

Staff Retention in Child Care Using an Internal Customer Service Model

Ask many child care center directors who their customers are and inevitably, they will cite parents, because they are the ones who pay for most of the services and are seen to be the beneficiaries of the service known as quality child care. Seeing parents as customers is a key concept in creating a family-friendly child care business and is not be underestimated.

However, thanks to the total Quality Management (TQM) movement, the definition of customer has expanded, and the early care and education profession can benefit from TQM's more generous definition. In TQM terms, the child care center has both "external" and "internal" customers. External customers are the aforementioned parents who purchase services, which include high quality care every day, weekend care, extended hours, seminars on ADHD, nutritious meals to purchase and take home, etc.

But center directors also have internal customers who are employed by the center. According to Juran (1988), "Within any company, there are numerous situations in which departments and persons supply products (services) to each other. The recipients are often called 'customers' despite the fact that they are not customers in the dictionary sense, i.e. they are not clients." Thus, the teachers, assistant director, cook, bus driver, custodian and accountant are all the director's internal customers. Looking at how to apply customer service principles to early care and education staff may cause the director to think differently; mentoring of new staff members, training scholarships, tuition reduction for staff children, and staff recognition events are all examples of internal customer service. Virtually all those things that the director does to enhance the working situation for her internal customers are also "customer service."

Directors all over the country report that they are fast losing their prized internal customers and are finding recruiting new staff in today's burgeoning economy both daunting and discouraging. Highly trained early childhood teachers are being replaced with people with little or no experience and training in this hiring crisis. Even the many directors who are very aware that retention of quality staff is preferable in the long term for continuity of care and for the survival of the business, are feeling desperate and asking for help as they continue to lose treasured staff members.

One answer comes in a recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* which advises, "In these days of talent wars, the best ways to keep your stars is to know them better than they know themselves, and then use that information to customize the careers of their dreams" (Butler and Waldroop, 1999, 144). In other words, knowing what truly motivates, honors,

and rewards staff members is essential to quality internal customer service and therefore to staff retention. Their research on “deeply embedded life interests (DELI)” (Butler and Waldroop, 1999, 145) suggests that what most enduringly motivates employees is not necessarily obvious to the employer, nor is it necessarily in tune with societal expectations. Each staff member has an individual DELI, such as mentoring, computer wizardry or project management; for maximum internal customer service, directors need to identify and encourage those DELI’s.

First, directors need to examine what brings the greatest job satisfaction to internal customers. Is happiness dependent upon doing work just because they can do it well? Or on how much they are paid? Fortunately for early care and education professionals, the answer to both questions appears to be “no” (Butler and Waldroop, 1999). Staff want to stay at child care centers when they find opportunities to do work that is meaningful according to their own values, or DELI’s. This would explain why some directors have found while some teachers have left to take higher paying receptionist jobs in corporations, that they return to the center because the work is more meaningful.

To consider how to meet the needs of each internal customer, directors will want to think about these “Big Eight” DELI’s, based on Butler and Waldroop’s work (1999, 148-149) and revised to fit the early care and education profession:

Mentoring and Counseling: Helping others grow professionally.

Managing People: Motivating others to achieve success.

Managing Projects/Enterprises: Taking the lead on an endeavor.

Translating Technology: Applying computer expertise to ECE settings.

Theorizing: Leadership on envisioning “big picture” innovations in the field.

Number Crunching: Figuring out accurate and streamlined budgets/finances.

Artistic Expression: Creating an original way to do the work.

Teaching: Delighting in contributing to growth and knowledge.

The following vignettes illustrate classic DELI matches and mismatches in the child care world.

Mentoring and Counseling

Theodora, lead infant teacher, values fostering the professional growth of the teachers on her team. Promoting Theodora to Assistant Director in charge of office matters, including billing, in order to raise her salary, will not honor her DELI. She will soon seek another position where she can do her life’s work of mentoring, even for less pay. To keep her happy at work, be sure that she coaches new staff, has team members who seek her guidance and gets a student teacher, a CDA candidate or an apprentice every semester. They will benefit from Theodora’s counseling and she will thrive in the process.

Managing People

Nia loves being the Education Coordinator at Heat Start: she meets staff needs by ordering new materials, planning in-service training and making curriculum suggestions. She takes pride in the number of staff who are enrolled in CDA and in college and is always on the lookout for the newest opportunity to help others grow and achieve. Although she was an excellent teacher early in her career, Nia now sees that environment as narrow; if asked to return to the classroom, she would seek other employment. Her “deeply embedded life interest” is more oriented to helping the whole program improve.

Managing Projects/Enterprises

Azra thrived when she was put in charge, first as lead teacher in one toddler room, then as coordinator of the toddler pod. Azra’s constant focus on the “big picture” will likely lead her into a management position. An informed director, recognizing Azra’s interests and potential, will know to position Azra to become site coordinator when that new offshoot center is developed. Internal customer, Azra, excels when her work lines up with her DELI (that of managing an enterprise) be it toddler education at the center or be it responsibility for getting a new site up and running. She will take pride in getting the details right and enjoy working with the contractor to get those short toilets in the right place. A director looking at succession planning will be smart to have Azra on her list.

In contrast, Sherry is already the executive director of a large center with four assistant directors. The Board of Directors despairs because no matter how many administrators are hired, decisions never seem to get made. Sherry doesn’t delegate and the Accreditation package just hasn’t been sent to NAEYC although that has been a goal for five years. Sherry was a wonderful teacher for twenty years and certainly has the maturity to make decisions, but she spends so much time visiting in the classrooms to meet her obvious teaching DELI that she is both unhappy and ineffective in her current role. It is time for a change.

Translating Technology

Laurie grew up in a computer-filled household; she learned to play computer games before she learned to use the telephone. She loves to assist the office staff in choosing and

installing new technology and has a wonderful large computer section in her classroom which she shares with other classes when her children are on the playground. Laurie prides herself on being the center techno-guru and creates amazing signs and banners for reminders and special occasions. Her supervisor will do well to be sure that Laurie has some “techno-time” every day, without ignoring the fact that she needs to work on her parent-conferencing skills which do not match well with her DELI.

Theorizing

Toby would rather read *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* than organize the stockroom, which Azra thinks he should do. An astute director will find ways to engage Toby in studying how to incorporate Reggio Emilia curriculum ideas into the center’s culture, or conduct a real cost of quality study in the community, or lead a task force on compensation within the state. Perhaps he will go to graduate school or serve as adjunct faculty at the local community technical college in the evening to meet his DELI, while continuing to teach three-year-olds during the day.

Number Crunching

Fortunate is the director who has a Sinead on the staff; her DELI includes getting the numbers right every time. As classroom staff, she seemed to care more about attendance forms and lunch counts than about circle time; now she enjoys writing the annual United Way report and has the W-2’s and the 1099’s ready on January 2nd. Sinead takes pride in doing the monthly financials for the Board meeting but it would not be a good idea to let her go to the meeting or make a presentation. She does not aspire to be a public speaker and honestly would not be interested in serving as the director, should the opportunity arise; these are simply not her “deeply embedded life interests!”

Artistic Expression

Barbara spends hours mixing paints for the easel in her four-year-old classroom; light pink, magenta, sky blue, and chartreuse are daily fare. She writes notes to parents in calligraphy and composes a tune for each child’s birthday. Her documentation panels and bulletin boards are exemplars for other staff, but she seems unaware of how different her work is; she simply enjoys creating an aesthetically pleasing environment. Barbara’s DELI is obviously a great asset in the early childhood classroom, but don’t promote her to be the CFO!

Teaching

The early care and education field is loaded with people like Lesley who understand that babies crying and toddlers biting are part of typical child development. Some are motivated by helping children who have been abused or neglected. Their DELI's include taking pride in the accomplishments of children in their care and in their own contributions to the child's growth and development. Wise directors make sure that external customers give these internal customers enough credit for their work. The parents who are employed in an industry which has a product may need some coaching on how to express how much they value the work of teachers.

But before looking at the "deeply embedded life interest" of others, leaders would be well-advised to do some self-assessment. The quintessential (and most overlooked) internal customers are directors! (Bruno, 1999). Chances are they have been happiest in positions that allowed them to do work that matched their most heartfelt motivation. Naturally, many directors' DELI's are Managing Enterprises. Other directors find their DELI's are teaching; leaving the classroom behind is painful for them. Early care and education managers whose DELI's are mentoring may find that the paperwork part of their work drives them crazy, and so on. The managers of the centers are every bit as worthy of quality customer services as are staff members, parents, and children. In order to avoid burnout, they should be forthright with the Board of Directors in structuring their job descriptions to include their DELI's.

Once directors have identified their own "deeply embedded life interests," the task is to identify each internal customer's motivating DELI. Annual evaluations that encourage sharing of manager and staff perceptions of the staff member's motivation will communicate to the staff members that the director is invested in their individual fulfillment. Some DELI's are obvious, but others are not. What people do well may not be the tasks which are most important to them.

But why wait until the annual evaluation? A staff meeting on the topic of DELI's may provoke new appreciation of staff motivations. Providing information on "deeply embedded life interest" in advance will give people a chance to reflect (see Butler and Waldroop, 1999). A structured exercise using dyads where partners who work closely together identify their own and their co-workers' DELI's might be a good way to begin the discussion. Or, if many of the staff are new or are quite young and have not thought much about these issues, it would be good to consider pairing them with more seasoned, long-term employees. Another starting point might be asking each staff member to share with a partner one example of doing work that truly felt meaningful. The manager will inevitably see both potentials and places where adjustments in staffing need to be made.

Does the other TQM tenet that “the customer is always right” apply equally to the internal customer? In a disciplinary action, can a “customer” be terminated? The answer to both questions is “Yes,” paradoxically. “The customer is always right” can be translated to mean the staff member (internal customer) has a right to be heard, listened to, taken seriously. Without internal customers the center cannot exist; their satisfaction is essential to quality programming. At the same time, an internal customer who fails to meet the requirements of the job can be terminated; some DELI’s simply cannot be satisfied in certain jobs. Being sensitive to the internal customer’s legitimate needs and wishes equals internal customer service; directing a quality center for children and families equals external customer service. The needs of internal customers must be weighed within the broader context of serving the greatest good of the entire organization.

In the current American economic landscape, child care external customers are far easier to find than internal customers, as demonstrated by long waiting lists and no responses to advertisements for new staff, suggesting that directors focus on new ways to increase internal customer satisfaction. Learning the “deeply embedded life interests” is one place to start!

REFERENCE

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