



**BEYOND CONSUMERISM:
FROM ORDINARY TO EXTRAORDINARY
THROUGH CONSCIOUS COLLABORATION
WITH YOUR CUSTOMER**

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Beyond consumerism: from ordinary to extraordinary through conscious collaboration with your customer. It's all about consciousness, relational equality, and behavioural change.

Primitive capitalism may have promoted a view of power dynamics where the objective of the organisation was to corner and dominate the market in order to charge premium prices and maximize profits. In this view, customer education was a negative - an ignorant, dependent customer made it easier to extract a profit.

Megatrends in the last two decades have unalterably changed these dynamics. The information revolution, market innovation, the global economy, reduced barriers to entry, social media and device-driven communication continue to have a dramatic impact on the bargaining power and the relationships between the stakeholders of every organisation. So much so, that, counter-intuitive as it may seem, organisations need to lead the way in leveling or equalizing the power differentials between themselves and prospective customers to best serve all involved parties.

Without a heartfelt commitment to customer education and stakeholder partnering, organisations face a stark alternative: the inevitable consequence of becoming irrelevant.

Consciousness

John Mackey and Rajendra Sisodia coined the term 'Conscious Capitalism', the title of their 2013 book on this subject. Indeed, the key word for bringing about desired and necessary change in organisational and customer relationships is 'consciousness'. Businesses who truly understand the customer need, who are able to say no to customers who want to buy for the wrong reasons (driven by unconscious forces that do not serve their long term interests), and who are able to target those customers who will truly benefit

from their products and services, are the businesses who will thrive in a world of high expectations.

In this new world, to really build a lasting and profitable relationship with their customers, organisations need to consider how best to bring a new level of consciousness to the customer relationship, and find a way to ensure that in their interactions with the organisation, customers consider critical questions often out of consciousness at the time of purchase:

1. Are they making choices that really do serve their needs and interests?
2. Are they aware of, and able to resist those primitive, unconscious impulses that lead them to make unwise choices?

It's counter-intuitive, it's anti-consumerist, but it may just be the best way forward for organisations and their customers, and for global sanity: a new, more mature and responsible way to achieve profitability and sustainability. For both the organisation and the customer, it's about consciousness: how to know when to say no to the wrong things and resist temptation, and yes to the right things, for the right reasons.

Conscious collaboration involves a deliberate attempt by the organisation to position itself in the centre of the varying perspectives of the customer, the stakeholders, the organisation itself, and its larger vision or purpose.

Organisational values in a collaborative culture mean that it's no longer good enough to for customers to have to shoulder the burden of needing to protect themselves from the subtle and not so subtle appeal to their needs, wants and values from advertisers and businesses in a consumerist world.

Consciousness is borne from a reflective modality. In an organisational context, consciousness may be best achieved through reflective conversations. There are ongoing conversations that need to take place at all

levels to identify blind spots, gaps and underlying needs. Conversations to build this kind of consciousness must explore the current reality, the future aspiration, the gaps that are inevitably present, the various options that may be available to close the most important gaps, and how best to take action.

Relational equality

Relational equality refers to the interaction between the customer and the organisation. It embraces two concepts borrowed from the field of counselling and psychology: the primacy of the human relationship and the equal value of both its participants.

Carl Rogers, one of the great voices in the counselling world, wrote in the 1950's about 'client-centred therapy' as an alternative to the previous 'doctor knows best' attitude which had, until then, infiltrated the practice of therapists and counsellors. Rogers argued that a paternalistic style, influenced by the medical model, and fashionable at the time, was counter-productive to healing, and that an alternative type of relationship, in which the client, and his/her thoughts, feelings and responses, was central to bringing about a more respectful relationship that would in turn lead to therapeutic change.

Rogers identified a number of features that he regarded as integral to an equal, respectful relationship, some of which can be appropriately adapted for alignment in a new organisational world of conscious collaboration with customers:

- A. A **relationship** between client/customer and therapist/organisation must exist, and it must be a relationship in which each person's perception of the other is important.
- B. The therapist/organisation needs to be **genuine** within the relationship.
- C. The therapist/organisation **accepts** and **values** the client/customer.

- D. The therapist/organisation experiences an **empathic understanding** of the client's/customer's frame of reference. Attuned empathy on the part of the therapist/organisation helps the client/customer appreciate the therapist's/organisation's regard for them.

The relational equality that results improves the likelihood of both participants, in this case, the organisation and the customer, engaging in a relationship that is based on an equality of interests and participation. When the customer is listened to with a 'customer-centred' sensibility, the organisation's capacity to attend specifically to the customer's unique requirements is maximised. In this way, the customer's contribution is privileged and the customer feels heard and valued. Both parties are thus beneficiaries of the relationship; the organisation is more relevant because it learns to optimally position its products and services through its interaction with the customer, and the customer feels *truly* served. This approach improves the chances of the relationship being profitable for the organisation, beneficial to all parties, and sustainable over time.

Behavioural change

Changing behaviour is never easy. It's even harder in organisations where there is an established way of doing things, or a dominant organisational culture. A new modality of conscious collaboration is likely to require a radical shift in the culture of many organisations. It will change performance criteria, the approach of customer-facing staff, the organisation values, the operational strategy and the role of leadership. None of this will be possible without a clear rationale for why such behavioural change is important and necessary, and without clear and active leadership that models the way forward.

To help engage with this change process, to instil a culture of conscious collaboration, the ten key themes below form a basis for an extended conversation, and an action plan for transformation.

How to make the change: ten key themes

The following ten themes are interdependent. They build a values-hierarchy for the organisation, and need to be considered together as an integrated whole, to bring about a fundamental shift from the traditional way of treating customers as a means to an end, to a new way of customer partnering and collaboration.

1. Reflect on why conscious collaboration is important

To bring about the required change in culture and values, organisations need at the start to engage in a reflective process of why conscious collaboration is important.

In a world of many choices and more empowered customers, to focus on the organisation or the individual alone at the expense of other involved parties, is not a sustainable option. Energy, or the reason for interacting together, will dissipate and the parties – customers, stakeholders, and even the organisation itself – may be in danger of losing meaning and reasons to continue to interact.

The reflective process also invites questions about the organisation's competencies, or strengths and weaknesses, and allows for appropriate action. What needs to be done to build new competence? When might it be necessary to a) partner with another provider, b) refer the customer elsewhere, or c) collaborate with the customer to improve the product or service being offered? An honest reflective process is likely to identify where improvement is needed.

In any reflective process, an awareness of subjectivities is required. In the conversation about change, these need to be 'bracketed' so that the organisation is able to really listen diagnostically, both to its staff and to

customers. Organisational effectiveness starts with self-awareness and self-mastery (by-products of the reflective process) in key staff, and then interpersonal effectiveness across the organisation and with its customers.

2. Introduce a new approach to listening: 'diagnostic listening'

A new approach to listening, that fosters conscious collaboration, can be borrowed from psychology.

Carl Rogers advocated that the process of 'active listening' is integral to building a helping relationship. Rogers (Humanistic Psychology) as well as practitioners from the field of Existential Psychology, argue that in order to really understand and assist a client, the counsellor needs to be able to *bracket* his or her own needs, assumptions and tendencies towards advice and rescue (or 'sales script'), in order to engage in the process of active listening.

Empathy, according to Rogers, is the capacity of an individual to 'feel into' the experience of another, and in the therapeutic relationship, to do so without foreclosing on the client's experience.

Can this be relevant in organisational life and be used to build meaningful and lasting customer relationships? The bracketing of one's own thoughts, assumptions and conventional conversational tendencies on the one hand, and empathy on the other, clears the 'relational space' so that the counsellor or organisation can listen with an 'inner ear' and hence ask probing, relevant questions about the client's or customer's needs and requirements.

A probing conversation will facilitate the process of active or diagnostic listening. It is important for organisations to be able to find out how customer's choose to interact with them, to understand what customers need, and how or whether this aligns with organisational purpose, and if not, what alternatives

can be offered by the organisation to be of service.

In a situation where a misalignment is identified by the organisation, choices can be considered. These may include:

- A. Extending organisational purpose, while maintaining a core focus and avoiding straying from core values
- B. Advising customers of more suitable options for them; i.e. don't buy, buy less, buy elsewhere.

The type of listening that is client (or customer)-centred, empathic and facilitates accurate, respectful and insightful problem solving can be thought of as diagnostic listening.

Diagnostic listening levels the playing field. Rather than only privileging organisational needs, it is a means to understanding the unique situation of a customer and, based on the knowledge, skills and expertise of the organisation, to tailoring a product or solution that meets their unique requirements. In so-doing, diagnostic listening redresses an historical power imbalance generated by organisations that dictate to, or impose solutions upon customers, and instead, cultivates an environment where both parties are equal and valued participants in finding a solution.

3. Know when to say no to the customer

This can be harder by far to put in to practice than to preach about, but it may be the key to building trust and loyalty. Organisations practicing relational equality, diagnostic listening and conscious collaboration may discover earlier than the customer, before the sale or transaction is concluded, that the wrong choice is being made. Is it possible that by acting accordingly, by actively dissuading a customer from buying because the organisation's product or

service is not in their best interests, both the organisation and the customer benefit more in the long run? The reputational credit for the organisation may be worth the investment in such contrarian thinking.

4. Refer the customer on to a better solution that meets their needs

The hard option, to refer a prospective customer to another provider, may in fact translate into a more loyal customer in the medium- or long-term, who insists on returning, or even staying, perhaps less for the product or service, and more for the trusted relationship with the organisation. The referral option builds relational equality. The organisation's superior knowledge of the industry is shared with the customer, and the opportunity for collaboration grows. Customers may be more ready to make referrals, or to work with the organisation to help improve or customise the product or service to meet their needs.

5. Build collaborative relationships with other providers

Extending collaboration to other providers, even competitors, may strengthen organisational positioning. Could a fee be negotiated for customer referrals? Are there opportunities for collaboration with competitors that strengthen the industry and the organisations within it, rather than being perceived to be anti-competitive?

6. Role model new behaviours with staff

Conscious collaboration may not be easy to embed. It will inevitably require a change in organisational culture and in core values. The biggest influence on organisational culture is derived from leaders modeling the desired culture and preferred behaviours. Leadership may need to engage with staff in the same manner that staff must engage with customers. Modeling behavior in a

consistent manner is critical, preferably underpinned by a clearly defined strategy and rationale, or organisation purpose.

7. Be upfront about values and principles

To build trust with customers and avoid unwarranted suspicion, an open declaration may be needed at the start of any customer interaction. At the very least, it may include something like 'our goal is not to make a sale out of you at all costs', and it may also include a lot more about conscious collaboration, before considering the possibility of advising the customer to go elsewhere.

8. Learn from and reward the customer

Some of the most profitable organisations are successful because they know how to learn from individual customer interactions, and then develop expertise and solutions to better serve each customer. Organisations that reward their customers for participating in this shared learning are likely to entrench customer loyalty and embed relevance over time.

9. Analyse customer behaviour

This theme extends from the previous point. There are powerful analytical systems and tools that allow organisations to understand customers' needs, wants and behaviours, and to engage in targeted campaigns that serve both the customer and the organisation.

10. Never stop asking

At the heart of the change in customer relationships is the need to engage with respectful curiosity, and ask questions that create a greater awareness of what is needed most and what is most relevant. To do this well, organisations

need to embed the ethos of relational equality into organisational culture and values.

Conclusion

The psychologist, Victor Frankl, stated that 'between a stimulus and a response lies a gap; inside this gap lies your freedom'. This article suggests that it is becoming more important for organisations to engage actively with the gaps between their current and future states, between themselves and their customers, and with the tensions at play within customers' wants and needs. The way to 'freedom', or lasting relevance for organisations in a challenging world, may be through a more conscious collaboration with customers, that necessitates a new modus operandi, underpinned by lived values.

About the authors

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