Listening Is Not Enough

*You've Got To
Do Something Positive
About It Next*

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When people ask me what I do for a living, I tell them that I "help my clients to hear their customers and then do something positive about it". But you know what, it's not true. That's what I'd like to be doing. More often than not, it's not what happens.

Reality Check

The first part, the bit about hearing customers, that happens most. Well, kind of. Many people I work with get in touch to get better at listening to their customers. But that's not the same as hearing them; at least not in my book. The key to that is the bit about doing something positive. Organisations rarely ask me directly for help with this. Yet it's clearly crucial. After all, what's the point in even trying to listen to the voice of the customer if you are unable to respond positively as a consequence to what is said? I don't think you're really hearing anything, unless you can do that.

And let's be clear, by positive, I'm talking about making changes as a result of your listening that constitute an improvement. Doing things which are ultimately going to be recognisable as 'better' in the eyes of the customers you're listening to. Like faster response, greater relevance, higher quality, easier completion, longer lasting, better price, better fit, getting closer to 'just what I wanted, where I wanted it, when I wanted it' (Womack and Jones, 2005). That's positive to customers and real evidence that you're hearing them.

All too often, it doesn't happen.

In twenty years, working as an opinion researcher, manager, and more recently consultant, I've seen the evidence. No doubt you have, too. I've come across (and yes, written) opinion research reports that went no further than a shelf; sat with managers struggling to know what to do next with the voice of the customer data put in front of them; and listened to employees whose job it was to keep collecting and processing questionnaires, writing up numbers and customer comments, whilst never believing for one second that it'd make any difference to anyone, let alone the customers.

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And for many years, I wondered why it was so difficult to do something positive. It bothers me, you see. And dealing with it is what I really like to do. Listening isn't sufficient.

From listening, to hearing and positive action

So, what does it take to build a 'hearing organisation', one which doesn't just listen to its customers but continually demonstrates that it's hearing them by doing something positive they can recognise as a result?

What follows are four key traits of hearing organisations. These are the things I look for from the outset, and work with my clients to develop. Are they the whole story; the complete answer to the problem, no less? No, they aren't. But they matter a lot. Check them out and think about what happens in your workplace. Most of all, ask yourself how you might contribute to developing the kinds of capabilities described.

No 1. Hearing organisations understand that the object of listening is to form a basis for action

Organisations that don't just listen to their customers, but also respond positively as a consequence, clearly get what W. Edwards Deming meant when he said, 'the object of taking data is to form a basis for action.' (Deming, 1938). This elegant statement, all about purpose, is the first thing to consider where you work.

Ask yourself, what is the purpose of your organisation's listening efforts? Not just the stated purpose, what is the actual purpose (they are not always the same) as identified by what actually happens with the outputs?

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It's been my experience that most voice of the customer data collected in organisations are reported on up the hierarchy. They are used for monitoring. Their actual purpose, even if it is not openly recognised, is for people distant from the day to day work to check and keep tabs on how things are going, to seek reassurance, not truly to learn something new that can be used as a basis for action. They are, in fact, nearly always a basis for passivity; no need to do anything here, everything is normal.

Is this what happens in your workplace? Does monitoring describe the 'action' taken with a majority of data collected from your organisation's listening efforts? Do most outputs take the form of reports to senior managers or some other management team? If they do, chances are your organisation, though it might be said to be listening, is highly unlikely to be doing something positive as a direct result.

No questions asked

A director called the central research team specialists for a heads-up on the results from the annual customer survey. He wanted to know the customer satisfaction ratings for the services in his department.

Inevitably some satisfaction scores had risen, others fallen. For every fall, he gave a variety of explanations, each one as convincing and plausible as the next. He was good at this. He had all the answers. After all, he knew that nobody gets on in their career admitting 'I don't know'.

Were his answers right? Nobody knows. Did he set out to test his theories in any way? No. Did the research specialists suggest this possibility, maybe even offer to help? No. What was learned as a result of the survey? Nothing. What got better as a result? Nothing.

The director moved on to a better job. The monitoring survey continues...

But here's the thing, don't just look at what's done with the outputs, ask yourself what realistically could be done with the kinds of data collected? Put yourself in the shoes of a line manager or member of a team presented with the voice of the customer information routinely generated, would you know what to do next to improve performance and make a positive difference for customers in the future?

Here's a second trait to look for.

No 2. Hearing organisations have questions that need answers, lots of them

Sounds obvious, doesn't it. But think about your workplace, how many questions do you hear being asked around you every day about the way things work, what's happening, what are the problems, and why? And if they are asked, how readily do people answer that they don't know? It's not a bad answer. It's a very powerful answer, so long as they know how to take the steps to collect the data needed to find out? Instead, is it the case that 'having all the answers' is the primary currency of working life in your organisation; the thing that defines a manager and decides who looks good and who gets on?

Problem solving is at the heart of doing something positive.

You see, it's the organisations that keep coming up with questions, precisely because they recognise there are things routinely happening and problems occurring, lots of them, for which they don't have all the answers, that are most capable of hearing and responding to their customers. And often it's not even necessary to speak to a single customer to ask a question of them effectively.

Imagine, for example, that your customers apply for a service through a paper based form. You could be asking what proportion are filled in incorrectly and what are the consequences in terms of delays and customer-chasing (you them, them you)? What parts do they get wrong and why? Is this missing information truly needed to do what needs to be done for customers? Really? What if you started to do the process face-to-face with customers instead? Answers to questions like these speak to the customer experience; funnily enough without necessarily having to speak to any customers at all. But most importantly, they'll lead to positive responses, such as redesigning the form to make it easier to complete or dropping it completely; either of which might be expected to improve performance and reduce the burden on customers and employees alike.

Problem solving is at the heart of doing something positive. Organisations that build a problem solving culture, in which employees routinely bring the problems and challenges they face into the open to be dealt with, ask lots of questions. And when they ask them both of and about their customers, as they inevitably will, they don't just listen to the answers, they likely hear what's said and do something positive as a result.

Now for a third trait.

Great expectations

A group of employees sat down together for the first time to consider customer comments from an ongoing satisfaction survey. Their task was to learn just what matters to customers, what's going wrong and how they might make things better for them.

Top of their list by the end was customer expectations. The conclusion, expectations must be managed better; customers must be told just what they can and can't reasonably expect from the service.

What did customers actually say? Many were grateful. But they also described long delays; chasing to get things done; staying in and no one showing up; things still not working after being fixed; and poor workmanship.

How many customers said they had a problem with their expectations? None, of course.

No 3. Hearing organisations listen to what's being said to them every day

Listening to the voice of the customer is conventionally equated with specialist activities periodically initiated by organisations themselves, things like opinion surveys or focus groups. These are seen as the domain of experts and those responsible for them are typically located somewhere distant from the daily work.

Organisations that hear and respond positively to their customers are different. They recognise that their customers initiate contact and talk with them every single day; ordering products, requesting services, making appointments, providing information, offering explanations, making complaints. This is the authentic voice of the customer and it's everybody's job to listen to it, wherever it can be heard.

So where most organisations set out to deal with each individual demand made upon them, categorising and allocating tasks (what most of us think of as the 'daily work'), hearing organisations also seek to continually distinguish between all the voices and what they are saying in order to keep improving (also the 'daily work').

In recent times the organisational capability to keep hearing and distinguishing between what customers are saying has been powerfully illustrated by the example of 'failure demand'; a concept artfully explained and popularised by management consultant, John Seddon (2003).

Taking as his starting point what everyone who has received a service knows to their cost – that organisations frequently, as he puts it, 'fail to do something or do something right for the customer,' – Seddon has shown how it's possible for organisations to systematically listen to calls and requests from customers in terms of the value being sought by them and to learn what really matters to them and how they are being failed, and then to respond positively by improving, continually.

So, hearing organisations will know what they are being asked for by customers and just how often. They'll also know all about the ways in which customers tell them they are being let down. Whether it's because workman or deliveries fail to turn up, or jobs don't get done in one go, maybe for the lack of basic parts, or work undertaken simply isn't good enough in the customer's eyes. This is the kind of knowledge that can be used to lead improvement efforts. For an organisation that knows what matters to its customers and how it is failing can continually work to close the delivery gap.

But this perhaps begs a question, who is doing the listening, hearing and responding positively as a consequence?

Which bring us to a final trait to look for.

No 4. In hearing organisations it's everybody's job to listen

I've said that often traditional listening efforts, such as opinion research, are the preserve of professional experts, individuals with the keys to a black box of arcane knowledge. In contrast, in hearing organisations there's no mystique involved, everybody listens.

So what does that mean? And how could one recognise it in the workplace?

Well in hearing organisations the results of listening efforts are visible to everyone. Voice of the customer data aren't buried in reports to be fed up the line to distant managers in a forlorn effort to keep them in touch, nor are they simply put on the intranet where it's difficult to ever find them. They can be found in the workplace right where employees doing the daily work can see them and contribute. This is something frequently achieved with low tech methods, such as post-it notes with real customer comments on a whiteboard or just stuck on the wall. These can be studied, moved around, and added to without any great technical know how. The voice of the customer is accessible and easier to hear.

Following on, time is made to listen collectively. It's not a one-off event. Employees regularly sit down together and reflect on just what customers are saying, why, and how to respond. It isn't the job of specialists, of researchers or statisticians, nor is it solely management's job, though it is lead by managers who have the authority to make changes for the better. And it's not reduced to an item on an agenda; it's the sole focus of the meeting. Everybody present is there to hear what customers are saying and share their knowledge in order to improve.

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Customers on film

People naturally focus on methods and answers to the 'How?' questions. In this dazzling era of technological change, it's hardly surprising when organisations reach for new media to try and get the voice of the customer heard better.

The NHS uses DVDs to showcase patients telling stories of their own experiences. Powerful stuff, according to employees, many of whom find it refreshing to hear customers speaking; especially senior managers who don't get to do this often.

Things happen as a result; new initiatives, new facilities. Good news.

But what about after the obvious changes have been made? Are the typical stories patients tell, heard better on DVD?

Delays, without explanation; rushed doctors who don't listen properly; unclear and incomplete explanations of treatment and medication; patients still tell stories about all the difficult things that defy straightforward fixes long after they appear on film.

Of course, the fact that they keep meeting and listening together means employees pretty quickly exhaust the most obvious improvements. More intractable problems remain, requiring deeper reflection, perhaps more data, and frequently the involvement of others. Whatever, the challenge for everyone in a hearing organisation becomes to find ways to deal with and keep improving these, too. The voice of the customer isn't allowed to become so much aural wallpaper.

Finally, in hearing organisations managers know that listening is a key part of their 'day job'. It's not a separate function, a luxury engaged in only when all the daily work is done and the fires have been put out. It's the heart of their role as leaders of improvement, the ones who work together with employees to keep identifying problems and solving them.

Something you couldn't otherwise be expected to know

So that's what I mean when I say that I help my clients to hear their customers and then do something positive about it.

They enthusiastically explain something they learned from listening to customers. It's something which you couldn't otherwise have been expected to know. And then, they show you exactly what they are doing differently today because of it.

These are the capabilities I like to help them develop: Listening with purpose and the intent to act; cultivating questions and seeking answers to them continually; tuning into all the different customer voices that can be heard around you right now; and doing it together with everyone who shares the goal of serving and doing better for customers.

It takes time and effort, of course. There are difficult threads here. Managers will struggle with, even reject, the idea that listening and improving is a key part of their daily work. It isn't now and their world doesn't end. Employees will find it hard to believe their input will ever be truly valued. The experience of too many let downs and fads makes it hard to contribute freely and creatively. Leaders will likely feel there is much to commend the way things are now and insufficient on offer to risk changing.

But it can be done.

Imagine if you will, when nobody at your work tries to convince you they listen to customers by pulling a report on some focus group done twelve months ago off the shelf. When they don't email through a batch of performance charts showing 95% satisfaction rates from an ongoing survey lots of customers don't answer and nobody believes in. Instead they enthusiastically explain something they learned just last week, from listening to customers. It's something which you couldn't otherwise have been expected to know. And then, they show you exactly what they are doing differently today because of it.

That's hearing and that's positive.

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About the author:

I set up my consultancy in 2004, after 15 years working as an 'opinion researcher'; a label that no longer described what was 'in the tin'. I really do see my goal as helping my clients hear their customers and then do something positive about it.

Home is in York, in the North of England, with my wife and two children, both of whom are home educated. Life is hardly ever quiet, frequently fun, stimulating and filled with discovery.

You can learn more about me at http://davidallenconsultancy.co.uk/biography.asp .

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