

# Customer Service

*for*

9-1-1!

**DEALING WITH  
DIFFICULT PEOPLE**

**FRAME OF MIND**

Introspection is a personal process of looking inside at your own thoughts. This is a process I went through when designing this training. I understood the concept but the term customer service was vague to me. Not vague in the sense that I didn't understand customer service for my company, or for myself as a customer. Hey, I live in Seattle — home of Nordstroms, the consummate queen of customer service! Still, whenever I, or anyone, approach any learning there is the need to connect personally to the material. So, I held the intent of connecting with the subject of customer service for the Comm Center — personally. Here is what image floated into my mind.

It was a dark and stormy dayshift in the Comm Center, the kind not warm and fuzzy for a grave supervisor. My trainee Joan was late (again) and I was thinking about the next step with her. Joan's total experience in public safety was a volunteer typing project as a Police Explorer, which turned out to be less know-how than was needed for this work. We were learning medical today, if she ever arrived (she hadn't called).

The printer in the back room was out of paper, and I couldn't find any. The floor was typical morning shift change; talking, laughing, yawning; the smell of new coffee brewing. I had my headset draped around my neck ready to plug in, but our console was busy on a call. I sat down for a moment on the dark training console, intending to scribble a quick to-do list.

It was raining hard and usually days like this result in a high level of calls for accidents, flooding and other rainy day activities. The fourth 9-1-1 line had rung about four times, no one seemed to be able to break free to answer it. I plugged in and answered against my better judgment.

*"Police, Fire, Medical."* I was trying to get my screen up.

*"What?"* an agitated male voice said.

*"This is 911, what are you reporting?"* I said sweetly.

*"I'm reporting nothing."* the young male answered.

*"What can I help you with sir?"* thinking what's up here?

*"If I tell you where there's a stolen car, can you keep my name out of it?"*

**"Work is love made visible.  
And if you cannot work  
with love but only with  
distaste, it is better that  
you should leave your work  
and sit at the gate of the  
temple and take alms of  
those who work with joy."**

**– Kahlil Gibran**

**“The better work men do is always done under stress and at great personal cost.”**

**– William Carlos Williams**

“Where is the stolen car located?” I answered, we dispatched for 8 agencies, this could be out of our jurisdiction, and maybe he needed to call County.

“That isn’t what I asked you!” he was loud, I stared at my screen.

“You asked me if I could keep your name out of it, right? Yes, I suppose I could, but I’d need to know more.” I was professional but less sweet.

“You don’t need to know nothing but what I tell you. Now, can you tell me if a car is reported stolen by the license plate if I give it to you?”

“Yes, I can tell if it’s been reported stolen.” I really didn’t know what he wanted at this point but I was sure he was up to no good.

“What are you needing sir?” My face was hot, someone was waving at me on the other side of the window and my computer screen was not responding. I was on the phone without ALI, which should never answer 9-1-1 lines. I had violated one of my own rules. I couldn’t gather any location information on this jerk, I felt defenseless. I knew I shouldn’t have answered this line. This line shouldn’t exist without ALI!

“I need you to stop being a bitch and take this information on this stolen car, unless you don’t give a damn about it.” He was shrill.

“I would love to take the information if you would stop being an asshole.” He hung up.

Ahh, fond memories of my worst work. I was angry! I felt and responded with anger. It wasn’t only him, it was everything and the edge I had that day. In addition to all the other factors I was getting a divorce and my kids were reacting to it. Regardless, I knew I was wrong and human but still it wasn’t my best work. I asked for a few minutes and went into the Deputy Director’s office, just to take a quick assessment of my own stress level at work. But I didn’t talk about me; I talked about the trainee who still hadn’t arrived. Today, I would have talked about much more than the trainee. Nevertheless, I didn’t know what I didn’t know back then. There were a lot of things I could have done better in my work, but it was a ‘learn as you go’ atmosphere and I was learning a LOT! Now I have the opportunity to design training for you around what I, and others, have learned over the history of our profession.

**Customer Service for 9-1-1?**

Another connection I had to customer service was at the college. The room for 9-1-1 training was close to the Customer Service course. I knew the teacher for the course and her curriculum. And my college advisory board had requested a customer service unit of study for the students. As I researched the global teachings and concepts around customer service, I knew they didn't fit this work very well. No disgruntled 9-1-1 customer is likely to find another emergency number to call. We can't go out of business. And we don't just lose customers — we LOSE customers.

But, still this topic remained enormously significant for many reasons. The most noteworthy need for this training is you: your work, your professionalism, your profession, your wellness, your mastery. Many of you are already mature professionals with customer service skills and a strong understanding of the concepts offered here. However, many times we react with instinct. We 'feel' or 'guess' that we are on course, but never get a chance to confirm those skills. I've heard many people say, *"I found out I was doing a lot of things right, and it felt good."*

There is also a need to set standards for our profession. We need to define and align with a body of knowledge, a set of principles. Once we actually define and align to certain professional standards and conduct, and hold them as truths, we can actually pass them on to the new generations. No work should be learn-as-you-go. There is a body of knowledge. There are experts in the field doing great work this moment. Consider this training your confirmation, a tool source, new knowledge and new thought. Consider this training a vehicle for introspection and insight so that you can enlarge your understanding of yourself and your chosen professional path.

Our leadership is now stepping forward to establish procedures to guide. Our trainers are beginning to isolate and identify the methods, skills, and tactics that work so the next generation can refine and pass them on. We need to publish our belief systems (what we believe to be true). I found very little information published on this subject. Even so, customer service, as we define it here, is the foundation for all good work you will do.

**What Does Customer Service Mean?**

cus·tom·er (ku's tem-mer)

*n.*

1. One that buys goods or services.
2. *Informal.* An individual with whom one must deal:

**"If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow."**

**– Chinese Proverb**

**“How much more grievous  
are the consequences of  
anger than the causes of it.”**

**– Marcus Aurelius**

**ser·vice (sûrvs)**

*n.*

1. Employment in duties or work for another, as for a government
2. Work done for others as an occupation or business
3. The performance of work or duties for a superior or as a servant

You don't really have customers in the business sense because no one buys anything from you. Or do they? Taxpayers pay for your service, responders are 'users', your agency pays you to perform. Who is your customer? *'Anyone in your professional capacity that has the right to expect anything of you'*. Your customers are: callers, citizens, administration and your peers.

Service means quite simply, giving 'them' what they expect of you — what they have a right to expect of you. You are in a service industry. To serve means to assist, to facilitate. A waiter facilitates your getting food. He is the middle person between you and the source of food. Without the waiter you would need to go to the kitchen and ask the cook for food. Incredible service is like love; hard to define but easy to recognize when it's NOT there.

But it's not entirely about 'them'. Giving great service, understanding the nature and scope of the work, and performing at optimal levels has many advantages for you. We will study many methods, new thoughts and new ways of doing things that will make your job more enjoyable.

The first thought we want to introduce is the idea of a HOLON. Let's explain a Holon with the following definition — but we're not talking about a tree, we're talking about you and your work, so make the transition.

**Holon**

A holon is a node in the tree structure. Holon comes from the Greek *holos* meaning "whole" and *on* meaning "part" or particle. The key characteristics of a holon include that it asserts its individuality in order to maintain the set order in the tree structure, but it also submits to the demands of the whole tree structure in order to make the system viable. Holons are self-contained, autonomous pieces which follow a prescribed set of rules. The holon has a "self-assertiveness tendency" (wholeness) as well as an "integrative tendency" (part). This duality is similar to the particle/wave duality of light.