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Officer Development Series – *Customer Service*



Creating a Culture of Customer service

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

Excerpt from *Step Up and Lead*

Every organization has a culture. It is either created by design or default. Creating a culture of customer service does not happen by accident. Buying into the concept of layered leadership (the need for leaders throughout your entire organization) is especially important when it comes to customer service.

Helping others seems to be part of the DNA of most firefighters. Creating culture; however, goes beyond just being a good person. There has to be a clear and focused objective or mission on behalf of your organization. Like any mission, it starts with the vision of one person – a leader. In this case, that person can be you. Once others see what you are striving to accomplish and understand it will have a tremendously positive impact on your organization, they will buy into that vision, and you are well on your way to creating a culture by design, rather than default.

Everyone plays a role in creating culture, from the person who answers the phones to the leaders in the field, but the individuals who have the greatest impact on the organization overall are usually those at the top and middle of an organization – the officers.

Fire Officers play critical roles in creating the right *customer service* culture within the fire service. Officers have the obligation to set the standard, which can be accomplished by taking the following actions:

1. Providing leadership and guidance on what is acceptable and what is not.
2. Setting a good example for others to learn from.

3. Clearly communicating the mission of the organization.
4. Supporting the field members who are in daily contact with the customers.
5. Publicly recognizing outstanding effort and make a big deal out of the right activity.

Once again, true to human nature, this is usually where some individuals will point out that the people at the top of their organization may not be doing any of the actions listed above. Why do we do this? I believe it's because too many people look for someone to blame when things aren't perfect. If you just fell into that trap, now is a great time to remember that **YOU** can make the difference. You can help your organization achieve the right results and begin to create the right kind of culture.

Who are your customers?

Anyone that interacts with your organization, on any level, is a customer.

The right activity **ALWAYS** produces the right result. The right result for any service based organization like ours is providing the best customer care possible. To do this, remember the acronym **Customer-KARE**.

Customer-KARE

- **Knowledge** – It cannot be emphasized enough that you must understand how to do your job and how to meet your customer's expectations.
- **Attitude** – The manner in which you approach and interact with others will have a lasting effect. People always remember how you made them feel.
- **Respect** – Respect your customers at all times, otherwise your organization is destined to fail. Don't ever forget, the customer is always right.
- **Excellence** – This should be the overall goal for when people think about and talk about the experience they had with you and your organization.

If the upper management of your organization fails to recognize the importance of providing great service to your customers, the organization is heading for failure. That is, unless the individuals who are dealing directly with the customers (like you) “get it!”



Frank Viscuso is a fire chief, speaker, and regular contributor to Fire Engineering magazine. Frank is the author of four books including the best-selling textbook *Fireground Operational Guides*, and his leadership book titled *Step Up and Lead*.

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