

When everything is political

A CUSTOMER CARE MODEL FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A mayor was called to a community meeting. People had been promised houses, but where were they? The mayor had no houses handy and she had not made the promise, but the people were angry. One man got up and threatened to drive out those who had been allocated houses in a neighbouring development. Conflict was in the air. The mayor listened. She had no magic solution to this problem, but she listened and showed the people that she understood. She did not solve the problem but she did defuse the crisis.

This example shows a special type of customer relations management (CRM) that is not found in the private sector but is crucial in public sector institutions – where the ‘shareholders’ and the ‘customers’ are the same people. If you are dissatisfied with your local municipality, there is no alternative supplier of municipal services to which you can switch. Public unrest could soon turn into conflict and the destruction of public property, as evidenced in some parts of the country in the run up to the local government election earlier this year.

The nature of customer relations management

Political customer relations management needs to be seen as part of the package of approaches that a municipality needs to master when planning a customer care strategy. CRM is not only about smiles at the front desk and a responsive back office; it also depends on getting your balancing act right. Managing customer relations requires the feeding of three CRM ‘beasts’ at the same time.

Corporate CRM is the overall culture of respect for the customer that transcends all activities of the municipality. Corporate CRM activities are led by the switchboard – or the corporate call centre – and by the ‘walk-in’ centres in municipal offices. Traffic and housing offices, libraries and clinics can also play a role here when they provide general services that do not require technical expertise in areas such as financial interactions, applications, information requests,

service comments and bookings for halls and sports facilities. Queries and complaints are directed to service departments when a field response is required.

Political CRM activities ease the relationship between customers and their political representatives. These include the consultations around the IDP and the municipal budget and how communities interact with their ward councillors. The success of political CRM is shaped by how political representatives work with the officials in the municipality. Political CRM activities require the administration to support politicians with the information they need to communicate to their wards. It means fielding the queries that arise out of mobilising campaigns undertaken by the council.

Function-specific CRM activities vary greatly. They include call centres for emergency services, transport information, electricity and water as well as traffic fines, vehicle registration and building plans. All of these deal with citizens and their needs directly. Because function-specific CRM is so varied, it is important that different services should comply with uniform guidelines in operating call-taking facilities or in monitoring their dealings with citizens. Good co-ordination – and internal Batho Pele – is the name of the game.

Taking the pulse of service delivery

The CRM system can be used to take the pulse of service delivery. It helps to plan where resources are most needed

for improvements, which is why it is necessary to follow a 'model' of CRM, so that the powerful spin-off benefits can be realised from the intelligence system that can fit alongside it. In all cases, the main information needs are to record who the customers are that have concerns, what the issues are and whether the complaints are closed. These information flows help to set service standards, including formal service charters, and help in monitoring performance. They also act as an 'early warning system'.

Political CRM has two information requirements:

- Firstly, analysing the queries and complaints received by the municipality by area to identify gaps in service delivery and the relative intensity of citizens' concerns about the different issues.
- Secondly, monitoring the feedback from citizens to the campaign initiatives of the council, by area. This second set of issues is transformational in nature and it is less easy to measure. Both types of information are, however, important for political CRM.

Corporate CRM needs to pull together an overall picture of service delivery and the response profile to different queries and complaints. A particular need is to be informed of follow-up actions by the back office so that reliable statistics can be prepared on unresolved queries, so that citizens can be kept informed of the progress of their query.

Function-specific CRM needs to keep abreast of CRM information in other departments as well as monitoring their own performance.

Comment

The philosophy of CRM is clear, but making it real is very difficult in councils that are driven by turf disputes and where silo attitudes have become embedded over time. A council may appear to agree on the definition of CRM and its link to Batho Pele, but it requires determined leadership to make things happen.

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This is the third and final of a series of articles on customer relations management in local government.

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ODA is a majority black-owned strategic change management consultancy specialising in complex, large-scale institutional and social change processes. The company grew out of a number of business initiatives spanning more than a decade, and combines the experience, networks, knowledge capital, and skills of some of Southern Africa's leading practitioners in the fields of organisational strategy, public sector reform and urban sector development.

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