



Using a Consultative Approach

Negotiating Internally

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If you're looking for a way to bust through the log jam created by conflicting functional objectives and constrained resources that ultimately impact customer satisfaction, try a consultative approach to negotiate internally.

You've seen this problem or one just like it: Customers complain to the salespeople about errors or problems. The salespeople take the issue to an internal group that can help such as IS. IS has 1000 other projects on their plates and can't allocate resources. Finance won't approve more money for more IS resources (profit targets the reason, of course!). The salespeople feel frustrated. Animosity builds between the functions. And, oddly enough, the customer complaints continue and sales scrambles to drive revenue to meet company goals.

Achieving your company's business objectives requires understanding customer needs, focusing everyone in your company on those needs to deliver in a way that **exceeds their expectations**. The problem: the customer's needs are often layers away from what most of the people are worried about in getting their jobs done day-to-day. Every function has its own focus and priorities. Resources are limited and the customer gets lost in the conflict of allocating those scarce resources.

Executives who deal with these issues successfully tell us that they use a consultative approach to negotiate internally. They help people identify and build on common interests that focus on meeting and exceeding customer needs. This consultative approach to negotiating helps people find ways to meet their own objectives while contributing to the achievement of overall company goals. It requires understanding everyone's divergent needs, finding common ground and generating many options to craft a solution that everyone can buy into.

These executives use a disciplined process to negotiate internally, get commitment of resources and get people to buy in to customer-driven goals. The next time you are faced with internal conflicts that are difficult to resolve between different functions that need to contribute to a common objective, try these steps.

Connect business objectives with satisfaction of customer needs

Identify how business objectives depend on driving customer satisfaction. For example, sales goals are not numbers to be achieved but are really a function of understanding customer needs and helping customers to find ways to meet those needs, one customer at a time.

Explore interests and positions of all parties

When a conflict arises between functions it is critical to use a consultative process to understand the reasons for the conflict. Ask questions to understand how people feel about what they are being asked to contribute. Probe to find out what people feel stands

in their way. Learn about other conflicting priorities and pressures they are under. Seek to understand what's behind the stand they are taking. For example, the IS department can't allocate more resources because they are constantly responding to fires in the company without any sense of the real priority of those fires (i.e. how those fires impact customer satisfaction). Get out at as many issues as possible and at as deep a level as possible. This creates a foundation for exploring mutual interests. Get at the value each party places on what they say their needs or constraints are.

Identify mutual interests that align with customer needs

If you've done your homework in the last step, you will have a foundation for determining mutual interests that can serve as a platform for a solution. This is a critical part of the process, but a difficult one. It means elevating issues to a higher level that establishes commonality. For example, IS's concerns about resources can be elevated to a mutual interest by restating the concern as a need: "You need to find ways to reduce the number of fires that break out due to customer complaints and one-off requests for help from other departments like Sales." This does not eliminate the immediate conflict – Sale's request and IS unwillingness to respond. But, it gives a new way to frame the solution to the problem with the customer's needs as the focus.

Develop and explore options

Mutual interests make it easier to explore options that will help the parties get their needs met as they relate to customer-focused mutual interests. Often, when conflict breaks out, the biggest problem is that the parties focus on a single issue. It becomes a single-issue negotiation. In a single-issue negotiation both parties lose. The parties drive deeper into their own corners because they see no options they can support. Having more options creates more flexibility. It allows each function to get something they need.

Get everyone involved in developing options. This helps people better prioritize their own needs. For example, maybe some of the customer complaints are more easily addressed by simple solutions. Sales can feel that it has "won" by getting some of the most immediate needs resolved; IS can feel that it has "won" by not having to become over-committed yet again. So, in this step get beyond the single issue by laying out all the issues and the mutual interests and explore many options. For example, explore resource constraints, deadlines, conflicting commitments, and customer's true needs. Work with all parties to look for tradeoffs. Sell the benefits of options that connect to mutual interests.

Develop a customer-focused solution people can commit to

Generating and exploring many options provides a menu of possible solutions. Revisit the mutual interests and the needs of the customer. Combine options to configure several possible solutions with the parties and get them to react to the pros and cons. Generate new options where obstacles appear in a feasible solution. Often the best solution comes out of the dialogue created among parties about the options. These solutions often contain options that no one thought of earlier.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

Even after you have created a workable solution, problems can still occur. Commitment to the solution may wanes and/or the same conflicts occur next time the issue arises.

There's one sure-fire fix: communicate, communicate, communicate. Keep asking people how they feel about the solution as it is implemented. Keep people focused on the benefits to the customer. Resell the benefits each party is reaping in the short- and long-term. Let people know how the outcome worked. For example, let the IS people know how their contribution impacts customer satisfaction and reduces the one-off requests from Sales. Let the salespeople know how customer satisfaction helps increase sales and how IS support reduces these problems in the long-term.

Using a consultative process to negotiate internal issues creates solutions that enable people to solve longer-term, root cause problems that will ultimately reduce the number of fires that break out. And, the biggest benefit: everyone is working together with the customer's best interest in mind.

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