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Quality: A Competitive Advantage?

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Introduction

Employees are one of the key elements in the operation of a successful hospitality business. Having the right employees will greatly enhance the likelihood of success for any enterprise. Much work and academic study has taken place examining the recruitment and selection, and the training of employees (Conrade, Woods & Ninemeier, 1994, Donnellan, 1996, Mullins, 1995, Roehl & Swerdlow, 1999 and many others). Yet many hotel and hospitality companies pay scant regard to trying to understand the motivations of their employees and its impact upon quality.

The implementation and integration of organizational climate, service quality, and customer satisfaction are critical issues for current day managers. Many initiatives in quality are instituted but most fail to meet any or most of their objectives (Lovelock, 2001). An argument is presented that quality initiatives without understanding an organization's climate are always prone to failure and a good organizational climate is a prerequisite for any successful quality initiative. A conceptual model is proposed that seeks to explain the relationships between organizational culture, organizational climate, service quality, customer satisfaction and organizational performance.

Service quality in hotels is an issue of critical importance for the industry. National and international quality standards have been set that rely heavily upon documentation and quantifiable measures, yet it is noticeable that the number of service quality initiatives has subsided over the last few years. This is not to say that the importance of service quality has diminished but the success of the programs that were put in place to support quality improvement has proved to be mixed (Lovelock, 2001, Kordupleski, Rust & Zahorik, 1993, and Kimes, 2001). A recent article in the Courier-Mail carried the headline "Sloppy service driving tourists away: Minister" (Anon, 22nd August, 2005) reporting upon a speech by the Federal Tourism Minister Ian Macfarlane warning

tourism operators to lift their game with the inference that they will lose market share. Although service quality in the hotel industry has been discussed in the literature and in the press, not enough attention has or is being paid to its operationalization and day-to-day implementation. The purpose of this paper is to provide insights to successful implementation of service quality programs.

Determinants of Service Quality

Several approaches can be taken when examining what constitutes service quality in the hotel industry. Davidson (2003a) identified three aspects of defining service quality in hotels: measurement and achievement of performance standards, customer assessment of service quality, and the employee/customer interface approach. Ekinici and Riley (1998) concluded in their review of the literature on measurement of service quality that neither the theoretical or empirical approaches have resolved the issue on how this is most efficaciously addressed. Using the customer as the judge of quality has also seen a great deal of academic study by leading theorists such as Berry, Parasuraman and Zeithaml (1988) with their SERVQUAL multi-item scale for measuring service quality and by Knutson, Stevens, Wullaert and Yokoyama (1990) with their LODGSERV index specifically designed for the lodging industry. Both these approaches use a perceived gap analysis in service delivered and the customer perceptions of service quality. The problem with this approach is that there are many different customers and what is quality for one person may not be the same to another. Gehani (1993) supports the view that customer perceptions of service quality vary depending upon their background. This is in line with most industry professionals experience in having different people coming to differing assessments of quality. There is no “absolute” for service quality. Therefore, the issue of defining service quality is very complex.

Berry, Parasuraman, and Zeithaml (1994) identified several determinants of service quality including reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Reliability in the service

or product was bound to the performance standards but was also about the level of service offered. Responsiveness was the willingness to deal quickly and efficiently with the needs of the customer. These were a direct result of the training and attitude to service of the employee. The assurance dimension dealt with the level of trust, confidence and empathy the employee demonstrated to the customer and was supported by Harris, Bojanic and Cannon (2003) who pointed out that 75.6% of service quality is judged, not on product, but upon the service attributes of the staff.

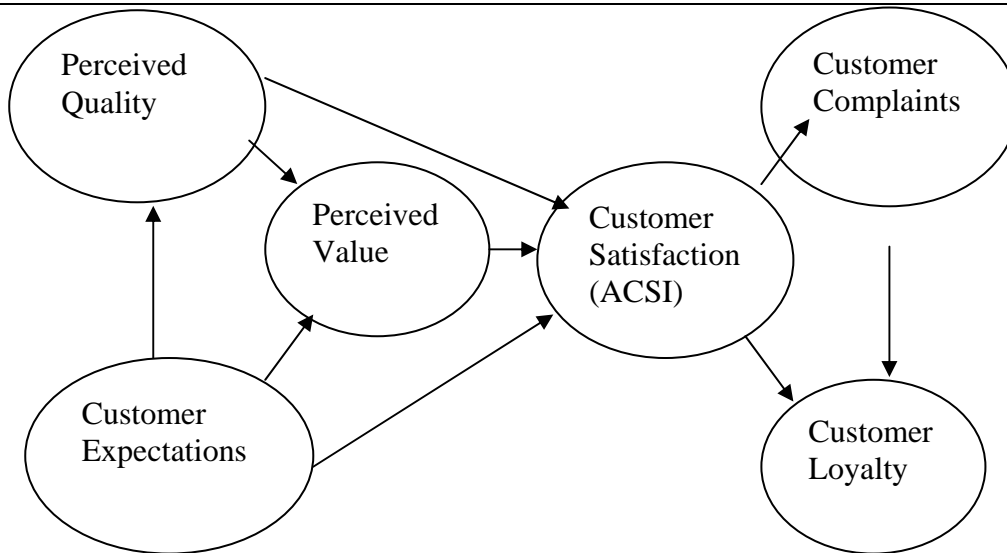
Customer Satisfaction and Service Quality

Customer satisfaction is a major measure of service quality in the service industry. Its measurement takes many forms and includes pre and post-customer surveys, focus groups, mystery shoppers, total market surveys. Many companies conduct customer satisfaction surveys themselves or commission market researchers to track their customer satisfaction rates. In the hotel industry it is common to use guest comment and feedback forms; however, they have been heavily criticized in the past as poorly designed and an inadequate measure upon which to base any strategic decisions because of low response rates and bias (DeVeau, DeVeau, & Downey, 1996, Jones & Sasser, 1995, and Gilbert & Horsnell, 1998).

The American Hotel & Lodging Association (2002) reported on the customer satisfaction scores of major hotel companies compiled by the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) (2002) in cooperation with the University of Michigan. This study tracked customer satisfaction ratings over a range of industries and for the hotel industry it reported on companies such as Hilton Hotels Corporation, Marriott International Corporation, Hyatt Corporation, Holiday Inn, Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide Inc., among others. The ACSI model showed Customer Satisfaction

as being made up of Customer Expectations and modified by Perceived Quality and Perceived Value (Figure 1).

Figure 1. American customer satisfaction index model



Source: ASCI (2002)

Hospitality service quality and organizational climate

When discussing the role of climate and its links to the provision of high quality service it is first necessary to understand the operational environment of the hospitality industry. The provision of high quality service has become essential to survival, and many hospitality organizations are attempting to implement various quality management schemes. The performance and credibility of hospitality organizations like Accor, Ritz Carlton, Hyatt, Sheraton, Marriott, Intercontinental, Four Seasons, Hilton and others, which have already successfully implemented quality management systems, is a compelling justification for all other hospitality organizations also adopting similar strategies.

However, there is no guarantee that the introduction of quality programs will lead to success. Harari (1993) points to a success rate of only 20-30%. Similarly, Eskildon (1994) reported

that 63% of those surveyed with Total Quality Management (TQM) programs had failed to reduce internal defects by 10% or more. Many organizations that started a formal quality initiative lose their way or give up within two years, in the process wasting a lot of time, effort and money, they have not grasped that quality initiatives are a continuous process (Lovelock, 2001). Most of the quality programs also fail to address the issues of psychological/behavioural aspects that are essential prerequisites for such change. They are too focused on the pure mechanics of implementation and that without the supporting behaviours quality systems are rendered useless or are simply doomed to fail.

Research has shown that companies need to be aware of three separate kinds of organizational climate in order to ensure the success of quality improvement efforts, a climate for service, a climate for innovation, and a climate for human resources or employee welfare (Schneider, Gunnarson and Niles-Jolly, 1994). The climate for service is readily identified by the hotel industry where employees need to have the right attitudinal approach to the job. An attitude for service is the key aspect that hotel recruiters are looking for in new employees.

The Ritz-Carlton hotels state in their Credo “we pledge to provide the finest personal service and facilities for our guests...” with their Motto stating, “We are Ladies and Gentlemen Serving Ladies and Gentlemen”. This document goes on to talk about empowering employees, wanting them to create pride and joy in the work place, be involved in planning that affects them, and creating a work environment of teamwork and lateral service. Such an explicit statement of the very highest of service attitudes demonstrates a company commitment to a climate for service. Of course the many other hotel companies also have similar commitments but do not always put it in such an explicit and forthright manner.

A climate for innovation connotes new things happening continually, an approach that is very similar to Hammer and Champy (1993) and their concept of re-engineering. It is a re-assessment of how jobs are designed, systems operate, and how products and services are delivered. A major feature is the devolution of decision making in job design, making employees responsible

for most operational decisions and providing a supportive environment where they feel empowered.

The climate for human resources and employee welfare is linked to the climates for service and innovation. HRM and many management theorists have long advocated that treating human resources in a strategic manner as a basic tenet of any successful company. This is especially important for all service industries where, like hotels, the vast majority of its output is characterized by intangibility, heterogeneity, and simultaneous production and consumption. Table 1 shows a comparison of selected HRM climate dimensions that reinforce the importance of managers being aware of and creating the appropriate climate.

Table 1 Comparison of HRM climate dimensions

SCHNEIDER AND BOWEN (1985; 1993)	JONES AND JAMES (1979) JAMES AND JAMES (1989)	DAVIDSON et al. (2001)
WORK FACILITATION Conditions on my job do permit people to reach their work goals.	WORK FACILITATION Supervisor helps achieve goal attainment through such activities as scheduling, coordinating, planning and providing resources	WORK FACILITATION Supervisor provides the help you need to schedule your work ahead of time.
SUPERVISION Supervisors I work with use the rewards they have (praise, performance appraisals) to let people know when they have done a fine job.	GOAL EMPHASIS Supervisor stimulates personal involvement in meeting group goals. JOB FEEDBACK The extent to which an individual is aware of how well he is performing on his job	SUPERVISION Supervisor encourages the people who work for them to work as a team JOB FEEDBACK You have good information of where you stand and how your performance is evaluated
ORGANISATIONAL CAREER FACILITATION The organization provides information and counselling about my career.	OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND ADVANCEMENT The degree to which an individual feels that the organization provides a vehicle for development of desired personal skills, goals and rewards.	OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND ADVANCEMENT The opportunity to learn worthwhile skills and knowledge in your job
ORGANISATIONAL STATUS People outside (the organization) think the people who work here are high calibre people.	PROFESSIONAL ESPRIT DE CORPS The degree to which an individual believes his profession has a good image to outsiders and provides opportunities for growth and advancement.	PROFESSIONAL ESPRIT DE CORPS The hotel has a good image to outsiders and emphasizes personal growth and development
NEW EMPLOYEE SOCIALISATION People coming on the job get special training that helps them get started.	No directly comparable measure	No directly comparable measure

In many ways organizational climate becomes a surrogate for leadership as it supports the notion of empowerment and devolved decision-making, hence understanding how it is created is vital to hospitality managers. If a good organizational climate exists for Service, Innovation and HR/Employee Welfare it then follows the overall organizational climate will also be good. This simply provides the best possible conditions for quality service to take place. Of course it is management's responsibility to ensure that the supplies, equipment and resources needed are there to support the service operations.

Hospitality operations, organizational climate and customer satisfaction

Employee involvement is integral in the development of any service quality plan.

Employees must be able to take responsibility and occasionally take risks in pursuit of service quality without fear of recrimination. In this process a central element is freeing up thinking and allowing the redesign of jobs to facilitate service quality. Service oriented employees will often redesign their own jobs to provide a better service even without the formal consent of management. Therefore, the need for the developing of a climate for innovation in the context of a continuous improvement is the cornerstone of success.

There is also a need to establish a quality climate and culture that is evident within the organization. Kordupleski, Rust and Zahorik (1993), and Kimes (2001) found that of the overall quality processes used in service industries was responsible for the variation in an organization's output. Francese (1993) looked at building a responsive climate and found a clear link between teamwork, entrepreneurial management behaviour and adaptive marketing policies and activities. These results reveal the link between service quality, responsiveness and organizational climate. The climate of the organization is an important factor in the creation of quality services as defined by the customer. Within the wider quality movement there is evidence to show that without an

environment where the employee is satisfied it will be difficult to enlist the employee's support for the objectives of management (Cole, Bacayan & White, 1993).

A number of studies have claimed there is a positive relationship between organizational climate, and customer satisfaction (Davidson et al, 2002, Schneider & Bowen, 1993, Snyder & Schneider, 1975, Francese, 1993, and others). A related, but different, question is the extent to which employees' perceptions of customer satisfaction and customer's own reports of satisfaction match. This is an important issue, particularly for service industries such as the hotel industry, as customer feedback may be difficult to gather, and particularly difficult to gather in an unbiased form. A small number of studies have addressed this issue.

Davidson, Manning, Brosnan and Timo (2002) found in a sample of 1443 hotel employees of 14 Australian hotels that there was a correlation between organizational climate, employee perceptions of customer satisfaction and RevPAR. Organizational climate accounted for a 30% variance in the employee perception of customer satisfaction. Furthermore, that employee perception of customer satisfaction accounted for a 23% variation in the RevPAR between the hotels. The results of these studies indicate that direct reports of customer satisfaction are closely mirrored by employee perceptions of customer satisfaction.

While there are obvious advantages in understanding the forces that are involved in the creation of the organizational climate, it is the linking of that understanding to day-to-day activities that hold major significance for management. The effect of managerial action and leadership factors on the climate of the organization are now well known and documented (Davidson et al. 2001, Francese 1993, Kimes 2001 and others). Supportive management is essential, where subordinates may try and fail without any fear of reprimand.

Many organisations are now using an employee opinion survey (organizational climate) and no doubt they furnish both local and corporate management with a great deal of useful information. This process is firmly embedded into management procedures and is now used as one of the

benchmarks of management performance. The climate of the workplace is a fundamental factor in the provision of quality services. Organizations need to recognize the climate for employee well being in their organizations as the basis for the development of a climate for innovation and a climate for service. They should not be seen as separate entities so much as elements of a greater whole.

Hospitality Industry View of Service Quality

In a recent study by Chacko, Davidson and Green (2005) hotel HR and Room Division executives were first asked to define the determinants of service quality as seen by their respective organizations and then to specify how service quality was measured, see table 2. Executives were asked about corporate culture, the role of supervisors’ and managers’ in service quality and major issues in achieving service quality. Finally, they were asked questions regarding sufficiency of resources to support a service environment and why service quality matters. In essence, questions that pertained to various facets of overall service quality were asked.

Table 2. Interview Questions for Overall Service Quality

Overall Service Quality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does your property define service quality? • How do you measure service quality? • What part does corporate culture play? • What part do supervisors and managers play in enhancing service quality? • Are there sufficient resources to support a quality service environment? • What are the major issues for your property in achieving service quality? • Why does service quality matter?

Agreement existed between the human resource executives and the operations executives on how they defined service quality. All managers agreed that meeting and exceeding guest expectations was the ultimate definition of service quality. The guest driven definition shows consensus that understanding the guest is the major factor in service quality and is supported by

Ekinci and Riley (1998). The secondary definition of service quality was through brand standards and driven by the company. All managers agreed that external standards were a tertiary means of defining service quality.

Human resource and rooms executives agreed that guest feedback through comment cards and surveys on property were the primary measure of service quality. This was the case, even though literature speaks to the contrary (DeVeau, DeVeau, & Downey, 1996, Jones & Sasser, 1995, and Gilbert & Horsnell, 1998). Operations executives believed guest surveys mailed to the guest (electronically or paper) after checkout was the second measure of service quality, company programs, brand standards and service checklists were the third measure of service quality. In contrast, human resource executives believed that company programs, brand standards and service checklists were the second measure of service quality while guest surveys mailed to the guest (electronically or paper) after checkout was the third measure of service quality. Both sets of executives agreed that external forms of measurements of service quality as very important.

Both sets of executives believed that corporate culture had an impact on service quality and cited operationalisation of the culture through the employees as a driving force. They also cited the corporate culture embodied through company brand standards as another impact on service quality. A portion of the operations executives described the senior management as setting the company culture and employees emulating the management while delivering service.

There was a clear difference of opinion between operations and human resource executives with regard to the role played by supervisors in enhancing quality. Operations executives viewed the role of supervisors as coaches and trainers, while human resources executives saw the supervisor's role more as controllers responsible for holding employees accountable for service standards.

Executives from twelve of the 14 properties believed that there were sufficient resources to support service quality. Many gave examples of having on property training managers or the support of corporate training officers.

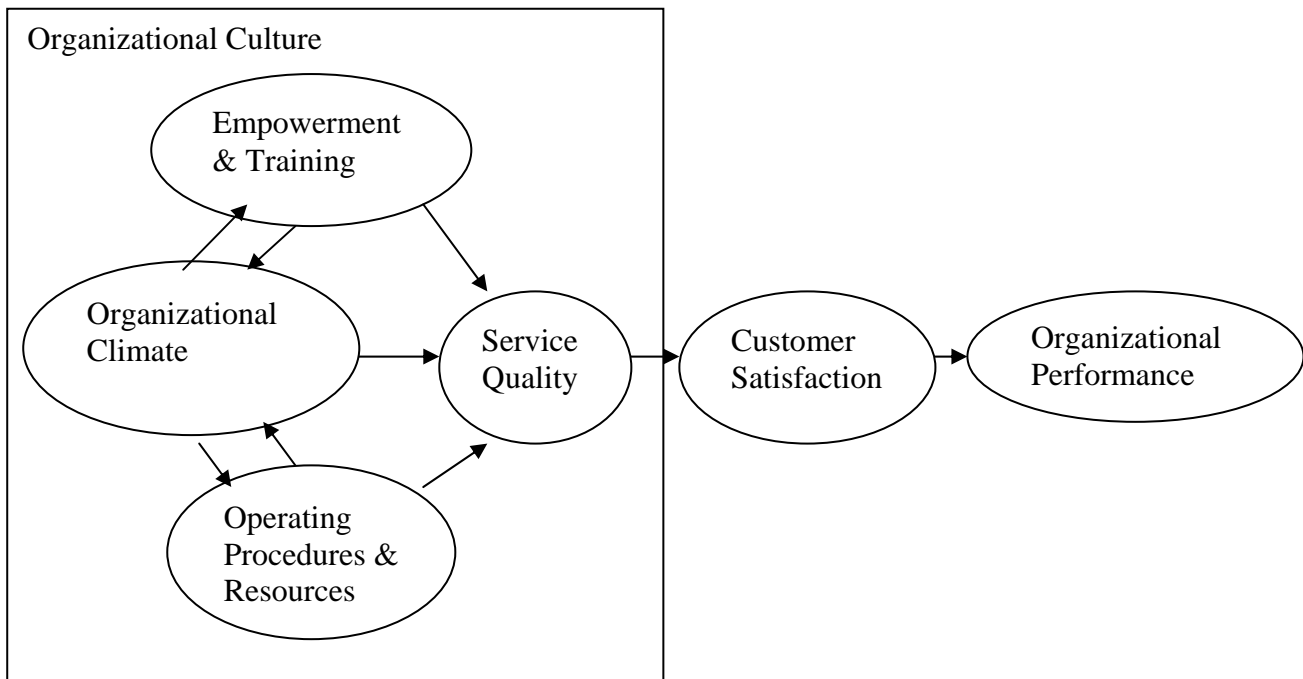
When asked about the major issues the human resources executives believed that the availability and quality of the labour market is the primary issue and maintaining consistent service is secondary. To the contrary, the operations executives believed that maintaining consistent service was the primary issue and availability and quality of the labour market was a secondary issue.

When asked why service quality mattered, the human resources executives were split between differentiating themselves from other properties and the direct relationship that service quality has to profitability. In contrast, more of the operations executives believed that service quality differentiated the property from other properties and the relationship to profitability was secondary.

A Proposed Conceptual Model

The ACSI model provides an excellent example of the impact that customer satisfaction has upon organizational output. However, there is a need to analyse the organizational process further in order to understand how climate and culture shape the service quality of any organization and that in turn impacts upon customer satisfaction and output. The proposed conceptual model (Figure 2) addresses the relationships between culture, climate, service quality, customer satisfaction and organizational performance.

Figure 2. The relationship between organizational culture and climate, service quality and customer satisfaction, and organizational performance



Source: Davidson (2003a) CSP Model

The model shows that organizational culture bounds everything that goes on within the organization. It takes time to develop and is affected by rules, norms, employee and management practices, and procedures of the organization. Culture can be described as the social glue, a frame of reference or the shared values that shape how the organization and individuals act and react.

Organizational climate is affected by the prevailing organizational culture but can be measured separately by a process of scoring individuals on a climate survey and then aggregating those scores to the department and organizational as a whole. Climate is a snapshot of time that tells managers what the employee perceptions are. Whereas culture is slow to form and difficult to change, climate is much more volatile and can be changed by many things within an organization. It is this malleability that makes it such a valuable management tool. By taking regular readings of organizational climate management can detect areas that have problems and take appropriate action

to change.

Climate is also affected by the amount of empowerment, training, operating procedures and resources. These elements provide employees with the necessary tools to do their job well and react to individual customer requirements, thus enhancing the service quality. The model proposes that there is a direct link between organizational climate and service quality and that this link is modified by the extent and level of empowerment, training, operating procedures and resources. Even when the organization achieves its desired service quality level it must then seek to achieve customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is itself modified by customer expectations, perceived quality and perceived value.

The sum of all activities within the organization that culminate in the service quality output is then judged by customer satisfaction. It is here that the conceptual model of Organizational Climate and Service Quality links with the ACSI model of Customer Satisfaction. However, the utility of the proposed model is that it demonstrates the linkage within the organization and the external processes of customer satisfaction and organizational performance.

Mainstream management and leadership texts deal with all the elements but do not offer a conceptual model to understand the relationships between elements. Over recent years the title of Quality Manager, or similar, has appeared on some corporate hotel organization charts. These individuals were charged with the task of measuring and identifying where and how quality improvements can be instituted. Most of the quality initiatives, however, have become the responsibility of the departmental managers who set up quality teams to review their performance and benchmark against a competitive set. This and the ratings of major companies on a customer satisfaction indices, is ample evidence of how seriously the industry now takes its quality processes. Much of the hotel management emphasis in the past twenty plus years has been on increasing the

standards of operation through training and education. Universities and colleges worldwide have taken up this challenge to provide trained and educated employees for the hotel and tourism industry to the point where it is a rarity for such a program not to exist in any institution. Concurrent with the drive for a better educated and trained workforce has been a consequent increase in the level of professionalism within the hotel industry. Today most hotel companies have the standard operating procedures in place and hotel managers generally have access to a large amount of data at their disposal to enlighten their decision making.

What has not happened is the linking of all the elements into an integrated management approach. Hotel managers have tended to deal with the elements of Empowerment, Education and Training, Operating Procedures, Resources, Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, and Performance, individually. Even the hotel companies that have instituted organizational climate surveys have not used them as the basis to understand the whole operation. Why??

Most hotel companies realize the importance of climate but the management systems are simply not geared to deal with its integration and simultaneous use in daily management operations. Put simply, it is easier to do things in neat little boxes. Of course there are exceptions and enlightened managers but not enough as yet.

The imperative for any hotel is to improve its performance and that is linked to all the other elements of the model. Today the marketplace is becoming more and more competitive and hotel margins are under pressure. Therefore the level of sophistication of managers will need to increase to meet these challenges. The CSP model offers a basis for managers to understand that it is the integration of the elements that hold the key to obtaining improved performance from hotels.

Applications and Conclusions

Theorists are often criticized for what managers perceive as a lack of reality.

‘That’s fine but how do we do it?’

The basis of the CSP model is first to understand and evaluate the hotel organizational culture. Is the culture what is intended and is it in concert with any corporate culture? Complete an organizational climate study and put in place a system that at least measures it on an annual basis but preferably on a six monthly basis. Included in the organizational climate survey should be a separate section that seeks to find out what employees perceptions are of guest satisfaction.

The analysis of this data will provide key understanding of the hotel organization and employees perceptions. It may well take three to six months to get this information and analyses completed. Remember the design of the questionnaire is likely to reflect each individual organization and is better done by someone with expert knowledge. Managers may now begin to modify policies and procedures covering all the elements of the model. The process is continuous and needs to ensure that employees are involved in all stages of the discussion and implementation. A key element is the data gathered on employee perceptions of customer satisfaction that can be compared with the other measures used to gauge customer satisfaction.

The whole management system changes because it now incorporates elements that weren’t previously taken into daily operational account:

- Organizational culture
- Employee perceptions (organizational climate), and
- Employee perceptions of customer satisfaction (a proxy for customer satisfaction).

These bring a major new dynamic that can be used in an integrated management system.

Does it complicate the management processes? Yes.

Does it offer the potential for better performance? Yes.

Customer satisfaction using employee perceptions has been addressed by gathering data from both customers and employees. There was a strong correspondence between customer attitudes about service quality and employee perceptions of the quality of the service customers received. Employee perceptions of customer satisfaction, from the results of empirical studies, provide the hotel industry with another very reliable way to ascertain a reading on customer satisfaction (Davidson et al, 2001).

Consumers are better served if the policies, practices and procedures of an organisation met the needs of employees and as a result have a directly positive outcome in terms of service quality for the consumer. The creation of a climate for service is an example of organisational effectiveness and being responsive to its customers. Within the wider quality movement there is a call for the incorporation of the concept of employee satisfaction because the evidence shows that without an environment that supports the employee it will be difficult to enlist the employee's support for the objectives of management. The CSP conceptual model seeks to explain the relationships between organizational culture, organizational climate, service quality, customer satisfaction and organizational performance. It demonstrates a more holistic perspective showing the multi-faceted nature and the relationship between the constructs and the reality of performance. This model supports the premise that it is important to gather data from within organizations on human resource and operations management factors such as empowerment and training, organizational climate, and operating procedures and resources. The definition for service quality is guest driven through meeting and exceeding guest expectations and that is mediated by the effect of environmental forces for all service organisations.

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