

Inter-Section Problem-Solving And Customer Satisfaction¹

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There is no disputing that cultivating customer-driven employee behavior throughout an organization is an important element of its success.

To help accomplish this, I use a technique I call *Inter-Section Problem-Solving*. This technique is designed to get people to see other people in the organization as customers—*internal customers*—while at the same time keeping their focus on external customers. In describing this technique, I am using the word “section” to refer to an organizational unit. It may be a department, a section, a work-group, etc., depending on the structure of the organization. It could also be a manager or supervisor group vs. employee groups. In other words, it is any subgroup of people relating to, producing for, or dependent on others in the organization.

This technique boils down to four simple steps:

1. I begin by asking each section to specify to identify other sections they depend on for information or actions and other sections to which they provide information or actions.
2. I next ask each section to form a “panel” that examines how their work is in any way made more difficult by something that other sections do. I ask them to come up with a series of recommendations to those other sections about processes those sections could change that would help them be more effective at what they do.
3. I then facilitate a series of “panel meetings” in which each panel shares their suggestions with people in other sections relevant to them throughout the organization. These meetings gave each section an opportunity to develop and present for discussion their suggestions for changes that could be made by other sections to help them make their own work more efficient and effective.



Important: during my facilitation, I keep the discussions focused on problem solving, rather than griping and faultfinding.

4. Each panel meeting is transcribed and the transcriptions are given back to all sections so they can implement agreed-upon changes.

¹ From: <http://arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm> —Please take a moment to look at Arnie's site: www.arniedahlke.com

An example comes from the Building Inspectors Section in a County Permitting organization. The Inspectors found that during final inspections in the field, customers would become upset because an Inspector could not find documentation showing that certain permits—such as an environmental permit—had been properly signed-off by the Permitting Section prior to the final inspection (which was a requirement of the County). This, of course, caused a delay in the final inspection, because the customer had to go back to the Permitting Section to get the sign-off.

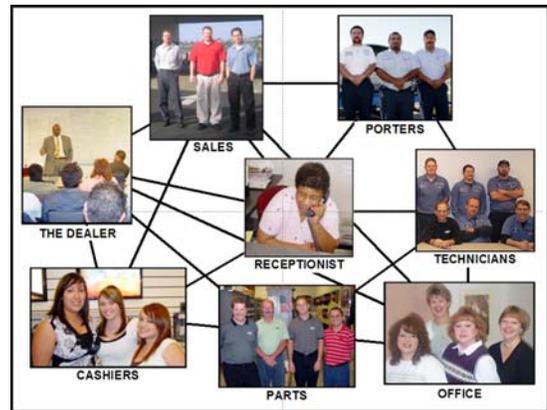


As a result of this, the Building Inspectors put together a panel meeting. The Building Inspector panel met with other sections, looked at processes, and came up with suggestions to improve the effectiveness of documented sign-offs, discussed them with members of the Permitting Section (as well as other sections present at the meeting), and came up with agreed-upon solutions.

The Inter-Section Problem-Solving technique is very effective. Many inter-section problems get solved during the meeting. Many more are improved later as sections pour over the meeting transcriptions.

In using this technique, I have found that people come to see and appreciate what other people are contributing to the organization’s success, highlighting their interdependence. They come to view the organization as a blend of many levels and many sections, working together to produce customer-valued products or services. In other words, they develop an *interdependent* mindset.

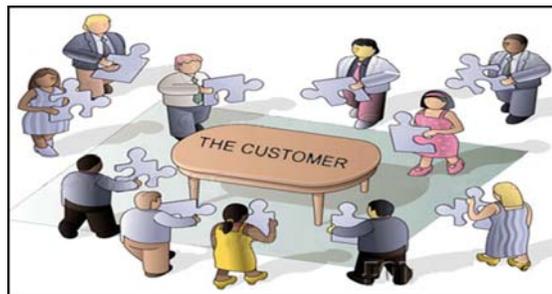
This interdependent organization can be pictured as shown at the right, using an automobile dealership as an example. From the Dealer to the Receptionist, the dealership is a network of internal customers connected to one another. People and processes are all interconnected in an effort to produce customer-valued products and services.



The more conscious people are about being internal customers to one another, the more likely they will be to adapt a customer-driven mindset. In the end, this can only benefit the external customer.

The Inter-Section Problem-Solving technique not only addresses issues and solves problems between sections of an organization, it also promotes organization-wide teamwork. I have found this approach to be one of the most useful methods to develop an interdependent organizational culture in support of the organization’s Strategic Plan. It provides people with a more comprehensive picture of the organization as one team and the importance of everyone in it. And, it aligns everyone toward the *real* bottom line: **creating customer value**. In addition, as a side benefit, the panel meetings further reinforce problem-solving mindsets. It doesn’t take more than a few meetings for people to face a problem with the attitude “how can we fix it” rather than pointing fingers at someone to blame.

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