

“I Just Work Here” Creating a Frontline That Improves Your Bottom Line

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by John Skabelund

Have you left a convenience store lately, wondering why the cashier seemed so put out, even hostile, while ringing up your purchase? Do you long for a simple “Thank you” or a “Have a nice day” when your change is handed to you at the video rental store? Have you had the impulse to reach across the counter and tickle the disgruntled robot who’s handing you your change, just to see if you could get a smile or even eye contact?

What has happened to America’s frontline?

Throughout the country, at every sort of retail business, fast food and other restaurants, and customer service departments everywhere, to name just a few of the affected industries, on-the-job apathy runs rampant. Unreliable, bored, unmotivated, unfriendly and even openly antagonistic frontline employees give your customers a bad impression of your business and make it difficult for them to want to come back, only to have to deal with this same attitude again. You may already have experienced the tremendous impact your frontline’s attitude can have on your repeat business and, thus, your bottom line.

More and more frontline employees are clocking in for work while clocking out mentally. What can you do about it?

In the long term, money alone appears to do little to improve the frontline’s motivation. If a bigger paycheck doesn’t cure the “I’m just here for the check” attitude, then what will? Here are some suggestions for working with your employees to get your frontline to start caring about your bottom line.

Share the vision

Show your frontline employees the Big Picture, and help them to realize their role in the workplace and the impact of their work on the business. Rather than letting them feel like a dispensable cog in management’s machine, make clear the tie-in between good customer service and repeat business. Most frontline employees, when they understand how necessary repeat business is to keep the company running, will respond positively, if only to ensure that they will continue to have a place to come to work each day and a steady paycheck.

While encouragement for a job well done makes an individual feel good in the short term, employees need proof that they are integral to the business’ success if you are to achieve long-term results. A business owner who couldn’t initially afford a competitive receptionist’s salary hired the least expensive employee he could find. After a few months, however, a colleague called him to say that not only was he treated rudely by the receptionist, but he was told, when he tried to order a product, “We ain’t got none of them.” Lesson learned, the owner hired a “Director of First Impressions” to answer phone calls and take orders. He explained the impact of the position on the company and how important it was to make a great first impression on every customer. Now, the employee who answers the phone not only hears praise from management for doing a great job, but is given proof that he or she is a valuable asset to the company’s continuing success.

Invest in your employees

A retail business owner with high turnover blamed “today’s kids’ lack of loyalty” instead of looking for substantial root causes for his inability to maintain a reliable staff. Though it is easy to attribute high employee turnover to a Generation Y characteristic, the real cause of the problem often lies with the employer and a lack of effort to encourage employee buy-in.

You may never have thought about it in these terms, but management usually makes decisions based on information that the frontline doesn’t have. So, feeling misunderstood and unheard, frontline employees retreat to an extremely unproductive “us versus them” stance in relation to management. Employees who feel detached from the organization’s decision-making process find it very easy just to show up for a paycheck, give minimal effort, and, finally, not show up at all.

If your employees are stale, revive them by giving them an opportunity to be heard. Invest some time and involve your staff in the decision-making process whenever possible, and you’ll see the payoff; they will, in turn, invest in you and your company with their time, energy, skills and loyalty.

When you simply take the time to ask employees their views on matters affecting the business, they will feel more involved and empowered; their loyalty is a natural byproduct of those feelings. And when you make decisions that are contrary to the frontline’s point of view, explain the factors that went into the decision-making process and how their input shaped the final decision.

Reward performance

Telling an employee that they have done a great job makes them feel good for the short term, but eventually wears off. Excellent frontline employees might not be with your business for long, as your customers see an exceptional level of service and try to woo your people over to their businesses. So it’s essential for you to establish a rewards system that works in order to keep your best employees.

A skilled clerk who’d been working at a convenience store for a year had a stack of business cards from the store’s customers who had offered him jobs in a wide variety of industries. He hadn’t left yet, even though he hadn’t received a pay raise he’d been promised three months before. More than the money, he appreciated his employer’s flexibility with scheduling; he valued his time more than money, and his manager had discovered what he valued most, then developed a way for him to earn it.

Remember, it isn’t always money that motivates your frontline. Whenever possible, reward improved and consistently good performance with whatever each employee wants most.

Create the frontline you want and need

Don’t despair that there just aren’t any good workers out there anymore. You can have the frontline staff you want and that your business needs by taking action. Start today by explaining your organization’s Big Picture to every employee. Ensure that they understand their direct impact on your business’ bottom line. Follow that up by making each employee feel like he or she is a part of the business by giving everyone a voice in decision-making whenever you can.

Finally, develop a reward system for improved performance. Whether it is profit-sharing or something else they value, you will develop employee loyalty by making an effort to recognize and compensate superior performance. If you follow these steps, you will find yourself with a frontline that cares as much about your company’s bottom line as you do.

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