

# Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

Standing at a large discount department store checkout, my wife and I waited somewhat impatiently as the clerk flipped the switch to engage a flashing light over the checkout station and called for the manager. No, I hadn't passed counterfeit bills, been recognized as one of the FBI's Most Wanted, or been caught sneaking a few goods through the checkout without paying. I had just written a check and the store manager was the only person in the vast expanse of retail floor space who could approve the purchase. In fact, with all of the flashing checkout lights screaming for the store manager, it was apparent there was only one decision maker in the entire store.

After about fifteen minutes, the manager, struggling for air like he had just been diverted from mile nineteen of the Boston marathon, showed up to approve my check. In a matter of seconds my purchase was approved. The clerk switched the light to a steady blue, the manager headed off to another checkstand, and my blood pressure began the long journey back to homeostasis.

This was the third miserable experience in a month shopping at this store and marked the last time my wife entered any of the stores in the nationwide chain. That was well over a decade ago. Not surprisingly, the company has filed for bankruptcy several times since then.

Discount department stores aren't the only ones with a flare for customer *disservice*, however. Businesses everywhere are feeling pressure to sacrifice customer service on the alter of cost control. At the same time, customers are becoming increasingly intolerant of shabby service. What's the true cost of losing this battle? Our discount department store says it all: losing the right to compete.

Have you ever wondered what would happen to your department if those you serve in the business had choice like we all do as shoppers? If asked about your service to them, would your internal customers describe their experience like the shopper and the flashing light at the checkstand? How long would your department be able to stay in business if your customers could vote with their feet?

For some internal customers, the wish has been granted. Those in the revenue generating part of the business have sounded the trumpet long and loud enough for control over overhead costs. They're now flexing their new-found muscles by demanding more accountability for the expense of purchasing, human resources, information systems, and other departments. They want more than speedy responses from these groups, they also expect relevance. They want to pay for work that helps them get the products out the door, deliver promised services, satisfy the ultimate customer, and improve their costs to do it all.

A vice president of human resources once told me that if her department can't convince those in operations of HR's value, she and her entire department will be out seeking other sources of income. It sounds harsh to those who live to bask in the warmth of corporate protective custody, but it's reality for every business operating in the marketplace.

For those who think it unfair, there is an alternative. You can wait patiently at the flashing light over the checkout stand and pray that your internal customers will do the same for you. The choice is still in your hands...but it's now in theirs, too.

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**Trying it on for fit.** Make a list of others in the organization who depend on you. Next to each person or department listed, write down what you think they need from you to serve those who depend on them. Meet with them and ask them to share with you their frustrations serving their customers. Compare their responses to what you wrote down and look for opportunities to improve. Pick out one or two areas where you can make the most impact and work on them. After a reasonable period, ask your internal customers how your improvements have helped resolve their problems, and how you can do even better.

Send me an e-mail and let me know what you learn from your experiences. I would love to hear from you.

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