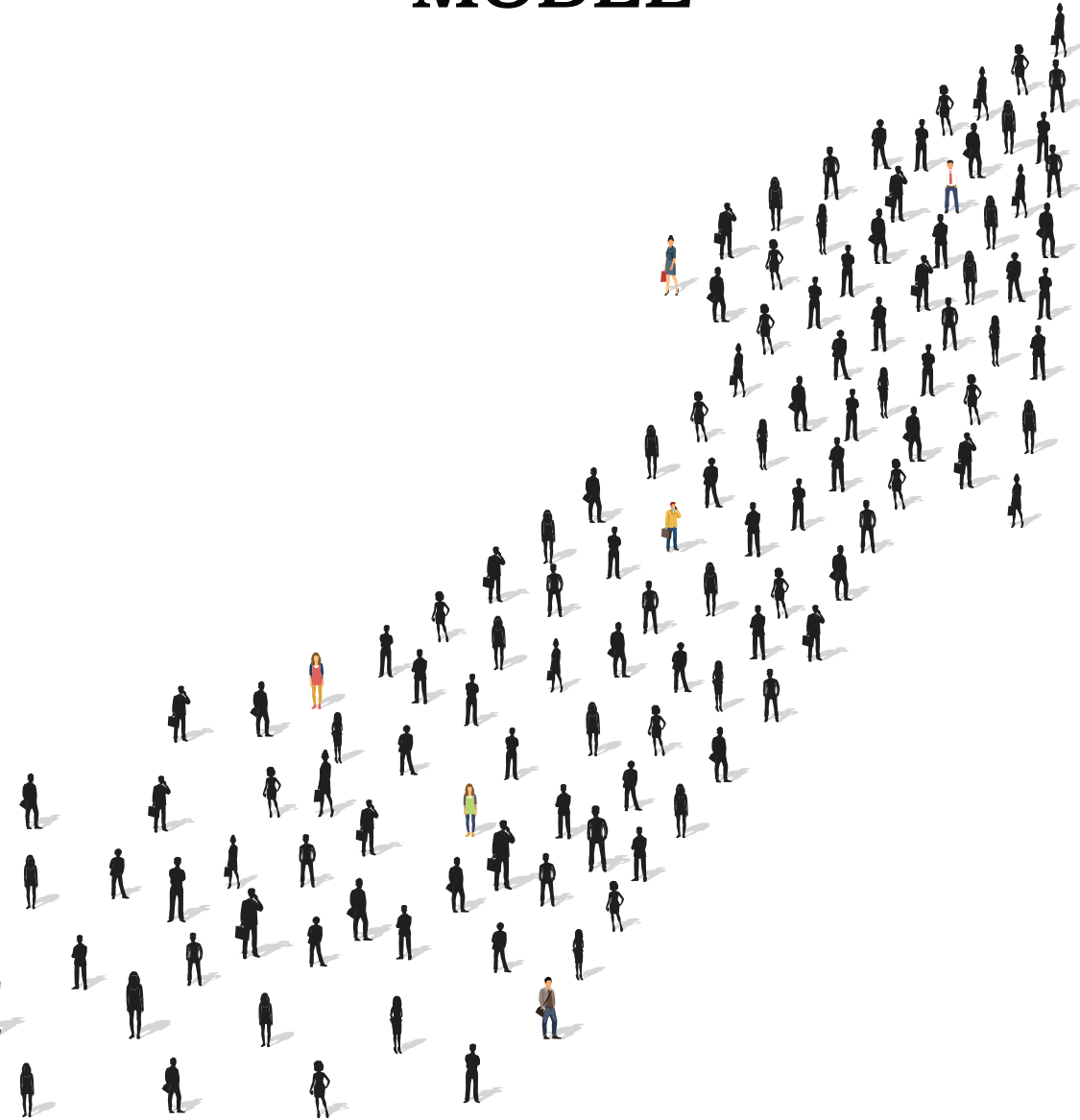


THE SEWA CUSTOMER-CENTRIC MODEL



DR. RASHID ALLEEM
GCC Happiness & Peace Ambassador

The SEWA Customer-Centric Model

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The SEWA Customer-Centric Model

Dr. Rashid Alleem



The SEWA Customer - Centric Model



Keep Challenging Tomorrow

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*To those who have big dreams
and audacious goals.*

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I also acknowledge the stellar efforts of two individuals whom I have had the good fortune to work with on several projects throughout the years. A warm thank you goes to Syeda, SEWA chief knowledge officer for supporting my message and my voice, and for her editing assistance and insights that helped shape and refine a few ideas in this book. I offer my sincere appreciation for her numerous suggestions and contributions. Kumar, head of design for his creativity and long working hours.

Writing a book is neither easy nor quick; it can take its psychological toll not only on the author but on his family as well. A special warm hug and thank you to my family for your help, patience, and encouragement. You truly are the wind beneath my wings. I love you. You made this writing much easier.

To the people of SEWA, I did my best to tell your customer-centric story accurately, interestingly, and usefully. To our readers, thank you. I believe you've picked up the right book.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is not meant to be a comprehensive corporate history of Sharjah Electricity and Water Authority (SEWA) or a complete autobiography. The purpose of this book is to provide an overview of how almost 1.5 million residents of Sharjah were unsatisfied with SEWA's services, but through a transformational service leadership philosophy they became loyal customers in less than three years.

From an outsider's perspective, SEWA's customer-centric model may have seemed like overnight success, but a lot of mistakes were made and lessons learned along the way. Many of my leadership qualities, philosophies, and approaches were actually shaped by my experiences growing up.

As you read through this book, you'll probably notice some sentences that aren't in perfect English or the best examples of English grammar. I am an Arab, but I love the English language and sharing my philosophies and thoughts with English-speaking people. I wrote this book without ghostwriters.

I invite you to join me on a journey to learn what we learned. Take what you find useful and apply it to creating a great customer-centric organization.

PREFACE

Most of us don't think about our water and power until we don't have it. We expect it to be there: efficient, instant, and reliable. Customers who call their utility organizations rarely do so with compliments; instead, if they call, they call because there is a problem that needs to be solved. The utility sector is changing in parallel with technological advances, customer expectations, and environmental concerns. Hence, it goes without saying that the utility sector is challenging. In addition, these challenges are made even more complex in public sector environments, which are typically known for having issues with changing priorities and funding, bureaucracy, lack of innovation, and customer service.

It is against this backdrop that Dr. Alleem has done an extraordinary thing. As chairman of SEWA, he led a cultural and business transformation that placed the customer experience at the center. This turnaround thus led to significant outcomes for the Authority, and, perhaps most importantly, for the citizens of the Emirate of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. Dr. Alleem describes the journey toward customer centricity in an informative and engaging

style, while he also provides a useful roadmap for anyone interested in transforming their organization to focus on customer-centricity.

This book is filled with counter-intuitive and surprising lessons. For example, employee experience is the first thing Dr. Alleem discusses in the first chapter as a key building block in his overall framework. Most customer experience models acknowledge the role of employees and organizational culture somewhere in the framework, however, it often tends to be cursory and underdeveloped. As we start out on our journey, over the first few pages of this book, Dr. Alleem invites us to meet his Nine Champions.

As the Middle East leader for the Great Place to Work® Institute, a global research and management consulting firm, I invest most of my efforts in changing the mindsets of leaders to see the value of unleashing their people's potential and creating a great workplace. In doing so, I always come armed with data and stories of inspirational and visionary leaders who saw the strategic value of building a high-trust, high-performing workplace. Great workplaces tend to outperform market indices in every country we do our research in, and in public sector organizations, great workplaces can have a substantive knock-on effect on citizen engagement, resource utilization, satisfaction, and so on.

As an example of this, in one study, which focused on Fortune's "100 Best Companies to Work for" list—one of the lists we produce through our research, we used the American Customer Satisfaction Index. After conducting the study, we found that the ratings for the best companies were 4.2% – 4.6% higher than their industry counterparts. If we stop for a moment, this intuitively makes sense. Customers experience our organizations and our brands largely through our people. On the other hand, an organization's people perceive its culture through their interactions with managers and fellow employees, their experience of their work and its alignment with the mission

and strategy of the organization, and the management practices that support effective work. Unfortunately, there are lots of good workplaces but few “great workplaces.” So, I continue to meet with leaders to help shape their people strategy, and perhaps convince them that focusing on people is good for their business.

In light of the above, how refreshing it was to come across Dr. Rashid Alleem. He is one of those visionary leaders who just “gets it.” He fundamentally understands that you can have a great strategy, really smart marketing, top-notch efficiency practices, and a competitive product or service, however, without paying attention to “how” all this gets done (i.e., through your people), success will most likely be hindered and unsustainable. Dr. Alleem sees customer centricity as based on six key imperatives. You’ll find out more about these imperatives and how they fit together into a powerful framework later in this book. The people at SEWA play an important role in giving life and executing those key imperatives. This “people before strategy” is refreshingly new and different when discussing customer centricity, while it is also one of the reasons I was instantly drawn to his work. I think you will be pleasantly surprised at the novel way Dr. Alleem brings together the why, what, and how, as described in this book. If you are looking for an innovative approach to implementing a customer-centric transformation, read on!

Dr. Michael Burchell
Great Place to Work® Middle East
November 2018

INTRODUCTION

There's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.

—Morpheus, *The Matrix*

Thank you for picking up this book!

The book you are holding is the best book ever written about customer-centric quality service. This book is a complete package. Its purpose is to explain clearly and in depth SEWA's customer-centric model, which has secured an ace position on the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) corporate list and become a legendary success in just three years for delivering exceptional service. This book is full of inside stories, development, and experiences. I can argue that the model is by far the best customer-centric model ever formulated in this region. You may wonder, "What are this model's unique success factors?" or "What makes this model legendary?"

The SEWA customer-centric model is an unprecedented approach to quality customer service. It's a bespoke model that was devised from the synergy of my theoretical knowledge and practical expertise. The model encompasses the customer experience management philosophies that I have read in best-selling books and researched from authentic sources worldwide. I teach these management philosophies at the top UAE universities and have delivered keynote speeches on globally renowned platforms. I brought my pearls of wisdom right from the classroom to the boardroom.

A large part of the model is inspired by my practical, hands-on expertise in establishing an emotional connection with customers. I have burned the midnight oil researching and benchmarking global industry stalwarts in the customer arena—organizations that have gotten under customers' skin, like Google, Disney, and McDonald's, to name a few. I asked myself, *If they can do it, why can't we?* Since then, I've integrated the best practices of regional and international trend-setting organizations that rank high in customer perception and brand value.

As you will learn, the SEWA customer-centric model evolved during my journey toward SEWA brand turnaround and rejuvenation. I started as the chairman of SEWA on April 22, 2014, a historical day in the history of the company and Sharjah as well. I was handpicked by His Highness Dr. Sheikh Sultan bin Muhammad bin Al Qassimi, the ruler of Sharjah, to take the helm of an organization that was "nearing a catastrophic end." It was one of the most successful turnarounds in the recent history of the UAE. (See *The SEWA Way* by Rashid Alleem).

In this book, I will share the course of action that made SEWA a customer-facing brand associated with high levels of service and professionalism, as well as what it takes to sustain SEWA's brand identity and retain loyal customers. Great ideas don't add value unless they are put to good use. Throughout this book, there are cita-

tions of customer-intrinsic best practices that, if employed regularly, will make you and your organization more productive and successful.

While dozens of books extol the virtues of customer-centricity in the corporate world, little has been written about a utility company's customer-centric ambitions. In my fifteen-plus years at the top management level of government and private organizations, I have transformed institutions into outstanding product and services juggernauts exemplifying a high-octane, performance-based culture. I strongly believe that quality service is the most important thing a customer is looking for in a company.

This book sprung out of my last book *SEWA Brand Turnaround and Rejuvenation*. As a matter of fact, this book started as a chapter in that one. However, to justify the efforts and excitement, I thought it deserved to be elaborated upon in book form, with more inspiring and real-life experience stories from Sharjah's customer base of over 1.5 million. The book is also replete with examples of "legendary" customer service delivered in truly innovative ways.

This is a book for those who want to make a difference in their organization. It is a book for managers who care as much about their customers as they do about their employees. It is a book for those who believe the future is something you create, not something that happens to you. I believe this quote from Thomas Edison summarizes my journey nicely: "I failed my way to success."

This book is full of surprises and jaw-dropping stories. You will meet some of my "nine champions," who were instrumental in implementing my customer-centric model. You'll be awe-struck to learn how I stumbled upon them and how they benefited the daunting task appointed to them.

I hope you enjoy reading *The SEWA Customer-centric Model* and, more importantly, that it allows you to transform your organization and keep the customer at the center of your strategies.

This book is only a snapshot of how we provide exceptional service every day at SEWA and how everyone who works there has become more productive, successful, and fulfilled as a result. We invite you to experience our programs for yourself.

Enough said. Let's get going.

Enjoy reading!

Rashid Alleem

August 2018

Chapter 1

Hazy and Crazy

*Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress.
Working together is success.*

—Henry Ford

A Very Difficult Task

By the end of 2017, Sharjah Electricity and Water (SEWA) had successfully gotten on the bandwagon of co-creation and collaboration, green economy, and creativity and innovation. Now my next step was to make SEWA a customer-centric rather than a product or price-centric organization. By customer-centric, I mean the customer is the center of the universe. Everything revolves around the customer. You cannot become customer-centric until all parts of the organization *passionately* embrace the customer.

While I was writing this part of the book, I came across a very interesting quote from Jerry Gregoire, CIO of Dell: “The customer | 7 |

experience is the next competitive battleground.” To this I said, “Seriously? Then SEWA is in the absolute wrong territory. And totally unarmed—what a challenge!”

During mid-2014, the main things that gave me sleepless nights were SEWA’s poor customer service performance and its negative and sluggish workplace. It lacked both the management know-how and the deep pockets to ensure success. It was facing frustrated and unhappy customers around the clock. The comprehensive customer satisfaction survey carried out at over ten locations in SEWA, with the help of a local leading customer service organization called *Ta-sheel*, brought forth a very low satisfaction index compared to the industry’s trends. The situation was going from bad to worse. Some of the phrases John Bogle used in his amazing book *Enough* describe my situation:

“Too much cost, not enough value”

“Too much complexity, not enough simplicity”

“Too much counting, not enough trust”

“Too much focus on things, not enough focus on commitment”

“Too many twenty-first century values, not enough eighteenth-century values”

In my words, “It was completely hazy and crazy.”

Insufficient Customer Orientation

Here I singled out two sides of the most handicapping deficiencies in SEWA’s customer care. First, I found that very few SEWA employees really wanted to work to get and keep customers, because dealing with customers is tough. Customers reject sellers, they make harsh demands, and they expect their needs to be filled immediately.

The second concern was that the SEWA marketing department was not sufficiently organized to serve and deliver what our target customers wanted and expected. Most employees thought that it was marketing and sales' job to serve the customers. Hence, most of the employees preferred administrative jobs because they were impersonal, easy going, and involved zero interaction with customers. They felt dealing with customers was more hassle than it was worth.

I said to myself, *What's all this junk?* I felt the question was grabbing me around the throat. I am not going to release my grip and let you breathe until you answer me!

I confidently answered, *I'm up to the challenge.* I will not survive. I will prevail. I will not merely succeed. I will thrive. I'm reminded of a German proverb that says, "Begin to weave, and God will give you the thread."

Facing Down Reality

I was surprised, but not shocked. I was determined to revolutionize the way our people thought and worked. We no longer live in a time-bound existence where our work and actions are measured by clocks. Social media and emails have eliminated physical, geographic, and time constraints on communication.

The picture I saw was unsatisfactory. It's not about installing new software or hardware. It's about changing people's brainware. Even though most SEWA employees had at their fingertips the latest computers and smart systems, their heads and hearts remained in the twentieth century.

But I reassured myself by saying, *Becoming a customer-centric organization is not easy. There is no reason to make it harder than it needs to be. What is most important right now?*

Setting proper expectations was one of the most important things I had to do to get off to the right start. St. Francis of Assisi said, “Start by doing what’s necessary, then what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible.” I knew I had to develop expectations about all the things I was about to face. My top priorities were the organizational culture, the quality of the company’s products and services, competitive positioning, brand, the operation, and the management team. These expectations would help shape my agenda, guide my thinking and my decision-making style, and articulate my journey to success.

Lack of Clarity

Customers are the lifeblood of any organization. Everybody should know this. Parts of the organization wanted to be customer-centric; they knew the customer is king and the customer is the real boss. However, employees lacked a shared understanding of the intended experience they were supposed to deliver. I wanted to pick safe paths and avoid the pitfalls that some companies had fallen into: In the quest of becoming a customer-centric organization, they had carved out ambitious but illusionary (unreal) goals. For example, a few years ago, Sage North America created a vision of delivering an “extraordinary customer experience.” The problem was that it didn’t clarify what made its experience “extraordinary.” The employees created their own versions of extraordinary and without clarity, the company lost its path. Ultimately the company had to prohibit agents from helping customers!

Catch Me If You Can

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To fend off false starts and flash in the pan situations, I plunged into clearing the fog and setting a clear-cut scene to help SEWA achieve a customer-centric culture. Embedding customer-centricity into an organization is like playing a game of “catch me if you can.” It’s an ever-moving and ever-changing target.

I began by building a customer-centric team to spearhead and lead the transformation. I told myself, *I need a core team to rally and align the rest of the organization to change their behaviors, embrace customer-centric communications, and ensure that SEWA will work in unison to achieve our goal.*

New Team, New Attitude

There’s a lot of truth in the familiar saying, “None of us is as smart as all of us.” I like what Steve Jobs said once, “Great things in business are almost never ever done by a single person.” The problems and challenges SEWA was facing were too complex and interdependent to be solved by any one person. I needed a good management team consisting of talented and capable people who would make SEWA both powerful and defensible. The team should be behaviorally cohesive, intellectually aligned, and committed to creating a customer-centric organization.

Build a Cohesive Leadership Team

Establishing a strong team was the best first step I took toward exacting our vision and strategy. But I didn’t just need a team. I needed a good team. Jim Collins perhaps put it most memorably when he

implored in *Good to Great*, “First who, then what.” Walt Disney confirmed his commitment to developing the best and the brightest at Disney World when he said, “You can design and create, and build the most wonderful place in the world. But it takes people to make the dream a reality.” Hence, I wanted the team to become an extension of my personal leadership, a force that projected my vision, values, and requirements. A team who could hone, own, and implement my strategic agenda. A team that would magnify my management methods and my branding message.

Who Gets Onboard?

Before answering the above question, let me tell you an interesting story about Apple’s recruiting process. I have extracted the snippet from an intriguing book, *Leading Apple with Steve Jobs*, by Jay Elliot. The hiring process is completely different for a job at the company headquarters in Cupertino. Some applicants have been interviewed on a bench in the mall, in a coffee shop, or at an outdoor restaurant.

The author said that once he met a man who had been interviewed by Steve Jobs, who complained to the author about the way he had been treated. It turned out that the man had gotten off on the wrong foot right from the start by showing up in a three-piece business suit, revealing at a glance that he hadn’t taken the trouble to find out anything about Apple’s culture. Then the man wanted to show Steve Jobs a piece of work he was proud of, which he had brought with him on his computer. He reached into his briefcase and pulled out a Dell laptop. The interview was over the instant Steve Jobs saw the Dell.

The story resonates with me because I would prefer to work with people I am comfortable and compatible with.

The Challenge

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“Who gets on board?” was a hairsplitting question. I didn’t want anyone or anything to trip me up. My goal was very clear. “Stop unnecessarily pissing people off and deliver a delightful customer experience.” I therefore spent a lot of quality time discriminating the backstabbers from the rest. I recognized the need to do things differently early on, along with some intuition and observation.

While I was mentally preparing to shortlist my new team members, I was crystal clear about one thing: The team should comprise employees from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities so that I get the best talents. The challenge would be to ensure that they live in harmony and feel included.

That night, I went to bed thinking of how to overcome this challenge.

The next morning, I woke up to some controversial headlines on global media channels. This is what Bloomberg published on June 26, 2018: Netflix Inc.’s CEO Reed Hastings fired his chief communications officer Jonathan Friedland, for using a racial slur in a work setting. Friedland said on Twitter, on Friday, that he’s stepping down following “insensitive” comments he made to colleagues. He used the n-word, which is extremely derogatory and offensive, twice in the past year.

Hastings wrote the following explanation on Twitter: “His descriptive use of n-word on at least two occasions at work showed unacceptably low racial awareness and sensitivity and is not in line with our values as a company.”

Hastings praised Friedland’s contributions to the company but said his behavior left him no choice. Hastings runs Netflix based on a culture of freedom and responsibility with nine core values, including judgment and communication.

| 14 | The news confirmed my thoughts about creating a diverse team; however, I wanted everyone to feel included and appreciated.

The Nine Champions

I want people who dare to be different. They challenge your thinking, fuel your ideas, boost your competitive edge, and make you and your business a winner. I always advise having no more than nine diverse, knowledgeable, skillful, and smart employees who possess a “passion to win for the customers.”

It's a Small-Team World

When it comes to team building, I live by my definition of a team: “A team is a select group of people with different abilities, talents, experience, and backgrounds who come together for a shared purpose. Despite their individual differences, that common goal provides the thread that defines them as a team.”

If a team includes too many high status people—“stars” or “A- players” as they are commonly known—they will compete for social standing and fail to consider others’ ideas. To make matters worse, the more status people have, the more status they crave, according to UC Berkeley social psychologist Cameron Anderson. He refers to the effects of status as “drug-like,” and it’s ruinous for collaboration.

There’s something alluring—and commonsensical—about the notion that if you just get enough A-players in an organization, you’ll succeed. One management theorist called this “the super-chicken model,” where you collect as many status-striving, alpha

types as possible. While a few A-players can be enormously helpful, it's possible that success is not about out- hiring the competition for these people. It is more about how you form teams and how people work together as teams. In short, while we need to take race, gender, and other issues into account to create diverse teams, it turns out we need status diversity too.

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Throughout my business life I have used a maximum of nine leadership team members. I love calling them the *nine champions*. Each has a unique role, accountability, and responsibility to energize the customer culture of SEWA. My secret to selecting them is easy. They are hard-working, ambitious, disciplined, and well educated. Among the nine I included people of wisdom who have experience working under tough conditions and overcoming SEWA's old culture of "how it's always done around here." Let's get to know the nine champions and their basic roles.

1. The ***sponsor*** provides resources, removes roadblocks, and decides when to disband the team.
2. The ***leader*** ensures the team has clear objectives and makes sure everyone is involved and committed.
3. The ***challenger*** questions effectiveness and presses for continuous improvement and results.
4. The ***doer*** urges the team to get on with the job at hand and does practical tasks.
5. The ***thinker*** produces carefully considered ideas and weighs and improves ideas from others.
6. The ***supporter*** eases tension, helps resolve personal agendas or conflicts, makes things easier, and maintains harmony.
7. The ***organizer*** maintains schedules and makes sure all members stay on the same page.

8. The *advisor* advises the team about the risks that may come along the way.
9. The *energizer* provides inspiration. He can view situations and opportunities with innate simplicity.

I have never been in a big group that worked well. It's more likely to spark controversy than closeness. Countless studies have shown the benefits of smaller teams. Most teams struggle simply because they are too large. A leadership team should be made up of a small group of people who are *collectively* responsible for achieving a common objective for their organization. The smaller group is really the best way to get connected on a deeper level with other people from the team. I always believed in small teams, where every member can stay involved all the way through. And it's easier to transfer your vision.

1. What do I want them to know?
2. What do I want them to do?

The American anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Focus and responsibility are more challenging with too many people; that is how you end up with folks staring down silently at their smartphones for an entire meeting. A few feel bored, yawn, and might snatch some sleep. Hence, three conditions are essential for the nine champions to be effective: Trust among members, a sense of identity, and a sense of efficacy.

Great Starting Point

After carefully selecting the nine champions and designating their responsibilities and accountabilities, I summoned them for a

kick-off meeting. I wanted to prime them for the *herculean* task that they were starting. Right from the beginning, even before they officially kick-started the customer-centric overhaul, I wanted to set some ground rules and a code of ethics for the team.

The Meeting Day

The team entered into the knowledge room with much anticipated zeal. Enthusiasm was written all over their faces. All of them were happy as a lark. I asked them to secure their seats.

“Many congrats to all of you,” I said cheerfully. “I have hand-picked you all to be the ‘chosen one out of 5000 employees.’ Be proud of yourselves. You are the cream of the crop who will determine SEWA’s success and bring about some phenomenal changes in the culture here. I don’t want you ladies and gentlemen to be stuck behind desks. We know a lot about our customers’ habits, incomes, and other characteristics used to classify them, but we know little about the thoughts, emotions, and states of mind induced by our customers’ interactions with our products, services, and brand.”

“I want you to be out on the dance floor—customer happiness centers, watching what customers are doing and finding out how you can make the place happier and more enjoyable for them. If you do not have leadership that is always striving for improvement, then you are not going to have the culture of service running through the veins of SEWA, and customer satisfaction will remain more a slogan than an attainable goal. Be light on your feet, because you will be moving a lot. Remember, keep me in your minds, because I am keeping you in my mind. Good luck. God bless SEWA.”

“Today I want to share a few rules of thumb for being on the team.”

Rule 1: No blame, no shame

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This rule is expressed well in the quote from John R. Wooden: “Never criticize, nag, or razz a teammate.”

All of them looked boggled, as if I had thrown a curve ball at them. I could almost hear them thinking, “What a rule!”

I said, “This means I want a no blame no shame culture among the team members.” I paused for a moment. “We will use a trial and error approach to improve processes and maximize customer service. Deal?”

“Deal,” they all said loudly.

Building Intimacy

I smiled in appreciation. “The concept of accountability is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it drives results that would not be achieved if nobody ‘owned’ the outcome. On the other hand, accountability can do a lot of damage when things go wrong. Most of us don’t believe it’s our fault and almost always, the root cause is complex.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“A no blame, no shame culture identifies that problems are often complex and usually not the fault of only one person. If that were so, that person would generally fix it. So where a problem has occurred, the concern is far better off finding out what happened. The first step to achieving this is to stop looking for the culprit. The vast majority of us intend to succeed. As the ‘nine champions,’ our job is to help one another, not to nitpick at one another.”

“Point taken, sir,” the *supporter* said in an assertive tone.

“What’s rule number two?” the *energizer* asked.

I laughed. “The second rule is the life-blood of any human interaction. Just pay more attention here. It’s motivation.”

Rule 2: Motivation

“This one is about motivation. There are two types of motivations: extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation.”

“We never thought motivation could be classified as well,” the *challenger* said loudly. “Can you shed some light on it?”

“Sure, extrinsic motivation can be defined as ‘behaviors performed to attain contingent outcomes’ and intrinsic motivation as ‘behaviors performed out of interest and enjoyment.’ I want you all to be intrinsically motivated to do the job!”

I stopped for some time and looked at my nine champions’ faces one by one to ensure their full engagement.”

I continued, “Extrinsic motivation, as pointed out earlier, drives one to engage in something to achieve a desired outcome separate from the activity. It leads one to engage out of obligation—to avoid feeling shame, for example. Most bluntly, it leads one to engage at less than optimal effectiveness.

“Hence, rule number one is to never criticize or nag your peers, and rule number two is to be intrinsically motivated. Remember these rules and you all will come out with flying colors. SEWA is a place where you’ll be celebrated, not tolerated.”

Tools for the Journey

After setting distinct and definitive priorities for the team and assigning duties, obligations, and responsibilities, I wanted to pick up the right tools to help the team achieve its mission and goals.

We worked on our software and hardware needs. We asked our IT department, Deep Divers Team, to determine our computer requirements.

This is another example of “taking care of the champions.” I had to give my champions the right tools they needed to get their job done, and improve their productivity and performance.

Smart Meetings

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It's a fact that meetings are a serious drain on an organization's time and resources. A 2018 study conducted by Quartz at Work found that meetings can consume upto 17% of the workweek and an estimated \$37 billion per year. I bullet-proofed my meetings by creating a unique process. A *European Business Review* article laid out the magical “four Ps” model of effective meetings. I was so moved by it I adopted it immediately. It demonstrated immediate benefits and streamlined most of my day's meetings. It proved to be a life-saving piece of information, so I decided to use it again with my nine champions.

I can't help but share it with you in the following infographic, which I created.

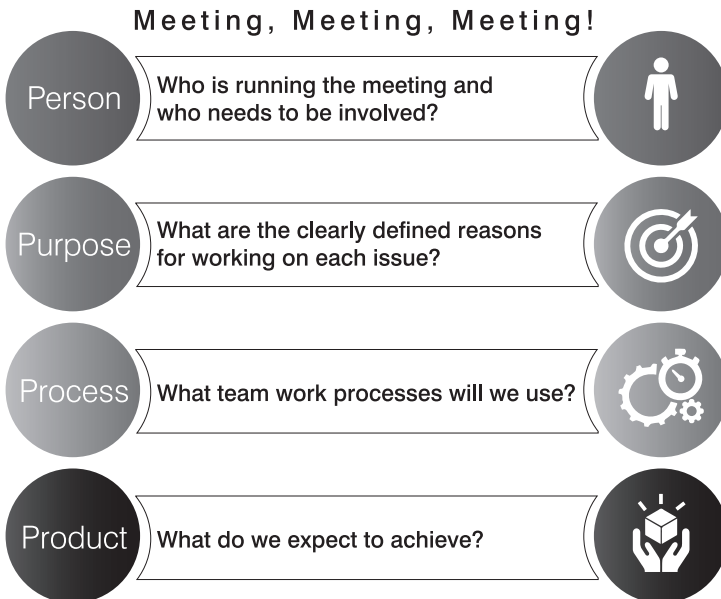


Figure 1.1 The 4 P's Model

Whenever you are about to engage in meetings, or any form of teamwork, it pays to set out the above four Ps, which I am highlighting in the following paragraphs.

Person: The job for the “person” is to clarify who needs to be involved in each part of the agenda. In SEWA’s case, the “person” was not necessarily the agenda owner, team leader or even the subject expert, just someone who is good at keeping focused.

Purpose: The “purpose” question provides a strategic analysis of what you need to be working on, at the team level, in order to achieve your business plan. It is a relevance check and helps to maintain a balance in teamwork. For us, asking “why” helped to bring clarity, priority, and a sense of ownership into the meetings, which was heavily lacking.

Process: The “process” is linked with “purpose.” In fact, the process you use to achieve your purpose will be driven by the nature of the purpose. To tease it out, we asked questions: “Is your purpose more strategic or more operational? Are you looking to set or refine direction (strategic) or report on progress or deviations against plan (operational)?” Processes for working with strategic purposes are, of course, different from operational ones. This set the tone right from the beginning.

Product: The final P, and in many ways the most important one, is having “the end in mind.” If the “Purpose” is at the strategic level (the “why”) but the “Product” is at the operational level (the “what”), you won’t achieve a thing. Specifying the “Product” at the start of the meeting helps arrive at a clear destination.

Following the above four Ps led us to better results-oriented and shorter meetings. To put it into practice, we put up wallpapers of four Ps in all our meeting rooms that served as reminders. It saved us enough time, energy, morale, and oxygen to focus on other priorities. Now, you have to decide, what will you do with the time you will save?

Making Every Meeting Matter

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I was aware that the human brain isn't meant to process so many disparate topics in one sitting. There needs to be greater clarity and focus, which meant there needed to be different kinds of meetings for different kinds of issues. And, yes, that meant there would be more meetings, not fewer. I was impressed with what Patrick Lencioni wrote in his book *The Advantage* about the kinds of meetings that any healthy organization must conduct. According to his book, there are four basic types of meetings. For the ease of reading, I have recreated an infographic for them.

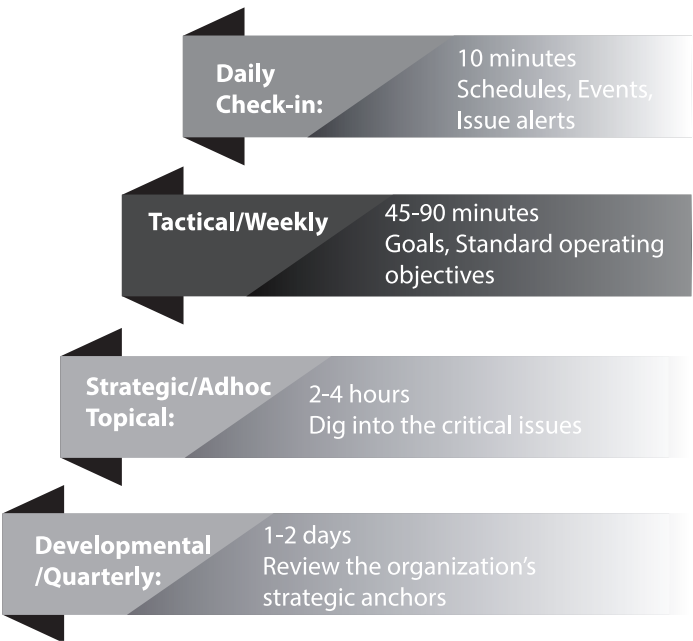


Figure 1.2 Smart Meetings

Let's have a close look at each meeting.

1. Administrative/Daily Check-in: Essentially, it's about the team getting into the habit of gathering once a day, for no more than ten minutes, to clear the air about anything administrative that would be helpful to know: schedules, events, and issue alerts, that kind of stuff.

2. Tactical/Weekly Staff Meetings: This kind of meeting is about having a real-time agenda; this entails creating a one-page scorecard or chart that includes the thematic goal, defining objectives, and their standard operating objectives. This type of meeting can consume 45-90 minutes in total.

3. Strategic/Adhoc Topical: This is the most interesting and compelling of all meetings. The purpose of this kind of meeting is to dig into critical issues that can have a long-term impact on the organization—any issue that warrants more time, energy, and preparation. As for the timing of topical meetings, it is okay to spend two to four hours at one go. No one is going to complain about spending too much time discussing critical issues.

4. Developmental/Quarterly Off-site Reviews: This meeting is about stepping back from the business to get a fresh perspective, which is why it is done away from the office. Activities that should be addressed during these meetings include reviewing the organization's strategic anchors and thematic goals, assessing the performance of key employees, discussing competitive threats, etc. The length of these meetings is not really negotiable, usually they last up to one to two days.

No Pointless Meetings

As a result—and trust me when I say this—employees actually look forward to meetings, and even enjoyed them. In fact, they got real

work done during those meetings, which made their lives, and the lives of their colleagues, better as a result.

Now let me introduce you to a particular type of meeting I created and introduced especially for project meetings.

Gist Meetings

As I explained in the introduction, poor customer service and failed projects gave me sleepless nights. When I took a close look at the state of SEWA's projects, what I found shocked me—and the prime reason boiled down to inefficient meetings. (Of course, there were more shocking reasons for failed projects, but we'll explore that in greater depth in my book *SEWA Project Management Model*.)

I understand projects (big or small) require meetings. May I suggest one simple thing: gist meetings. I introduced the practice of “gist meetings” at SEWA. The ultimate purpose of these meetings is to briefly and succinctly discuss issues and unearth the nitty-gritty of the matter. I love these meetings because the team would assemble to discuss the punch line of any scenario at hand and then disperse to execute with a clearly defined action plan. Since its introduction, the gist meetings score high among SEWA's top managers.



Chapter 2

Ready for the Journey

Push away all the noise and listen to the sounds of the universe.

—Anonymous

In one of the strategic meetings with my newly crowned champions, I said, “Time is tight; we are in a race against the clock. However, you can save a little time by focusing on six success factors. It’s like, if you were going into a battle, and you are able to take only a few weapons with you—these success factors will save your life. Remember these factors are not optional. They are necessities.”

The following section elaborates on the success factors I shared with my team that day.

Success Factor 1: Positive Attitude

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No one goes through life untested, and the answer to these tests is a positive attitude. It's about constantly maintaining a winning environment. As they say, have a positive, joyful attitude and you'll have positive, joyful results. A positive attitude pre-programs us to seek actionable opportunities, which means we arrive with a dynamic mindset ready to jump in and get something done. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.

Sometimes, inspiring words can move people and leave an indelible mark in their minds, leading to an infusion of positivity and "feel good hormones." I witnessed the amazing power of positive energy on July 14, 2018. The Italian Business Council Dubai & Northern Emirates invited me to a business networking event. As one of the main guests, I was asked to address the audience. I gave a motivating speech about finding the sweet spot between dreams and passions, that's paramount and fundamental in any phase of life.

The next day, I received a grateful email from the secretary general and the vice president of the council, with a special mention that my speech was well received by the audience and inspired every single soul to instill positivity around them. Not only was I touched, but I was also deeply inspired.

Success Factor 2: Clarity of Purpose

Once you define your purpose, you become unstoppable. You will not only boost your confidence sky-high, but you'll be able to rise higher and see God's blessings and favor in a great way. Successful people have a definite sense of direction. They have a clear understanding of what success means to them. Everything they do is consistent with their goals. This requires work ethic, focus, and

prioritization skills that match their purpose and it might require tremendous sacrifices.

Success Factor 3: Manage Process Tight, Product Strong

The phrase “process tight and product strong” means every day and at every step, we deliver great outcomes in the most efficient manner. If we have to work on tight deadlines, planning and time management are key to making it work. We break large tasks into smaller manageable chunks and make sure to attach milestone deadlines to each task. If we suspect something might go wrong (and it probably will!), we are prepared for it and create a Plan B.

Success Factor 4: P.U.S.H (Persist Until Success Happens)

I read the PUSH acronym in a fitness social media post, and I was immensely motivated by it. It’s easy to stay motivated when you start something, or when you’re seeing results. The trick is staying motivated when you’re not yet seeing results. The important thing to remember is that even if you don’t see it yet, every workout is bringing you closer and closer to the goal you set for yourself when you started.

I would add: *Never give up. Keep moving.*

Success Factor 5: Be dedicated to continuous learning

Well-known business author and change agent Tom Peters encourages cultivating “towering competence” — becoming the very best at what we do by continuing to learn and hone our skills, to the point where we become highly regarded and sought after by our coworkers and professional peers.

Continuous learning means we're keeping the "raw material pile" of our brain freshly stocked, which enables us to come up with more and better ideas and innovations which every business needs today. New ideas and solutions are a primary way we can add value to our jobs and, therefore, increase our success.

Success Factor 6: Share Bad News

A celebrated personality I admire, Colin Powell, put it well when he said, "Bad news isn't wine. It doesn't improve with age." My personal belief here is, if there is bad news, have the guts to tell me. Don't try to hide it. When the present is bleak and the future is uncertain, delivering bad news is tough enough. Having to explain why things are bad on top of that can seem impossible, but great leaders are committed to sharing the news, the context, and their explanation of why, no matter what.

Use mistakes for learning rather than a club for coercion.

Be Positive Toward Yourself

I have learned a lot over the years, and most of the lessons were hard ones. As Bob Proctor thoughtfully points out, "Big failures big lessons, little failures little lessons." Consequently, I have also had to pay my fair share of pain tax too.

Have the Courage to Fail

When you are in a field that is part of your destiny, going down for a short time isn't a failure at all. Rather, it is a time to gather the strength to go even higher. Edwin Louis-Cole said, "You don't drown by falling in the water; you drown by staying there." There's

an old Japanese saying, “Fall down seven times, rise up eight.” You are not meant to live a miserable and unfulfilled life. George Burns said, “I’d rather be a failure at something I enjoy than be a success at something I hate.”

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When you follow the destiny God has given you, you will lead with passion and enthusiasm.

A few weeks after discussing the ‘success factors’ with my nine champions, I gathered them again in the “Rise and Shine” seating area of my executive floor. It’s a lavish sofa with serene ambience, tastefully crafted for SEWA visitors and employees.

Draining People

I addressed the team in an exhilarated voice. “It’s time for you to rise and shine, my champions. Now, you are primed with the wealth of knowledge about success factors and how to work your way towards super-productive meetings. Nothing can stop you! but, I have a caveat for you all.”

“What is it?” the *Thinker* asked.

“Have you ever heard of the term ‘emotional vampires’?” I asked.

“Yes,” said the *Doer*. “I remember reading about them in your previous book *The SEWA Brand Turnaround and Rejuvenation*. It was an alluring concept. We still feel them around the corner.”

I smiled at him. “Yes, you are right. Interestingly, the emotional vampires aren’t the mythical characters from the famous American series *The Vampire Diaries*. I am talking about living human beings who suck all the positive energy out of us to fuel their relentless hunger for negativity, leaving us drained, exhausted, and unhappy. These are the authentic predatory, mind-clouding, shape-shifting creatures of darkness. Whatever you call them, emotional vampires, energy suckers, or toxic people, they can wreak havoc on your life and projects if you don’t have effective strategies to deal with them.”

Prevailing Over Darkness

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The *Thinker* raised his eyebrows. “That’s bad. It’s sickening. How do I know them?” he asked glumly.

“They use a lot of phrases like, ‘me first,’ ‘poor-me,’ and ‘why-me,’” I replied. “And—”

“There’s more?” the *Supporter* asked, clearly worried.

“They like to see you upset, frustrated, and all bent out of shape,” I replied warmly. “They derive pleasure from seeing you panic-stricken.”

The *Energizer* finally spoke. “That is horrible, mean, and nasty. How do we get rid of them?”

Beat the Crow

You must have heard the eagle allegory. If not, here’s the gist of it. When the eagle is out flying, often a crow will come up right behind him and pester him. Although the eagle is much larger, he cannot maneuver quickly. To get rid of this pest, the eagle simply stretches out his eight-foot wingspan and catches some of the thermal currents, and he rises up higher and higher. Eventually, he gets to an altitude where no other bird can live. The crow can’t even breathe up there. On rare occasions, eagles have been spotted at altitudes as high as 20,000 feet, nearly as high as a jet flies.

So you all have to learn this lesson; If you want to get rid of your pests, you need to rise higher.

Betrayal

“Yes, enemies are bad,” I replied. “But what if they know something

you don't?" My answer is beat your enemies well, and then treat them well; They are not going anywhere, and they might even turn out to be your good friends in the next go-round. The Holy Quran encourages us to do just that. 'And not equal are the good deed and the bad. Repel (evil) by that (deed) which is better; and thereupon the one who between you and him is enmity (will become) as though he was a devoted friend.'

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"The question here is, How you respond to the bad things energy vampires do? Well, in an ordinary business environment the other side competes with you. In the case of betrayal, your side becomes the other side. Your plans become your competitor's reading material. Your employees become your enemy's employees. For those reasons, betrayal must be roughly dealt with. They deserve to be fired or shunned."

SEWA Quality Service Journey

As I was writing this page, I swelled with pride, because SEWA was undoubtedly a pioneer in the region when it came to mapping its customer journey. Before going any further, let's define a customer journey map. *A customer journey map tells the story of the customer's experience, from initial contact through the process of engagement into a longer-term loyal relationship.*

Don't Reinvent the Wheel

In my very first management meeting with the nine champions, I asked, "What do you already know about our customer journey?"

One of them said, "We have been trying to measure customer satisfaction and have plenty of data as a result."

I replied, “The problem is that measuring customer satisfaction does not tell anyone how to achieve it. Have we ever tried to gauge valuable insights from the information that we’ve already gathered from our customers’ interactions and feedback?”

There was no reply.

“A successful brand shapes customers’ experiences by embedding the fundamental value proposition in every feature. For BMW, The ‘ultimate driving machine’ is much more than a slogan; it informs the company’s manufacturing and design choices. A small sticker, ‘Designed in California, Made in China’ communicates the message that Apple is firmly in charge but also interested in keeping costs down. Sometime it could be the distinctive ‘potato-potato’ sound of Harley-Davidson motorcycles’ exhaust systems that creates exceptional experience.”

I took a deep breath. “This information is valuable when mapping the current state of our customer journey. There’s no need to reinvent the wheel. Look at our listening centers, surveys, and customer complaints. There’s ample food for thought out there. And yes, make sure you are looking at structured feedback and unstructured feedback, such as social media and review sites.”

I looked at some customer surveys lying on my table. “Let’s face it, internal interviews are not enough. Surveys are not enough. Market research is not enough. We need to collect data from all the interactions that customers have with us, and also have a way to understand customer needs, wants, expectations, and emotions during each interaction.”

I made it clear that I was keen on mapping our customer’s journey with us and I wanted everyone to buy into my decision. I told them, “The journey mapping process would provide us with greater visibility of what happens upstream and downstream of our interactions with customers, thereby improving our ability to deliver

the desired experience. And above all, you are responsible for identifying which experiences matter the most in balancing customer satisfaction with profitability.” | 35 |

Emotional Highs and Lows

However, mapping the customer’s journey wasn’t enough. To delight my customers, to wow and win them, I must create unforgettable, compassionate experiences that meet and exceed their expectations and advance my customer strategy. I want to get into the minds of our customers, and understand what they really want. In short, I want to document the emotional highs and lows my customers experience and listen to the voices of the customers (VOCs) along the journey. That calls for something outrageous and distinctive.

Stand Out in a Crowd

In today’s competitive markets, smart companies strive to stand out from others in the crowd. Low pricing is one approach, but it eats away at the profit margin. Super high quality is another approach, but it can be hard to deliver if the product is a commodity item, easily available from other sources or vendors.

In fact, providing good service isn’t the “it” thing either. Quality, service, and fair pricing are all expectations these days. To find something that separates us from the crowd, we had to provide a fabulous experience to our customers and take it to a whole new level. This will get us noticed. Consider the wisdom in this magnificent quote: “Be outrageous. It’s the only place that isn’t crowded.”

Amidst all that craziness, (and the futile effort to catch up on my sleep!) I decided to move beyond lip service and reorient SEWA’s

entire business model around its customer, leading to increased customer satisfaction. In short, build a customer-centric organization. It's an established truth that consumers have never been smarter than they are today. They have more information than ever before to help make decisions.

Communicating the Vision

Knowing well that the journey will *not* be an easy endeavor, customer expectations continue to increase, and my rational mind reminds me, *Rashid, things ain't getting easier*. Serving customers is one of the hardest parts of the utility business, given its breadth and complexity.

Common Objectives

I had plenty of thoughts in my mind, all bidding to be put into effect. I lulled my mind by settling for three vital elements of customer experience management: 1) standardization and Integration, 2) customer service promise/pledge, and 3) omnipresence

Standardization and Integration

I comforted my analytical mind. *Take it easy*. It's no surprise that customer experience management is a challenge for all organizations, but aiming to be a leading organization, I wanted standardization and integration, across people, processes, systems, and data, to be at the heart of SEWA's customer experience management.

SEWA corporate governance facilitated transparency. Money and profits were never the motivators for me. I have always been motivated by building a service business where the *right* customer is the king. As a result of my proposal, on January 22, 2015, His Highness Dr. Sheikh Sultan Al Qassimi, the ruler of Sharjah, issued an executive order containing all our tariffs, charges, and commercial levies in a published book to our customers. This was the first time in the UAE that a utility had an initiative like this.

Customer Service Promise/Pledge

This was the second important step. It was the customer pledge. In order to deliver great customer service, SEWA pledges to provide its customers, stakeholders, and partners with services in the following manner:

- **Smile.** “Smile, you are in SEWA,” is our catchphrase/motto. We speak this universal language to generate passion for customers and will do whatever it takes to achieve customer experience excellence.
- **Friendliness and courtesy.** We will be enthusiastically welcoming, helpful, and proactive in our customer service efforts.
- **Timely and responsive.** We will be prompt, showcase a can-do attitude and take initiative to anticipate a customer’s needs and wants.
- **Accurate and consistent.** We will always aim for 100% accuracy and comply with SEWA customer service policies.
- **Accessible and convenient.** We will continue to be affable, continue to simplify, and continuously improve our procedures and policies to attain greatest customer delight.

- **Truthful and Transparent.** We will embed ethics and integrity in our processes as a core component. We will foster a culture of honesty, clarity, and trust.
- **Resolution-mindset.** We will strive to resolve difficult situations calmly, effectively, and advance towards zero pending complaints.
- **Socially-Engaged.** We will embrace social media for customer engagement.
- **24/7 Listening Center.** We will assure round-the-clock communication with our customers through our highly efficient, highly trained, and multilingual agents.

High Tech with High Touch

I can proudly say that SEWA is the only utility to have renamed its call centers as “listening centers.” With this, I was able to balance the high tech with the high touch, thereby adding the human element to the monotonous province of customer experience.

It is entirely possible for a call center to operate efficiently but *not* effectively. This paradox happens when organizations aim to meet only customer expectations; however, that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Real customer delight is achieved when you find the *sweet spot* by striking a balance between customer needs, wants, and expectations.

Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg recently spoke at Stanford University about building voice, not brand. Sandberg said, “If you are doing it to develop your personal brand, it’s empty and self-serving and not about what you’re talking about. If you’re doing it because there is something you want to see changed in the world, that’s where it will have value and depth and integrity.”

My SEWA listening centers serve this purpose. To avoid customers leaving frustrated, the role of the SEWA listening centers is to ensure that each of our customer's wants, needs, and expectations are not only met but exceeded, and that the customer's voice is heard loud and clear. This is what we call "seeing through our ears."

What's Next?

The SEWA customer pledge/promise delivered great rewards. The results were good enough at this stage. Ensuring quick resolutions to customer issues leads to decreased queuing and waiting time. We saw the *First call resolution (FCR)* metric move from red to green in the performance dashboard for the first time ever. Eventually, fewer calls were abandoned or routed. Nevertheless, customers still went in circles and my listening center agents continued to pass the buck on customer issues.

1. Omnipresence

The word "omnipresence" portends the concept of being everywhere, in all places at all times. It's about being accessible everywhere. An omnipresent brand is a universal brand that consumers/customers have become used to needing in most cases, on a daily basis. My ultimate goal was to operate from a similar kind of mind-set. I asked myself a few challenging questions. *Am I operating at the right level of targeting and thinking big enough? Am I setting my expectations high enough? Is it the right thing to do?* We were dealing in a mass market and not a niche; our target audience span over 1.5 million consumers in the city of Sharjah. My intention

was to enlarge my footprint with the goal of dominating and being everywhere, to become the most loved brand in the region.

The omnipresence mind-set would allow us to make all our decisions with the goal of making our brand, our product, and our services omnipresent. That, in turn, gives us the most power; we would become omnipotent as well.

Gradually, I began to ask myself a hard question. “How do you build a truly customer-centric organization?” Interesting question, isn’t it? Sometimes it takes creativity to ask an interesting question, and it takes innovation and technology to answer it. Let’s experience the journey!

The Missing Piece

The idea of creating a SEWA customer-centric model was the answer. The model was the place where creativity met innovation and technology. The question posed above was my takeoff point towards creating effective customer experience management. After conducting intensive research and sifting through white papers, case studies, global best practices, and lessons learned from mega-corporations worldwide, and after consulting great leaders and successful colleagues, I developed the model.

I found that mega-corps models are generally built on one of the trusted models, so I decided to go for it. Specifically, I referred to the Malcolm Baldrige Award Recipient’s innovative customer-focused practices and embedded them within the SEWA spectrum. This became the missing link that would complete my vision of truly great customer experience management. Prior to sharing my SEWA customer-centric model, I would like to highlight the Malcolm Baldrige Award Winner’s best practices that inspired me. Have a look!

The Malcolm Baldrige Award Winners Practices

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- **Utilize Multiple Listening Methods:** The winners utilized multiple listening methods to understand customer requirements and capture the customer's perception of their company's performance and to track customer relationships and consumer trends.
- **Highly refined complaint management processes:** The winners use a closed-loop complaint management process—where the process begins and ends with the customer. The frontline employees handle customer complaints as they are communicated, and focus on continuous improvement and performance measures.
- **Customer focus is demonstrated at all levels and cascades from the top:** Senior executives/leaders are the explicit guardians of customer service. Focus teams hold focus groups with customers to understand the need.

Bonding with Customers

Now, I felt it was high time to start bonding with customers. This was the proverbial Gulliver among the Lilliputians, and it called for my immediate attention. As I wanted to switch gears, I took a back seat and viewed the process from the customer's perspective. I wanted to get rid of the reactive, descriptive, and transactional past, and evolve as proactive, energized, and progressive. You may be curious how I did it. Though my way was distinctly un-SEWA-like, I felt this was a desperate need. The change had to be both incremental *and* revolutionary.

This rang a bell in my mind about a great Chinese philosopher's insights .

Yin and Yang Balance/Paradox

The Yin and Yang balance/paradox is based on embracing dualities. This Taoist (philosophical tradition of Chinese origin that emphasizes living in harmony) theory denotes “a situation where contradictory yet interrelated elements exist simultaneously and persist over time.” This signifies dualities that are oppositional yet also synergistic or interrelated within a larger system; for example, male/female, cold/hot, or day/night.

The yin and yang balance inspired me to come up with a rough plan of my future course. My love for infographics forced me to put my thoughts in the below visual. As the Chinese proverb says, “One picture is worth ten thousand words.”

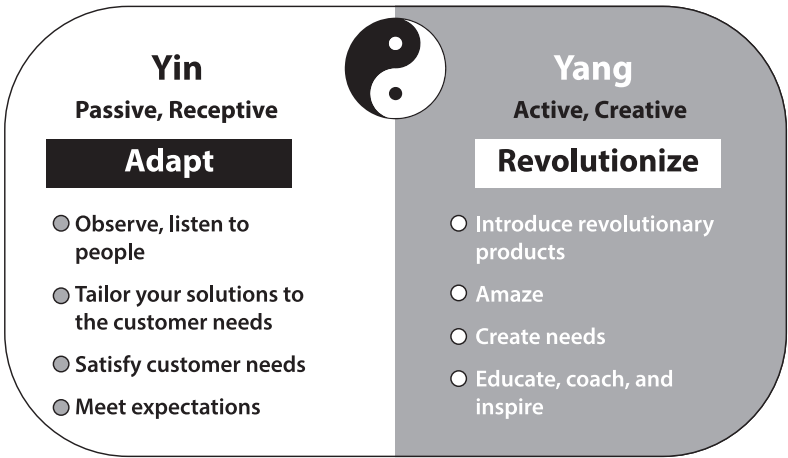


Figure 2.1 The Yin and Yang Balance

Nutters

Miles Young, the global CEO of Ogilvy & Mather, has recommended that business people “hire more nutters.” They think totally

differently than we do. They come at things from a very different perspective.

What's Stopping Me

Adapting this philosophy gave me a sense of peace and complacency. By now, I had the closest thing to a formula for crushing it. Yet I knew that even a so-called formula wouldn't be enough. There has to be something more to it. I wondered, *What's stopping me?* The question teased me for a few days (and nights), until I found the solution in a Japanese philosophy called *Kaikaku*.

Kaikaku

Kaikaku is a lean production term that means *radical* change, transformation, a revolution. It means radical overhaul of an activity to eliminate all waste (*muda* in Japanese) and create greater value. It is a rapid and radical change process. Kaikaku is necessary to break paradigms and elevate people's awareness to a higher level. The ten core points below formed the crux of SEWA's transition to becoming customer-centric by adapting the Kaikaku.

1. Strive to amaze our customers, and employees; ask ourselves, "What would an ideal customer experience be?" and look for ways to make the maximum contribution to that ideal state.
2. Develop a creative dissatisfaction mindset by showing discontent with the status quo, noticing problems, feeling ineffectiveness, and foreseeing threats; ask ourselves, "What would an ideal process look like?" and search for opportunities to make radical improvements.

3. Look for opportunities to do much more with much less; apply the 80/20 principle, also popularly known as the Pareto Law, which states that, for many events, roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes.
4. See problems as opportunities to make things radically better and to hone our winning skills for creative problem solving.
5. Challenge assumptions and the status quo; recognize that the current practice may trap employees in old ways of seeing and thinking.
6. Take different perceptual positions and look at the current practice with new eyes; ask “Why?” and “What if?” questions.
7. Know how to sell our radical ideas to other stakeholders and overcome resistance to change.
8. Brainstorm creative solutions with our group; go wild; think outside the box; look for synergies.
9. Think positively and act promptly; start improving things and learn as we go.
10. Follow the radical improvement action (Kaikaku) with continuous small improvements (Kaizen).

Obsess Over Customers, Not Competitors

One of SEWA’s core values emphasized *having a passion for customers*, but SEWA lacked external radar that would align it with the same. Redesigning SEWA to put customers at the center was nightmarish, especially because most of the employees were highly diversified and change-resistant. Who cared about the customers? However, I declared to my employees that we had to take the onus to *transmodify* SEWA into a cutting-edge customer-centric organization. Customer service was not our domain. SEWA is the only

provider of electricity, water, and natural gas to Sharjah residents. That was the be all and end all—they had no choice, so we enjoyed the monopoly!

To become customer-centric, we needed to train our customer-facing employees in the *art* of delighting customers. Further, we needed to inspire in them proactive problem-solving skills, while also teaching them responsibility and accountability. We needed a lot.

I thought all my wisdom and logic would fail. We plunged ahead anyway and began with a customer journey map.

Flog the Bad Guys

Deep within, I am an advocate of Oscar Wilde’s quote, “A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies.” The quote is a truism in today’s world. I got rid of the people who would undermine me in a negative way. I identified the villains and flogged them out. Why? Because they didn’t buy into the program, would never get on board, and would only be destructive. I’m not talking about people who had healthy disagreements, open debate, and strong points of view. I’m talking about those who would knife you in the back—the backstabbers—and try to destroy what you’re trying to do.

Please don’t mistake me for an unkind soul. I know that every creative idea involves some deviation from the status quo, and that usually means that the people who embrace it will feel some discomfort. It is bound to draw resistance from employees who must implement it.



Chapter 3

Dare to Dream

Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm

—Publilius Syrus

It was 11 p.m. I was about to retire to bed to catch up on sleep before an early meeting the next day. I still remember that moment with great clarity. While in deep slumber, in my subconscious sleep, I heard people enthusiastically repeating what I'd been saying, and this was validation that I was hitting the mark. I immediately sprang out of bed, grabbed a double espresso shot, and sat in my study with my pen and a notebook. My hand could hardly keep up with the words that were rushing into my mind. After laying down the fundamental elements of the customer-centric model, I felt a powerful sense of relief that I can't explain. The very thought of creating the customer-centric model filled

me with enthusiasm. I began by surfing through mega corporations such as Amazon and Apple, well-known for keeping customers at the heart of their processes. I asked myself what they do and, more importantly, how they did it.

“Umm. Yes, I can do it too,” I said in my deepest voice.

My eureka moment had arrived! I thought this was the time for creating another model that would become the nucleus of SEWA’s customer-centric roadmap. I told myself, *After all, profit is not why we are in business; we are in business to solve problems.*

The model depended heavily on the individual consumer’s journey across the SEWA services’ touchpoints.

Shall We Begin?

Let me start with the sage advice and wisdom of Gandhi, “First, they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight with you, then you win.” You will discover that the secret to an exceptional customer experience can be the linchpin to your organization’s organic success. Sometimes a good experience may not be a thrilling one but one that is trouble-free. Hold on to your excitement, you are only an inch away from greatness. Keep reading!

The Six Imperatives of the SEWA Customer-Centric Model

In the age of the customer, business as usual is not enough. Everything we do needs to make sense of what the customer needs, so we put customer in the middle of our doughnut and ensure that all our resources are coordinated around our customer’s needs.

Below is the infographic of the model I came up with to center SEWA on its customer.

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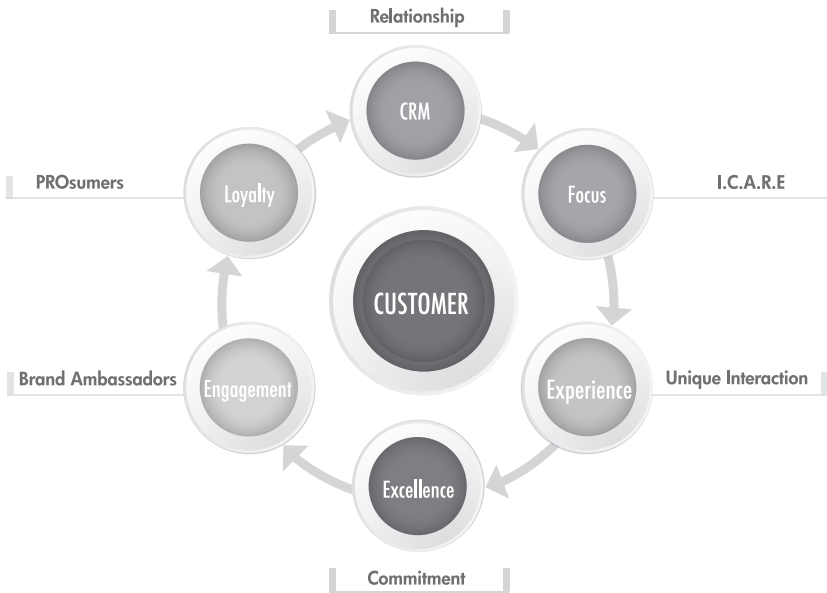


Figure 3.1 The SEWA Customer-Centric Model

The model consists of six strategic imperatives. Before we move on, let's address the model's key points.

1. Customer Relationship Management
2. Customer Focus
3. Customer Experience
4. Customer Excellence
5. Customer Engagement
6. Customer Loyalty

Imperative 1: Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

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CRM represents an essential tool for a company trying to create a long-term, profitable relationship with its customers, partners, and clients. CRM offers increased opportunities to use data and information both for understanding the clients and creating value. CRM means building a long-term relationship with the consumer based on IT technologies and the internet.

Imperative 2: Customer Focus

Being customer-focused means placing the spotlight on the people that keep our business afloat: our customers. Customer-focused strategies are designed to help us know who our key customers are and understand what entices them to stay loyal while singing our praises. This also means applying customer thought processes and culture and building ownership across all functions of SEWA. While achieving this, SEWA aims to identify opportunities to improve efficiency while also providing more effective service by improving the customer experience. Organizational growth means keeping customers happy, and customer-focused strategies are designed to accomplish this task.

Imperative 3: Customer Experience

The world is getting smaller. Nations and communities are becoming more diverse. We are serving over 1.5 million people 24/7 in Sharjah. They hail from diverse cultural backgrounds. Not all customers are created equal. Some require more attention than others, some require guidance from time to time, and some simply do not wish to be disturbed. By gaining insights into needs, preferences,

and behaviors, customer journeys can be optimized at critical touchpoints. Consistently delivering positive experiences establishes relationships. Strong relationships build loyalty and drive growth.

Imperative 4: Customer Excellence

Of course, if you are truly serious about service excellence, everything you do must be centered around your customers. We undertook the following commitments to achieve customer service excellence in SEWA.

- Get as close to our customers as possible so that we fully understand their needs and expectations.
- Design our products and services around those needs and expectations, and continuously modify and enhance them as customer needs and expectations change.
- Deliver products and services in a way that consistently exceeds expectations.
- Introduce informal and formal feedback systems so that we always know how we are performing and are able to continuously improve.

Imperative 5: Customer Engagement

This imperative is achieved by following a three-fold strategy. The first step is creating awareness and understanding for our customers by responding to the impact of new technologies, modern lifestyles, and evolving energy needs. Second, we respond to our customers' needs by aligning our services with their evolving expectations. Third is using customer data and analytics to influence business decisions and enhance customer experiences by ensuring the information we hold about them is relevant to our interactions.

Imperative 6: Customer Loyalty

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Customer loyalty is an important determinant of long-term financial performance. If we do not keep customers satisfied and loyal, they will be lured away by the competition. However, competitors are not the only barrier to customer retention; unmet customer demand for both quality products and friendly and efficient service can also contribute to massive customer exits.

With the SEWA customer-centric model, we reached heights we might have never thought possible—and the model can do the same for you and your organization.

First, you need to know key points about the model based on our experiences. These are SEWA's best practices and philosophies in action.

Perfectionism

SEWA believes that simplicity is the ultimate sophistication. I admire simplicity. It's one of my leadership mantras. I believe organizational business models should be articulated simply and succinctly. Complexity obscures; simplicity cuts right to the heart of the matter. Hence, I didn't want to run behind perfection. Experience has taught us that perfection is a bit like the Loch Ness monster. There are people who search for it their whole lives—but nobody has ever seen it. I have taken all my experiences, successes, and travails and used them as the foundation for my model. I told myself, *Things do not need to be Harvard-tough all the time. Employees need not be bombarded with multiple complex programs.* The SEWA customer-centric model was designed for employee execution, it ensures that each employee is ready, willing, and capable of delivering on the customer-centric strategy.

Simplexity

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Today, it's not about solving complexity; it's about finding "simplexity". Simplexity is a product development engineering firm, hired by leading technology companies to design their next-generation products. The most important step is asking the right questions to truly understand the client's needs. Simplexity strives for simplicity, reducing product cost and improving reliability for its clients through its 7 Steps to Simplification© process. I was quite impressed with the process and thought it might prove helpful to my nine champions. I advised my '*leader*' to run through the seven simple steps and create a workshop around them. The steps are super simple and don't need any expert guidance. One just needs to maneuver through them with simplicity.

1. Ask questions
2. Write down the specs
3. Brainstorm from a system perspective
4. Do the math
5. Design with the end in mind
6. Prototype the test
7. Select proven manufacturers

The workshop proved successful in paving the path towards our next vital step—excellence.

Creating Excellence

The SEWA customer-centric model is ever-evolving and open to continuous improvement. I strive for excellence and celebrate suc-

cess as it come. My aim is to never stop growing and delivering exceptional service. I wish I were a superhuman with extraordinary superpowers to achieve extraordinary excellence, but as they say, not all wishes come true. I am a human with limited capabilities but infinite possibilities. To execute the SEWA customer-centric model successfully, I went on to create an army of customer engagement officers whose only purpose was to engage the heart, soul, and mind of SEWA customers and reach a whole new level of wowing them.

customer.engagement@sewa.gov.ae

Developing engagement doesn't have to require significant capital investment. Often engagement emerges from small gestures that remove barriers between an organization and its customers. When organizations listen and execute based on the needs, wants, and expectations of their customers, they pull the entire customer base and engage them at a much deeper level that in turn fuels trust among them.

Customer.engagement@sewa.gov.ae was created to accomplish all that and much more. Each customer engagement officer's business card had this address imprinted on it so that any customer at any touchpoint could be engaged. Their specialty is creating customer loyalty and engagement at each touchpoint. I ensure they understand that not all touchpoints are the same. At each touchpoint, the gap between customer expectations and experiences spells the difference between customer delight and something less.

The WOW Factor

“WOW” is such a short, simple word in a marketing glossary, but it really encompasses a lot of things. To WOW someone, you must

differentiate yourself. There is one thing that every customer looks for—expectations, often very high expectations. Wowing our customers meant not only meeting their expectations, but also exceeding them and whatever you do must have emotional impact.

In SEWA, we have two main categories for jobs; line jobs and staff jobs. Both are equally important. Line jobs include sales, marketing, branding, process engineers, and product supervisors. Staff jobs include legal officers and administrators of all types. To ensure the best customer service, we became laser-focused on the line jobs where maximum interactions happen with the customer. Wowing customers doesn't happen overnight; it is about dedication, commitment, attending the early morning meetings, weekend travel away from home, checking and rechecking the customer journey, and the endless hours of incremental progress.

To ensure these parameters, I designated a couple of customer engagement officers at the customer-facing centers. As expected, this initiative produced results that trickled down to the day-to-day experience of frontline workers. It was all about creating an environment of engagement at all touchpoints in the customer's journey. I fully supported and valued the officers so that they felt confident when facing customers. Unlike other organizations, I didn't want my frontline employees to be fearful of management and ill at ease. I wanted them performing in a natural and relaxed way.

Perfecting the Art of Customer Service

Nowadays business books are full of ear-tickling clichés about customer service, like “close to the customer,” “customer-centric,” “customer-focus,” “the art of customer delight,” etc. They were never there earlier in large successful customer-driven organizations, like Disney, because the customer and his details were the heart of the game. They placed customers at the center of their universe. This

| 56 | was reason enough that Walt Disney used to be called a “Guestologist.” You will learn more about this title in the coming chapters.



Imperative 1

Customer Relationship Management (CRM)



We've spent the last 30 years focusing on the T in IT, and we'll spend the next year focusing on the I.

—Peter F. Drucker

In business terms, customer relationship management (CRM) refers to practices, strategies, and technologies that companies use to manage and analyze customer interactions and data throughout the customer lifecycle, with the goal of improving business relationships with customers, assisting in customer retention, and driving sales growth. This definition fit partly in SEWA's domain, though I replaced customer retention with customer delight and driving revenue and growth with driving innovation. Our SEWA CRM is unique and highly personalized. It is the sum of the knowledge, experience, and trust SEWA has with its customers, employees, suppliers, and distribution partners.

The Building Blocks of SEWA CRM:

I. Solution Mindset

When I took over as a chairman in 2014, customer complaints were high, and their frustrations were exacerbated by their inability to find someone in SEWA who could answer their questions or provide satisfactory clarification. Becoming a customer-centric business presupposed a fundamental shift in mindset from selling services to solving problems and delighting customers. By engaging our customers over and over to truly understand them, we were able to transform *every* customer touchpoint into a memorable and delightful experience. We introduced three main communication tools:

1) communicate with the SEWA Chairman, 2) provide around the clock toll-free service to customers, and 3) implement the customer happiness Index.

Communicate with the SEWA Chairman

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To learn from customers, you have to implement effective feedback mechanisms to capture complaints and gather general satisfaction data, to analyze this information regularly in a meaningful way to identify areas for improvement. We made it clear to our customers that we are human and make mistakes, but we very much wanted to learn from them.

I followed Japanese manufacturing guru Shigeo Shingo's clever techniques to make production processes mistake-proof, because while brilliance and ingenuity are wonderful, nothing quite undermines professional credibility faster or more thoroughly than an avoidable mistake.

I launched an initiative called, "Communicate with the SEWA chairman" with the intention of achieving a zero-pending complaint status. One of the best ways to achieve customer satisfaction is by successfully resolving a customer complaint.

A mistake that the customer knows about but you don't is painful for all; if you don't know about it, obviously you can't do anything about it. We need to encourage customers to share their annoyances when they occur and not remain silent.

As I mentioned earlier, some customers are coy by nature. They are reluctant to share feedback, especially if it's negative. However, they don't mind opening their hearts in an online platform and sharing their pain points with us. Moreover, we never disclose the identity of the customers; they are assured they are in safe hands.

"Communicate with the SEWA chairman" is one of many extraordinary initiatives that serves as a bridge between the outer world and SEWA. In fact, there's even more to it. What makes this

initiative unique is that it paves the way for the community to contact me directly through our website. I want to learn the nature of the complaint first-hand so that it may be resolved quickly. Using this portal, our consumers can register their suggestions, queries, and grievances at the click of a button. Then, my proactive team follows up each and every query to ensure it is addressed within a designated timeline—usually under twenty-four hours.

I insist that SEWA employees tell customers the whole truth, even if the truth is bad news. This helps me to delight my customers, as well as crowdsource innovative ideas and translate them into services that deliver happiness and positivity at the highest level.

How Are We Doing?

The initiative was launched on May 31, 2016, and as of August 31, 2018, 2869 queries have been registered and 2701 have been resolved. The rest have been directed to the relevant department and will be resolved soon—hopefully before you finish reading this book!

Hong Gay Eu, director of Nuwater, Singapore said, “‘Communicate with the SEWA chairman’ Interface is unique for the one cardinal reason that usually CEOs run away from complaints. Here we have an unconventional chairman who openly welcomes complaints and other input.”

Be Engaged

I urge my readers to touch base with me using the ‘Communicate with the SEWA chairman’ Interface. Be engaged; reach out to me from any part of the world by giving your ideas, suggestions,

and views by visiting www.sewa.gov.ae. Let's collaborate. Let's co-create!

Customer Happiness Index

Most of us have good reason to be concerned with customer happiness. After all, no one wants to be connected with the bad guy. As a standard, our customer happiness index includes three core metrics that gauge overall happiness levels – satisfaction, loyalty, and propensity to recommend. They provide guidance on how to improve overall happiness by identifying specific behaviors that have the greatest impact and measuring performance against these.

Benchmarking

I really wanted to move the needle. To exceed customer expectations and keep smiles intact, we started holding workshops with customer-facing employees to ensure they understand customer expectations and are properly equipped. We used benchmarking techniques. The main objective of our benchmarking was finding examples of superior performance, and understanding the processes and practices driving that performance. We then improved our performance by tailoring and incorporating those best practices into our own operations—not by imitating, but by innovating. This also involved discovering what was the best performance being achieved—whether in a particular company, by a competitor, or by an entirely different industry.

The following section relates to a great example of our cross-industry benchmarking tactics. This time we chose the world's leading

online travel operator, Thomas Cook, to learn how they excelled in implementing CRM and reaped enormous benefits from it.

Thomas Cook

Thomas Cook wanted to establish direct relationships with its target audience and particularly non-existent customers. The travel operator was also keen to have more influence on its customers' online journeys and obtain a better understanding of their purchase lifecycle.

Thomas Cook launched a highly targeted lead generation campaign and travel survey to capture information on future buying intentions and specific customer requirements that have a bearing on their decision to buy. Furthermore, they started a nurture program of individualized text messaging to increase user engagement.

Once the nurture campaign ended, the survey data and responses were immediately fed into the Thomas Cook newsletter program to become part of the overall new CRM strategy.

The results achieved were just as successful from a Return on Investment (ROI) perspective. During the most recent campaign, more than 15,000 leads were collected and email engagement rates increased by more than 30%.

We learned a great deal from it. Next we zoomed in closer to benchmark with regional customer-centric success stories.

Smart Park Assist System

Speaking of exceptional experience, I am reminded of my recent visit to the Mall of Emirates, located in Dubai, UAE, where I had previously almost lost my car in the parking lot. This time the

experience was completely flipped, thanks to the new Smart Park Assist system they introduced. It saved my day!

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The mall came up with a bright new solution for frazzled shoppers. Using innovative technology, including M4 sensors and smart kiosks, Smart Park Assist lets shoppers find their cars in seconds, saving time and reducing stress for mallgoers. Mall visitors first need to enter their license plate number in one of the several kiosks installed around the parking lot. Smart Park Assist will then locate the car, take a photo of it, and display it on the kiosk screen so the visitor can confirm it is indeed their car. Once confirmed, a detailed map will show the car's exact location.

The time savings from Smart Park Assist boost people's happiness, resulting in a memorable experience.

2. Fit-For-Purpose Business Processes

Organizational complexity is the number one reason companies fail in their efforts to become customer-focused. I decided to inject cost-effectiveness, trimmed the extraneous long-hauling processes, and uprooted the clunky rules/regulations/policies. Simplifying things is a smart move. This can be achieved by strictly assigning critical success factors (CSF) for the organization's standard processes and ensuring continuous improvement.

Collective Effort

SEWA built linkages across its departments. The employees formed the SEWA Family Whatsapp group to stay connected and discuss initiatives. I am an active member in the group, sharing knowledge as well as solving customers' needs. I made it clear that employees at

every level in every division will also need to deeply understand customer needs in order to make the end-to-end customer experience streamlined and satisfying.

3. SEWA 24/7 Listening Center

One of the great ideas that reached us through the Communicate with SEWA Chairman Portal was that our customers wanted a round-the-clock service. The idea was immediately fleshed out and a toll-free number, 800 SEWA, came into existence for that purpose.

Our customers would call the listening centers when they needed information or there was a problem the center employees ended up knowing more of what was happening in the field than the field employees did.

Chief Listening Officer

I appointed the chief listening officer, Shareef, to facilitate the information exchange between customers and field employees, and keep his eye on the average handling time (AHT, the golden standard of the listening center's efficiency). I wanted to make it super easy for customers to reach me by email. I made some ground rules for SEWA, including that emails must be answered in 48 hours and telephone calls within four rings.

We created the listening center as part of SEWA's customer service pledge, and worked toward achieving the listening center's objectives and sustaining our theme. This allowed us to see through our ears. To ensure that the listening center functions seamlessly day in,

day out, the appointed chief listening officer lent a patient ear to all our customers with a resolution-mindset. He pays undivided attention to the customer complaints adhering to ISO 10002:2014 process of complaint-handling related to products and services within an organization, and manages the processes that help us handle customer complaints more effectively and efficiently. This ensures that more customers are satisfied with the service we provide.

A focus on customer service training and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of key metrics has resulted in a dramatic drop in complaints and calls to the center.

Seeing Through our Ears

Soon enough I renamed 800-SEWA, our around-the-clock toll-free call center, “listening center”. Through this call center, SEWA practices “seeing through our ears,” which means we not only see the customer’s issues superficially, but we also comprehend the root cause behind the issue. We follow the H-E-A-R-T principles to address any customer complaints.

- H-** Hear them out, listen attentively.
- E-** Empathize with the guest, ‘I can hear/see your pain.’
- A-** Apologize, ‘I am sorry you were disappointed.’
- R-** Respond to the problem, ‘What can I do to help?’
- T-** Thank them and take action immediately, ‘Thank you for taking the time to tell me about this.’

We created a unique checklist that helped us shape our pledge to customer service. It’s a five-step guide for being an active listener.

- 1. Pay Attention** - Acknowledge what the customers are saying.
- 2. Show You're Listening** - Use positive body language and friendly gestures.
- 3. Show You Understand** - Validate the customer's concerns/issues.
- 4. Don't Interrupt** - Don't curtail a customer who is talking with an untimely intrusion.
- 5. Respond** - Be open and honest in your response; treat the other person sensitively and appropriately.

Listening to Your Customers Matters

Michael Dell, founder of Dell Computers, once said that his organization's three golden rules are, "Disdain inventory, listen to customers, and never sell indirect." Critical among these is listening to the customer. It is important to emphasize here that, even in syndicates like Dell, listening closely to customers and responding to their needs and wants in real time is vital.

I designated my chief listening officer to meet face-to-face with global and large commercial customers regularly. We use various mechanisms to keep close contact with these customers and what they want by organizing events such as *SEWA Energy Meet*, *SEWA Bankers Meet*, *SEWA Partners Meet*, and *SEWA Business and Media Meet*.

Empathize With Customers

Addressing customer complaints is one of my top priorities. We delve deep into our customer's issues and empathize with them. My chief listening officer and the listening center team empathize by following some crisp steps:

a) Interview : Have thoughtful conversations with customer(s) and understand them through their stories.

b) Observe : The team should be a fly on the wall around the customer, carefully observing the customer's experience.

c) Immerse - Become a customer yourself by experiencing life in the customer's shoes. Immersion enables us to experience first-hand what it's like to be a user. It is an excellent method of identifying tacit feelings/needs.

Right from the outset, I had advised SEWA's chief listening officer to find out the prominent reasons for our customers' frustration. After a few weeks, he came to me with a long sulking face and an even longer customer frustration list.

Here are some reasons that topped the frustration list:

- Having to communicate with SEWA multiple times for the same reason.
- Long wait times both online and offline..
- Impolite customer representatives.
- Having customer representatives claim one thing and deliver another.

The list continued...

I realized that having only a chief listening officer would not suffice. To empathize with the customers I needed a host of well-armed and dedicated employees to eliminate the frustrations. I said to myself, *Rashid, be ready for a new full-time job.*

I decided to appoint a chief service officer as an aide to clear up the fog of disappointment in our customers' minds. I rang up my HR recruitment officer and asked him to line up an interview for the same. After days of scrutinizing potential candidates, I finally found one. Want to know more about him? Read on.

Chief Service Officer

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I appointed a resourceful, service-minded employee and designated him as chief service officer (CSO). The CSO is typically responsible for developing processes and tools, both internally and externally, to give all customers the maximum value through an intelligent and efficient use of resources. His top job was to understand and remediate the largest *root* causes of dissatisfaction and frustration among our customers. This typically involved identifying toxic service interactions and trouble- shooting them right away.

By now, we were listening to our customer's needs and wants. We were also solving customer friction, and had begun providing spectacular seamless services at every interaction and touchpoint.

Build your Business Around the Customer

During this phase, I had a meeting with my CSO to discuss the challenges he was facing in his new role. I could see a ray of sunshine break through the dark clouds of doubt. Now was the time to put customers at the center of our universe and move on to gain customer focus.

While I was in the frame of mind, I remembered what Michael Dell, the founder and CEO of Dell Computer Corporation, did when he faced a similar situation. He also knows the customer is king. Twice each year, he claims Platinum Council meetings, which are held in various regions around the world. In these meetings, upper management sits down with customers to learn about their needs, concerns, and visions for the future. All of this shared information helps Dell lead the company in directions that benefit customers.

Both the employee profit-sharing and incentive-compensation plans are tied to measurable customer satisfaction data.

4. Seamless, Integrated, Tailored Experience

In this 24/7 paradigm, how could we develop a much deeper understanding of the evolving customer—and make the right choices about how best to serve them? Accenture has the answers. Accenture research conducted a November 2015 survey that evaluated 15,000 customers across twenty countries. They identified that, first, companies should try to increase the desire for their product or service, and second, they should lessen the pain involved in getting it to the customer.

“Me First” Theory

I was quite amazed by the survey results. They shed light on the next generation customer’s minds. I felt it would be nice to share a glimpse of the survey results with the readers. The survey found that the always-on-non-stop customer demands the following:

Know me: Create the ability to really know the customers and communicate with them in a hyper-relevant manner across all touchpoints.

Inform me: Truly understand and provide the kind of information the customers are seeking at every step of their journey. Communicate with them with total transparency.

Make it easy and engaging for me: Reduce transactional friction and create engaging experiences that will drive loyalty.

Get it to me: Fulfill each customer's demands, whenever
| 70 | and however they want, with an economic model that supports the
organization's profitability targets.



Imperative 2

Customer Focus



When you're trying to make an important decision, and you're sort of divided on the issue, ask yourself: if the customer were here, what would they say?

—Dharmesh Shah, CTO of Hubspot

Free Advice

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Almost half a century ago, Mahatma Gandhi stated a fact that is still relevant today: “A customer is the most important visitor on our premises; he is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption in our work; he is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider in our business; he is a part of it. We are not doing him a favor by serving him. He is doing us a favor by giving us an opportunity to do so.”

As mentioned earlier, SEWA successfully qualified for four ISO certifications. This element of SEWA’s customer-centric model was in alignment with ISO 9001:2015, a quality management system that helps ensure customers get consistent quality products and services, which in turn brings many business benefits, which is underpinned by the eight principles of quality management. Just as you’d expect, customer focus is the first principle as it should be.

The second Key Strategic Imperative covers both customer needs and customer service. It stresses that a business should understand its customers, as well as what they need and when, while trying to meet, but preferably exceed expectations.

As a result, customer loyalty increases, revenue rises, and waste reduces as a business’s ability to spot new customer opportunities and satisfy them improves. More effective processes result in improved customer satisfaction and an organization orienting itself toward serving its clients’ needs and wants. Being customer-focused usually contributes strongly to a business’s overall success and ensures that the company put its customers’ satisfaction first.

Visible, Customer-Focused Leadership

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The reason for the outpouring of emotions around the world at Steve Jobs' death was that his products and customer expectations had touched people. Having clear leadership from the top that articulates what customer-centricity means to your business, and what it looks like in practice, is critical to creating a customer-centric organization. I did this by empowering top executives to own the customer journey, from initial contact through final resolution. I advised them to keep challenging themselves with the question, Am I both engaged and engaging in providing delightful experiences?

I wanted employees to go above and beyond the call of duty, and solve problems; I wanted quality service to be the standard call of duty.

I wanted to leave no stone unturned. As is evident, our customer base was a mixed bag. Some would prefer to pay their bills online, whereas some would physically drive miles to lodge a complaint. There was a huge bracket of suppliers, partners, vendors, etc., who would pay us (surprise) visits quite often. Providing a unique experience to these diversified customers was grueling.

Telephone

I wished my customers would abstain from playing the game telephone. Does this remind you of your kid's last birthday celebration, where one person whispered a message to the person next to them and the story was passed progressively to several others, with inaccuracies accumulating as the game went on? The point of the game is the amusement of hearing the final player's describe what they

heard, which typically is nothing like the original. I call this amusing game an everyday ‘mis- telling’ of stories. This happens when customers are unhappy or frustrated and they share their grievances with others; the other person spices the story up to make it more palatable and tells it to the next person, and so on and so forth. The final version that goes viral bears no relation to the original message.

At SEWA, we have a marvelous practice of awarding Bravo cards to our peers. A Bravo card is a unique symbol of appreciation for colleagues; it can be given to anyone by anyone, irrespective of their position.

Priya, the head of the SEWA registration department, awarded a Bravo card to a loyal Emirati national who had been working and took a couple of pictures with the gentleman. Happy ending, right?

Not really. The moment Priya shared the pictures, they went viral in the city, making the rounds on all the social media sites and garnering only negative responses. People began to troll her, saying that an expatriate was bidding farewell to a local who has dedicated his whole life to serving SEWA. The rumor caught fire when people started commenting on the picture that it’s disrespectful for a senior local employee to be given a farewell tribute by an expatriate.

I never knew that a humble gesture of thanking colleagues could be so wildly misinterpreted and turned into such an unsavory incident. This was the height of the telephone game at work.

While I had little or no control over the telephone game at work or among customers, I decided to divert my energy towards something else that was unsettling me: my customer complaint management system. To solve the problem, I made customer complaint management a systematic process with tangible results—the hard dollar value. I adopted the “hug your haters” philosophy.

Hug your Haters

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If there is one company in the world that epitomizes the philosophy and lessons of “hug your haters,” it’s KLM, the official national airline of the Netherlands.

Compared to airlines in the United States, KLM’s home market is quite small. A major reason KLM has been successful is that they differentiate their brand with customer service. In social media alone (not counting telephone and email support), as of this writing, KLM has 150 employees answering questions and addressing complaints twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, in fourteen languages.

KLM’s journey to being a customer service powerhouse was triggered not by a strategic planning session or executive decree, but by a volcano.

In 2010, a massive eruption of Iceland’s Eyjafjallajökull volcano caused the cancellation of 107,000 flights over an eight-day period, impacting the travel plans of approximately 10 million passengers. As Karlijn Vogel-Meijer, formerly global director of social media at KLM, recalls, it was chaos. “Suddenly, there was a flood of questions coming in from people asking us, ‘I need to go to my wedding? I’m not able to get out of Netherlands. I’m not able to get out of wherever.’”

She remembers it clearly: “There was this specific moment where an employee went into the office of our vice president of e-commerce at the time and said, ‘Listen, we can either pretend the questions are not coming or we can start answering. But be aware, if we start, there won’t be any way back.’ And our vice president said, ‘Answer them all.’”

“There were hundreds of people from all over KLM at tables with their laptops, answering questions from customers, and that was the start of our social media service program,” Vogel-Meijer recalls.

Reading this excerpt made me realize the importance of hiring a chief customer officer. I chose someone who had the patience and the disposition of a beloved primary school teacher. She had the capacity to absorb the heat from people and stay calm in the eye of the storm.

Chief Customer Officer

I appointed a chief customer officer (CCO) to be responsible for maintaining a cordial relationship with our customers. Though this position is relatively new in this part of the world, I introduced it to provide a single vision across all methods of customer contact and to wow our customers with service excellence.

The CCO was in charge of managing the walk-in customers. As for the irate and angry customers, we had appointed a chief listening officer who had mastered the art of informal water-cooler conversations, resolved customer pain-points, and communicated with the SEWA chairman about serving digital customers. That is what I call the real deal in showcasing customer-focused leadership.

Shared Learning

Shared learnings include new information, insights, knowledge, lessons learned from past experiences, and best practices that have been benchmarked.

At SEWA, we define shared learning as the ability to capture, store, transfer, and use our knowledge and effective practices across SEWA to accelerate improvement. Stated more simply, it is connecting people who have knowledge with people who need it.

Undoubtedly, the responsibilities of the SEWA CCO were challenging. I remember sharing an interesting story with her that would help her achieve better results, but only if she could gauge what to do and what not to do. | 77 |

I have summarized the story below.

Tesco Challenge

Back in March, 2016, according to a newspaper article from the *Guardian*, Tesco had issued its fifth profit warning and share prices plunged (down 16%): Tesco was on the floor. Why does this matter? Why is it worth me writing about? Let's go back a little.

In the early 2000s, Tesco was lauded by many, including customer-centricity gurus, the 1:1 marketing gurus, the data mining and predictive analytics players, and customer loyalty program vendors. Tesco was the exemplar of harnessing customer data through a loyalty program (Tesco clubcard), using data mining and predictive analytics to generate insights and doing database driven marketing based on these insights. In the process Tesco went from being just one player among UK grocery retailers to being the dominant retailer. At one point it looked like there would be no stopping Tesco.

Today Tesco is on the floor. Why? Because Tesco's management ended up doing what management teams do exploiting customers to extract surplus profits for the top executive and shareholders. I think some wise person said something like, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

We can learn a lot from Tesco if we are grappling with the challenge of shifting a business toward a customer-centric orientation. We know not to base our business on using data/insight

to exploit customers, but to use data/insights to generate superior value (product, proposition, customer experience) for the customers.

It's Done ... Now, Tell Me What's Your Concern?

As a customer-focused leader, I was convinced that to meet the demands of prosumers, we have to be proactive, which meant inspiring my employees to want to serve. Many times, without hesitation, I have reached out to a dissatisfied customer, used the Arabic sense of humanity, and said, "It's done...now, tell me what your concern is?" This magic line immediately spreads smiles and eases tensions.

I realized this gesture also helped to shape our brand's image. Since then, I have continued to personally intervene to make sure the needs of the customers and prosumers are surpassed each and every day.



Imperative 3

Customer Experience



Budgets, contracts, meetings, reports, and the never-ending things that eat up your time are of no value unless they end up producing a happy, delighted customer.

—Dr. Rashid Alleem

New Mindset. New Paradigm

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Great customer experience needs to be laid into the company's keel. It should be an essential element of the go-to market strategy. The customer experience needs to be positive at all points of contact along the way, with consistency, every single time! In so doing, you have a brand that lives and grows *emotionally* with people.

Our exceptional customer experience pillar was built on two fundamentals:

- 1) the late Steve Jobs' customer experience philosophy and,
- 2) Disney's I.C.A.R.E model.

Jobs' Customer Experience Philosophy

Where other industry leaders idealized a hard business head as the key to success, Jobs insisted on demonstrating the superiority of passion, taste, and belief. With this value system, Jobs engaged everyone whose lives were touched by Apple, from his senior leadership to his customers. Below is a glimpse of his philosophy.

Jobs wanted to live every detail of the customer experience. He'd say to the development team, "Okay, I am the product. What's happening to me when the buyer tries to take me out of the box and start me up?" He was detail oriented and constantly discovering imperfections in everything. For him, success was in the details.

Create great experiences : Jobs was (mostly) a lateral thinker. However, lateral thinking is best suited for those knotty problems that serve up Catch-22 situations (you can't get X unless you first get Y, but you can't get Y unless you get X first) This is when you stop examining the alternative solutions and start examining the problem itself. Jobs believed that lateral thinkers don't wear blinkers.

Jobs' ability to focus on details was one of the most crucial aspects of his success and the success of his products.

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Taking a cue from Steve Jobs' innovation secrets, we innovated the customer experience by benchmarking the very best model for customer service.

Jobs didn't look at his competitors; he had a larger vision of what a consumer experience should look like in a retail store selling computers. He out-did his competitors by deciding on a blue ocean strategy, which is what I also use in my professional life. Sometimes we tend to make decision-making much harder than it needs to be because we are clinging to pre-conceived ideas. Such ideas are incredibly difficult to uproot, like old habits that die hard. Instead, the best move often may be to widen our range of options. We can do so by clicking on the drop-down menu in our mind and examining whether there are options we may have overlooked.

Rather than haggling with competitors, why not create a competitive advantage? SEWA did it by creating a fantastic customer experience for every customer every time.

Disney's I.C.A.R.E Model

I read the book titled *The Experience* long ago. Back then, the book enthused me in many ways (and it continues to do so) simply because it unravels the puissant ways for any organization to become customer oriented. I immediately rushed towards my bookshelf, looking for it among my hundreds of books; it felt like I was on a treasure hunt searching for gold. After a while, I tracked down the book. "Bingo! I found you. I cared about you over the years, now you care about me," I said.

I stayed up the entire night reading. The book gave me a formula as a guideline to help me to create better customer service. I.C.A.R.E

is my second customer experience pillar adapted from the book *The Experience*, by Bruce Loeffler and Brian T. Church:

Impression: The first and the last imprint on people's mind; this is the catalyst to building a great relationship.

Connection: The pivotal point between contact and relationship. Striking the right chord to convert clients and customers from consumers to ambassadors (those on a mission to tell the world specifically about you). All this rests on the ability to create a deep/intellectual, emotional, and personal connection.

Attitude: The lens through which you see the world. It's the outlet of the outer expression of your inner feelings. It's the manifesto of everything you think, say, and eventually do.

Response: The hallmark of customer service and an exceptional experience is the response. The motto of service is to respond and not react. The crux lies in the response time, tone, and talent.

Exceptional: The management team and employees must be prepared, empowered, and endowed to have the exceptional experience living and breathing within them.

The Customer as Me, Me as the Customer

Jobs' philosophy and Disney's I.C.A.R.E model can rev up even customer service laggards. When I applied I.C.A.R.E at SEWA, the outcomes were extraordinary and full of new opportunities. The main idea was to offer the highest level customer experience possible, thus creating brand ambassadors for SEWA. If you make this a focus for your organization, you are one step closer to creating a dynamic, focused, and practical solution to what most companies are missing today: an exceptional experience.

Small Change, Big Result

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Do you want to know how important listening to your customer is? Disney is a classic example here. Disney wants all of its customers to leave as happy as they arrived. They were facing a problem; they realized that some visitors were unable to locate their car in such a large parking lot. Disney set out to efficiently and effectively solve this growing problem. We all know how frustrating it can be when we are unable to locate our cars after a day of fun in the sun, to such an extent that it can dampen our day's experience. Disney wanted to ensure that our memorable stay at their theme park remains just that, so they created a chronological system that works based on one's arrival time, which determines the lot you park your car in. So, if you're lost in their massive parking lot, simply call for help from the many conspicuously-attired Disney staff. Tell them when you arrived at the park and you'll be at your car in no time. Disney understands that the total customer brand experience needs to be positive at every stage.

To claim your place in your customers' hearts, you must ensure their experience has the wow factor.

Customer Experience Lab

A customer experience lab (also referred to as a customer room) is a way for members of the organization to better understand the customer experience. Whether this happens monthly, quarterly, or annually, it's one of the most robust and direct ways for a company to see what their customers go through to interact with them. Not only does it engage leaders, but it also unifies their decision-making and creates an accountability forum.

I have been fascinated by this idea for quite some time. And customer experience labs have become *en vogue* in the last couple of years. In the field of gaining insights into customer's tastes and preferences, one organization that caught my attention was IBM, nicknamed the "Big Blue".

IBM was among the first large brands to open a customer experience lab, which had three major goals:

1) Enhanced customer insight to better predict individual customer behavior across multiple channels. **2) Customer engagement** to personalize the experience and avoid delivering a one-size-fits-all Customer Experience (CX) to consumers during a time of increased personalization; and **3) Employee engagement**, which was essentially, greater employee involvement in defining and re-imagining different customer touchpoints.

On the weekends, I read my weekly copy of marketing magazine. I remembered coming upon a piece that spoke to this point. The key point the article made was that brands were spending millions on the above-the-line marketing but failing when it came to customer satisfaction.

One of the paragraphs jumped out at me, because I have experienced it as a truth and so have many others:

"The research reveals that even for product-driven companies, consumer comments are almost always focused on service. This means that the more inferior the service a brand offers, the lower the satisfaction score they are likely to get. As the saying goes, sales heaps but service reaps."

Customer Experience Inspectors

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How about hiring a customer experience inspector? I asked myself. There are many reasons customer experience inspectors (CXI) are in demand these days. Twenty years ago, the customer experience inspector position was rare, unheard-of, and easily dismissed. Now the position is indispensable. Typically, a CXI works with other chief executives and aligns leadership across the company on customer values, priorities, and goals. They serve as the voice of the customer and as agents of change; they work across departments to prioritize initiatives that reduce any pain points customers encounter.

As I write this page, I am proud to share a recent initiative by the Emirates Airline. They appointed a chief experience inspector on each of their flights. This person travels like any passenger would and sees the journey from a customer's eyes.

The Emirates experience inspectors are empowered to question or pin point the service quality of the on-flight crew members. They prepare a report on the shortcomings and councils about the customers' moments of truth, moments of magic, as well as moments of misery.

SEWA Customer Experience Inspectors

Peter Drucker said, "The purpose of a business is to create a customer." Recently, however, Shiv Singh, VP at Razorfish, added to that definition by stating, "The purpose of a business is to create a customer... who creates customers." Clever, right?

I put this definition on the walls of my customer experience help desk, formerly known as the telephone room or operator room.

I intentionally renamed the room the customer experience helpdesk and handpicked existing employees to answer the inbound calls. Yes, you guessed it right. I gave them a unique and more apt job title: customer experience inspectors.

My advice to them has always been the same. I believe that customer inspectors need to have a good memory, be empathizing, and have good note-taking skills. They also need to be committed, reliable, and impartial; meet deadlines; stick to a script; and show enthusiasm.

Rational and Emotional Customer

Customer experience engages both sides of the brain; humans are both emotional and rational. We want good value and efficiency, but we also want to like and trust the companies we patronize. We want to feel good about ourselves when we do business with them. We'll put up with a less than perfect service if we feel that the people we're dealing with care about us, are trying hard, and will get there in the end.

SEWA had to deal with the rational and the emotional customers, and we knew the importance of satisfying both. Quite a task!

Guestology

To tackle this mixed bag of customers and provide my listening center staff a direction to handle these customers proficiently, I asked my chief customer officer, Mariam, to conduct a workshop with the team on Disney's Guestology (Disney's philosophy of

customer service) Compass Model. Disney's customer service is the gold standard for every business. In SEWA's case, the Disney's Guestology compass model showed the following:

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North / Needs: what the customer is looking to get out of the experience. Some needs are stated, but it is important to understand that many are not. For example, "I need to pay my electricity bill" might be one need.

West / Wants: the underlying objective or purpose of SEWA customers, whether stated, unstated, or perhaps not even fully recognized by them. For example, "I want a positive and seamless experience from SEWA's billing office that leaves me feeling good, relaxed, and in a positive mindset to go home."

South / Stereotypes: preconceived notions, whether positive or negative, that customers have about the SEWA experience. A customer might believe there will be a long line at the customer billing counter, or that the SEWA Customer Care & Billing (CC&B) software will not recognize their details.

East / Emotions: customers have these or are likely to experience them. For example, "I feel rushed and annoyed that this is so hard to deal with. I am exhausted by waiting on line for so long."

A Good Listener

The above workshop helped us to understand different types of customers. In fact, one fine day, my chief listening officer rushed to my office with some documents in his hand. His big smile and bright eyes hinted that he had great news. While handing over the documents to me, he said, "The points of the Disney compass helped me plan a customer-satisfaction program by identifying the emotional mindsets, wishes, and needs of our customers. I need your approval to implement the plan."

I quickly glanced through the plan and approved it immediately.
| 88 | Before he could utter a word, I said, “Go and bring your plan to life.
You can thank me later.”



Imperative 4

Customer Excellence



The companies that survive longest are the ones that work out what they uniquely can give to the world—not just growth or money but their excellence, their respect for others, or their ability to make people happy. Some call those things a soul.

—Charles Handy

My definition of customer excellence is 100% customer satisfaction, 100% of the time. We can never truly say that we have achieved excellence because it's a journey, *not* a destination. The journey clearly requires a great deal of commitment on our behalf, but also from those who work with and for us. The starting point in this attempt to rise above the norm is to demonstrate a real long-term commitment, and leadership to that aim. I am in!

Beyond Watch-out Mode

At this stage, it would be fair enough to say that a sizeable chunk of SEWA customers were still apprehensive to engage with us. They were in “watch-out mode,” overseeing our activities from a safe distance, reluctant to plunge in wholeheartedly because of their earlier painful experiences, which made them cautious very cautious as their ideas were utterly rejected and they got “hand-slapped” so to speak. I wanted to engage my customers and move them from watch-out mode so they could immerse themselves with us and join the crowd.

Demand-Driven

Just how did McDonald's know that it was time to introduce salads and keep their stores open 24? How did Apple know that consumers wanted “an intelligent, on-the-go personal assistant” (Siri) to assist in anything and everything a phone can do? The simple answer is that each of these companies deeply understood the facts, the content, and the economics of what consumers demanded.

SEWA is similar. We drilled down and peeled off the layers of customer demand. We know that not all customers are equal.

The challenge was to transition from the existing traditional model to one that delivers what customers want and knows the customers' needs better than anyone else. This started with a thought-provoking question: What do customers want? The answer is in the Five Fs of Customer motivation.

- 1. Functions:** How does the product or service meet their needs?
- 2. Finance:** How will the purchase affect their overall financial situation not just the price of the product or service, but also other savings?
- 3. Freedom:** How convenient is it to purchase and use the product or service?
- 4. Feelings:** How does the product or service make customers feel about themselves, and how does it affect and relate to their self-image?
- 5. Future:** How will they deal with the product or service and company over time, whether support and service will be available?

Customers, of course, want benefits in all these areas, so we better be aware of how our product or service fulfills the entire range of their needs. However, we need to remember that business, like life, has trade-offs, and we are not going to be able to do everything. We have to figure out the areas where our product and service excel—and that most motivate our customers—and concentrate on those.

I was immensely inspired by Henry Ford's vision for his cars. Money and profits were never his motivators. Ford's cars dramatically changed American society because Ford was able to build reliable cars he could sell inexpensively.

Ford said, "I will build a motor car for the great multitude. It will be large enough for the family but small enough for the individual to run and care for. It will be constructed of the best materials, by the

best workers available, after the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise. But it will be so low in price that no man making a good salary would be unable to own one—and enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God’s great open spaces.”

The Energizer Pyramid

Abraham Maslow created his hierarchy of needs from basic to aspirational. However, I came across a better way of looking at this: rational to emotional, essential to energizing. Peter Fisk, a customer experience expert, attempted to parallel Maslow’s pyramid with a customer needs pyramid. The outcome was the Energizer Pyramid.

The Energizer Pyramid interprets customer needs and the benefits we offer.

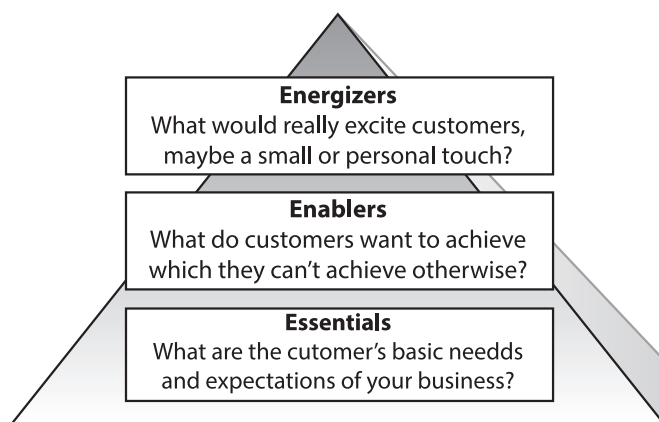


Figure 3.2 The Energizer Pyramid

“Essentials” are what customers expect us to provide. We make sure we deliver them every time, but we can differentiate and engage people in other ways.

“Enablers” are what we enable people to do that they couldn’t do otherwise. They are more about the application and use of the products and services.

“Energizers” might be small but emotionally important factors— aesthetic design, service style, little extras that people love, and tell their friends about.

Customers come with different missions and motivations. They differ in how valuable they are to you and how valuable you are to them. The above pyramid helped us a great deal. Primarily, it helped us to classify our customers into six broad categories: Major, Regular, Ad-hoc, One-off, Digital, and Abusive customers.

1. **Major Customers:** We treat them like royalty. (We give them exceptional service or what I like to call “the red carpet treatment.”)
2. **Regular Customers:** We make sure they get good service and take note of anything they say about our business. We call them VIP customers.
3. **Ad-hoc Customers:** These customers buy from us every now and then. We mustn’t give them that much special treatment.
4. **One-off Customers:** These are people who have bought only *once* and are unlikely to buy from us again. We don’t recommend spending much time on them.
5. **Digital Customers:** We don’t know who they are, but they pop up from time to time. They are (mostly) impatient and demanding. They surface only when they are worried about a blackout or emergency interruption to their electricity or water supply. However, they are quite informed and easily pleased if treated tactfully.
6. **Abusive Customers:** They are the nasty and notorious ones. They are the ones who go beyond angry to abusive, making life miserable for the entire listening center team. Just let them go and ignore them. I call them “red tape customers.”

You might be surprised to see “abusive customers” on our list. McDonald’s is a good example of how to deal with abusive customers tactfully. Here’s what I witnessed first-hand at a McDonald’s in Singapore on a notice board addressed to abusive customers.

Dear Customers,

We believe in fostering gracious behavior in our restaurants and creating a pleasant environment for both our guests and staff. Please treat our staff with respect and dignity. McDonald’s reserves the right not to serve abusive customers.

That’s a crystal-clear message to all those notoriously abusive customers who throw tantrums at the drop of a hat.

No Excuse for Abuse

I believe companies must find the right combination of management style, employee treatment, and motivation to ensure the greatest levels of productivity. Keeping employees engaged isn’t always simple. And respect is one of those foundational puzzle pieces that make all the other pieces easier to fit. Without it, it’s hard for employees to stay upbeat for long. Respect is one of those subtle lubricants that keep the engine of management running smoothly.

Here’s another example of a company that went that extra mile to show respect toward its employees. During a recent business visit to the United Kingdom, while I was queuing up for my immigration check, even before reaching the Border Force officer, I spotted a placard in the Heathrow airport that had an amazing message for the passengers.

Thank You for treating our
Officers with respect
It is a criminal offence to verbally or physically abuse Border
Force Officers

Who Is Your Right Customer?

“The customer is always right” is a controversial phrase. Regardless of its origin, it is extremely well-worn. A customer who does not understand my value proposition, or care about my time and energy is the wrong customer for me.

“The *right* customer is always right” is the strategy. The right customer is the one you are targeting not the other way around. They are the one you have proactively designed your services for in a sustainable, repeatable, and profitable way: The SEWA Way.

XEROX: Six Steps to Quality Improvement

Excellence is a process and not a one-time event. To close the gaps in our business processes, we imitated and innovated from the best practices of other trend-setting organizations. For example, realizing that SEWA lacked a well-defined process for designing new products and services, I directly implemented the XEROX Corporation’s six-step approach to quality improvement.

Step 1: Recognize the need/gap

Listen closely and seek understanding. Make time in your schedule for the steps required to fully understand and prepare for making

an improvement. Don't wait. There's nothing to be gained from a magic date or milestone. Continuous improvement is worthy of pursuit at any time.

Step 2: Consider our options

Start exploring the benefits of making a change. Why do it? What barriers would prevent your success? What assistance would help overcome potential obstacles?

Step 3: Gain insight

Start small and you'll uncover new insights into the challenges ahead. This new information gives you an even deeper understanding of the problem and its barriers. Armed with this knowledge you'll be better positioned to gather the resources and support you'll need for success.

Step 4: Take action

Define your goal in specifics. Include rewards to reenergize the steps along the way. Create a support system to help you work through unexpected challenges and cheer incremental success. Make a list of motivating statements to help you maintain focus and reaffirm the importance of your goal.

Step 5: Make it a habit

Try to create situations conducive to your new behavior. Plan to track your progress, especially during the first month of change. It will help you keep your goal in mind. Integrate time to track or acknowledge your goal as a daily action item or as part of your project/time management process.

Step 6: Overcome setbacks

Failure is inevitable. Psychologist Joyce Brothers observed, "The person interested in success has to learn to view failure as a healthy, inevitable part of the process of getting to the top." Don't spend too much time beating yourself up over it. Just regroup and try to understand ways to avoid repeating the slip. If you've followed the previous five steps carefully, you will get back on the path to success.

Sunday Is Review Day

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Sunday is the first working day of the week in the UAE. The SEWA executive team holds regular Sunday meetings to keep an eye on the KPIs, customer satisfaction index, the factors affecting our top and bottom line, the brand engagement, and etc.

I chose Sunday, because we are at our most rejuvenated mental state on that day. As the weekdays pass, our mind slows down and our body becomes cumbersome. Winners begin early, right? As they say, lose an hour in the morning, and you'll spend all day hunting for it.

SEWA Customer Happiness Center

SEWA opened a sophisticated new world-class happiness center to suit its customers' aspirations and enhance their level of satisfaction. It is designed to receive clients/customers in a relaxed atmosphere, away from the long lines. The employees at the center receive customers with a smile and make an effort to meet their needs. The center also has a library containing useful books in different languages and a self-service kitchen with refreshments and beverages.

The most rewarding thing for me is when I see customer-facing employees embrace the culture of customer experience. These are individuals who might have previously felt uninvolved in SEWA's greater business strategy and believed that they personally could not make a difference. Once they are engaged, they see how impactful their role can be and that they truly are a vital part of growing SEWA, driving revenue and maintaining their unique culture.

Who Comes First

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Johnson & Johnson declares that customers come first, employees come second, and this will give the investors the best results. However, the Marriot Hotel chain puts the order slightly differently. “We first hire and train the best employees. If the employees are happy, they will serve the customers enthusiastically and competently. Then the customers will come back to our hotels. This will produce the most profits for the investors.” Not surprisingly, Hal Rosenbluth, who heads a large travel agency, picks up the same theme in his book bearing the provocative title *The Customer Comes Second*.

Employees First

The reader may be wondering whether I have a half-baked knowledge of customer-centricity. What about the internal customers? The employees! Well, I take pride in the fact that I take the mental well-being and contentment of my employees seriously. As a matter of fact, that’s the mettle I am made of. I can’t see people around me frowning and unhappy.

A great culture is defined by its ability to work equally well for customers and staff. And that demands a specific type of leadership, what business people call service leadership. Service leadership is about respecting and trusting employees. Service leadership is about being a strong advocate for the customers and employees.

Everyone is a Customer

Another aspect of service leadership is never being satisfied with the status quo. Service leadership demands constant focus on finding a better way to serve both customers and employees.

Let me share with you a story about “Poka- Yoke,” which is Japanese for “avoid mistakes.” Japanese manufacturing guru Shigeo Shingo introduced clever techniques making production “idiot-proof” into the Toyota production line. Shingo looked for the simplest, cheapest, and surest way to eliminate foreseeable process errors. One of the plant’s employees burst into tears. “I am not an idiot!” she cried. A stricken Shingo quickly scrapped “idiot-proof” in favor of declaring his initiatives essential to making assembly lines “mistake-proof.” Genius.

Organizations focus primarily on their external customers, such as partners, clients, profit-making consumers, and other stakeholders. The employees are the last concern! At SEWA, we do it inside out. Employee happiness has secured the top position on my agenda since I joined SEWA; I also introduced monthly gathering and progress meetings from the outset.

Net Promoter Flywheel

I wanted to create the right conditions for my employees to have the responsibility and accountability for creating more promoters among customers. This stimulated “micro- innovations” in which my employees experimented with new approaches to creating promoters among customers.

I adapted an advanced way to move beyond simply calculating a Net Promoter score. Bain and Co. call this the “Promoter Flywheel.” In engineering terms, a flywheel is a heavy disc or wheel used to dampen variation in the speed of an engine and maintain forward momentum when the engine’s force is at its lowest or could even run in the wrong direction. In the Promoter Flywheel, companies store goodwill (energy) in the form of promoters among both customers and employees. When the inevitable mistake happens, promoters keep the loyalty engine of the company moving in a positive direction, protecting the company’s interests. They defend

the company against the accusations of detractors (or competitors), and they suggest ways to improve the situation.

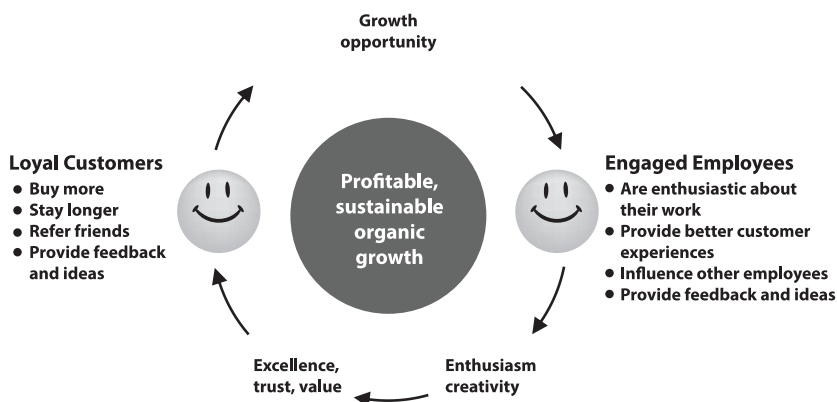


Figure 3.3 The Promoter flywheel

Don't Punish

We don't believe in punishment when things don't turn out so well; we never track down who was at fault and scream out at them. We find out the mistake happened, and improve our systems to cut down on that type of mistake happening again.

But of course it's a big deal if we make same mistake twice.

I believe every employee is a brand ambassador and an advocate anywhere, anytime. I always teach that. This is what I repeatedly tell my employees: "If I run a chain of department stores, my cashiers are critical brand ambassadors."

Therefore, to become a holistic customer-centric organization, my next great initiative was appointing a chief happiness officer.

Chief Happiness Officer

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Here's an old adage that inspires me: "Words are cheap; deeds are dear." I walk the talk and deliver on my commitments. I didn't take on a customer happiness officer (CHO) to win a bizarre competition to become the happiest company on Earth. I created this role to become as productive as possible. Our CHO was chosen from the HR department; in fact, he was our very own Saeed Al Qaseer, the HR manager the one who is closest to everyone. He busied himself with diagnosing the emotional well-being of SEWA employees and adjusting workplace policy and culture in order to create the conditions for happiness. This involves distributing surveys that measure satisfaction, leading workshops on everything from communication skills to mindfulness meditation, and generally diagnosing the office atmosphere.

SEWA Happiness Mailbox

Another notable initiative is the SEWA Happiness Mailbox. This great initiative deserves an elaborate description. Employee engagement and contentment are at the heart of SEWA's strategy and vision. They say that employees are a company's greatest asset, but I believe that's only true if the employees are actively engaged. To ensure just that, at every monthly employee gathering, the Chief Happiness Officer nominates an SEWA employee, from any department, who has actively spread happiness and positivity, which thus enhances employee engagement.

This SEWA practice is close to my heart because engaged employees do meaningful work and have a clear understanding of how they can contribute to the company's mission, purpose, and strategic

objectives. I personally hand over the key of happiness to the nominated employee, who opens up the happiness mailbox containing some cash coupons, gift vouchers and goody bags. This is one of the most-loved initiatives that works wonders to put a smile on employees' faces and guide them towards a standard of excellence.

SEWA Lunch and Learn

SEWA Lunch and Learn focuses on one of the most important aspects of our company: the people.

It helps with transparency and understanding:

“Even though we all work together, we’re on different teams and we might not know what everyone is working on all the time,” my chief knowledge officer once said. This happens frequently at companies of all different sizes; you might understand what projects your team is working on, but not know the team across the office. SEWA Lunch and Learns serve as a platform for teams to explain their responsibilities. When we understand what everyone does on a day-to-day basis, we have a new appreciation for each employee at our company and understand where they fit.

It builds community: At SEWA, our Lunch and Learns aren’t about work they’re about people. They give everyone a chance to showcase their outside projects, interests, and who they are as a person.

It fosters learning and growth: “You never know what can happen when you start bouncing ideas around with people you don’t normally work with,” said Kati Curri, Bitly’s office manager. An environment where people are encouraged to learn also encourages them to grow their technical or interpersonal skills. “A lot of people here will have the opportunity in the future to speak about

what they know at conferences or events,” Katie added. “Lunch and Learn can give those who aren’t as comfortable speaking in front of people a chance to do that.” |103|



Imperative 5

Customer Engagement



*The more you engage with customers the clearer things become
and the easier it is to determine what you should be doing.*

—John Russel

To create an exceptional relationship with SEWA's customers, I was determined to make SEWA a place where customers experience second-to-none service. As traditional marketing methods became less effective, customer engagement became the new currency by which SEWA aimed to measure its effectiveness.

The internet is replete with multiple definitions of customer engagement that explain various strategies and models/frameworks for successfully encouraging customer engagement. I'll share an explanation that rings true to me. Simply stated, customer engagement is the depth of the relationship a customer has with a brand.

Engage All Six Senses

I can recall walking the floors and repeating this sentence to all my customer-facing employees, "Services are external to the customers, and experiences are inherently personal, existing only in the minds of individuals who have been engaged on an emotional, intellectual, or even spiritual level. So, strive to engage all six senses."

To literally engage all the six senses of our customers, I planned to conduct a quick one-on-one meeting with my customer-centric officers at my personal office. It may have sounded unbelievable to them, but I proved that we can truly engage the sight, sound, touch, smell, taste, and intuition factors of a customer's overall experience.

Sight: This is vital because about 70% of our body's sense receptors are located in our eyes. It's about targeting the visual means of customer connection. The interesting and colorful SEWA business models that decorated our walls were perfect for our customers, who were visual enthusiasts. The bright and eye-pleasing colors created memory links that would last for years to come, leaving an indelible mark on those prone to "perceptual blindness."

Sound: Connecting with people who prefer an auditory experience, I installed a high-quality sound system to play calm, mood-enhancing music at all customer touchpoints. To keep everything upbeat and positive, I encouraged my customer-centric officers and their teams to avoid chatting on the phone or discussing frowned-upon topics nearby customers.

Smell: Studies have shown that scent affects mood. Since the sense of smell is instrumental for the overall experience, we diffused the entire SEWA premises with pleasant air neutralizers, so the open, cross-ventilated offices always smell fresh and invigorating.

Taste: By taste, I mean the aftertaste left behind in a customer's mind once they visit SEWA. It's the flavor of experience that lingers on, creating a lasting impression. This fusion, between the initial impression of SEWA and a response, is what the word taste refers to.

Touch: If dealt with tactfully, this point of contact can do wonders. It's about touching the right chord of the customer's rational and emotional mind. A good customer experience can even touch their soul, and going that extra mile to serve them really helps. I advised my officer to find a sweet spot between the two.

Braille for Customers

Besides the emotional touch, SEWA takes care of visually impaired, handicapped, physically challenged people, also known in UAE as "People of Determination," by making their visit special and hassle-free. I am proud to share that we are the first utility in the Arab world to create an energy conservation braille book for the blind and visually impaired who cannot access print materials. The book is about conservation awareness and tips about saving energy and water.

All our buildings and happiness centers are green buildings with easy accessibility for handicapped and disabled people. They have a special fast-track service for them, besides wheelchair and easy commuting of design and building. |107|

And, now the sixth sense.

Intuition: By engaging all the five senses, we reach the sixth—intuition. This takes time and requires immense patience as intuition is aroused in the mind. As I recommended to my officers, “Unless you are successful with the five senses, you would get nowhere near the sixth one, so give it your best shot right from the start.” At this level, you become more aware, which helps to improve relationships and galvanize collaboration.

720-Degree View

I wrapped up the meeting with my C-suite officers by saying, “See, I proved Galileo wrong. The customer is the center of the universe, not the sun. In fact, the thing is, a customer is never out of warranty, even if his product is. Let’s shift from just in time to lifetime value. We should think about customer-relationship as an always-on engagement rather than a point in time interaction. Start focusing on lifetime, all the time. We need a 720-degree view of each of our customer.”

Immediately, my voice of customer (VOC) officer asked, “I thought a 360-degree view of the customer would do us enough good. You have something beyond that?”

Amused, I answered, “Sure, it’s a whole new dimension. Let me explain. To really know our customer, we need a complete view of that customer across all dimensions. A 360-degree view will only tell us about variables like billing and consumption habits, social

conversations and consumption history. To make that knowledge actionable, to drive more interaction and strengthen the loyalty of each customer, you need a 720-degree view, where the ‘second lap’ around the customer experience is all about what we do on a daily basis with the insights generated.”

Too often, organizations devote most of their energy to gathering customer data, but spend too little time actually applying what they learn to the day-to-day processes that drive incrementally better decision making. Only with that 720-degree view can we make more effective decisions around how products, prices, and promotions influence an individual’s buying behavior.

“Can you tell us about an organization that views its customers in 720-degree panorama?” the VOC officer asked again.

I smiled. “Mercedes conducted a focus group to test U.S consumers’ interest in Mercedes’ new Smart Car, a diminutive but stylish car that is a hit in Europe. The participants were largely skeptical, saying that the car looked unsafe, was too expensive, and perhaps might be considered only if they needed a third car for short shopping trips. After hearing this from several focus groups, Mercedes decided not to introduce the car in the United States. The company paid heed to the consumer’s needs, views, attitudes, and likely behavior.”

My Chief Listening Officer replied, “That means we have to move from story-telling, i.e. creating ads, to story-building, i.e. creating experiences. Placing the customer at the center of the story, reassigning customers from the role of audience to the role of a protagonist. It is *their* journey that matters.”

“Exactly. Well said,” I replied. “To execute this special job I will bring a new member to this team soon. Just wait and watch.”

So far, so good, I said to myself. *My customer-centric officers are doing quite well*. However, tackling the wow factor of exceeding customer expectations needed a special person. A well-known proverb rang in my head: “Horses for courses,” which means that

different people are suited for different things. I was clear that I would require someone who had nailed the art of customer service and customer engagement: a chief guestology officer. |109|

Hiring a Chief Guestology Officer

I immediately posted a job opening on my LinkedIn profile and mentioned the below bullet points as the basic candidate requirements:

- Superlative face-to-face service.
- Understands the customer's needs, wants, and expectations.
- Pays close attention to every aspect of the customer's experience and engagement.
- Analyzes that experience from the customer's perspective — walks in the customer's shoes.

As expected, questions poured in from my followers about the job's details. The title itself received thousands of hits and likes, which I expected because chief guestology officer was such a unique and offbeat title. One of my followers commented, "It sounds unconventional and exotic." Hearing these responses made me happy.

In addition, hundreds of CVs flooded my inbox. Candidates from completely different industries also applied for the job. I even received CVs from the region's best hotels and leading airline companies. Well, this was to be expected.

The Hiring Process

I passed on the CVs to my HR department and asked them to shortlist the relevant candidates, who would eventually go through a final round of selection.

Days passed, and then weeks went by.

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Almost two months after I posted the job opening, the Chief Human Resources Manager rang me up. I could sense that he was completely nonplussed and bewildered. Before I could greet him, he said, “His Excellency, you have put me in a stew for the last two months.”

I laughed hysterically.

He continued, “Since the day you posted a job requirement for the ‘chief guestology officer’ in SEWA, CVs have been pouring in from every possible corner of the world. I haven’t seen so many people submitting for a job since I joined SEWA. What a great experience. Thank you, sir.”

“Now tell me, did you find a good one?” I asked with a smile. “Many,” he replied excitedly.

“That’s great, but I need the best of the best.”

SEWA Customer Engagement Hub

As we were transitioning to a customer-centric organization, it was time to move from smart talk to smart action. I adopted a totally new breed of customer engagement technique. I worked elbow to elbow with my customer-centric officers and created customer engagement hubs all across SEWA’s branches, including the SEWA Head Office.

Our customer engagement hubs were exclusive areas for rendering specialized human-to-human experiences for our customers. I believe a customer doesn’t quit a brand; they quit a bad experience they had with a brand. If we repeat the bad experience again and again, the customer concludes that we’re sloppy or have bad systems. I want my customers to be genuinely engaged with the SEWA brand, not just sleep-walking around because they had no alternative.

This initiative was completely unique. SEWA customers felt valued and this resulted in pronounced positive effects on our brand value. Internally, this initiative shaped a culture that didn't stymie SEWA customers, but engaged them to work things out together.

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Organic Growth LinkedIn

On August 1, 2018, Rajai El Khadem, Head of LinkedIn MENA Public Sector, paid me a surprise visit at SEWA's head office. He was immensely excited about SEWA's LinkedIn account. "Dr. Rashid, the SEWA account is incredible. Without spending a single dollar on advertisements or visibility, each of your posts receives hundreds of likes and is shared multiple times. Many of your followers like and comment on the posts—taking time out to comment is magical. The traffic on your personal LinkedIn account, as well as SEWA's page, is increasing. Your thought leadership is far-reaching. It's showing organic growth by leaps and bound."

I smiled. "Thanks for the news, Rajai. I am a people person and SEWA is a customer-friendly organization. People comment because we give them a friendly platform to connect with us."

"I am sure there's more to it," he replied. "You have a sound digital strategy in place?"

"I have my heart and mind in place. The rest follows," I said.

Though he tried to coax out my secrets behind the wild success of our LinkedIn profiles, I didn't utter a word.

However, I will spill the beans now.

Post Updates Regularly

The easiest way to grow our audience organically is to share updates that our followers like, share, and comment on because the posts are

interesting to them. We post several pieces of content each week, and we even post daily. We repurpose images, infographics, and posts from our company blog, and we post links to events, webinars, ebooks, and other content.

Keep our Company Page Current

I made sure that our company page was current, because updates will get shared on followers' feeds, allowing them to share posts to their own networks. I also ensured that our career section is active with frequent job postings so people looking for jobs will find our page in search features or through connection suggestions.

Exercise Thought Leadership in Our Industry

We follow other businesses and engage with their content, using their reach to grow our following. We engage with our network by responding to comments, liking or sharing other posts, and engaging in relevant groups for our industry.



Imperative 6

Customer Loyalty



*The more effort customers must put forth in a service interaction,
the less likely they are to be loyal.*

—Jeffrey Henning

Beyond Satisfied

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Simply put, the key to growing loyal clients is growing employees. I like what Barry Gibbons said. “Guess what? Loyal customers like dealing with the same people.”

To me, customer loyalty goes hand-in-hand with emotions. Customer loyalty is the result of consistently positive emotional experiences, which turn customers into loyal advocates. For any good marketer, earning customer loyalty is achieving *nirvana*. I believe that to really win their loyalty, we need to simply solve their problems and delight them with our services and products.

But How?

I didn’t want to lock people in with absurd fine print and contracts, which would only hurt SEWA’s relationship with its customers in the long term. Therefore, I had to figure out what the customer really wants, what their aspirations are, and what’s in their best interests. Again, it’s all about meeting and exceeding expectations—and moving customers way beyond satisfied.

The search for the answers to the above questions led me to an interesting story about Amazon. It’s been said that Amazon, in the not-so-distant future, will send you two boxes every single week that you didn’t order. The first box will be full of things that Amazon predicted you might want, while the second box will be empty, to be used to send back the things you didn’t actually want. Amazon has plans to put customers in the driver’s seat. Can SEWA take some inspiration from Amazon? Yes, but if SEWA wants to move to a state of loyalty, it cannot be done without a loyalty strategy.

As A.G. Lafley and Roger L. Martin argued in a recent issue of *Harvard Business Review*, “a brand’s long-term performance is sustained not by offering customers the perfect choice but by offering them the easy one.”

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Easy to Fire, Easy to Rehire

The above quote reminds me of great brand evolution. I look at a brand like Netflix and see the evolution from a retention strategy to a deeper commitment to customer loyalty.

Once upon a time, Netflix made it difficult to terminate their service agreement. The idea was that the more difficult they made it for customers to leave, the more likely Netflix would profit simply because people neglected to take action to stop paying their monthly subscription. Today, Netflix gains loyalty by being one of the easiest companies to “fire.” Conversely, they are one of the easiest to “rehire.”

If you go to the Netflix landing page, you will see the words “cancel online anytime 24 hours a day” prominently displayed in multiple locations. Should you wish to pause or stop your service, Netflix retains your past viewing history and wish list for ten months, so your relationship with the brand is retained until you wish to hire them again.

The Amazon and Netflix stories that you just read had one thing in common—the ambition to create a loyal consumer base of die-hard fans. No organization under the sun would say “no” to a dutiful crowd hooting the brand’s name at the top of their voice. I appreciate such a noble ambition, but who shoulders the responsibility of this mammoth task?

My passion for making the world a customer-friendly place has made me interact with global CEOs and dignified decision-makers, but sadly, no one had an impressive answer to my question.

The irony of this ambition starts setting in when I asked them the aforementioned question. I know answering the question is almost impossible.

If you are wondering what my answer would be, it's simple! To shoulder the mammoth responsibility, why not appoint a chief loyalty officer?

Why do we need a Chief Loyalty Officer?

As mentioned earlier, I wanted SEWA's customers to be loyal to the brand, and its products and services. However, the irony of this started setting in when I asked who should shoulder the responsibility of this mammoth task. I started by asking, "Is there any marketing activity that is not done to make our customers loyal to our brand?" Any marketing activity will end up engaging our customer, either by making that customer loyal or otherwise, whether it is branding, promotion, or research.

I intended to make our customers loyal, and the five Ps of marketing (Price, Product, Place, Promotion, and People) became part of our marketing, which should be the authoritative function of the chief loyalty officer.

There was major unrest and bitterness in the organization when I decided to mix marketing with customer loyalty. I told myself, *Until I break down my company's internal walls, the external walls with customers will remain.*

I had requested the chief loyalty officer create a team of four people, including himself, with the main goal of "delivering wow through service." I named the team the "customer loyalty team."

Net Promoter Score

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Colin Fraser, Group Head of Wholesale Banking, Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank (ADCB), paid me a visit on May 17, 2017. During our meeting, he shared information about the Net Promoter Score (NPS) tool that the bank uses to pin down their customer loyalty.

NPS is an easy way to quantify loyal customers for a company's brand, products, or services. Since the metric is easy to calculate, most companies use NPS as part of their customer relationship management (CRM) strategy. All the customer needs to do is answer a simple question, for example, "How likely is it that you would recommend us to a friend or colleague?"

Answers are assigned a score from zero to ten, with ten being the most positive. Customers are divided into three categories: Promoters, Passives, and Detractors. Promoters (score: 9-10) are the most loyal, Passives (score: 7-8) are satisfied yet unenthusiastic, and Detractors (score: 0-6) are unhappy. The Net Promoter Score is calculated by subtracting the percentage of Detractors from the percentage of Promoters.

This simple exercise helped us to determine how many of our customers are assets and how many are liabilities.

I modified the NPS technique by asking my marketing department team to complete this sentence: "Our customers become much more valuable when..." The immediate answers tended to sound predictable and obvious. For example, someone said that customers become much more valuable when "they buy more of our stuff" or "pay more," and that "they reliably come back to us," or "they're loyal to SEWA."

The AWE question: “And What Else?”

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Three little words, “And what else?” have magical properties (I also call it the AWE question). They give you more options and create more possibilities out of thin air.

I jokingly told my customer-centric officers, “Think of our customers as *value-creating* partners and not as *value-extraction* targets.”

Time off

I said, “I know that human mind has a shorter attention span than a goldfish. Go take a quick breather, grab a cup of coffee, or take a recreational break and reorient yourselves.”

Once the officers came back, I advised them to dive into a brainstorming session. I asked them to assemble in the blue-sky room (a room with crystal-clear glass walls used for blue-sky thinking, i.e., thinking that is not limited to commonly accepted norms or beliefs) to try to find completely new ideas. Novelty is a virtue, as they say.

The team assembled and began their discussion. I stood outside the room and observed them through the transparent glass walls, passionately brainstorming and debating. Soon, the team started filling up the flipcharts with brightly colored ink pen.

I gave them some “we time” to process their clear thinking and line up their jumbled thoughts, before lending them an ear.

After a while, I entered the blue-sky room and said, “Have a voice. Start with being honest and transparent. Surprise and delight me.”

Our customers become much more valuable when...

- they give us good ideas
- they evangelize for us on social media
- they reduce our costs
- they collaborate with us
- they try our new products
- they introduce us to their customers
- they share their data with us

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Their responses nailed it. We discovered that our customers were not only a source of immediate income. They were a source of future revenue and partners in success too, provided we strike up a lifetime relationship with them, hence investing in the customer lifetime value. The big question here was how to achieve and sustain such a lifetime relationship, especially when we were experiencing a paradigm shift in consumer interactions and relationships. They are becoming “PROsumers,” a new marketing term.

Shift from CONsumers to PROsumers

The term “Prosumers” isn’t a new one. It’s been around the marketing world for years, but in today’s world of the internet and social media, it has taken on a new importance that business leaders and marketers can’t ignore. Prosumers provide the ideas for how products and applications affect the life of consumers. They provide the early warning signals about a product’s quality. They know more than you think about your competitors.

And More

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Prosumers are creative individuals who have a predilection for engaging in activities concerning firms or institutions they have a relationship with. They are valuable assets if fully engaged with a company. Prosumers provide feedback, creative ideas, and information for innovation. Veritably, they co-create with the firm and establish a relationship of trust and involvement. They become the voices of your firm's products and services, and therefore have a significant impact on the success or failure of your company, products, and brand, particularly through their involvement on social media.

Product Voice

Prosumers talk to products. They are so passionate about service or product, they have the ability to hear the product's voice. The mountain bikers wanted a better bike, a machine built specifically for the purpose of mountain biking. To fulfill their desire, amateur mountain bikers were willing to put in the effort and time, share their expertise, and learn from the expertise of others in building a special-purpose mountain bike. In their willingness to network, collaborate, and share, the mountain bikers were acting as both customers and producers of mountain bikes hence prosumers of modern-day mountain bikes.

Knowing What to Do

I felt an immediate need to hire a chief prosumers officer who could connect with our customers 24/7. We know that SEWA prosumers

are consumers who become involved in designing or customizing products for their own needs, thereby becoming a part of the design process, and contributing their intellectual capital to the organization by participating in the overall production phase.

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I still remember my first piece of advice to the new chief prosumers Officer. “The gap between company and customer is shrinking daily. As collaboration, co-creation, and personalization increase, SEWA customers have taken brand conversations away from the company in the form of tweets, posts, blogs, comments, and videos. In turn, prosumers who become brand advocates will be the Holy Grail for SEWA.”

I Have a Dream

I was quite fascinated by the prosumers concept. In Sharjah, we have over 1.5 million consumers. Imagine the heat generated if we converted them all into prosumers.

I have another finding that is worth sharing. *Lightspeed Research and Promise* undertook quantitative and qualitative research in early 2016 and found out that while many marketers have increased their focus on social media, word of mouth remains by far the most important channel for peer-to-peer recommendations. Two-thirds (66%) of consumers make recommendations this way. In comparison, just 15% of recommendations are made via social networking sites.

The above research geared me up to pursue the prosumers challenge. I found my method for leveraging the power of prosumers in a *Forbes* article published July 3, 2010:

- 1. Identify the key online influencers** for your product, brand, business, or industry.
- 2. Acknowledge those people** (e.g., send product samples, ask opinions, etc.).

- 3. Join the online** conversation where those people already spend time.
- 4. Develop relationships** with those people by interacting with them, providing useful information, and being accessible and human.
- 5. Leverage social media opportunities** by creating your own branded destinations, such as a blog, YouTube channel, Twitter profile, Facebook group or fan page, LinkedIn group, podcast, etc.

Soon enough, in a meeting with my chief prosumers officer, I discussed the above ways to create the “big-bang” transformation that would take the entire customer experience somewhere completely new. I told him, “Sometimes these big ideas come from customers. At first, the process may have a few hiccups, but there’s no shortage of tools and books on how to leverage the customer’s ideas. This can feel scary, but don’t worry you aren’t alone.”

He sighed with relief.

I told him, “I have already hired a ‘chief customer officer’ to help you on this mission. Your primary job will be to focus on the customers—decoding their needs, wants, and expectations. What do you think?”

Under my leadership, both the chief prosumers officer and chief customer officer started SEWA YouTube channels, and began to actively engage our customer base on various social media platforms namely, SEWA LinkedIn, SEWA Instagram, and SEWA Facebook page. This informing, educating, and engaging ultimately led to thousands of followers. There was organic growth in our reach to customers’ heads, hearts, and minds.

The Upshot

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It's been a long, hard road, especially for SEWA, which has neglected its customers for years. Turning that around required considerable energy and resources, and it took time. But now, the journey is no longer a mysterious riddle, and the rewards are substantial. I was so confident about the model's potential that I remember telling my customer-centric officers, "You don't need to be a Steve Jobs or Marriot to create this kind of customer experience. If superior service isn't built in, no amount of goodwill can deliver it reliably, and no effort can compensate for the lack of it. Yes, it is hard, and yes, it takes time. But it's a process that can be learned and launched like any major change program, here in SEWA. Eventually, it can be built into SEWA's DNA."



Chapter 4

The Way Forward

Push away all the noise and listen to the sounds of the universe.

—Anonymous

Dear Reader, at this stage you may ask, “What did we gain from the model so far?” Well, the following points summarize the quick wins—the low-hanging fruits—that we have experienced.

- We started building a culture that puts the customer at the center and aligns the objectives, targets, rewards, and recognition of customer needs, wants, and expectations.
- The SEWA family started to deliver a positive and seamless customer experience at every touchpoint across the customer life cycle.

- Customer grievance traffic decreased.
- We learned that excellence in service differentiates us from others.
- Service design and delivery is proactive, not reactive; it involves actions and choices.

And of course there were financial returns as well.

As we became increasingly customer-centric, our once-tarnished brand image began to change. Gradually, we saw an increase in global organizations pursuing partnerships. Some of these blue-ribbon organizations include GE, European Space Agency, Kodak, HP, Honeywell, LinkedIn, Forbes, and Great Place to Work; they became our brand ambassadors to the world. This significantly drove our top-line growth as well as bottom-line net income and profits.

To Begin with the End in Mind

Thomas Shaw Dunn, head of Power & Water Engineering Middle East, visited me on August 2, 2017. In our meeting, we discussed our future prospects for working together. The team was taken for a quick tour of SEWA's brand turnaround. Eventually, the customer-centric model caught Dunn's eye. He asked, "The customer-centric model is fantastic, but in practicality how close are you to being customer-centric?" I answered, "Customer-centricity is a moving target, not a static one. No organization can claim that it is 100% customer-centered, because the moment it becomes one, the customer's needs evolve. The customers and their needs are ever-changing."

"And as Stephen Covey mentioned in his book *7 Habits Of Highly Effective People*, it's important to begin with the end in mind. We have this model that serves as a reminder for all the employees of the destination we want to reach," I added.

The customer-centric model is a success. But the challenge was to establish a system that would ensure the above model benefits SEWA; it had to be indoctrinated into the bloodstream of the entire organization, just as I had done with SEWA Balanced Scorecard the year before. However, this time I decided to look into the customer perspective of SEWA BSC through the lens of the Learning and Growth perspective, which was an interesting and unique approach. At that time, I didn't know what I was in for, but it culminated in an amazing feat in SEWA's history. |127|

Burn the midnight oil

Ali Anaqbi, professor of bioengineering and head of the mechanical department at UAE University, visited SEWA on July 30, 2017. Much to my dismay, he had a tarnished image of SEWA in his mind, and he arrived with the preconception of us as a slow-moving business. However, within a few minutes of his visit, he experienced a paradigm shift in his perception of SEWA. He was thrilled about SEWA's customer-centric model, the eight Ps of branding cycle, SEWA Academy aka SEWA A, and various other SEWA brand turnaround widgets. He could hardly conceal his excitement, and with a sparkle in his eyes, he said, "You must have burnt the midnight oil to come up with such thoughtful concepts and breathe life into them."

It was so gratifying for me. As he was leaving, he smiled and said that he was immensely grateful for the red carpet treatment we gave him. He was greeted with a smile and received a warm welcome, and every moment of his visit was memorable.

In another significant meeting on October 18, 2017, Nabil Habayeb, President & CEO of GE, Mideast, N. Africa & Turkey, visited SEWA to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

After the signing ceremony, I personally took him around, showcasing our models and frameworks. I could see the excitement on his face; he was basically soaking up the energy and vibes flowing through our Hall of Fame. Once we reached the customer-centric model, he was startled, and said, “Dr. Rashid, I am blown away by this model. I can’t believe my eyes. The model speaks volumes, and it’s incredible to see a government organization producing such an advanced model. Everything is spic-and-span, and I am in love with it.”

This was indeed a proud moment. He invited me to speak at the Jack Welch Management Academy in Virginia, in the United States. The icing on the cake was that he invited other senior leaders to fly there to attend the trainings.

SEWA Made Me Cry

Carole Van Caillie, business development manager of Indra, one of the world’s largest providers of proprietary solutions in specific segments of the transport and defense markets, and an IT bellwether in Spain and Latin America, visited SEWA on July 25, 2018. As a welcoming gesture, Syeda, my chief knowledge officer, introduced the SEWA management philosophies and familiarized her with our rebranding journey. What took her breath away was walking through SEWA’s Hall of Fame, getting to know the SEWA Mars Team, SEWA SWANs, SEWA Heroes, SEWA Extra Milers and SEWA Knights. Next, she was guided to the Wall of Remembrance—a wall dedicated to employees who served SEWA and during their tenure passed away. She was emotionally moved to see an organization recognizing employees who are no longer in this world.

“Such a noble thought. SEWA made me cry!” she said, as she wiped her tears and succumbed to the true spirit of this organization. |129|

On Top of the World

On August 13, 2018, Chuck Nugent, President and CEO of Gas Power System, Global GE Power, happened to visit SEWA headquarters from the United States on account of the phenomenal partnership we’ve had since signing our MOU.

As a gesture, I personally took him and his team on SEWA’s brand turnaround journey, familiarizing them with our business models and philosophies. I could feel his heart pulsating with the awesomeness.

“Dr. Rashid, you have given me a kaleidoscopic view of your organization. I came here to dig into your brain and understand its strategic reservoir, but I am leaving with an impressive amount of new knowledge.”

At this moment, I felt on top of the world.

If you’re enjoying *SEWA Customer-centric Model*, have a question, feedback, or just want to say hello, send an email right now. You can personally reach me at chairman@sewa.gov.ae. I’ll get back to you immediately.



Chapter 5

Chief Culture Officer

*A company's culture is the foundation for future innovation.
A leader's job is to build the foundation.*

— Brian Chesky, CEO of Airbnb

As you witnessed, SEWA was trying to figure out the right permutation and combination in its development, and to safeguard the model. The organization was experiencing a multitude of changes, from remodeling to process refinement, from the revision of a policy to the renovation of the departments. All the while, a tricky question kept teasing me in this state of flux: *How do I keep SEWA's culture from spinning out of control?* Since culture is an unwritten rule, it can often seem invisible, but it very much exists! I did not want to run SEWA on auto-pilot, nor did I want a single grain of

negativity to infiltrate it. This goes back to Welch's quote, "A negative or resistant culture can derail even the best strategy."

I needed to create a service-oriented culture person-to-person, a vibrant culture aligned with SEWA 2020 vision and strategy. A company culture is "the way we do things around here". It's the link between service leadership, service design, and culture.

Hire Right, Fire Right

When Apple CEO Tim Cook hired British retail executive John Browett, his tenure lasted just seven months. Cook told *Fortune* magazine in 2015 that Browett was "not a cultural fit" for Apple.

Chief Culture Officer

While jetlagged on a long-haul flight, I met a fellow passenger, whom I later found out was a chief culture officer at a renowned firm. His youthful smile captured my attention, along with his salt-and-pepper hair. I was quite curious about his role, so I dug deeper. He said, "My job is to protect my company's cultural core as it evolves into a massive multinational." I was quite charmed by his reply. I felt the need to appoint a Chief Culture Officer too. Getting back to square one—culture.

Secrecy Room

Sometimes you need to get your ducks in a row before you start. It's not about the preparation; it's about taking the first right step. Martin Luther King Jr said, "You don't have to see the whole staircase; just take the first step." The day I landed, I called my

C-suite officers to my secrecy room. It is a room where important information is kept completely secret from the other teams, except for the pieces of specific information they may need to do their own work effectively. Almost all of them showed up, the chief happiness officer, chief listening officer, chief service officer, chief loyalty officer, chief prosumer officer, and chief customer officer, and we discussed the need to hire a chief culture officer. |133|

I announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, in this room we discuss the critical confidential information that needs to be kept low-profile and under wraps. I want to reveal something. I need to hire one more person to sustain my model.” For quite some time, they mainly played defense. After a few seconds, they whispered, almost sadly, “O.M.G and who else?”

As anticipated, they were a little puzzled, but eventually I was able to sell the proposal to them. It was tough to convince them, but I didn’t throw in the towel.

Boot Camp

The starting point for closeness is relationships. It is the cornerstone of all growth. For my customer-centric team to grow and accept a new member, we had to go through several levels of deepening our relationships, making them more meaningful. I soaked in the present moment and decided that to convince my C-suite officers, I might have to take a different approach altogether. Aren’t we aware of the fact that our environment sets our mood and our surroundings influence our decisions? At first, I thought of taking them out for coffee or brunch to discuss my opinion with them, but I realized coffee or brunch would not serve the purpose of this heavy-duty discussion. This was a critical discussion that demanded a special environment. I wanted to

establish a somewhat formal atmosphere without choking their freedom of speech. I wanted a mix of seriousness and ease, a bit of mindfulness in a more laid-back setting.

After giving it some thought, I decided to go with boot camp. I don't mean the old military-style training boot camps; we have come a long way now. The concept of boot camps has evolved! Today, boot camp means a short, intensive, and rigorous course of training with a lot of fun elements thrown in. That's it—a boot camp was the best option. This is how some successful global companies develop their future leaders, so I was just following suit.

I summoned my C-suite officers and informed them about the boot camp. Right away, we hopped into our cars and headed forward.

Drill Sergeant: An Epitome of Excellence

As we know, a boot camp is incomplete without a drill sergeant. According to the U.S Army website, a drill sergeant is a symbol of excellence in initial military entry training, an expert in all warrior tasks and battle drills. He lives the Army values, exemplifies the warrior ethos, and most importantly, is the epitome of the Army as a profession. A drill sergeant is responsible for coaching, counseling, and mentoring of hundreds of soldiers.

I decided to don a drill sergeant's hat for my C-suite Officers.

I kicked off the meeting by saying, "Let's get our hands dirty." They must have thought I was kidding. They stared at me with starry eyes, wondering what would come next. I said, "I'll quiz you! Fear not. The quiz is quite easy; it consists of only one question. The rules are even much easier; there will be no grading, and

I have a hunch you'll do well."

I asked them to list the key reasons they thought appointing a chief culture officer was pointless. |135|

I was quite amazed at the answers. One of them argued that this role is best managed within HR. "You have given us the 15 winning principles and the core cultural values, so aren't you, as chairman, the keeper of culture here?" the chief loyalty officer commented with a cat-like smile. And the rest of them said, "Culture is about the collective way people work together, and it cannot be owned by any one person." They sounded unhappy. I thought all hell would break loose!

By now, I had figured out a broad-stroke picture of what was in their hearts and minds.

I worried the drill sergeant would also have to play the role of the chief firefighter officer! I scratched my head in disbelief. As I put together my thoughts, a very recent political example that aligned with my point of view popped into my mind. The news was making headlines all over the world. It disturbed me. It must have affected you too. *The Guardian* published this headline on January 15, 2018.

There's No Other Word but Racist: Trump's Global Rebuke for 'S*hole' Remark"**

"U.S. President Donald Trump has been branded a shocking and shameful racist after it was credibly reported he had described African nations, as well as Haiti and El Salvador, as 'shitholes' and questioned why so many of their citizens had ever been permitted to enter America.

“U.S. diplomats around the world were summoned for formal reproach, amid global shock that such crude remarks could ever be made in a semi-public meeting by the president of America.

“In a strongly-worded statement, the UN said it was impossible to describe his remarks as anything other than racist, while the Vatican decried Trump’s words as ‘particularly harsh and offensive’. The 55-nation African Union said the remarks were ‘clearly racist.’”

I further clarified, “Trump’s offensive comment caused fury and agitation around the world because it showed ignorance and a lack of respect for the culture of the countries in context. It was a shock, a culture shock. Culture, being the most sensitive link in any society, is the first element to be offended.”

I continued, “Some countries struggled to translate the obscenity because of a lack of verbatim terminology, but also due to the term’s vulgarity. The famously polite Japanese media tied themselves in knots trying not to offend their readers, with national broadcaster NHK [Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, Japan Broadcasting Corporation] sticking to ‘filthy countries’ as a translation for ‘shithole countries.’”

I looked at their thunderstruck faces.

“It is time we did things that are unique and different. I want SEWA to stand for cultural competency and sensitivity,” I reiterated. “Are you aware of the repercussions SEWA might face, if, even unintentionally, we happen to offend the cultural sentiments of our customers? According to a 2016 census done by the Department of Statistics and Community Development in Sharjah(DSCD), Sharjah’s population stands at over 1.5 million people, including around 200,000 Emiratis and over 1.3 million expatriates. Can you imagine the anger we would cause if we offended the cultural sentiments of people from over 150 nationalities living in Sharjah?”

I tried to convince them by explaining that our culture is a different culture, and by culture, I don't mean corporate culture exclusively. By culture, I mean the world inside SEWA and the world outside the corporation—the body of ideas, emotions, and activities that make up the lives of our customers. Professor Peter Jackson, author of *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography*, wrote, “Cultures are maps of meaning through which the world is intelligible.” |137|

I wanted someone who would be with my people *and* the external world. Probably someone with higher competencies; someone who knows SEWA in and out. Moreover, I needed to find someone who knew SEWA's culture deep down, who would live and breathe the unwritten and undefined rules of the organization, and who could do regular pulse-checks with the people, and the my customers. That meant gauging the happiness, engagement, and emotional health of those who supported us. And while customer service is an integral part of the equation, culture included just about everything SEWA does.

A Time-Out

They were all awestruck at the example I gave. Wide-open, bleary eyes and rounded, O-shaped mouths. I was expecting this. I smiled and suggested we take a break.

The team dispersed. A ten-minute time-out followed. Soon after, they reassembled.

“The weather has been on our side today. It is quite favorable for meetings like these,” I said. Some of them responded with a nod, while the rest were still soaking up the heat of the moment.

“What are your feelings now?” I probed. “Share what's on your mind.”

My chief prosumers officer replied, “First of all, a big thank you for taking us all out for boot camp today. Honestly speaking, I was a little apprehensive about this idea. I thought it wouldn’t work. There’s still a lot of deliverables at work, and I am going on a boot camp. Seriously? A day wasted.” He paused. “But I am glad you proved me wrong. The green environment, the objective of the meeting, and the example you cited were all on-point. And yes, the snacks were amazing too.”

I smiled. Their hearts started to melt. Now was the time to share another relevant example with them. This example would strike the right chord again; this time they would all be convinced of my idea to hire a chief culture officer for SEWA.

“All right, let me give you another recent example from the corporate arena. This time it’s the retailer H&M.”

I read aloud a Reuter News article from January 13, 2018.

South African protesters ransack H&M stores over ‘racist’ ad

H&M featured a black child modeling a sweatshirt with the slogan “coolest monkey in the jungle” on its local website in South Africa. This immature act caused angst and unrest, and H&M’s ad was wildly criticized. South African activists trashed a number of H&M stores in response.

Silence prevailed.

I took my phone out and showed them the video footage of the protesters knocking over mannequins and throwing clothing around the store in Pretoria, South Africa.

The violence reportedly spread to at least six shopping centers across the country. People posted tweets saying that the company was “facing the consequences of racism.”

My officers replayed the video over and over again. I could

see their crooked eyebrows straightening out and the tension in the room easing as well. The storm in the teakettle had started to settle. |139|

The FISH Philosophy

To make things clearer, I asked them, “How many of you would like to go fishing with me?” They must have thought their chairman was losing his focus or trying to change the subject—I could read their minds. I put them at ease by saying, “Okay, okay. Have you ever heard of the Fish Philosophy?”

“Hmmm, the Fish Philosophy?” they responded in unison, their voices all somewhat shrill.

Filmmaker John Christensen was in Seattle when he discovered a business pulsing with enthusiasm and commitment. It was the world famous Pike Place fish market, where large crowds come to watch the fishmongers work—and buy lots of fish. He was so charmed by the energy and positivity of the fishmongers that he formulated a philosophy inspired by what he witnessed. This philosophy releases the enthusiasm and creativity inside each of us. It helps you build a culture where people choose to bring their best to work. The Fish philosophy includes four simple, interconnected practices:

Practice # 1: Be There

This means being emotionally present for people. A powerful message of respect, “being there” improves communication and strengthens relationships.

Practice # 2: Play

To play is to tap into your natural way of being creative, enthusiastic, and having fun. Play is the spirit that drives the curious mind, as in “Let’s play with that idea!” It’s a mindset you can bring to everything you do.

Practice # 3: Make Their Day

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Finding simple ways to serve or delight people in a meaningful, memorable way. It's about contributing to someone else's life not because you want something out of it, but because that's the person you want to be.

Practice # 4: Choose Your Attitude

This means taking responsibility for how you respond to what life throws at you. Once you are aware that your choices impact everyone around you, you can ask yourself, "Is my attitude helping my team or my customers? Is it helping me to be the person I want to be?" Through the Fish Philosophy, we build stronger relationships with our team members and the customers we serve.

Months after this conversation, I happened to travel to Washington, D.C. While I was strolling down one of the main streets, I spotted an Amazon store. The modern interior was fascinating enough to turn any passerby into an avid reader.

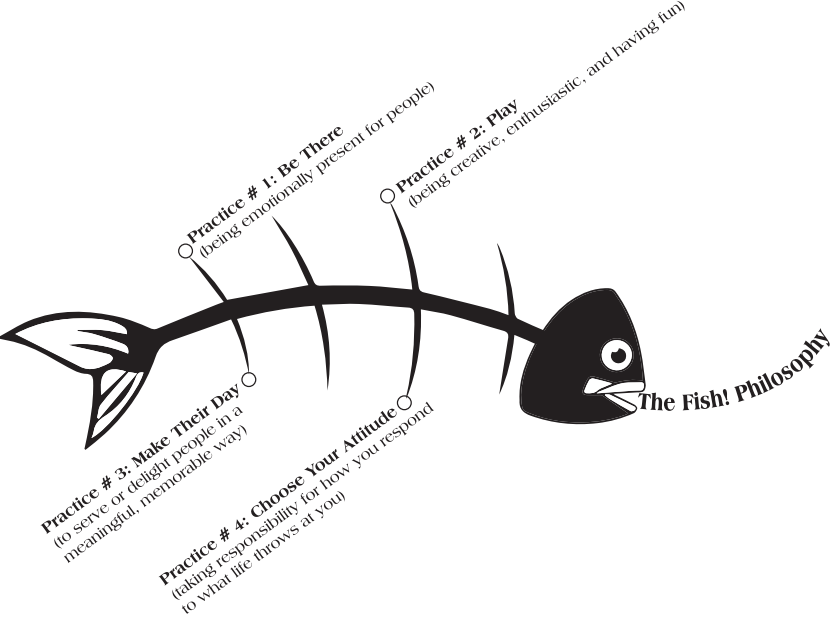


Figure 5.1 The FISH Philosophy

While I was sifting through some of the bestsellers, I chanced upon the book *The Fish Philosophy*, and I was reminded of the conversation I had with my C-suite officers. As a gesture, I picked up several copies of the book to give to them so they could extract the maximum benefit from the universal concept. |141|

100% Commitment

The meeting took longer than I was expecting. Time flew by. I decided to arrange a quick brunch for the team. I said, “Though the saying goes that concentration comes out of confidence and hunger, I will not keep you all starving. It’s 10:30 a.m. already. We have a quick brunch arranged for you all. Go nibble and give me your unanimous opinion.”

What followed next will surprise you.

Incredible? But possible. I could see a light bulb flashing in one of my customer-centric officers’ heads. With their eyes wide open to the possibility, they said, “Let’s bring them on!”

Without further delay, we started the hunt. We lined up interviews immediately.

I decided to join in the candidate interviews because there was something I was looking for. I knew that my customer-centric team would accurately evaluate skills, education, knowledge, experience, compatibility, and service-oriented proficiency, whereas I was focused on the cultural and capability fit.

Lean Thinking

While on the subject, I was also keen on finding certain vital skills and a potency for this unique role. At the top of my list was the

Lean Six Sigma methodology. I didn't want the new chief culture officer to be a person who wants to reach an XYZ destination but doesn't know the ABC of reaching there. I wanted him to exhibit a comprehensive problem-solving tool set to increase the speed and effectiveness of any process within our organization. As a result, there would be much-improved collaboration and performance at SEWA. This can be easily achieved if my chief culture officer has sound knowledge of the Six Sigma process.

The five phases involved in the process are **DMAIC**: **D**efine, **M**easure, **A**nalyze, **I**mprove, and **C**ontrol.

Define the Problem

This phase is about the bird's-eye view of the process, also known as a high-level process map. A simple question is sufficient here: What problem would I like to fix?

Measure

Mapping out the current process. How does the process currently perform? Keeping track of the process and trying to uncover the root cause for slack in the current process or defects as a result of the process.

Analyze

This phase is about listing concerns or pain points within the process. Essentially, analysis concerns narrowing this list down to the vital few causes.

Improve

It's time to move on to solution development by asking, "How will I fix the problem?" At this stage, the effort is to produce as many ideas as possible—a structured improvement effort that can lead to innovative and elegant solutions.

Control

This phase is about maintaining solutions by simply answering, "How do I sustain the newly achieved improvement?" The key element at this phase is documentation of the entire process.

Special Hiring

It was an arduous day, and many bright and talented candidates had appeared for the job posting. It was quite surprising because we never anticipated that such a talented group would be interested in a job title that was so unheard of. I must admit that they made our job quite difficult.

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Choosing one applicant and rejecting the other was a tough nut to crack. My customer-centric team had reviewed many candidates and sent one candidate for the final call. Salem, at age forty-four, was the youngest, but he also had the most diverse experience. He looked calm and composed.

To the Green Meeting Room

I offered him a seat, and after a long briefing conversation with him, approximately one hour, he was “peppered with questions.” I said, “I am sure you would agree with me that building culture is not a science, it’s an art. In fact, it is a process that, when done well, is capable of uniting the energy, minds, and emotions of the entire workforce into laser-like focus. SEWA sees its culture as a competitive advantage, a differentiator, and a critical foundation for its brand. Because culture is a key component of the SEWA brand identity, having someone with a title that reflects that importance makes perfect sense. Why do you think we should hire you as the chief culture officer for SEWA?”

“Culture is not something to be managed but rather something to be led,” he confidently replied. “A leading culture involves investing in people, developing next practices, collaborating, and embracing risk and risky people.” He paused. “I have read your book *The SEWA Way*, and I’ve been following the news about your recent brand turnaround efforts. All that I could surmise is

that you are keen on creating a healthy culture by making it the focal point within the corporate values, purpose, vision, mission, and strategy. And I think I should be given a chance to prove my mettle.”

Listening to his answer, I thought that great customer service flowed naturally from him, and it could further be reinforced by SEWA’s cultural core values. I was quite impressed by his confidence. He had an airy, breezy attitude, and I got carried away with it.

I told him, “World-class companies spend years creating a culture around the customer and their needs. Their commitment to delivering customer value is genuine. In fact, Zappos, a leading online shoe and clothing retailer, is happy to fire employees if they do not fit within their customer-centric culture.”

The Zappos example gave him a jolt. Immediately, his facial expression changed; he probably didn’t expect to hear about the firing process during the hiring interview. Seeing his bewildered face, I tried to set him at ease again. “Be happy. You are in. Congratulations.”

I handed over the list of SEWA’s cultural core values. “SEWA has eleven core values that guide every activity at the company and form the heart of SEWA’s business model and culture. SEWA’s cultural core values differ from those of other companies in a couple of ways. In addition to being untraditional, these values create a framework for the company’s actions. This is exemplified in the company’s commitment to their customers and employees’ well being and satisfaction.”

SEWA's Culture

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SEWA's culture has core cultural values embedded and they influence SEWA's ability to attract and retain quality employees and customers.

"The main component of these is simplicity in behavior and attitude. It's about how people behave toward one another.

SEWA managers and employees eat together in the staff canteens. Everyone adopts the SEWA formal and common dress code. Creating a sense of belonging and fellowship gives SEWA efficiency and success."

The candidate thanked me and left happily.

Striving for Excellence

SEWA promotes a so-called field visit, during which managers and executives are encouraged to take time out from their regular work day and spend time working in the field and stores. This helps them better understand the needs and expectations of the customers and the employees.

By now, I was convinced that SEWA could be powered by the positive energy of my chief culture officer. On one hand, the SEWA customer-centric model had already started showing tangible results. And the next time around, the chief culture officer would do the rest. I could enjoy my sleep now.



Chapter 6



Knowledge is power if applied and shared.

—Dr. Rashid Alleem

The Greatest Asset

Workforce readiness is a challenge facing corporations around the world. Social debates rage about how to align formal education with the needs of business. In short, how can we bridge the gap between the theoretical and practical worlds?

Organizations declare on their lobby wall the guiding value: “People are our greatest asset.” Yet training and development dollars are the last items budgeted and the first ones cut during a crisis. I completely concur with the authors of *Talent Wins*, who claim that

most executives today recognize the competitive advantage of human capital, and yet their organizations use talent practices stuck in the twentieth century. It's time we create a people-first company led by talent.

We at SEWA offer our own solutions for short-term and long-term objectives. Rather than talking about new hires' lack of workforce readiness, SEWA has developed a curriculum that ensures workforce success for anyone who fits with SEWA culture and is ready to become a "Sewarian."

In my book *The SEWA Way*, I talked about getting the right people on the bus and the wrong people off the bus. SEWA's core cultural values are not rhetoric; they shape employee behavior and can easily be acted upon. They are simple, apply to all, and are motivational. Therefore, there's no reason for an employee (old or new) to fail to adhere to it.

A Cultural Misfit

I would like to share a real incident about a recent tough decision that I had to make. I love to hire new talent from diverse ethnicities, races, creeds, and backgrounds. I appreciate the myriad ideas diverse recruits bring into SEWA. Each has their own uniquely pertinent point of view. It's like looking at the same piece of art from various angles. I enjoy sharing my knowledge with them.

However, it upsets me when an employee turns out to be a cultural misfit. I recently had to let go a new hire before she even completed her probationary period because she did not adhere to SEWA's eleven core cultural values. You either stick to them or you are ticked off the list. Full stop.

Design the Future

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The future is unknowable. As the influential management thinker Peter Drucker taught us, the best way to predict the future is to create it. Yet there is one final task left: Currently, SEWA's situation is nothing less than marvelous, and the future also seems bright. However, as they say, "Nothing in this world comes with a guarantee." I improvised this lovely saying in the following way: "Nothing in this world comes with a guarantee or a warranty." In other words, you should insure what I call the soft infrastructure around your efforts so that it doesn't collapse when you are not around or you take your eye off the door. I always tend to look at the dark side of things, especially things that might lie in the future, and indeed, the future often brings dark things to pass. Yet bad times are overcome with wisdom and authenticity. Great leaders expect and accept every possible loss. This thought gave birth to SEWA Academy, or SEWA A.

Essential Knowledge

Life is uncertain, the future is unknown, and the world is experiencing so many destabilizing events. Yet the task remains to master our own fate. How do you thrive in uncertainty? I wanted to create a training and development dynasty, where SEWA's current and future leaders could be rigorously trained to be upbeat, friendly, and customer-focused, taught to create "the happiest place on Earth for both the employees and the customers."

My goal was to conduct SEWA-style leadership and customer service programs and workshops that would create super-engaged

employees whose positive outlook would extend to all customer interaction. I developed in-house training programs that breathed a mission into SEWA A: edutain and innovate.

At SEWA, we encourage our employees to read books from our library to help them grow, both personally and professionally.

Gearing Up For the Future

Peter L. Bernstein said, “We simply do not know what the future holds.” I wanted SEWA A to offer curricula that would support functional managers and employees in improving their skills in a variety of leadership and management disciplines, from business planning and strategic thinking to operations and people development ultimately empowering my employees to self-manage and manage teams.

Leadership Training

I believed that the most important step was motivating and developing SEWA leaders and future leaders. Hence, the goal of my robust coaching and mentoring program was to lay the foundation for prosperous and passionate future leaders. I know how to attract and retain the best people, but SEWA needs a strong competitive advantage in the labor market, something that’s difficult to copy. A strong company culture is just such an advantage. It’s difficult, if not impossible, for any organization to soar with the eagles if you are led by a flock of turkeys. Hence, at SEWA, I focused on creating a culture where employees can fly high. I mandated building a workforce that stays ahead. Even if they leave SEWA or are head-hunted by dark horses,

they are worthy of lapping up superior positions and leading organizations in the near future. This belief of mine is embedded in my leadership philosophy: The true test of a visionary organization is not the healthy balance sheet, nor the size, nor quality certificates, but rather the kind of people the organization turns out.

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Tom Peters shared a magic mantra for companies meddling with the challenges of global competition. “The magic formula that successful businesses have discovered is to treat customers like guests and employees like people.” We created an internal language to reinforce this ideology. SEWA employees are “family members.” Customers are “guests.” Suppliers and vendors are “partners in success.” All new employees go through a SEWA Traditions orientation course where they learn the SEWA way to make both employees and customers happy.

Listed below are the initiatives (that later turned into mandates) embraced by SEWA A:

- SEWA gives a six to nine-month intensive orientation and on-job training to new employees at company headquarters, where they earn SEWA’s technical certifications, and learn the organization’s principles and policies before moving on to actual work.
- The programs are oriented around the SEWA Way’s fifteen principles and eleven core cultural values.
- Encourage co-opetition (a healthy mix of cooperation and competition) among employees.
- The end result of all programs is to produce happy and satisfied customers.

As a part of the organization’s learning and development strategy, SEWA A wanted to ensure that the high-potentials receive assignments that stretch their abilities and expand their knowledge,

exposing them to a variety of markets, cultures, consumers, and business circumstances in tune with SEWA's evolving leadership requirements.

As a matter of fact, money spent on training and development alone does not ensure a pipeline of leaders who are able to take the business in the direction you set. SEWA A is different, because learning-development processes are linked to the need to deliver business results, and they are highly disciplined and rigorous. I see leadership development as a tool for business success, and I become personally involved in it.

At SEWA, employees are evaluated in their first six months of employment right from induction to job responsibilities that are tailored from the start. To be sure the goal is met, the SEWA HRM and I personally design the career path for the most out performing talents.

A Lasting Legacy

Other organizations, commercial and institutional, have used SEWA Academy as a source of ideas and concepts for capturing their own service strategies.

On SEWA A's inauguration day, I began my speech with the following words: "Budgets, contracts, meetings, reports, and the never-ending things that eat up your time are of no value unless they end up producing a happy customer."

Not long after making my above statement, Fausto Nepote, the managing director of Ansaldo Thomassen, Italy, and his team visited us for the first time. As per protocol for the VVIP visits in SEWA, the guests were taken on the SEWA brand turnaround journey. Interestingly, one of the team members, who happened to be their business development manager, had paid a visit to SEWA almost five years

earlier. He immediately remarked, “I have visited SEWA before, but this time it’s remarkably transformed from what I experienced then. I could feel the change right from my first step onto the new SEWA premises.” |153|



About The Author

Dr. Rashid Alleem is ranked third among the 25 most influential CEOs in GCC and is considered one of the 100 most influential CEOs in the Middle East. Recently, the Academic College of Oxford, United Kingdom, honored Dr. Rashid Alleem with the title of “Honorary Professor” in recognition of his scientific, administrative and humanitarian efforts, and contributions, especially in the field of sustainable development. He is a passionate writer; an environmentalist; a sought-after thought leader; the creator of CRITRAL Thinking, a unique blend of “critical and lateral” thinking; and an internationally respected transformational leader. The founder of Alleem Knowledge Center, Dr. Alleem is a dynamic leader who has worked with prestigious governmental, semi-governmental, and nonprofit organizations. He is an entrepreneur par excellence with a flair for effective, strategic decision-making by means of innovative thinking. Dr. Rashid was recognized as “The Knowledge

Ambassador of the UAE” by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum—the Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and ruler of the Emirate of Dubai—and as “Environmentalism of the Year 2012” by the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad.

Dr. Alleem earned a Ph.D. from the University of Salford, in Manchester, UK. Being a “sustainovationalist,” he has received five honorary doctorates from different universities: Atlantic International University (USA), in recognition of his achievements in the socioeconomic fields; Somalia National University, for his humanitarian services; American Global International University (USA), for his global business contributions and numerous academic achievements; Indian Peace University, from which he received a Doctorate in Philosophy for his exceptional contributions, dedication, and social services to society; and Doctor of Philosophy (D. Phil) from Amity University, in recognition of his exceptional vision, deep commitment to the environment, professionalism and direction in the pursuit of excellence; his strategic vision and inspirational leadership in steering his organization towards continuous growth and dedication to the good of humanity.

Dr. Alleem was recently recognized as The Global Green Ambassador by DMG. Under his leadership, SEWA received the Voluntary Cancellation Certificate for excellence in energy-saving and the reduction of CO2 emissions by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2017. He was bestowed with the Friend of Singapore Sustainability Award 2017 by the government of Singapore, and he became a member of the advisory board of the Singapore World Water Council. He has received the prestigious title of “The Ambassador of Peace & Happiness in the Arab World” by Voice of Kerala (VOK) Radio Station.

As a highly sought-after keynote speaker, presenter, and teacher, Dr. Alleem is well-known for delivering compelling and practical messages to audiences of more than 200,000 people per annum, including at some of the largest regional and international venues. |157|

Last but not least, he is one of the most interviewed and published charismatic media personalities in the region. A prolific writer both in English and Arabic, Dr. Rashid Alleem is the author of several books on management and leadership. His newest book, *The SEWA Way*, showcases 15 winning principles, providing a roadmap for achieving success both on an organizational and a personal scale. Aiming to improve social, economic, and environmental living conditions worldwide and helping to improve the quality of life for hundreds of millions who have not yet seen the benefits of sustainable development and inclusive growth, he has written four books on the topic of sustainability: *My Green Journey in Hamriyah*; *Sustainability: The Fourth Wave of Economy*; *I Am Committed: 17 Global Goals*; and *Alleem Sustainable Development Goals*.

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MAKE IT HAPPEN

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TOP PRIORITIES



Exceeding Expectations Every Customer, Every Time

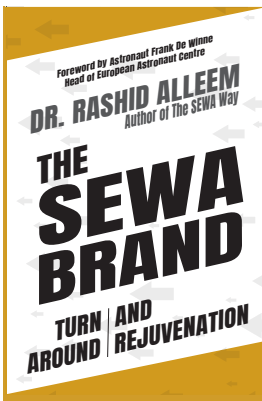
INTRODUCTION

A groundbreaking book for organizations to embark on a customer-centric culture, framing a ‘people before strategy’ argument that is refreshingly new and different. The book offers persuasive and well-researched perspectives as well as real-world insights that can aid leaders to invent or reinvent the customer service arena.

To build a customer-centric culture, business leaders should adopt the six key imperatives:

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- Customer Focus
- Customer Experience
- Customer Excellence
- Customer Engagement
- Customer Loyalty

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