

Exceptional Customer Service by Administrative Services Departments

By Kevin W. Harper, CPA

John Contreras is relatively new as the Public Works Director of the City of San Cajoles. He has just looked at his department's monthly report and can't understand why employee benefits are so high. He received the monthly report from the IS Department and, thinking that IS can tell him how the report calculates benefits, he walks over to the IS Director's office.

Bob Fosse, the IS Director, is in his office. He has had one of those days of fielding complaints from users who each think they should be his top priority. Bob is not happy to see John at his office door. When John explains he wants to understand how the benefits rates are calculated, Bob is relieved. That is something that the Finance Department can answer! He quickly refers John to Finance.

When John arrives in Finance, the Finance Director is not there. He leaves a message with the department secretary asking the Finance Director to explain how employee benefits are calculated. The next day, John gets a voicemail from the secretary stating that the Finance Director asked her to let John know that employee benefits are handled by the payroll unit, which is part of the Human Resources Department.

John walks down the hall to see the Human Resources Director, Jean Rossi. Jean listens intently to John's question and responds that while she personally is not an expert on the employee benefit calculations, he has come to the right place. Jean calls in her payroll supervisor and introduces Sally Yoshino to John. John and Sally go to Sally's desk where John explains what he is looking for. Sally states that the employee benefits rates were established by the budget unit at the beginning of the year. Sally can provide the percentage used to calculate the amount of employee benefits charged to John's Department, but cannot explain the components of the rate.

As John slowly heads over to meet the Budget Manager, he wonders how the City has reached such a point that no one can answer a simple question, and why they don't even seem to want to try. He also wonders how he can effectively manage the Public Works Department without the support of the City's internal administrative functions.

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The fictional City of San Cajoles' has several problems that keep it from providing exceptional customer service. Perhaps the biggest of these problems is that the employees of the administrative services departments (Finance, Human Resources, Information Services, Clerk, Attorney) have not been adequately trained in providing customer service to the customer departments (Police, Fire, Public Works, Community Development, Economic Development). The following steps should be taken by management to mold the attitudes and behaviors of the administrative services employees:

- **Formal Customer Service Training** should be provided to all administrative services employees. Topics should include the importance of customer service, how to provide excellent customer service and how to prioritize the required time commitments. The training should stress that inquiries like John Contreras' are *opportunities* to make high-impact customer service impressions for comparatively small commitments of time and effort. It should also stress that any request by a customer must be "owned" (i.e., any customer question posed to any administrative services employee should be answered as if the administrative services departments were one large, efficient service organization. Each person John talked to should have either obtained the answer *for* John, or at least followed up with him to assure that he received a satisfactory answer.
- **Staff Goals and Evaluations** should include customer service as a major component. No performance evaluation or set of goals for any administrative services employee can be complete without a customer service component.

- ***Staff Meetings*** - Every gathering of administrative services employees should have some discussion of customer service. The discussion can be about plans for improving service, examples of recent successes, comments or requests from customers, training, etc.
- ***Continual Positive Feedback*** - Administrative services management should look for examples of good customer service and then publicly and lavishly praise and reward those responsible. No opportunity to reward good customer service should go unpraised.

Even John Contreras would be proud.