

The Important Balance of Hi Tech-Hi Touch

Bob Gaylor

The Scene

In this world of high technology, it's important to give employees and customers what they want—High Touch. It's all very simple. For some reason, we all insist on being human, and I for one think that's great. I don't want to be a robot—plugged into a computer and expected to act like an extension of some high-tech gadget. Oh, don't get me wrong: I like high tech. I have a car, home, and workplace full of the latest. I may not understand all the complexities of each device—for example, my seven-year-old grandson recently pointed out that my VCR was monotonously blinking twelve o'clock—but I enjoy them. I surely appreciate the marvels that high tech can provide: the comforts, service, and fun treatment. I'm smart enough to realize that the variety of entertainment I enjoy and participate in are electronically driven. So, a grand hurrah for high tech!

But I'm also smart enough to realize that high tech can sneakily remove or diminish high-touch feeling, the human interaction so abundant prior to the button-pushing invasion. Unfortunately, the majority of our population has never experienced a telephone party line, a neighborhood ice cream social, an ear glued to the family radio waiting for Fibber McGee to open his closet, or a magic decoder ring obtained with "a thin dime and two Wheaties box tops." No, I am not suggesting we return to those "good old days" before the electronic age. I'm simply saying that the basic motivational factors that worked then are still in style today: recognition, pride, responsibility, importance, love, caring, communicating. I have not found a high-tech device that can provide the pleasure of a warm hug or replace the thrill of hearing a four-year-old giggle as you romp on the floor in a tickling exhibition.

The Reaction

Do any of you know someone who is weird? Sure you do, because there are a lot of them in our midst. I'm convinced that what will induce weirdness quicker than anything is too much high tech and not enough high touch. I've heard that three or four hugs a day will prevent ulcers.

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Explain to me why residences for senior citizens permit and encourage pets and children to visit and why Aunt Mildred eats and sleeps better following that episode of touch. While you're explaining, explain personalized license plates, pet rocks, messages on T-shirts and car bumpers, human-interest talk shows on TV, potted plants, and monogrammed memo pads in work areas. Is it obvious to you, too? We insist on being individuals, on being human, and I applaud.

Now, if we can educate management on this phenomenon, we can make the work unit more productive, more motivated, and more fun. This transition statement is very important, so permit my redundancy. I insist you continue buying the gadgetry. Plug it in, get all excited, watch it wink and blink. It's great! Just provide and introduce appropriate human interactive balance at the same time. If you do, you may not have to use your surreptitious surveillance devices to monitor your employees' keystrokes and telephone conversations. For goodness sake, some of you managers have become more autocratic than my old, tobacco chewin' first sergeant in post-WW II days. The sad part is that this practice of checking on the workers will continue until worker rebellion reaches the peak it did in the 1950s and '60s when labor unions mustered to combat authoritarianism.

No, I don't see a resurgence in union activity; the workers of today are more sophisticated than that. They are now able to undermine productivity and quality service in more subtle, undetected ways.

The Challenge

So, boss, the next move is yours. Almost every business in America now has high tech, but not every business has high productivity, high morale, and employee motivation. It should be obvious that technological gadgetry is not the panacea that many believed it to be. What is the solution to this problem?

As I see it, it's all rather basic and elementary. The solution lies in a sequence of events, and realistically, it actually occurs in a sequence. It all begins with whom you hire. Hire the most knowledgeable, experienced, motivated, enthusiastic, service-oriented person you can find. A blend of those talents is much better than any one by itself.

Believe me, there are a lot of credentialed people out there doing a horrible job of providing terrible service. If I were interviewing you, I wouldn't focus on your educational level until the second or third question. My first question to you

would be, “How do you feel about service to the customer?” And don’t forget, everyone has a customer—a person receiving your service product. I was an Air Force cop for 17 years; everyone living on that air base was my customer.

Once you’ve hired your potential peak performers, agree on the expectation and the standards of the job. Give them oars and an invitation to help row the organizational boat. Train them in the skills they’ll need, listen to their ideas and suggestions, give them ongoing feedback—all those things that good leaders have been doing for years. If you’re not doing the good things already, it’s senseless for me to repeat them; you wouldn’t practice them anyway. But workers deserve to leave work with a feeling of contribution, importance, and pride. If they are not, they are probably singing, “You load 16 tons and what do you get,” and so on.

The payoff? Fame, success, and glory for your firm. Why? The workers will ensure it by meeting the customer’s needs, by seeing the business through the customer’s eyes, by delivering more than has been promised, and by being committed to quality because “that’s just the way we do our job!” If it doesn’t work, I’ll give you your money back.

I offer a closing example that will put all of these thoughts in a neat package. True story, witnessed by me. There is a sandwich stand on a street corner in Laredo, Texas. The owner has been dispensing hamburgers and fries for years. Recently he hired an 11-year-old boy to deliver the food within a downtown radius. I saw the man hand the lad a sack of food; I watched in amazement as the youngster ran full speed down the street. I stood there and waited for his return. He returned full speed, breathless. Talk about motivation! I struck up a conversation with him as a lead-up to my most probing question: Why? Why did he run so fast? The facial response was one of surprise, his verbal response priceless: “Because,” he said, “people like hot french fries.”

This would be a good time for all of us to reflect on whether or not our firm is delivering hot french fries and, if not, why not. At this moment, when the words *quality*, *productivity*, and *empowerment* are bouncing off of seminar walls all over America, we would be smart to realize that these things are by-products of a properly trained and motivated workforce. There are no shortcuts; there is no magic.