

Leaders Must Invest in Customer Relationships

As a leader, you are in the Customer business. Some of you are interacting with external paying customers; all of you have internal customers. Regardless, as a leader you must invest in customer relationships if you want to be successful.

If you want to have a successful valued relationship with anyone, you must be willing to invest in it. This isn't a new idea, but perhaps when I add the word "Customer" to the idea, it changes your thinking about it. What I want to do in the next 400 words is challenge your thinking a bit and give you some tangible things to consider.

Here are some specific ways you can invest the relationships with your Customers.

Understand their needs better. Do you know the needs, worries, concerns, goals and strategies of your Customers? If not, how can you possibly serve them at the highest level? This applies both to an individual who is your Customer, as well as for the organization as a whole. You can't provide as much support, value or empathy as possible if you don't know their concerns and aspirations.

Over-deliver. It happens all time (and far too frequently with me); a Customer asks for something and because I want to please them, I let them know when I can deliver something to them. Then I miss the mark I set. This is over-promising, and it is a problem. In most cases, if I would have given myself two more days, I would meet the mark and delivered as promised. Why not deliver sooner than you promise, or greater value than you promise? Why not include a delightful surprise that adds to the experience for the Customer? Every time we over-deliver we are making a positive investment in the relationship with that Customer.

Be their champion! Are you rooting for them, their interests and their success? Your Customers are *people*, and people like to know that other people are in their corner. Cheering when they make the sale or acquisition, when their children graduate or hit another milestone, or when their favorite team wins (or loses) is important. We all like to know there are people in our corner. Are you a champion for your Customers, personally and professionally?

Listen. Really listen. If I could pick the most powerful way to invest in the relationships with your Customer, this would be it. When you listen, it makes the other three suggestions above possible. Remember that truly listening is a selfless act; you are letting the other person know that you value more than what they are saying, you value them.

Notice I haven't really mentioned any investments of money here; rather I'm suggesting investing something more valuable and often harder to come by: your time and attention. When you are willing to invest in this way, your chances of nurturing your relationships (with Customers or anyone) grows significantly.

I urge you to think of this as an investment, and I am confident the returns will be gratifying.