

However, as with any worthwhile enterprise, simplifying isn't always simple! There is no difference in the shiny new world of customer experience. Where the cacophony of noise, trumpeting customer journeys, voice of the customer, employee engagement, making it easy, whizzy technology often confuses, confounds and diverts even the most conscientious inhabitant of Planet Simple.

Principles still rule

While many of the processes and activities associated with the operational side of customer experience are necessary and effective, they are rarely the ideal starting point for an effective customer experience strategy. Companies that seek to improve customer experience will not succeed unless they incorporate *fundamental principles* that govern human effectiveness and conscious thought. These principles are common to societies that prosper and endure, and are vital to establish a foundation for the tools and practices that transform an organization and bring a customer experience strategy to life.

I've long been a fan of the late Stephen Covey and have drawn much inspiration from his seminal tome *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. The main theme, among a plethora of life changing ideas and highly visionary concepts, is that there are *principles* we must follow – natural laws in the human dimension that are just as real, just as unchanging as the laws in the physical dimension, as gravity and motion.

One of Covey's simple yet highly effective examples is that of a farmer who decides to take most of the summer off and then, in a flurry of activity in September, plants his fields hoping to fast track his crop by October. As Covey says "The farm is a natural system. The price must be paid and the process followed. You always reap what you sow, there is no shortcut."

Customer service reflects many of the important aspects of the human dimension and can quite often run the gamut of emotions and reactions in a single 10 minute interaction. Yet despite this, few organizations have invested the time needed to look in the appropriate mirror to understand how and why a specific event unfolded as it did. I don't mean recording a call, or a contact centre side-by-side. I'm talking about the basic underlying human character traits that defined the outcome, both practical and emotional, and its effect, good, bad or ugly, on the participants.

While customer experience may not be quite a natural system like farming, cutting corners, short term fixes and ignoring *fundamental principles* are equally likely to result in failure. This poorly disguised "strategy", equally at home on the farm and now popularly known as putting "lipstick on the pig", is as the name suggests, quite often just a cosmetic exercise. This usually shows up as money and effort spent on marketing programs, new product announcements, corporate rebranding and customer service makeovers without making sure there is alignment with the underlying processes and the *fundamental principles* that can drive and sustain long term, internal business transformation.

Building the Foundation – The Four Principles

I looked closer at some of the companies that really do have customer experience working for them and found strong evidence of the principles that are vital to the development and sustainability of a Customer Experience program; **Culture, Commitment, Community and Communication**. The power of these principles, both individually and in combination, are that they are founded on deep, basic truths that have broad and enduring applications. When integrated into our daily lives they provide a context and a framework that can mobilize people to develop the understanding, skills and patience to handle almost any situation. You can't pick these up at the cosmetic counter.

Any discussion involving principles and natural law will undoubtedly uncover a full complement of ideas and concepts that can apply to almost any eventuality. While we may all have different interpretations of these specific principles, I also believe that there is universal awareness and understanding of their value, and their importance to the survival and growth of any business.

Let's look closer and see how these principles relate to our customer experience journey.

Culture

Culture, especially corporate culture, isn't something you can mandate, although that hasn't stopped Michael O'Leary from trying. Culture is a set of shared beliefs, values, and practices that is developed from the inside out and based on additional, complimentary principles such as fairness, courtesy, and empathy. The key word here is shared. Look at Zappos 10 Family Core Values. Think about Ritz Carlton's "Ladies & Gentlemen serving Ladies & Gentlemen", LL Bean's "Satisfaction has no time limit" and John Lewis' constitution that states that "the happiness of its members" is the Partnership's ultimate purpose.

While the decision to create an uncompromising customer centric culture often comes, or is influenced from the top, everyone can and should play a role in consistently delivering the company's customer service culture. In the case of Zappos, the online retailer who has taken customer experience to new levels, it wasn't just Tony Hsieh, the CEO, and his senior team; all of the employees have always had a strong voice, and are directly responsible for, designing the core values on which their service culture is built. Their yearly "Culture Book" is a consistent and evolving testament to the strength and durability of this approach.

Tony Hsieh beautifully and succinctly captures the upside of starting with culture in his book *Delivering Happiness*:

"At Zappos, our belief is that if you get the culture right, most of the other stuff – like great customer service, or building a long term brand or passionate employees and customers - will happen naturally on its own."

While Zappos have clearly benefitted from the effect of osmosis, I still believe it's necessary to orchestrate and blend the other three principles in equal measures to be able to create the harmony and play the music that keeps customers singing and dancing happily to your tune. Alas, many businesses forget this, and like Eric Morecambe are playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order.

Four Seasons is now a world famous luxury hotel brand, highly regarded for its culture of excellence. But as with many other successful businesses, it came from humble beginnings. Isadore Sharpe, the CEO and founder, launched the business with the Four Seasons Motor Hotel in Toronto. That's right, a motel! But a very different one that was born from the principle of developing a culture where guests' comfort drove all other decisions. Growing up in Toronto in the sixties, I have fond memories of the profound changes that it drove in Canada, not just in hotel service but in most other aspects of business and customer service.

We get an insight into his approach in the title of his book; *Four Seasons –The Story of a Business Philosophy*. As with Stephen Covey, I found Mr Sharpe's words inspirational. He provides validation and endless examples for the four principles. Throughout the book there are recurring themes of building a *culture* of quality and service, earning the *commitment* of managers and staff, creating a *community* of guests, employees and managers, all supported by frequent, open and honest *communications*. It clearly shows that this can be a business model for all companies, large and small, and not just luxury hotel brands.

A visit to the John Lewis website sums up the importance of culture very simply and succinctly: “Our Partners will tell you that the John Lewis Partnership is a very special place to work. We believe our distinctive culture – our spirit – lies at the heart of this feeling.”

Commitment

Getting the culture right is obviously a strong cornerstone in the foundations of customer experience. But unless and until there is *commitment* throughout the company, it won't have the staying power or game changing influence on the company's DNA to ensure that customer experience is a living, breathing organism and not just an empty promise or a marketing slogan. As with culture, senior executive ownership, on an on-going and visibly participatory basis, is a vital element in demonstrating commitment.

Autoglass, a leading UK consumer automotive service brand, and another company whose culture is powered by people, is a great proponent of senior management commitment. In a recent article about their customer experience vision, I highlighted the fact that when call volumes increase on cold winter mornings the whole company gets involved. Almost anyone from the directors to the rest of the management team, man the phones to ensure customer's calls are quickly answered and their problems solved.

But commitment isn't the sole responsibility of the top table and in a truly customer centric organization everyone in the company understands and demonstrates commitment in a variety of innovative and creative ways.

At Ritz Carlton a general manager went through 14 interviews to land his role. Four were with the owners of the hotel, but 10 were with other front line staff members who see that their commitment to quality includes having a voice in who joins them as colleagues.

Southwest Airlines has long been a poster child for great customer experience and, in particular, employee commitment. For those who haven't had the experience, the simplest way to explain it is to say that Southwest is the complete antithesis of Ryanair. The last time I flew with them I was pleasantly surprised to see the captain of the aircraft helping with check-in, and other flight crew doing whatever they could to ensure speedy, yet civilized boarding and an on-time departure. This commitment isn't accidental or occasional. As with Zappos, it is backed up by a published declaration of key commitments that supports their goal to remain a sustainable, profitable airline, and their culture of taking care of their people and the planet, while delivering a consistent and memorable customer experience

While commitment like culture can't be mandated, it is vital that the CEO or MD leads the way and lives by the same values as the rest of the company. Four Seasons also provides a powerful and decisive example of the importance of commitment and its impact throughout the organization. As the company grew and staff numbers increased, Isadore Sharpe recognized the importance of involving all employees in the change process, and in particular allowing them to take responsibility and in effect self-manage. Some managers resisted this and, as Mr Sharpe believed so passionately in this and it's alignment to the Four Seasons' culture, he decided that they needed a clear code of values or a credo that all employees would contribute and sign up to.

As he recounted, reinforcing the credo, based on the Golden Rule of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”, was one of the most challenging and difficult things he had to do, especially as it meant parting ways with executives who, by their lack of commitment, contradicted this policy and negatively affected the company's credibility. He was clearly proven right and said that “enshrining the Golden Rule as our primary working guide was the most fundamental decision in shaping our future.”

This view is expressed in a similar vein by Stephen Covey who pointedly says “No involvement, no commitment” and goes on to say “that many organizations have people whose goals are totally different from the goals of the enterprise with reward systems that are completely out of alignment with stated value systems.” Another way to look at this is

to see if business leaders are committed to having a customer experience metrics that determine how everyone in the organization is measured and paid.

Jim Bush, EVP World Service at American Express, has put this principle into practice very effectively and measurably. His team of customer service people, known as customer care professionals, are part of a measurement system that surveys the customer and gets that feedback for every servicing transaction which is used that to measure their performance, complemented by some productivity indicators. Those two measures drive incentives that are the basis for compensation for the customer care professionals, and indeed all of the management team. This has not only led to increasingly happy customers, but has also contributed handsomely to the bottom line at American Express.

As with culture, commitment may be seen through different lenses and be demonstrated uniquely in each company. But, as the examples show, if it is based on a deeply shared and socialized value system, is aligned to the overall business culture and based on correct principles, then commitment and unity will flow through your company like a welcome and cooling summer breeze.

Community

The digital age and social media have brought new meanings to the concept of community, but, as well as being a founding principle of the declaration of customer experience, a sense of community has been around since the beginning of time. The unchanging and most enduring quality of community is, as Paul Hawken says in his book *Blessed Unrest* that “community resides in its ideas, not in force.”

In customer experience terms, community resides comfortably and symbiotically with the other three principles. It is dependent on intertwining and bringing together the different parts of an organization to agree common goals, and ways of achieving them, in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration. When a business is successful in creating this internal spirit of community then extending it to customers, partners and the wider geographic community, just feels like a natural and rewarding thing to do.

When you look at almost any UK customer satisfaction survey, you can always expect to see John Lewis and Waitrose high on the list. John Lewis is not only highly regarded reputationally, but is also highly profitable and the clue to why they are so successful is in the name “The John Lewis Partnership.” The organization was founded over 100 years ago and in 1920, John Spedan Lewis, the founder’s son, introduced the first profit-sharing scheme along with a representative staff council. These “radical ideas” were based on seven basic principles which are still the driving force behind the company today and are prominently featured on the company’s web-site. Their definition of *community* is that “The Partnership aims to obey the spirit as well as the letter of the law and to contribute to the wellbeing of the communities where it operates.” What part of this wouldn’t appeal to any right thinking and ambitious organization? Sadly most businesses fail to even come close to this due to their misguided and clumsily applied “policies and procedures” or ingrained resistance to change that hampers many of their employees.

Shep Hyken, in his book *Amaze Every Customer*, features Ace Hardware as a great example of an extremely successful, but perhaps little known company whose community spirit is legendary. This has made it stand out against many of its larger, perhaps better known DIY rivals such as Lowe’s and Home Depot, and outpaces them in terms of revenue, reputation and employee growth. While primarily a US organization, they also have operations in much of Latin America and Asia, and wherever they go they make a profound and lasting impact on the community. In the USA since 1991, the Ace Foundation has raised over \$54 million to help sick and injured kids.

The Ace store owner is totally focused on clearly identifying and standing out within their customer community and being helpful for each and every person in that community. Their reward for this commitment is being ranked highest in customer satisfaction among home improvement retailers for a sixth consecutive year in the JD Power and Associates survey.

There is also an encouraging and welcome communal trend in the UK. A recent study by data analyst Kantar showed that despite the challenges faced by local store the “big four” supermarkets were losing market share to them. As James Lowman, of the Association of Convenience Stores put it: “Competing with the big boys is tough, but good independents can survive and thrive by finding a point of difference – often greater customer service and a much deeper knowledge of the community.”

The idea of community has limitless possibilities in terms of geography, participation and focus. But the power and reach of community in terms of its impact on customer experience is something that any business can and must aspire to, as a platform for growth, a forum for reasoned discussion and a contributor to the greater cause of the common good that a business, and its employees, can bring to life.

Communication

This may seem pretty obvious, and hardly an earth moving concept. Unless you are UK train operator, who collectively seem unable to communicate effectively with passengers, when they have a problem on a line or other hard to believe issues that only seem to live in the railway world. But communicating with passengers, customers or guests is very much dependent on a company having an open and honest communication policy that builds trust and provides reinforcement for employees to act with integrity and compassion in those critical moments of truth that can define a great customer experience.

Companies like Four Seasons, Zappos, John Lewis and Southwest Airlines all feature regular two-way feedback sessions, employee briefings and councils, that give all employees and managers a voice in any decisions or issues that positively affect the quality of customer care. When employees have been involved in defining and developing the culture and committing to its delivery, having them act in harmony with the values and principles they helped create and communicate, is almost second nature.

In each Four Seasons hotel there is a centrally located hotline that allows front line staff to immediately communicate any customer problems as they arise. In one case a doorman advised that a guest was unhappy that he had to wait 20 minutes for his car to be brought to him. When he heard about it, the GM of the hotel immediately called the guest at his office to apologize and his frankness and genuine concern did much to restore the guest’s trust and faith in the hotel.

Each year the Zappos *Culture Book* is updated and the core values revisited and reinvigorated by all employees. The book’s general public availability is enduring, documented proof of Zappos commitment to communicate and share their ideals with their broader audience of customers, friends, partners and suppliers.

At John Lewis, power in the partnership is shared between three governing authorities: the Partnership Council, the Partnership Board and the Chairman. This ensures that communication is open, frequent, visible and truly participatory throughout the business.

The annual Southwest Airlines One Report™ measures and reports their results on their financial, social, and environmental performance. This is communicated via their web-site and current and past years can be viewed, downloaded and compared. This isn’t just a static pdf file, but increases and enhances Southwest’s communication ethic by allowing anyone to customize the report to their own particular areas of interest.

Once again, I’ll turn to Stephen Covey to describe the theme that runs through the communication principle of successful and caring companies. He says “seek first to

understand and then to be understood.” Most companies are so busy with the second part (which is certainly important), that they neglect or pay lip service to the first. Unless and until you understand what your customers truly want and need and what they value, it will be difficult, if not impossible to get this principle working properly and to be able to communicate in a language and a way that they will understand and respond to.

George Bernard Shaw summed it up nicely: “The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

Size doesn't matter - it can work for any company

The companies that are successful reputationally and financially have long since recognized that getting the basics right in terms of these *fundamental principles* is not only an essential element for delivering a great customer experience, but also has broader, long lasting benefits beyond those associated with loyal customers and healthy balance sheets. These companies can endure difficult economic times, overcome internal crises, and generate an environment of innovation and ambition by giving employees more than the boon of occupation and create a spirit of true sharing and ownership in the business. They typically have much lower staff turn-over, increased motivation and a willingness by all employees to go the extra mile without being asked.

The operational steps involved in deploying a customer experience program such as customer journey mapping, employee engagement, organizational alignment, process improvement and infrastructure development are still critical elements in achieving long term success. However, as we saw on the farm, these ideas and activities can't just be planted quickly and be expected to bloom overnight. Without strong roots and constant nourishment based on the four principles, the flower of customer experience will wither and die and it will be impossible to create a healthy, sustainable and consistent customer experience strategy. The sticking plaster approach really only lasts until the next shower.

While I don't doubt there are many other worthwhile and relevant principles that can be applied to the design and delivery of a successful customer experience strategy, I see these four principles as the starting grid on an innovative and flowing mind map where you can develop associated ideas, words and concepts.

Once the principles have been socialized, accepted and adopted throughout the business, you can then begin to build on them to benchmark your current performance, align the whole company with the strategy, design and deliver the ideal experience, and measure and validate the customer response and evolving requirements.

When I've spoken to people about these ideas and the companies that exemplify them best, they often say that they are not Zappos, John Lewis, Four Seasons or Southwest so it wouldn't work for them. They also may point out that they are just a small company and they can't invest in this type of approach. My response is to ask them what parts of these company's core values or principles aren't worth aspiring to? What does it really cost to act ethically and with integrity and honesty? What happens if you don't? Couldn't they find one person from each department that would jump at the chance to put these principles into practice? What's the alternative to not doing it?

I also stress that all of these companies started out as small operations and didn't necessarily have lofty ambitions on day one. But, they were driven by an unyielding, uncompromising belief in basic principles and a determination to stay true to those, no matter how challenging, and sometimes unfashionable they may seem. For these companies, customer experience has always been working and hasn't even called in sick.

That's why they're still here and flourishing today.