

Doing the Customer Feedback Dance

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The customer feedback dance requires two sides: you and your customer. To ensure a good time for both dancers, there are two things you really need to know: your state of readiness to dance, and the dance readiness of your customer.

First of all, who will be leading the dance? Many product management teams fail to take the lead – they just manage customer feedback. Have you ever tried to dance where no one took the lead? It's a horrible experience.

Warrin Bennis, who widely regarded as a pioneer of the contemporary field of leadership studies, explained what I'm talking about in this way:

"Leaders conquer the context - the volatile, turbulent, ambiguous surroundings that sometimes seem to conspire against us and will surly suffocate us if we let them - while managers surrender to it. The manager administrates; the leader innovates. The manager is a copy; the leader is an original. The manager maintains; the leader develops. The manager focuses on systems and structure; the leader focuses on people. The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust. The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long-range perspective. The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why. The manager has an eye on the bottom-line; the leader has his eye on the horizon. The manager imitates; the leader originates. The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it. Managers do things right; leaders do the right things."

If you find that your customer feedback initiative lacks the expected luster, then ask yourselves if you're leading the dance, or just managing the steps. I'm betting that you forgot that you were even dancing!

Now let's take a look at some items to determine your dance readiness:

Can you two-step?

Are you ready to appreciate your partner (customer)?

"Appreciation is a wonderful thing; it makes what is excellent in others belong to you as well." – *Voltaire*

It is important recognize and appreciate this integral part of any customer feedback initiative – only then do you leverage the skills, experience, and insight of your customers in this elegant dance with the market. If you don't lead, then either someone else leads, or the dance is a flop and ends before it ever started. Your readiness to recognize contributors and appreciate their contribution is obvious. The real dancing partners that you can really benefit from won't even bother if recognition and appreciation of fellow contributors is not there.

Are you ready to take action and place the interests and concerns of your partner in front yours?

"The things partners say positively about the dance are not the opposite of what they say negatively. What makes people happy is related to what their partners do, what makes them unhappy is how they are treated." *Frederick Herzberg*

In the dance, we don't pick partners who look good; we pick partners who make us look good. Differentiation isn't about what we look like; it's about our ability to make our partners look good. If we think we're ready to dance with our customers, then we better be ready to make them look great! We need to lead the dance, if done right, you don't need to worry about their capability, you can make anyone look good.

Now let's take a look at your dance readiness as a partnership. There are leadership challenges you should be aware of:

- The dancing couple must match and synchronize their steps with the business ideas and purpose of the customer feedback initiative. There is an initial period of uncertainty and even reluctance in the dance that the customer spends establishing, refining, and monitoring their participation. Is your Customer Feedback program still ready to lead the dance?

- How exciting, your dance partner has confidence in you. Now your partner begins to let the word out and all the users within the organization begin to participate. During this period of the dance, you both take turns defining, shaping, publicizing, and energizing the dance. One of you steps forward, the other must respond with a backwards step. Strategies and objectives become aligned, the product management team must synchronize with the customer's vision and expectations.

- Now you need to involve, facilitate, and communicate encouragement to your dance partner. They want specifics about how they are doing. Customer feedback programs without key performance metrics being reported back to the customers is like dancing with a dummy. Your partners will bail on you.

- It's at this point that you've got to love dancing. You're now ready to consider group dancing, yes even the line dance. Market segments and supply chains align and synchronize with the goals and objectives of your feedback initiative. Once more are you ready to lead? You must provide focus, unity, and connectivity to the various dancers. I'll tell you it's a challenge, but what a blast.

- Finally, you're going to want your feedback initiative to provide enablement, engagement, and empowerment throughout the innovation lifecycle. If you thought dancing was a challenge before, just take a look at your team now. Tasks and jobs of the individual dancers must be coordinated and synchronized with members of your product management team within context of your product management processes.

The bottom-line: if you're not ready to dance, then get off the dance floor. Customer feedback initiatives are all about relationship building. If your product management team isn't ready to build and maintain relationships while assuming the proper levels of leadership, then you

shouldn't expect much from your initiative. However, for those rare and few product management teams that are ready to lead long-lasting relationships within the customer feedback initiative, the rewards can be spectacular.

Do you want to DANCE?

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