

**Guard Against Resentment Flu:  
Inoculate Your Employees with Internal Customer Service  
By Marilyn Suttle and Lori Jo Vest**

You don't want to catch it. You certainly don't want to spread it. And if employees contract it, it can have a devastating effect on your company's bottom line. What is it? It's resentment flu and it's epidemic in businesses across the country. Surprised? Even though your employees are still working, their first thoughts may not be on how lucky they are to have a job. With financial pressures on businesses higher than ever, taking good care of your employees can help keep them from catching a bad case of full-bore resentment.

Today's workers are experiencing high stressors. They've seen friends, family, and peers lose their jobs. They notice homes in their neighborhoods going into foreclosure. Perhaps they themselves have endured unpaid "furlough" time or salary cuts as employers use preventive measures to avoid more layoffs. They're coping with the discomfort of developing new strategies to work leaner – doing more with smaller budgets and less manpower.

At home, these same workers have had to cut back and deny their families the little extras. "No teenager, you cannot have an iPhone." "No spouse, we cannot take that vacation." "No self – you'd better put that money in the bank or pay down those credit cards." Even those with secure jobs and an optimistic attitude are pausing to question the logic behind company loyalty.

In addition, workers today are dealing with a new breed of consumer. New research shows that the recession has created perfect conditions for the emergence of the "hypersensitive" customer. Who are they? Well, for starters, 74% of them will walk out of your business without buying anything if they don't like the way a front line employee treats them. Indifference is enough to have them take their dollars elsewhere. They are also quick to use social media (such as online customer review sites, twitter, and Facebook) to tell the world exactly what they think of your company.

Employers are putting increasing pressure on their frontline employees to be constantly "on" and "highly attentive." This means they need emotion-management skill development at a time when their own feelings are a bit rattled.

What does this mean? It points to a workplace that is highly susceptible to gossip-spreading, doom-and-gloom predicting, less tolerance for team work, a lack of trust, and falling sense of security. If your business doesn't take steps to inoculate the workplace with internal customer service, this sense of "dis-ease" will spread and quickly start affecting your paying customers. What's happening on the inside will eventually show up on the outside.

The good news is that you can start now to create an environment where resentment and ill will cannot thrive. Being mindful of the following questions can be the catalyst for creating a more successful and resilient workplace environment.

Questions to ask:

1. If I were an employee walking into the doors of my business without having any ties to it, what would make me want to get up in the morning and come to work?
2. Am I congruent – displaying the same level of courtesy, diplomacy, and positive regard with my employees as I show customers?
3. Do I correct the mistakes my employees make with shame and blame or do I give the message that mistakes are a form of accelerated learning.
4. Am I a conflict avoider? If so, how might the workplace environment improve if I saw properly managing disagreements as opportunities for growth? What would that look like? How would that perspective empower every employee to use their voice, feel valued, and contribute?
5. Am I modeling the behavior I want to see in my employees?

Recently, a manager at Ford Motor Company shared how she developed a flu-resistant attitude. “Our department is proud of ourselves,” she said. “We were given a budget and time frame that seems improbable. We’re banding together to make it happen. There’s a new sense of pride we have in ourselves for accomplishing so much in a lean situation.” Focusing on teamwork, acknowledging everyone’s value to the success of assignments, and celebrating every success is her formula for keeping attitudes positive during challenging times.

When someone has a full-blown case of influenza flu, doctors recommend the B.R.A.T. diet (bananas, rice, applesauce and toast) to ease a queasy stomach. This acronym can be redefined to stabilize the core of your workforce as well. Here’s our take on it:

**B – Buy-in:** For every hour you spend involving your employees in company strategies for dealing with economic realities and new initiatives, you’ll save eight hours of grief from employees who feel disengaged, uncommitted and resistant to being forced to change.

**R – Review and Respond:** Pursue and review opinions from both customers and employees. Don’t just read the feedback, respond to it. Your staff members who are doing a specific job know that position inside and out. They may have insights for creating better processes and resolutions to some of the stickier issues that sabotage workplace success. It is also helpful to review job placement. Putting the right employees in the right positions is crucial for creating an upward spiral of happy, productive workers. When your people’s strengths and interests fall in line with their job descriptions, you’ll engage their passion and get more brilliant results.

**A – Accountability and Appreciation:** Set clear expectations for every employee, so you can practice accountability. Privately call out managers and staff (and yourself, for that matter) when those expectations are not being met. One negative employee who continuously laments a bad customer experience affects the well-being of the whole. Give employees a channel to properly vent and then hold them to the expectation that they will move on in a positive direction.

Appreciation is also key to wiping out resentment flu. During a recent webinar discussion about internal customer service, Pam, a participant said, “My boss once leaned over my cubicle and said, “Have I told you recently how much I appreciate you?” Feeling great but a little unclear, she asked, “Really? What is it you appreciate?” Her boss got flustered, mumbled a bit, and walked away. It was a deflating experience that did more harm than good. “I could tell that his appreciation was insincere.” To offer effective appreciation, describe specifically what your eyes are seeing or how you are feeling about the employee’s contributions. When you pay attention to what’s going right, more that’s right will get done.

**T – Transparent Communication:** Mistrust is a major contributor to resentment flu. Are you true to your word? Do you say one thing behind closed doors and another thing to staff? At Sky Lakes Medical Hospital, a company featured in “Who’s Your Gladys? How to Turn Even the Most Difficult Customer into Your Biggest Fan, Jason Card, a front-line employee and his coworkers appreciate their CEO’s willingness to have regular lunch meetings with them to share the state of the business and answer employee questions. This transparency – even when the news isn’t good - creates greater trust among staff and a greater commitment to high performance. Sky Lakes improved their patient satisfaction scores significantly and became a Hospital of Choice due to their committed approach to training, involving, empowering, and being transparent with their front line.

Using the BRAT approach will help eliminate bratty employee (and management) behavior that keeps resentment flu flourishing while wearing down the resistance of even the most positive employees. Examine your commitment to creating a positive employee experience. How strong is it? Take it up a few notches. Make a list of what improvements can be made in your relationships with your employees, then put some of those improvements in place immediately. They’re your ticket to happy, more loyal customers and ongoing referrals.

2012 Copyright Marilyn Suttle

*Marilyn Suttle is the coauthor of Who’s Your Gladys? How to Turn Even the Most Difficult Customer into Your Biggest Fan. Marilyn travels internationally to deliver service excellence keynotes and workshops. Marilyn inspires her clients to excel by creating strong, productive relationships in every area of life. She specializes in creating “Suttle Shifts” in the way people think and act to produce massive results. When you need a keynote speaker or success coach, Marilyn can be reached at (248) 348-1023, [marilyn@marilynsuttle.com](mailto:marilyn@marilynsuttle.com) or visit [www.whosyourgladys.com](http://www.whosyourgladys.com).*

To access additional free customer service resources - including blog articles and video tips - visit [www.whosyourgladys.com](http://www.whosyourgladys.com).