

The model is simple in structure, easy to use, and low risk. It requires nothing in the way of ‘personal analysis’. It is therefore safe to use, even in the clumsiest of hands.

At a business level, one of the key benefits of Continue & Begin is the speed of application and efficiency of time involvement for both coach and coachee. In retail environments it is essential that any coaching model be quick to use and easy to share with colleagues. Continue & Begin was developed with simplicity in mind. That’s why, in just a few years since its inception, so many of today’s global brands are now using Continue & Begin to help their people to *continue to* do some things well and to *begin to* do other things differently – maybe *even better* than they already do.

PART A

underpinning principles

1

pits of despair

I've discovered a common pattern of speech when meeting with senior executives of companies I've helped. The executive, usually the operations director of a large retail operator, will set out his or her ambitions for the business. The conversation will go something like this:

Ops Director. We've got a clear business plan for this year. We are in a very competitive marketplace, and our customer satisfaction data is telling us that service quality is the key. In order for us to achieve the goals set out in the plan we have to address *customer experience* as our primary driver for performance improvement.

NDK. I see. What specifically do you have in mind?

Ops Director. We have a challenge with the quality of customer experience in our stores/branches/dealerships. It varies massively. We have some parts of the business that are doing really well in terms of customer experience.

The mystery shopping and customer satisfaction data tell us so. But we also have vast acres of mediocrity where the service quality is just ‘OK’. ‘OK’ simply isn’t good enough anymore. And then we have some parts of the business where, frankly, it’s a pit of despair. What I want is consistency across the national estate!

After a few years of hearing the same speech each time I visited a national retailer, I began to anticipate the language pattern described above. It’s actually quite hard not to say it out loud, as the ops director is about to reveal his or her hidden concerns. If the ops director is struggling to know what he or she wants (a common scenario) I will explain that sometimes when I meet ops directors for the first time they will say to me... and I then describe the above conversation. Time after time, the poor executive nods feverishly and says,

That’s exactly what’s happening in this business! That’s why I want to talk to you about a customer service training programme.

Pockets of excellence, vast acres of mediocrity, and pits of despair exist in every business-to-consumer national or regional operation I’ve ever worked with. It’s a feature of retail networks.

2

the model of excellence

Here’s a question for you: “Is training sufficient to embed new work practices?”

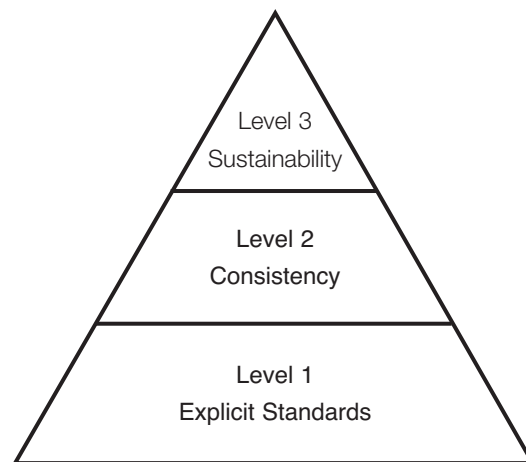
The answer is a definite “No!” and yet, despite this, when it comes to fresh ambitions about customer service quality, staff training is usually in the air. Of course, training plays an important role in service quality improvement. The challenge for senior managers is to choose the most effective training route to create improved skills and new capabilities.

But if we accept that training, on its own, is insufficient to create the changes you want for your business, then how can you ensure that a given approach to learning and development will be effective?

Fortunately, some of the world’s leading businesses have a helpful ‘success pattern’ for training. The pattern (almost!) guarantees consistent, high-octane performance, with that all-important criterion, *sustainability*. The pattern can be used as a guide to developing customer service excellence.

I identified the pattern during years of working with class-leading retail, automotive and financial services operators, and in one or two public sector agencies as well. It seemed that in almost every case, the very best performers in any given business sector had a framework for learning and development that followed a common pattern. The NLP community might call this discovery an output from ‘modelling’; I don’t think it was anything quite so grand, I just stumbled over it when I had a brief *Eureka!* moment.

The pattern is what Gregory Bateson, the anthropologist and polymath, called a ‘pattern which connects’. I call it the Model of Excellence. The model relates to three levels of influence:



1. Explicit standards

World-class operators have an explicit set of performance standards that spell out exactly what is expected of employees. This approach applies irrespective of the discipline, industry sector or

activity. Employees need to know what is expected of them if they are to work to a given standard.

This is Level 1 in the Model of Excellence (see diagram).

The ambition of most organisations is that the application of skills and techniques will achieve a performance equal to, or surpassing, the explicit standards. Given the right skills, tools and personal characteristics, this is an effective approach that works well for most employees.

What happens, typically, is that some form of training is provided in an attempt to transfer understanding and to develop the necessary skill sets. Smart operators develop bespoke training solutions that are tailored to suit their precise needs. Off-the-peg training packages rarely embrace the cultural idiosyncrasies of an organisation. Formulaic approaches incur resistance and are sometimes perceived as an imposed regime that the organisation has to ‘fit to’.

Even when the training is apparently a perfect match, the experience for many organisations is that, on its own, training has limited impact. In fact, a lot of training goes in one ear and out the other. That’s a fact. To make training truly effective it must be memorable.

Class-leading businesses ensure that new knowledge and understanding stays with the trainee long after the session has ended, through a combination of indirect suggestions, metaphors, stories, analogies, fun activities and games, language activities, humour and mild teasing.

Training has to be *fun* and *intriguing* – trainees learn more when they are relaxed and enjoying themselves. If you can make a course delegate or on-the-job trainee curious about learning, they will want more, and more, and more knowledge. And

confidence comes from underpinning knowledge. Think about it... when you've been anxious or nervous about a task or activity (maybe a presentation to an influential audience?) it's usually because there's an uncertainty at play; and for many people the uncertainty is caused by gaps in their knowledge about a given topic. All organisations need their people to be confident.

If people enjoy learning, they become confident and are more likely to become *even more* curious about those things they don't know... and then learning becomes a habit. In fact, you might be curious yourself about what you would like to know more about...

2. Consistency

Ask any senior manager in an organisation and he or she will tell you that across his or her national or regional estates there are pockets of performance excellence, vast fields of mediocrity, and occasional pits of despair. Too often, service quality can fluctuate over time between outlets, branches or offices, and this can create real challenges in maintaining a reputation of excellence.

Top-performing organisations strive for consistency of excellence in all geographic and functional areas of their business. Effective training can help with this, especially when it is practically (competence) based and aligned with the explicit standards of performance prescribed by the business.

Buy-in from the top is essential – there's nothing more influential than a senior manager or director participating in some front-line training. After all, culture starts at the top, doesn't it? A degree of 'air cover' helps too. When middle-ranking

managers know that they have the backing of the top people to release staff for essential training, it makes attendance on training events easier to justify.

But here's the rub...

Consistency is of limited value if it's temporary. World-class operators know that performance excellence must be delivered day in and day out, long after the latest training initiative has been launched. In some organisations, training is like throwing mud against the wall. Most of the mud slides off the wall immediately.

Consistency is Level 2 in the Model of Excellence.

3. Sustainability

In fact, training is a complete waste of energy and resources unless it is made *sustainable*.

New drives for quality, including the introduction of revised performance standards, are subject to what we refer to as *parachute training*. When organisations implement change, sometimes employees perceive the new project as the 'latest initiative' and the associated training as being delivered by facilitators or consultants who *parachute in*, deliver the training and are then *helicoptered out*. Even the most inspirational training events can be short-lived in terms of longevity of impact.

We've all been on training courses that are informative, good fun and even useful! The challenge for most of us is that when we get back to the day job our early excitement and enthusiasm gradually wanes as the realities of the daily grind take precedence. The commitment to new thinking and behaviour often

loses momentum after a period of compliance. Even when the whole team experiences the same learning and development programme – at the same time – the ‘stickability’ of the training can be questionable. Let’s face it: few training activities produce a long-term positive impact on their own.

Not surprising then, that many leading-edge corporations have found this is an ineffective methodology for improving performance.

Key to sustainability (Level 3 of the Model of Excellence) is the development of a coaching philosophy and skill set that allows local managers to keep the plates spinning long after the training event has passed. Sustainability through local coaching and management keeps the momentum up and the training alive!

Training must be supported by local leaders who ensure that trainees get the opportunity, encouragement and coaching to implement their new learning. Otherwise, why were they sent on the course or given the training in the first place?

If you don’t currently have a coaching culture and capability embedded within your organisation, get it sorted out! Every professional manager should be able to coach using a consistent methodology – it’s a fundamental management competence.

3

implementing the model of excellence

The Model of Excellence is now widely employed across industry sectors and the commercial/public sector divide. Why? Because it creates results.

The starting point, logically, is the creation of an explicit set of standards that people can relate to, that they believe could be achievable, and that they can incorporate into their daily working lives. Too many performance standards are couched in ‘management speak’ that other colleagues find difficult to digest. Make standards simple, meaningful and relevant and then train colleagues to be able to deliver them.

Of course, they’ll need the tools to do the job, and that might mean resource investment. Combine this with a local coaching capability that supports and encourages and you have the building blocks for a sustainable model of working that will create excellence across your organisation.