



Agents of Happiness

Tips and guidelines for all Berea City School District employees



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Introduction

We all know that customer service is important. We all know that we should be pleasant and helpful to those with whom we interact.

This guide is designed to give you useful and practical tips on becoming an “Agent of Happiness” to help bring your customer service skills to the next level. In doing so, you’ll not only help maintain the good reputation of the Berea City School District, you’ll help to make your job less stressful.

Question: Who are your customers?

Answer:

- a) parents
- b) students
- c) taxpayers/citizens
- d) co-workers
- e) all of the above

Hopefully, you said e) all of the above. Without internal teamwork, promoted by excellent internal customer service, an organization struggles to provide external customer service.

hello

Creating a culture of customer service

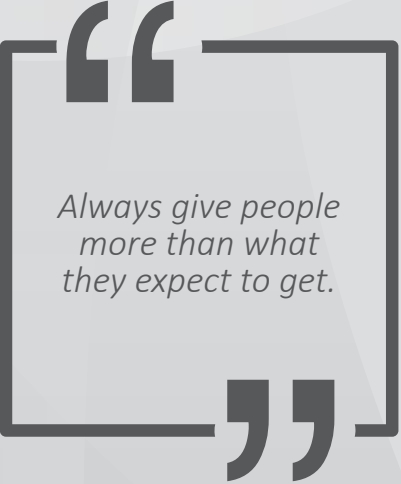
Customer service is everyone's job at BCSD whether or not you interact with the public.

Every parent and community member should feel comfortable and welcome at our schools.

The difference in providing good customer service to outstanding customer service is understanding what customers want and need.

- Everyone wants to feel welcome and important. Visitors and co-workers want answers and resolutions to their problems and requests.
- People want to be understood – to feel that their opinions, wants and needs are worth listening to and acting upon. In situations where it is not possible to provide your customers with what they want, how you treat them while trying to solve their issue will go a long way toward how they perceive customer service at your workplace.

Customer service is not a department, it's everyone's job.



*Always give people
more than what
they expect to get.*

The ABCs of excellent customer service include:

- A. Appearance—yours and your workplace
- B. Behavior—how you handle conflict
- C. Communication—written, oral and electronic

How you say what you say is often the most meaningful part of your communication. Body language and tone of voice can completely change the meaning of your words. In fact, most of your communication is non-verbal, which is why email should not be used to solve emotional, contentious, or confrontational issues.

Our brains are wired to quickly scan our environment and determine whether it is safe or dangerous. This means your reputation, the reputation of your school or department, and the reputation of BCSD hinge on the first few seconds of your interaction.

Customer service attributes

1. A passion for taking care of co-workers, students, parents, and the community.
2. A willingness to be flexible.
3. A work ethic based on dedication to BCSD and its mission.
4. An eagerness to learn.
5. Self-motivation and goal-oriented.
6. Excellent communication skills.

Customer service challenges

1. Simultaneously managing the customer's experience and the district's internal processes.
2. Being on the firing line and encountering angry customers when things go wrong.
3. Managing time by prioritizing and planning work despite a fast-paced, sometimes turbulent work environment.
4. Coordinating work with others throughout the district in order to meet the customer's needs.
5. Continually learning about new policies, services, and internal procedures despite time constraints or a lack of available training or coaching.

Tips for outstanding customer service

Friendliness

Consider the 15-5 rule for interacting in hallways: Make eye contact—acknowledge any customer at 15 feet. At 5 feet, offer a smile and extend a friendly greeting. Be aware of your body language, especially when you are tired, stressed, or are otherwise having a bad day.

Understanding and empathy

Sometimes, it's not what you say, but how you say it. Verbally acknowledging what the person is going through will help break down barriers and defuse emotions.

Fairness

Greet all visitors promptly and quickly ask to offer assistance, so customers feel that they will be treated justly and impartially.

Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning.



Information and communication

Take a tour of your facility through the eyes of your customers and see if you are sending the right messages. Would you want to enroll your child at your school, or recommend that a friend apply for a job at your work site? If not, start a dialogue about how you can improve. Here are some items to think about:

On the **outside**, does your school/workplace have:

- Clearly marked visitor parking spaces near the front door?
- Well-kept grounds free of trash and debris?
- Is your school's reader board up-to-date and accurate?
- Plainly marked entrances, particularly the main door?
- Do you have posted instructions on how to use entrance buzzers?
- A clean and appealing front entrance/lobby area?
- A welcome sign that clearly directs visitors to the main office?
- Attractive, colorful displays of student achievement? (for schools)

On the **inside**, does your school/workplace have:

- A clean and tidy front office?
- Reading material about the school/workplace for visitors?
- Welcoming and professionally dressed staff who greet all visitors promptly and quickly ask to offer assistance?
- Visitor badges?
- Promptly (within three rings) and professionally answered telephones?
- A well-informed staff with up-to-date information readily accessible?

Conversation and telephone tips

Be prepared:

- Use active listening, a structured form of listening and responding that focuses on the speaker. Focus on what the speaker is saying instead of thinking of a response to what is being said.
- Repeat in your own words, what you think the speaker has said.
- You don't have to agree with the speaker — you simply repeat what you heard the speaker say. This allows the speaker to know that they've been heard and understood, or, allows them to try and better explain what they mean.
- Do not interrupt them.

Answering the phone:

- Check your voicemail message and main voicemail system. Make sure your voicemail message isn't too long, fast or robotic. Let the caller know what to do if they have an immediate concern. Make sure the "Push Zero for Operator" option in your workplace voicemail system comes early in the message. Call yourself or your organization to hear how you sound to others.
- Check your voicemail regularly.
- Answer calls by the second or third ring, if possible.
- Be aware of how fast or loud you are speaking.
- Smile: it comes through, just like a frown. Breathe and focus. Speak clearly and calmly. You may have just answered a question for the umpteenth time, and you may be on deadline, but this is your caller's initial contact with you.
- Project a tone that is attentive and respectful.

*Customers may forget
what you said, but
they'll never forget how
you made them feel.*

Smile when you answer the phone, the inflection of your voice will translate to the caller.

- Greet the caller and identify yourself and the school/location. Ask how you can assist the caller. Example: “Grindstone Elementary, this is Cheryl. How may I help you?”

NEVER:

- Eat, drink or chew gum while on the phone.
- Leave an open line. Instead, place the caller on hold and check back with the caller frequently – every 30-45 seconds.

During the conversation:

- Speak clearly and distinctly.
- Focus your full attention on the caller and the conversation.
- Listen carefully so you understand exactly what the call is about.
- Forward calls to personnel that are available at the time.
- Take messages by promising the caller the information will be delivered. Read back what you’ve written to be sure the message is correct.
- End the conversation politely. Example: “Thank you for calling.”

When the requested person is unavailable:

- If the person is in a conference, observing in a classroom or out of the building at a meeting, it is appropriate to say so. This gives the caller a time frame to understand how long it may take to get a call back if he/she is the only one who can answer the question.
- If the person is away for an extended period of time, mention the person is away.

Phrases to avoid:

“I don’t know.”

Try saying: “That is a good question; let me find out for you,” or offer to connect the caller with someone who can provide the answer. If a call involves research, assure the person you will call back by a certain time.

“I/we can’t do that.”

Instead: “This is what I/we can do.”

“You’ll have to ...”

Instead: “You can... ” or “You may... ” or “Here’s how we can help you.”

“Just a second.”

Instead: Give a more honest estimate of how long it will take you and/or let the caller know what you are doing.

“No,” or “We can’t do that.”

Instead: Find a way to state the situation positively, “I want to help find a solution.” Dismissing an unhappy customer with “Sorry, that’s our policy,” is not providing excellent service. Try instead to let the person know what is possible. “Here’s what we can do.” You may need to transfer the caller to a supervisor when there is no solution to the complaint, such as making changes to the school calendar. Let them know you understand their concern and that you can either transfer them to a higher authority, or note the concern and pass it on.

Your customer doesn't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

*Empathize with
their concern.
Empathy goes a
long way.*

**When the caller is upset, a customer service star
LEAPS into action:**

L - Listen; allow the caller to express his or her frustration.

E - Empathize without interrupting; acknowledge the person's feelings.

A - Apologize without taking or laying blame. Put yourself in their shoes. Say, "I understand, I'd be unhappy too if that happened to me." Or say, "I'm sorry that happened."

P - (Be) Positive. Asking non-threatening questions helps callers to calm down and think about the facts of the situation.

S - Solve; suggest solutions that you can agree on, or ask how you can help.

Make sure to offer the caller a higher authority:

Providing alternatives empowers callers. It gives them the feeling they are choosing the solution.

Don't overreact:

Especially if the caller starts pushing your buttons with lines like: "I want to talk to someone who knows something."

Do not blame anyone:

Not the caller, yourself, or someone on your staff – even if you know who is to blame for a problem. This information should not be shared with the caller.

Paraphrase the caller's comments:

Ask questions if you do not understand the information being presented to you. Restate the problem as you understand it.

Remember:

A positive attitude is the most important asset you have. Avoid argument and criticism.

Particularly difficult situations

If the caller is swearing or using offensive language:

- Interrupt immediately and assure them you want to help.
- Address the language directly and keep control. Say in a calm tone of voice, “Excuse me, I want to help, but I’m not able to handle your abusive language.” Then follow up with questions to identify the problem.
- If the offensive language continues, remain calm and polite while telling the caller you will have to hang up. Then hang up the phone, gently. Immediately tell your supervisor about the incident.

If the visitor appears physically hostile or aggressive:

- Use common sense and call 911 (9-911) if the person presents an imminent danger. It’s a good idea to work out with your supervisor how to handle particularly thorny interactions ahead of time. Be sure to know what to do if your supervisor is away at the time of a future situation.
- Remain calm but don’t remain alone, always have a witness. Don’t hesitate to call your School Resource Officer or your supervisor.
- Ask the person to sit down. Repeat that you want to help and find a solution, but that you aren’t able to help unless you can have a civil discussion. Be aware of your surroundings. If you suspect the visitor is “playing to an audience,” try removing the audience but keep your witness.
- You may need to involve your supervisor, especially if you find yourself unable to handle the situation in a calm, detached manner or the hostility escalates.

*Always report back
in a timely manner.
If you don’t, you risk
losing credibility.*

Negative co-workers and internal customer service

One person can poison an entire office, affecting staff morale and customer service alike.

- Stress can negatively affect health. According to the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, health care costs are nearly 50 percent greater for employees reporting high levels of stress.
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health cites studies that show job stress is on the rise. One-quarter of employees say their job is their number one stressor.
- According to the NIOSH, lack of support or help from co-workers and supervisors are some of the leading causes of job stress.

There are varying degrees of difficult situations and personalities.

Difficult people and situations require immediate action that doesn't involve you becoming part of the problem.

Toxic people and situations may require additional assistance, such as elevating the concern to a supervisor or the Personnel Department.

Consider these tips for dealing with difficult people:

- Make sure you're not part of the problem. Taking responsibility for your part in inter-office conflict will give you the high ground when dealing with a difficult co-worker.
- Protect and promote your reputation by being courteous, delivering on your promises and avoiding office gossip.
- Practice active listening. Consider including a witness in conflict resolution.
- Avoid becoming defensive. Remain calm and professional. State your position clearly and politely, but firmly. Agree to disagree.

*Stay calm and never
take the present
situation personal.*

Dress to impress

Don't underestimate the power of first impressions. People make some pretty amazing assumptions about professional credibility and performance based on personal appearance. When employees dress professionally, they usually feel more self-confident and assured. School employees and teachers should consider projecting a professional image that models positive dress and grooming for students.

- Select clothing that is comfortable for you, yet communicates a professional attitude. Ask yourself, "Am I successfully representing myself and the Berea City School District?"
- Take your day's schedule into account when you are dressing. If you have a meeting scheduled with visitors, adjust your clothing to fit the situation.
- Allergies, asthma and sensitivities to fragrances are growing problems. Many people experience severe headaches and other symptoms with exposure to fragrance. Many of the soaps and shampoos we use already contain fragrance, so consider not applying an additional layer at the office. If you do wear a fragrance, ensure that it is applied lightly enough not to exceed your personal space. In other words, it is not detectable by another in your close vicinity.
- Select apparel, jewelry and hairstyles that are professional and appropriate to your workplace. How you look should not distract from your on-the-job performance.
- Dressing for success can promote a better environment for learning.

Students are influenced by staff members' appearances, as well as how they teach.

Do you have them at “hello?”

When it comes to interpersonal communications, how do you measure up?

Conduct the following self evaluation with a co-worker or supervisor to see where you may want to hone your interpersonal skills. Rate yourself from 1 to 10, with 10 being the best score you could imagine.

Standard	What I think (from 1-10)	Someone else's score
Eye contact/pleasant tone of voice		
Ability to conceal frustration		
Willingness to offer apology when it isn't my fault		
Willingness to offer apology when it is my fault		
Ability to handle unreasonable complaints		
Accessibility		
Willingness to make accommodations		
Indirect communication (Body language)		
Response to criticism		
Attitude		
Total score (out of 100 points)		

How did you do?

- 90-100 points Congratulations. Consider being a mentor to others at your workplace.
- 80-89 points Not bad. Consider seeking out additional customer service material, or contact the Community Relations for more information and retake the test.
- Below 79 points Not good, but thank you for your honesty and courage in taking the self-evaluation. Consider working with your supervisor to devise a plan to improve your interpersonal communications.

Please consider using these cards near your work station or to help new employees in your school or department.

Answering the phone:

Assume a “telephone” voice. Smile, it comes through, just like a frown. Breathe. Speak clearly and calmly. You may have just answered a question for the umpteenth time, but this is your next caller’s initial contact with you.

Greet the caller and identify yourself and the school/location, and ask how you can assist the caller. Example: “Grindstone Elementary, this is Cheryl. How may I help you?”

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- If the offensive language continues, remain calm and polite while telling the caller you will have to hang up. Then hang up the phone, gently. Notify supervisor immediately.



*Please provide us with feedback on your experiences with customer service in the district
by contacting the Board of Education office at 216-898-8300.*