

Problem Solving Skills: A Key to Customer Service

"Many failures in customer service initially seem like a success to us! We get our perception of the facts, and we come up with a solution that makes sense to us. The problem is we didn't get the customer's perception of the facts, so our solution may not be sensible to them."

Effective listening skills are key to correctly "reading a situation" or "sizing up a situation." The ability to solve problems, resolve differences and capture opportunities involves these listening skills coupled with another skill, the ability to analyze a situation. This requires asking the right questions to clarify problems, needs, wants and opportunities--what people have now compared to what they'd rather have. This helps you discover other people's perception of the "facts."

Following is a questioning sequence called NIOCL that is highly effective for analyzing needs, problems or opportunities in depth. With the factual information this probing sequence gives you, you'll be able to form "tailored" solutions that lead to cooperation, teamwork or buy-in.

Need:

Does a need, problem or opportunity exist?

Importance:

How serious is it? Is it a priority? Critical? Sensitive?

Quantify:

What is the size and scope of the need? Numbers?

Consequences:

What is its impact and effect? What if it's not solved?

Look / Listen:

Is the person open to ideas? Suggestions? Options?

This sequence when used with conversational rapport helps determine another person's perception of the facts, increases your own awareness of their needs, generates the data on which customized and personalized solutions can be formed, and leads to well-informed and committed decisions.

Once you really understand another person's perception of a problem, you will have a much easier time responding with a solution that will satisfy them. This is an essential ability for internal and external customer service, teamwork, sales and any other situation in which your people need to gain the commitment or support of others.