

The Four Most Important Words in Excellence

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Whether sales or service these four words will determine whether or not you deliver excellence:

1. Accountability
2. Communication
3. Comprehension
4. Consistency

While not seeking to minimize this profession, these four words can literally mean the difference between success and failure in any sales and service organization.

Accountability: “the quality or state of being accountable; especially an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions”*

These are powerful words...quality, obligation, responsibility...and day in and day out, everyone is held accountable for something. In most cases, accountability is a two-way street – people and organizations are accountable to each other. For example, a mortgage company agrees to accept the obligation of loaning the outstanding value of a property to a buyer, who in turn agrees to be accountable and pay the monthly payment along with the agreed upon interest. Teachers meet their obligation of providing an education for their students and to teaching the curriculum their superintendent outlines, and students (and parents) are obligated or accountable for attendance, homework, behavior and studying.

Yet, when it comes to work, accountability is what most employees fear most. No one wants to be held accountable, least of all sales and/or service employees. This leads directly to communication, comprehension and consistency.

Communication: “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior; also exchange of information; sign language = road rage”*

Information exchange. It seems simple enough, yet miscommunication takes place more often than not, especially in business. As a manager, it's not enough to think that your employees know what is expected, nor is it enough to simply tell them. People communicate in different ways and require different resources to ensure communication is remembered and learned. Some learn by hearing, others by seeing, and still others by doing. Effective communication requires all three methods. Tell your employees, show them and then have them do it.

Even so, is this enough? Do people remember after a single communication? In our world today, there is so much “noise” that for communication to truly be effective, it needs to be repeated and

recorded. People seeking to drown out superfluous noise practice selective hearing, which further complicates effective communication.

Managers must tell employees clearly what their job is, what the expectation is for their sales and/or customer service performance every day, how they are measured, where to go for more information, how to handle challenges or problems, and even things as simple as how to dress.

Employees must have access to the necessary material, Internet, books and other resources that can serve as references to what they've been told to make their jobs easier and to set them up for success. For example, if your business uses the Internet, be sure your employees have full access to internal resources as well as to the customer view of your business as reference tools.

A good example of this is Coldwater Creek, a retail women's clothing store. When a customer is in a store and requests an item that is not available, a salesperson can immediately go to a computer with the customer, look up the item online, help the customer with the selection process, close the sale and offer to have the item sent either to the store or directly to the customer. In addition, the salesperson can access internal information that tells them if the item is available in another store, is discontinued, will be going on sale, or other internal data that helps them communicate and close the sale. This is an example of service above and beyond with the interest of the customer coming first.

The best communication, however, is worthless without comprehension.

Comprehension: “the act or action of grasping with the intellect: understanding”*

Do your people *understand* what they are accountable for? Most people will answer, “yes,” yet most of the time people make mistakes or fail to meet expectations because of a lack of understanding. Comprehension cannot be assumed. Without a clear understanding, employees either do what they think should be done or what they feel like doing. Rarely, will they meet expectations.

Comprehension comes when an individual has a full understanding of what is being done, how it must be done, and why it matters. To fully comprehend, an individual must be involved in the process. They have to understand the benefit for himself or herself – like the great radio station WIIFM (**What's In It For Me**), and for the customer. Using a simple example, if you ask someone to jump off a bridge, 99% will ask why. They need to understand before acting, because it could be their “final act.” The same is true in business. Employees, who understand why processes exist, perform better. Often, simply asking questions will provide a reality check on whether or not an employee understands, and whether or not management is communicating clearly. This is not a dress rehearsal.

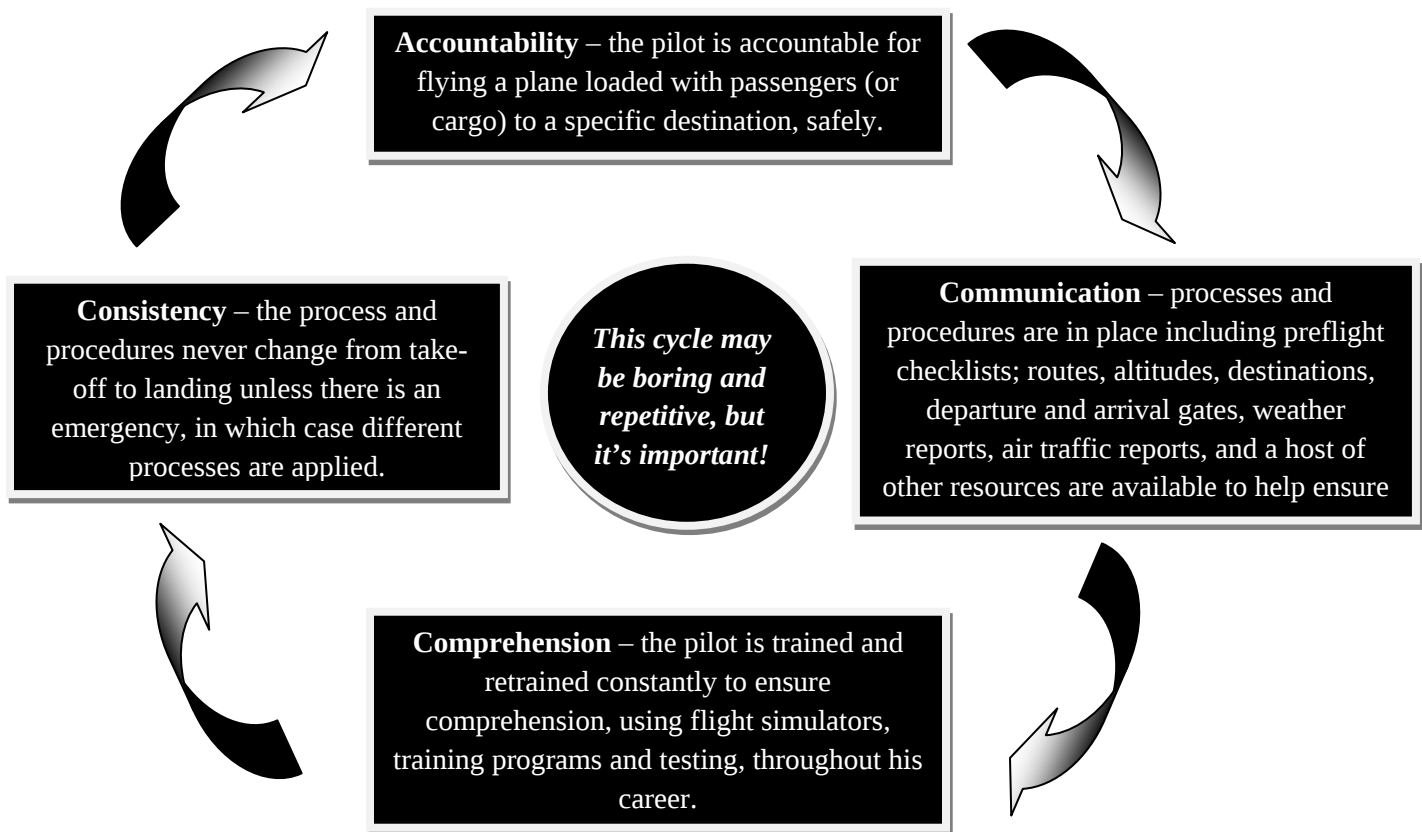
Consistency: “harmony of conduct or practice with profession”*

Another primary cause of misunderstanding is a lack of consistency from one manager to the other, or even by the same manager. If employees are educated on processes and expectations and they are applied inconsistently they are left wondering what to do. How can any employee be held accountable if the rules change day to day? Managers must be consistent. And, if changes

are made, they need to start back at the beginning, communicate what employees are responsible for, ensure comprehension and apply the new standards consistently. Only then can managers hold employees accountable and business achieve sales and service excellence.

Conclusion

Have you ever wondered why a veteran airline pilot, walks around the plane before take-off and then meticulously goes through a checklist before starting the plane? Even pilots who are 25+-year veterans consistently go through the same process before every flight. That pilot knows – comprehends – that the procedures and processes that have been communicated are in place to ensure that the plane and its passengers arrive safely at a destination, a trip the he as the pilot is accountable for. Let's break it down.



Accountability, Communication, Comprehension, and Consistency – when taken to heart and applied by management with their people, these truly are the four most important words in achieving excellence.

*Source: Merriam-Webster, m-w.com

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