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The revolution is here! We can either join in or stand by and allow our competitors to gain the advantages of participation.

What revolution is that? It's the Customer Centricity Revolution! It's where we are focused on knowing more about our customer's businesses, problems and markets; knowing more about how our solutions affect the results they expect for *their* business; knowing more about the experiences they expect dealing with their vendors; and knowing more about the unique requirements our customers have. It's where the customer's success and business activities become the focal point that drives our companies' operations, infrastructure, and what information is put in our CRM and ERP data stores.

So, what does it mean to be customer centric - truly customer centric? Some companies might say that they are customer centric because they offer 24/7 service, that they keep prolific information in great numbers of data bases on each customer transaction, developing and providing a 360° client view in their organization and they answer the customer's service requests with one person in one call. Certainly, these standards are necessary components of customer centricity. But they aren't, in themselves, enough.

The shift in power to customers in today's buy/sell process requires companies to implement a more robust customer centric strategy with this ultimate goal in mind: *Alignment*. The overall performance of the business depends on how well companies consistently and proactively align their value propositions with each customer's (or group's) basic and unique requirements – covering expectations of solution performance, experiences, and knowledge about their needs.

This alignment is facilitated by taking the steps necessary to adhere to the following ten centric focused criteria. While reading each criterion, ask the following two questions:

- How well does my company do this today? And...
- Will improving the company's activities to meet the criterion add value to both my company and our customers?

1. The company's vision and mission mention the customer and their success (not just making them more "competitive") as a goal and the company promotes as its highest principle "Do everything we can to make the customer successful!"

A corollary: A company knows why their customers can fail and does what it can to prevent it.

2. The company takes on the following attitude: A "risk" taken by the company is also a risk taken by their customers, so company and customers work together to manage or mitigate it.

For example, implementing new technology is always risky, so companies work with their customers to make sure it can be "installed," their people can be trained to use it, and support personnel are located in the right place *for* the right time (i.e., the company anticipates or knows *when* support will be needed).

3. A major company goal is to “make life easier” for the customer. Customer centric companies make it easy to, for example, return goods, get answers to all types of questions, call the CEO, understand warranties and guarantees, get training on their terms, optimize phone time, and voice their quality needs. Companies know that having “making life easier” skills and processes are a cost effective benefit for both their business and the businesses of their customers.

4. The company's loyal customer, “best” customer, and successful customer have well defined criteria that segment them into these categories, which is useful for focusing value propositions.

For example, the most loyal customer may not be the most successful, but when they buy, they buy from the company; the “best” customer may be the one that promotes the company's business the most, but may not buy the most; and the most successful customer may sell more goods and services than their competition but may not be the most loyal. Knowing this information, a company can develop a customer centric strategy for each customer type.

5. The company focuses enterprise *activities* – those designed to cut across the entire company down to those designed, specifically, for each individual - on what it means to retain customers and create repeat buyers.

This means that company strategies are developed to include the *results that customers can expect* from the successful implementation of the associated initiatives. It means that when designing jobs, the company makes sure they start with defining the customer's needs and expected results as the foundation for the job's activities and standards.

6. The company is aligned around the total value proposition for each customer segment, not just the products and their related services that are at the core of each proposition.

For example, providing industry consultative services to certain customer groups via (possibly) the sales force is a part of the total value proposition and, although not a core service (one that's related to core products) the sales organization has to align itself – taking into account their skills, processes, tools, physical locations, customer needs, etc. – with the appropriate customers to effectively deliver the service.

7. The company receives value back from their customers in the form of, for example, market promotions, feasible self-sufficient support, applicable co-branding programs, and useful, hard to get industry information (e.g. a “heads up” to technology breakthroughs or impending market shifts).
8. Essential corporate information (e.g. product availability, account status, problem reports) is available to all customers in “real time” as if they were internal to the company.
9. The company gathers information about their customers' customers and suppliers, how “information” flows around their customers' enterprises, how their customers operate, about their customers' strategies, and so on. More importantly, the company *asks* for some of this “non-transactional” information.

In other words, the company knows *everything possible* about their customers so they can constantly innovate their business, *with* and for their customers, to provide unique solutions for their unique problems or needs.

10. Companies know that customer centricity is implemented via a set of skills and processes *supported* by a set of tools and not just by installing the tools. They take the time to define the skills and processes they need to become customer centric – e.g. analytical skills and a process for “learning about the *entire* customer business” (see bullet above) – before they purchase and install tools to make them effective.

Use these ten criteria – along with business objectives, core value propositions, business goals, and targeted marketplaces – to identify and select the following, vital to robust customer centric strategies:

1. Skill and process capabilities (e.g. collaboration, innovation, and process management), and
2. “Knowledge creating” data and information.

As far as “creating knowledge” is concerned, most of the ten criteria suggest a need for more than what can be developed from transactional information – e.g. how they buy, what they buy, and by how much. They suggest a much more profound understanding of the customer (e.g. see criteria number 9). But, again, the business’ objectives will help guide the quality and type of knowledge needed and used to develop customer centric strategies.

As an example using the ten criteria, think of the following: If a company’s business objective is to be a product innovator, then customer centricity means something different than if its objective is to offer commodity products with world-class service. The first strategy might mean the company co-designs innovations with customers (a process satisfying criteria number 9) while the second might mean physically organizing the company close to customer sites (a process satisfying, minimally, criteria number 3).

Finally, implementing strategies will have to help institutionalize centricity into the business’ culture, that is, make it “natural” to have everyone think of the results of their activities in terms of customers. It can’t feel like it’s a “tacked on” behavior or appear as a temporary program to customers.

Think about the results of implementing quality management systems over the past two and a half decades: quality, while it’s still measuring products and services to predefined standards, has also become a way of operational life. Companies now think of the quality of information, skills, how well resources are managed, and so on. They have, for the most part, integrated their “quality goals’ procedures and standards” into their everyday activities, involving every individual as a result.

The same has to be true with customer centricity! Because being a customer centric company can’t feel contrived; it has to feel normal. It requires a concerted effort by the entire company: All of its activities and all of its results must be focused on the customers’ explicit and implicit goals.

Why? Because, customer centric businesses are the answer to today’s economic reality.