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"IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME, BELIEVE THEM" Empowerment Role Models

By John Tschohl

It's a way of life—or, at least, it should be.

I'm talking about empowerment. If you want to grow your business and ensure its continued success, it's absolutely essential that you empower your employees to take care of your customers. Doing so will eliminate the need to micromanage your staff, provide you more time to focus on the big picture, and dramatically increase your customers' loyalty to your business, which will result in increased revenues and profits.

Your competitors can offer the same products and services at the same price, so what do you have that will move customers to bypass them and patronize your business? Empowered employees who have the authority to bend and break the rules to provide those customers with unequalled service.

Nothing speaks to the power of empowerment like successful companies that have put it in place and, as a result, have realized great success. You don't have to take my word for it, however. Look at these empowerment role models:

Star Choice Credit Union. Although it has only 15 employees, this organization, located in Bloomington, Minnesota, clearly recognizes the importance of empowerment and its impact on attracting and keeping customers. Let me give you an example. Not realizing that the credit union didn't open until 8 a.m., I arrived at 7:15 a.m.; An employee arrived, walked across the parking lot, greeted me by name and said she would open up early to take care of me. Star Choice Credit Union shows that your organization doesn't have to be huge in order to be a role model for empowerment.

Metro Bank. Co-founded by Vernon Hill, this bank opened July 29, 2010, in London. Hill projects that within 10 years, the bank will have 200 locations, \$31 billion in deposits, and 10 percent of the market. I don't doubt his projections, particularly in view of his past successes.

Hill founded Commerce Bank in 1973 and grew it to 460 branches and \$48 billion in assets before selling it in 2007 for \$8.5 billion. He built that bank around empowerment. The number one rule at Commerce Bank—and now at Metro Bank—he says, is that every employee is empowered to say "yes" to customers, but two are required to say "no." When employees want to or have to say no to a customer, they have to go to someone with greater authority to get approval to do so. At most organizations, the opposite is true.

Wilderness Safari. This organization has, by far, the best customer service and empowerment I have ever had the pleasure to experience. It's in the middle of nowhere, and its employees are, for the most part, uneducated, but they have been trained well and empowered. Headquartered in Johannesburg, South Africa and Maun, Botswana, Wilderness Safari allows—in fact, encourages—its employees to do anything the customer wants; no rules, no policies, just an empowered staff focused on providing a great customer experience. An example: When I wanted to take photos and video of Victoria Falls, the Wilderness Safari pilot flew over them three times so I could do so.

Tanzania Revenue Authority. Even a government agency can be a role model for empowerment. The Tanzania Revenue Authority's main function is to assess and collect taxes, but Commissioner General Kitillya has made customer service and empowerment a focus for his employees. The result is an increase in average monthly revenues from \$48.6 million in U.S. dollars in 1998/99 to \$243 million in U.S. dollars in 2009/10.

“We believe that having an empowered workforce, with employees prepared to bend the rules in favor of customers, is so much better than having stagnant and conservative individuals who put the brakes on progress,” he says. Kitillya instituted yearly customer service-focused training for his employees and eliminated unnecessary bureaucracy. He even empowered his employees to waive penalties for mistakes.

You too can be a role model for empowerment—and realize success similar to that of the organizations I've mentioned here. Remember this: Your organization is only as strong as your least empowered employee.

John Tschohl, the internationally recognized service strategist, is founder and president of the Service Quality Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Described by USA Today, Time, and Entrepreneur as a customer service guru, he has written several books on customer service—his latest is *Empowerment: A Way of Life*—and has developed more than 26 customer-service training programs that have been distributed and presented throughout the world. John's monthly strategic newsletter is available online at no charge.