There is perhaps nothing as fundamental for organizations as customer service. Any company in a truly competitive market suffers an inevitable decline if it ignores this basic discipline for too long. Take McDonald's for example—the organization's recent confession to franchisees that 20 percent of customer complaints are due to "unfriendly service," with "rude or unprofessional employees" as the number one complaint is a reminder that the final customer touch point often determines whether or not customers return. Despite spending nearly $2 billion annually on advertising, McDonald's service frequently leaves a bad taste.

Similarly, Brian Moynihan, CEO for Bank of America, one of the country's largest banks in both assets and branches, has implored employees to improve their relationships with customers. How committed is Moynihan to this? He mailed letters to the homes of 270,000 employees outlining the need to make it easier for customers to do business with the bank. This comes after nearly five years of internal discussions about becoming "customer centric"—more than three with Moynihan at the helm.

The importance (and difficulty) of engaging an organization's "front line" to deliver on the customer strategy has been a recurring topic for HBR. It's one of the fundamentals that companies in all industries must remember to revisit and for some, resuscitate after periods of neglect.

Our research into more than 20 front-line focused organizations (the basis for our recent book Judgment on the Front Line), led us to a set of principles for moving well beyond the basics of customer service by putting power, resources and trust in the hands of front line personnel. By doing so, an elite group of companies has enabled their employees to more rapidly address customer problems, anticipate unarticulated needs and drive customer-facing innovation.

We uncovered information about a variety of companies, ranging from the Ritz-Carlton and Yum! Brands to the Mayo Clinic and U.S. Navy SEALs. Consider what we can learn from the following examples:

- Amazon, where CEO Jeff Bezos often insists on leaving an empty chair at meetings to represent the "customer's voice," has a data-driven culture which actively encourages employees to build experiments based on customer insight. Innovations such as shopping cart recommendations
have been the direct result of entry-level employees taking initiative. Behavior-based search was
first implemented by an intern, resulting in a three percent revenue increase.

- Zara, the Spanish fast-fashion company, receives quantitative data and qualitative observations
from store managers daily to better understand what customers want. Every day, store staff chat
with customers, asking questions like, "What if this skirt was longer?" or "What other colors would
you like for this item?" This has allowed Zara to limit failed product introductions to just one
percent (the industry averages nearly ten percent) while producing nearly ten times the number of
products as its largest competitors.

Even with these successes, we've found that no single organization has all of the answers. But combining
effective best practices from these diverse organizations and others provides a methodology for building
a front line-focused organization, as well as the leadership required to enable your front line to make real-
time judgment calls. This process encourages leaders to break down the individual elements required to
build and reinforce front line judgment while ensuring they provide an integrated, systemic framework for
action rather than a pastiche of so-called empowerment initiatives overlaid on a command-and-control
structure. As companies seek to get more contribution and creativity from frontline personnel, here's a
five-step process for moving beyond a suggestion-box mentality.

**Step 1: Get Started: Connect the front line to the customer strategy.** Paradoxically, empowering the
front line starts with senior leaders, who have the authority to ensure frontline voices are heard. Senior
leaders need to help match their customer promise to the capabilities of the front line while listening
closely so they can help align the culture, training, work processes and reward systems. Yum! Brands
CEO David Novak, for example, has given every employee the latitude to spend up to ten dollars to fix
any customer problem.

**Step 2: Empower Your Workforce: Teach people to think for themselves.** Employees at every level
need to understand the customer strategy. They also need simple problem solving frameworks that are
used throughout the organization to promote cross-hierarchical dialogue. We found that the methodology
mattered less than having a shared language and thought process for diagnosing root causes or
exploring unmet needs. For example, Ritz-Carlton uses MR BIV as a common framework for spotting
mistakes, rework, breakdowns, inefficiencies and variations in work processes.

**Step 3: Experiment to Implement: Grant front line workers latitude to experiment.** Front line workers
not only see service breakdowns but also opportunities for serving customers in entirely new ways.
Teaching front line leaders the basics for designing simple experiments enables organizations to test
many more ideas than could ever be orchestrated centrally. Facebook puts this into practice during "hack-
a-thons" designed to unleash pent-up employee creativity. Vital features such as Facebook Video, which
has garnered billions of views, have come from giving individual programmers the time and resources to
put their customer insight into practice.

**Step 4: Eliminate the Barriers: Break down the hierarchy.** Nearly every organization has embedded
assumptions about roles and power. Freeing front line capacity requires frequent, diligent effort to
eliminate decision processes or administrative work that gets in the way of enabling the front line to
expeditiously serve customers. For example, at the Mayo Clinic of Scottsdale, nurses have the power to
question any doctor's decision or diagnosis through its "Plus One" protocol, completely breaking down the
traditional hierarchy. If nurses - some of whom have far more experience than many doctors - fear for a
patient's safety, they can move up the chain of command or bring in a specialist to consult and potentially
override the initial care recommendation. The hospital was recently named by Consumer Reports as the
safest teaching hospital in the U.S.

**Step 5: Invest in Your Frontline: Put budget behind it.** Too often, companies reserve big budgets for
senior management training while spreading funding thin for front line personnel. Similarly, too many
companies are content to hire front line staff without carefully considering whether they possess the right
attitude and values to represent their brand. At Zappos, it’s not unusual for someone interviewing for a $13-per-hour call center job to meet with 15 people before being hired. If they do get the job offer, they will be required to sit through several weeks of training, including listening to recordings of real customer interactions, before they ever work a full day.

Delivering a great customer experience is a fundamental that every company needs to practice, and organizations that excel in this area focus on how to get the most from their front line. As companies such as McDonald’s and Bank of America reconsider how their employees interact with customers, they will be challenged to move beyond just rhetoric. If they are truly serious about turning their people into their greatest asset, they’ll invest in the front line.

###

Chris DeRose and Noel Tichy are co-authors of *Judgment on the Front Line: How Smart Companies Win By Trusting Their People*. They have advised CEOs around the world and worked with Royal Dutch/Shell, Ford Motor Company, 3M, and Intel.