“Leadership for Great Customer Service is laserlike in its aim. ... It is a terse, complete, focused, readable, at times amusing guide to addressing perhaps the number one opportunity for any acute care institution to win customer affection while making the working environment and staff's life more attractive simultaneously. Not a bad deal!”
—Tom Peters, from the Foreword

Your organization can have a top-notch customer service plan fully supported by management, but if the bedside staff does not embrace the approach, it may as well not exist. The authors of this unique book contend that the best way to get buy-in from provider staff is to show them that improving customer service can make their difficult job of clinical care easier!

This hands-on, humorous look at customer service was written by two practicing physicians and provides a thorough blueprint for creating and sustaining a practical customer service program. The “Patient Care Survival Skills” are proven, successful strategies that nurses, physicians, housekeepers, lab technicians—anyone who comes in contact with the patient—can employ to improve customer service and thus make their own job easier.

Concepts the book explores include:
• Just as every patient has a technical, clinical diagnosis, they also have a customer service diagnosis.
• The more patients know what to expect, the more they feel in control—and the happier they are.
• Because there is frequently a difference between the provider's expectations and the patient's expectations, leaders need to help staff learn to negotiate more effectively.
• Predetermined scripts help guide staff through predictable, frequent, and even problem-prone areas in your organization.
• Staff create “moments of truth” for patients thousands of times a day—the sum of which create the reputation of your healthcare organization.

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Thom A. Mayer and Robert J. Cates

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CHAPTER 1

Getting Started: Why Worry About Customer Service in Healthcare?

One of the most intriguing and troubling questions facing healthcare leaders is, How do I create a meaningful and lasting culture of customer service in my institution? Improving customer service and patient satisfaction are critical issues in administrative offices and hospital boardrooms across the country. Over twenty books have been written on the application of customer service to healthcare. (Don’t they look nice on the bookshelf?) The problem, of course, is that there is plenty of legitimate and genuine concern in the executive suite, but too little practical guidance in the patient care areas where clinical care and customer service are to be provided. The intention is almost universally good, but the execution is often lacking. Despite posting eloquent mission statements, paying substantial fees to consultants, providing training materials and sophisticated web sites, and delivering appropriately passionate statements at management team meetings to exhort the troops, for many healthcare institutions, when it comes to customer service, the words and the music just don’t match.
Leadership for Great Customer Service

Why is there such a long shadow between the idea of service excellence and the reality required to bring it to fruition? Why is there such a gap between the proclaimed commitment to and the actual delivery of customer service in healthcare institutions? Noted scholar of organizational behavior Chris Argyris (1993) comments, “For many institutions, the fundamental problem is the dissonance between the espoused strategy and the enacted strategy.”

Part of the reason for the dissonance between carefully espoused strategies of customer service and the enacted strategy seen in the patient care areas is that the staff, charged with enacting the strategy and providing the service, can clearly understand why it is important to the CEO, but not why it is important to them. As the old story goes,

The CEO of a large regional healthcare system took one of her key managers to the top of a hill overlooking the city. Pointing down at a ridge just below them, she said, “Imagine a beautiful house sitting atop that ridge, overlooking the city. Can you see it?” “Oh yes, I can see it,” said the manager. She continued, “Imagine there is a swimming pool just behind the house, can you see it in your mind?” “Yes, yes I can!” said the manager, getting more excited. “Imagine there is something off to the right of the house—it’s a tennis court! Can you see it?” “Yes,” said the manager, “I can see it!” The CEO continued, “If this customer service initiative is successful and we continue to increase our market share, someday all of that will be… mine.” (Adapted from Belasco and Stayer 1993)

Too often, it is apparent to healthcare providers that customer service initiatives may be great for the leaders and managers of
healthcare, but it is often far less apparent why it is good for those who provide that care on a daily basis. We will show you how to make the concept clear.

This book is written for healthcare leaders, but with an understanding that transformation to a culture of service excellence requires not just the intention of the leadership but also the constant attention of doctors, nurses, radiology technicians, laboratory technicians, registrars, and housekeepers across the organization. For this reason, our intent is to give you direction on how to give them direction to accomplish this. This book, of necessity, presents leaders with an approach to address those who provide service, including numerous clinical examples to use with your staff. While we have found that senior leadership’s commitment to service is essential (and we will give you plenty of examples of what you need to do), we have also found that simply exhorting the troops and acting as an example of service are insufficient to create service excellence throughout the organization. The clinicians must be shown how this can be done. The bedside examples we give are highly successful strategies to accomplish this. Our greatest hope is that you will finish this book, hand it to your leadership team, and say, “Put this into action!” If you do, you will transform your organization.

Many in healthcare feel as if they are “at the ramparts,” evoking images of a besieged, embattled industry facing declining revenues, increasing demands, an aging population, healthcare personnel shortages, emergency department crowding and diversion, and the fundamental reality that key providers of service—physicians—are typically neither employed nor controlled by the healthcare system. Into the midst of such difficulties comes the demand for improved customer service and patient satisfaction. Add to this the threat of chemical, biological, nuclear, and explosive terrorism and the rise of new “natural” infectious diseases such as SARS, and healthcare providers may legitimately ask themselves, Is this really the time to be focusing on customer service in healthcare?

This honest and straightforward question deserves a frank and direct answer, “Yes!”—but for a reason that is counterintuitive. Having
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taught the customer service training course (Patient Care Survival Skills) on which this book is based to healthcare providers for 10 years at over 300 healthcare institutions and to over 75,000 healthcare workers, we have found that the most significant challenge to creating a culture of customer service is providing healthcare leaders and the healthcare team a clear and practical understanding of why customer service and patient satisfaction should be important to them. (We know it’s important to you—indeed, your job may depend upon it.) To do so, we pose to them—and to you—a simple exercise. Take a moment to think of what your response would be to the following before proceeding further.

The #1 reason to get customer service right in healthcare is ________.

If you are like the thousands of other members of the healthcare team to whom we have given this exercise, your answers generally fall under the following classifications:

- It’s better for the patient
- It’s better for the family
- It’s better for quality care
- It’s better for the medical staff
- It’s better for market share
- It’s better for risk management
- It’s better for reimbursement
- It’s better for patient safety

All of these are great reasons to get customer service right in healthcare, but who primarily benefits—the service provider or those who lead and manage the organization? As suggested by the first point in the right-hand column, market share improves when customer service improves. Sounds great—but what if I’m a nurse in a busy, overcrowded emergency department. The reward for good customer service is…more patients? That doesn’t sound like a reward to us.

Any customer service initiative that answers, “Why are we doing this?” with, “Because the boss says so” or “It’s good for market share” is doomed to failure. In fact, this is precisely why most customer service initiatives in healthcare either fail or are not sustainable. The
fundamental paradox is that, while all of the above responses are certainly true (and excellent reasons for getting customer service right), they still miss the fundamental point:

_The #1 reason to get customer service right in healthcare is … it makes the job easier._

It is nearly impossible to effect change in service behaviors in healthcare unless the people providing that care understand this fundamental truth. Anything that is described as customer service should make the job easier. For that reason, there are two simple litmus tests for customer service initiatives and the programs comprising them:

**It’s called customer service, but…**

1. _Does_ it make the job easier?
2. _How_ does it make the job easier?

If anything that is described as customer service fails either of these two tests, the staff providing the care will fundamentally know that it is not truly customer service. In fact, they understand that things that come labeled as customer service but that do not make their jobs easier are actually _more work_. This is precisely why so many service excellence initiatives in healthcare either fall short of their goals or produce temporary results rather than lasting cultural changes.

How do we communicate this insight in a way that resonates with those who provide care and service to patients on a daily basis? How can we illustrate that customer service makes their job easier? Without a way of creating a widely shared understanding that service excellence works for them—as well as the patient—meaningful and lasting change is unlikely to occur.

We have all seen signs posted at the grocery store or on light poles asking for help in finding lost pets. But you might have missed this one:
Thom A. Mayer, M.D., is president and chief executive officer of BestPractices, Inc., a national resource in physician leadership and management.

Dr. Mayer has been the keynote speaker at numerous healthcare leadership conferences and also serves as the medical director of the NFL Players Association. He is one of America’s foremost experts on healthcare customer service, trauma and emergency care, pediatric emergency care, and medical leadership. He has published over 60 articles and 60 book chapters and has edited 10 medical textbooks.

On September 11, 2001, Dr. Mayer served as one of the command physicians at the Pentagon Rescue Operation, coordinating medical assets at the site. The BestPractices physicians at Inova Fairfax Hospital were the first to successfully diagnose and treat inhalational anthrax victims during the 2001 anthrax crises. Dr. Mayer is the lead editor of *Emergency Department Management: Principles and Applications*, the benchmark text on emergency leadership, and has served the Department of Defense on the Defense Science Board Task Forces on Bioterrorism and Homeland Security.
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