

TRANSCRIPT

The Thought Leader's Viewpoint Episode 5

(Introduction): Governors State University School of Extended Learning presents, The Thought Leader's Viewpoint.

Felicia L. Townsend: I am Felicia Townsend from Governors State University's School of Extended Learning. Joining me today is Chris King, the president of Robinson Engineering in Illinois. He has served as president since 2000. Chris also serves as a municipal engineer and project principal. His firm represents approximately seventy communities with a population of 650,000 residents.

Today we are going to discuss strategies to achieve exceptional customer service. Chris, thank you so much for joining me today.

Christopher J. King: Felicia, I'm really happy to be here.

FT: In your opinion, what should companies consider when building a customer focused organizational culture?

CK: Felicia, that is a great first question and one of the words that you used in that question is culture. In this day and age culture is so important for any organization. I believe that the first thing that we all have to do is know our customers. If you don't know the customer, you really don't know what the effort should be to solve their problems. To do that, you have to talk to them and communicate with them.

I think it's important to also think small. It's the little things that matter. So many of our customers require knowing how you differentiated yourself rather than how you're the same as everybody else...We never stop listening. You have to be able to communicate and hear what the client is saying more than hearing yourself talking.

The last thing we like to think about when we think about culture with our customers is ways to give back. It can be the little things that we do in our communities, whether it's donating a bench for the arts, supporting music on the plaza or other things. By giving back we show that we have a culture and we believe in our client's culture to.

FT: What practices can organization leaders implement to improve customer service?

CK: Customer service is one of those things that any leader has to continually monitor and help evolve. We try to do that with ongoing learning and develop of all of our staff. That has to be integrated within the fabric of any organization. We do that by supporting education, whether that be through somewhere like GSU. We employ lessons learned. You never stop learning. When things go well, you should document

it. When things don't go so well, you need to document it so you continue to learn.

Knowledge is power. This is the day in age of knowledge much more so than anything else. Another thing that we think about from a customer service standpoint is employee satisfaction. By having satisfied employees, that loyalty leads to customer satisfaction and loyalty. Your employees, first and foremost, are your face in the communities. So instead of first focusing on the customer, we try to invest in our employees then they focus on the customer so the focus is always forward not so much internally.

I think one last thing I would say is, continuous improvement. It's got to be expected. The speed of gain is second to none these days. You think about faxes that have come and gone. Smart phones are in everyone's pocket. Time is so compressed. We have to handle so many things in so much less time than we've had in the past. So all of those things are very important to customer service.

FT: What are some of the proactive customer service strategies that companies can use to engage their customers in the work that they perform in various communities?

CK: Felicia the great word that you used in that question is the word proactive. Reactiveness just does not work in this day and age. So one of the first things we all have to do is involve our customers. We don't just simply serve them, we have to be involved with them. We have to get to know them and by knowing them we find out what their wants are so that we can truly address their problems. By understanding your customers, you also find ways to go beyond just being a customer and take it out to their community.

Our customers who turn out to be staff and elected officials actually represent all the residents in that community. You mentioned that we serve some 650,000 people, that's really who are customer is. So we have to make sure that we understand that.

The next thing is to always look beyond the immediate. We truly have to understand the long term. We can't just think about what is happening in front of us today. It's what is happening to us today and how is that going to affect the future; that makes the difference of how you are serving that client.

It's always good to step back and view from the 30,000-foot level. Today with the adult attention deficit disorder that happens, people are so focused on the immediate, it's easy to not step back and remember the 30,000-foot level. So that's a very proactive way of addressing customer service.

FT: Name two challenges that companies face when trying to address the needs of their customers and how can these challenges be resolved?

CK: Great question. I'll try to think through the top two that come to mind. It seems like for many businesses, the default approach these days is to respond to problems as they arise. It's sort of like, just in time. That's a very reactive method. While it might satisfy the customer in the short term, it really doesn't surprise them or delight them. I think that's really what we want to do when we are trying to satisfy our customers.

So imagine if you can solve problems before the customers had to call you or even better, if you can address those issues before they were even aware of them. That's a very proactive approach that supports not only the possible but the probable. It turns out to be profitable as solutions get implemented through your work efforts. So that's the number one challenge. It requires a shift in a company's culture which, I would say, is challenge number two.

Culture is hard to change and for that paradigm to shift, leadership has to shift. I think leaders have to consider doing the right thing first. So how would you do that? Well you have to get customer feedback. Ask good questions. Try to solve problems, problems that haven't been identified yet. This gets back to knowing the customer.

It's also important to be upfront and honest with your clients, especially when a mistake occurs. They should never learn about a mistake through a back channel. That's real important from a cultural standpoint. One way we've tried to help our clients is through the creation of frequently asked questions because a lot of residents and communities have these questions and if you can anticipate them, help the client document them, and then publish them it helps to really address questions that people have and give answers for them.

FT: In one of our previous conversations we discussed the importance of companies delivering a high level of professionalism when interacting with their customers. Please elaborate on this.

CK: I'm glad you asked that question because professionalism, especially in my field, it's like doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers—you know we're all professionals. We've gone to school and we've been educated to try to take that education and apply it for the betterment of the customers that we serve.

So the first thing I would say from a professionalism standpoint is unless you're a commodity, don't act like one. No one takes their child to the cheapest doctor they can find to fight their child's cancer. You try to find the one that is going to save your child. I think of it like doctors how they're the stewards of our health and engineers we're the stewards of our infrastructure. Healthy infrastructure helps provide for a framework of a healthy society. As the roads fall apart, as the water systems fail so does the community. All of that drives property value. As property value start to fall, the community sinks lower.

When we think back to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, safety and security are at the base of that. Infrastructure really reinforces safety and security. Therefore, engineers, as professionals, need to lead that issue. We can't fail to act. We have to be ahead of it. We have to be proactive...We need to educate the public. We need to educate the elected officials...The most accomplished professionals demonstrate a sense of responsibility. We want to demonstrate that responsibility in our actions. We welcome the opportunity to take command of a task and we want to see it completed.

That personal responsibility helps create a perception of professionalism in my mind and among our peers.

I remember reading a book about how to take a journey to a higher level of professionalism and it spelled out that it's characterized by the desire to be the best businessperson you can be. It's kind of the same thing when you get back to culture. We want professionals to be the best engineers they can be. We want to protect the infrastructure of our communities. We want to have a desire to help improve the places that we live and we do that through our career as a professional.

FT: Yes and education, as you stated, is key. Can you name three effective ways to deliver exceptional customer service?

CK: Well the first one would be exactly what you just said, "education is key". You never stop learning as an organization. We have to continue to learn everything that we do. The second thing is that you always have to be open. We don't know everything. The pace of society today requires you to stay abreast with how technology is changing. Technology changes so fast. The next thing I would say is, listen more and talk less. That helps get back to knowing the customer. We have to listen and hear what they have to say...A fourth one is adapting. There is so much in this world that is changing constantly and an organization has to be quick to adapt.

FT: What inspires you in your role as president of Robinson Engineering?

CK: I guess I would say that I've been blessed to have a career. I've been here for thirty-five years and, as you mentioned, I've been the president since 2000. It seems like that was in a blink of an eye. Over that time, I live in one of the communities we represent. We live, work and play in these communities. It's where we raise our families. We get to improve the life of these communities in which we live. I think that's pretty neat.

For our employees, they are our biggest assets. That's one of the things about a professional service firm, it's our people. So we have to encourage them to grow and prosper. We do that through continuing education. We do that through benefits. We do

that through supporting them when they try to give back to their communities. Whether we are coaching in the community or whether we are teaching in the community, we try to manage this business to respect all of that.

We bought a condominium down in Missouri on a lake and we let our employees use it on a rotating basis.

FT: Very nice. (laugh)

CK: Yes, they get away and enjoy their family time. As you mentioned, we represent so many people, 170 employees, it's like a family. I think I've been pretty blessed to be able to provide a positive impact on so many lives.

The last thing would be a passion. Regardless of what we do in life, you want to do something that you have a passion for. I always counseled our employees that if you ever have one of those days where you just don't like your job, come talk to me because maybe it will pass. But if it gets to be routine, you have to find something that you have a passion in because if you have a passion you're going to succeed and when you succeed our clients succeed.

FT: Chris it has been such a pleasure talking with you about strategies to achieve exceptional customer service. Thank you for sharing your insights.

(Closing): If you want to learn more about the programs and services offered through Governors State University's School of Extended Learning, please visit govst.edu/oce, that's govst.edu/oce.

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