**Ready to Rectify: Learning With Role-Play**

**Ready to Rectify: Learning With Role-Play**

**Abstract**

Role-play is an especially useful learning method for teaching service operations concepts. The role-play described here simulates different types of customer-provider interactions by allowing students to improvise common scenarios when either a service provider has made an error or a customer has changed his/her mind. Student “customers” and “service providers” improvise known oversight scenarios, the “customer” acting as a customer with a stereotyped personality described on a card only s/he can see, and the service provider reacting to best accommodate the complaining customer. The debriefing discusses optimal ways to respond to each customer type in a service recovery situation.

**Keywords**

Role-play, service recovery, service management

**Introduction**

Most service providers experience service failures at one point or another – either customer failures or provider failures. Customers may not follow directions with self-service or adequately communicate their needs in face-to-face transactions with service providers. Service providers may provide the wrong service, an additional service the customer wasn’t expecting, or too little/ too much of the service the customer did ask for. Companies must be able to empathize with frustrated customers, rectify the error, know how to convey assurances that the firm takes their irritation seriously, and explain how the firm is working to uncover the source of the service failure so that they can correct the cause.

A good that fails before shipment costs money in terms of labor hours, parts, and effort in order to be restored. Once the good is sufficiently reworked however, the customer never knows that the defect occurred. When a service fails however, it is almost always an external failure, where a customer can see what went wrong. So rework involves more than just bringing the service into specification. The service defect can be rectified by rerunning the service but the customer is aware of the need for rework and remembers the defect even after it is repaired, entailing a need to rework the customer’s attitude, which is an uncertain specification.

“Ready to Rectify” gives students an opportunity to learn strategies that deal with unexpected breakdowns in service by having them act out encounters between customers and service providers who have failed to provide satisfactory service. It can be run with either undergraduate or graduate students who are learning about service recovery. The setup time is small – none for students since they are improvising – and 30 minutes for the instructor to read and understand the exercise plus the time required to create the “customer type” and “type of service failure” cards. The role-play serves as an excellent introduction to service quality in an operations management course and will provide plenty of fodder and common experience to drawn on when explaining the concept of service recovery.

**Learning Goals**

The learning goals for “Ready to Rectify” include:

* To understand the concept of service recovery.
* To be familiar with different types of customers that service providers may encounter when dealing with service failures.
* To understand how to diffuse potentially antagonistic meetings with customers and reach a resolution that is satisfactory for both the customer and the service provider.
* To understand the importance of being able to adjust, adapt, and compromise in order to solve a problem before it becomes a major dispute.

**Materials and Methods**

The simulation involves three to five minute role-plays where students play service providers and assume different customer personalities, and playact different service failure scenarios. Each service provider must determine the level of restitution s/he is willing to provide to make the customer feel that the service has been corrected and that his/her inconvenience has been compensated. Materials required for the role-play are minimal:

* Nine laminated cards with different kinds of service failure scenarios typed on each.
* Six laminated cards with different customer personalities and definitions typed for each.
* An overhead projector or white board with definitions of the customer personalities for the class members in the “audience” to see.

Business-sized cards work best for handling; lamination is recommended if the cards will be used regularly in classes.

The customer types and their definitions are as follows:

* Engaging/Cooperative: actively works with the provider toward an equitable solution.
* Overzealous: more than being cooperative, this customer type wants to pitch in and help the service provider correct the error.
* Passive-Aggressive: appears to agree with the service provider but won’t really be satisfied until the resolution goes his/her way.
* Silent sufferer: the service provider never finds out that this customer is unsatisfied because s/he never complains, often even if asked.
* Uncooperative: figures that the issue is solely the service provider’s problem. Nothing needs to be conceded.
* Revenge-Seeker: more than getting the service s/he originally sought, this customer wants to make the service provider “pay” for not getting it right the first time.

The types of service failure the couple may have to improvise around include:

* Service was not provided.
* Service provided was one not requested.
* Service was not provided to specification but has done no harm.
* Service was not provided to specification and does not meet objective.
* Service was provided correctly to one specification but the customer was expecting it to meet another specification.
* Service was provided correctly but customer changed his/her mind.
* Service was provided but original state (or reasonable facsimile) cannot be restored.
* Service has rendered emotional distress.
* Service has rendered physical harm.

The instructor first asks the class for volunteers to be the customer or service provider in each improvisation. The instructor arranges the “customer type” cards upside down and the student “customer” chooses a card from the six. S/he looks at the card but tells no one in the class what the type is. The “service provider” chooses a card from the “type of service failure” pile and reads the service failure out loud to the class. The “customer” and “provider” then role-play the service failure scenario. The exchange continues until they reach a resolution or some other conclusion.

**Results and Discussion**

After each pair reaches the end, the instructor asks the class which customer type the student “customer” was playing. The class considers what approach worked well in dealing with the stated customer personality, what didn’t work well, which (if any) actions were taken that were unsuitable, and any additional actions that could have been taken to help set things right. The improvisation is repeated with different students playing distinct dissatisfied customer types and various student service providers pulling separate service failure cards until all six customer personalities are covered. At the end of the scenario depictions, the class discusses best practices for implementing service recovery.

During the post-simulation discussion, the instructor can emphasize three actions service providers need to take to enact effective customer complaint handling:

1. *Attend to the customer’s frustration* by owning the problem, acknowledging the mistake without placing blame, recognizing the customer’s disappointment, showing empathy, and sincerely apologizing.
2. *Solve the problem for the customer* by repeating the service if necessary and providing compensation, even if it’s just a discount on future service.
3. *Investigate the source of the problem inside the organization* by finding its root cause, solving the underlying problem, and informing customers how company policies and procedures have changed to prevent a repeat of the problem.

Students can evaluate how well each “service provider” met these requirements when they interacted with their customer. Issues that may be brought out in discussion include:

* The role of interpersonal skills in services
* The importance of understanding and managing customer expectations
* Tradeoffs between the cost of appeasing a dissatisfied customer and the total cost of not doing so
* Definitions of service quality
* Measures of customer satisfaction
* Service guarantees – when they’re appropriate, how to design them, and how to measure their effectiveness

Finally, the simulation can be used to bring out experiences students have had and to involve them in class discussion. Students are easily involved in the role-plays, especially after the first pair does their role-play and “breaks the ice.” Undergraduates are often working in retail positions and have dealt with customers that include types covered in “Ready to Rectify.” Instructors can ask students how they dealt with similar customers in their own jobs and how they might have handled the encounters differently now that they have learned about service quality and service recovery. By sharing their personal experiences, the role-play and its reactions brings an immediacy to the material and increases its personal relevance for students.

**Conclusion**

The goal of service recovery is to create customer loyalty by effectively responding to customer complaints and by making use of information collected at the time of a service error in order to improve performance. The role-play described here simulates different types of customer-provider interactions by allowing students to improvise common scenarios when either a service provider has made an error or a customer has changed his/her mind. The role-play simulation serves as an effective introduction to service recovery and is a wonderful means of involving students in class discussion. By enabling students to incorporate their own experiences into a classroom exercise, students engage more fully with the material being taught. Ready to Rectify is easy to set up and easy to implement and is an excellent complement to a lecture-based course.

**References**

1. Fitzsimmons, J.A., Fitzsimmons, M.J., Bordoloi, S.K. (2014), *Service Management: Operations, Strategy, Information* Technology, 8th ed. (McGraw-Hill/Irwin, New York)
2. Thompson, H. (2004), *Who Stole My Customer??* (Pearson/Prentice Hall, New Jersey)