



Defining Effective Service

Competencies

"This Deep Dive draws from one of the Areas of Competence in the [Career Development Manager/Leader Competency Framework](#). Through reflection, analysis of real situations, and practical activities, you'll explore how this part of the framework shapes your leadership practice."

The Challenge Ahead

The career and employment sector operates largely through organizations that secure government contracts to deliver employment-related services. These contracts are term-specific, which makes continuity from year to year difficult. Winning a contract often means rapid hiring and onboarding, while losing one can lead to staff reductions. Contracts typically define outcomes and processes, leaving little flexibility and minimal provision for overhead or staff development.

This environment creates pressure to meet contractual requirements with limited resources. The vision of high-quality service imagined at the proposal stage can fade as operational realities take hold. New staff juggle data entry alongside client support; clients present more barriers than anticipated; employers tighten budgets.

Yet, despite these challenges, the sector remains committed to helping people move forward. Each new contract brings an opportunity to innovate, strengthen partnerships, and advocate for approaches that balance efficiency with impact. While experienced voices note the growing complexity since the 1990s, the drive to create meaningful change continues to inspire those who choose this work.

The Leader's Role in Service Enhancement

You're likely reading this because you see that the only way things are going to get better regarding quality service for clients is if you make them better. This recognition of ownership of the situation is Step 1! Whether the resources are readily available or not, you can and need to effect change. Further, rallying staff around a high priority area will likely improve all areas of performance. It may feel like you don't have the luxury of the time needed to devote to service enhancement, but the opposite is true: A genuine focussed effort on service will save time in all other areas.

Next, think culture change rather than procedure change, and bring your staff along with you. You've been a customer of organizations that have undergone mass service training, and you know what it's like to have service people go through the motions of "service" when you and they both know they really don't care.



The phrase “culture eats strategy for breakfast”¹ is worth contemplating here. True customer service comes from people who genuinely want to support people and who believe their organization supports them in doing so. Further, sustainable change is more likely when staff are the co-creators of the change than when you are. Genuine, durable service enhancement will occur when staff are supported in finding ways to align their values and interests with the goals of the organization.

Creating culture change can be a lengthy and intricate endeavour, but it does not have to be. Sometimes, a culture can be changed simply by allowing, supporting, and encouraging staff to do what they know to be right. Your staff are likely doing human services work because they want to support humans! Their current level of service, which needs enhancement, was brought about by multiple explicit and implicit organizational messages that there was no time to develop relationships with those being supported, service was a luxury that wasn’t in the budget, efficiency was more important than service, and even that “efficiency” and “service” are somehow opposites.

Undoing the effects of previous messaging will get you closer to better service, but more is required to truly enhance service and set the stage for continuous service improvement. This resource will walk you through the steps to get your team on the track of ongoing service enhancement.

Service Enhancement Process

Step 1: Own Service Enhancement

John G. Miller’s idea of QBQ™ is usefully applied to this step. QBQ™ stands for the “question behind the question,” which refers to the question people should be asking themselves when they are asking complaint-oriented questions. Say your question is “*Why does my team provide poor service?*” or “*Why doesn’t the funder give us enough money to support our clients well?*” Instead, ask the question “*How can I help my team provide better service?*” or “*How can we support clients well in the absence of extra resources?*” The question behind the question is all about your role in addressing a concern. It moves your thinking from helpless pawn to agent; powerless to powerful; negative to positive; and moving away from something to moving toward something.

You probably have the QBQ™ concept in your psyche already, perhaps with different labelling. It is raised here because *service enhancement is not only up to you taking an active role, but also up to each team member taking an active role* (see Step 2 for an explanation).

Before going to Step 2, consider your role in the team’s service behaviours in Worksheet 1:

- What questions do you ask yourself about your team’s service behaviours?

¹ This phrase has been attributed to Peter Drucker, Steve Jobs, Jack Welch, and Mark Shields, an executive of Ford Motor Company. Shields made the saying famous and attributed it to Drucker. However, the Drucker Institute claims that Drucker is not the source.





- “Why won’t X take a couple of minutes to get to know a client and develop a relationship before asking all the intake questions?”
- “Why are staff looking at their screen when asking clients questions? Why aren’t they making eye contact?”
- “Why are we getting such poor returns on our follow-up calls with clients?”
- What are the better questions behind the questions you ask yourself?
 - “What have I pressed staff to do that has inadvertently led to staff rushing through critical processes?”
 - “What can I do to help staff interact with the client well and enter data later?”
 - “What is my role in ensuring clients see our organization as genuinely helpful?”





Worksheet 1: Reflecting on Ownership: Questions Behind Questions

In the table below, record up to five complaint-oriented questions about your team's service levels you ask yourself. Then, record one or two questions about your role in the problem or its solution.

Questions you ask yourself about your team's service behaviours	Questions behind the questions





Worksheet 2: Clarity: Service Enhancement Values, Intentions, and Goals

The table below is intended to help you get clarity about service enhancement. Working through the table will help you think through what you will say about the values, intentions, and goals behind your desire to enhance service when you meet with the team to discuss service enhancement.

Area	Key Ideas
Values	<i>What has led you to focus on service enhancement? What personal and organizational values will be fulfilled by enhancing service?</i>
Intentions	<i>When you think about enhancing service, what do you envision will be different for clients, staff, you, your leaders, funders or other interest holders important to you?</i>
Goals	<i>Knowing they likely will change after introducing the service enhancement idea to the team, what are your initial goals for the initiative?</i>





Worksheet 3: Clarity: Service Enhancement Limitations

Your service enhancement initiative will eventually be in the hands of your team. Each team member will be making decisions about the provision of service on a client-by-client basis. To do so effectively, the team will need to know the limits of their discretion in terms of time they spend, resources needed, actions they take, and commitments made. You will involve the team in finalizing these limits, but you will need a starting point.

Use the table below to identify boundaries of time, resources, actions, and commitments. Try to be as clear as possible about the inner edge (just barely acceptable) and outer edge (just over the line) of each boundary.

Area	Boundary	Within Boundary Example	Over the Line Example
Time What discretion will staff have re: spending relation-building time with clients?			
Resources What resources could be made available to support staff's service efforts?			
Actions What actions related to service are within reason?			
Commitments What promises can staff make to clients about future programming, access to help, etc.?			





Step 2: Target Culture Change

Where Step 1 has you own your role in service enhancement, Step 2 centres around you encouraging and supporting team members to own their respective roles in service enhancement by:

- working with team members to ensure clarity regarding service principles, limits, and aims
- helping team members fill competence gaps they may have vis-à-vis service
- inviting input from team members regarding improvements and innovations
- recognizing and appreciating team members individual and collective efforts

If you are familiar with Dennis C. Kinlaw's model of employee commitment, you will see his four components or pillars of commitment in these statements: clarity, competence, influence, and appreciation.

Clarity is needed to ensure team members know the boundaries within which they are providing service, the intentions and values underlying the desire for service enhancement, and any specific goals to be achieved. Having clarity creates a safe working space for employees; they then can make decisions knowing what's "in" and what's "out."

Competence is needed for the employee to perform well and therefore not waste mental and emotional energy worrying about whether they are doing the right thing or doing the right thing well. The confidence ensuing from competence frees up cognitive bandwidth, bandwidth that is needed to pay attention to service enhancements. This confidence also diverts emotional energy away from inward-focussed worry and anxiety about performance and toward outward-focussed concern for clients and their needs.

Influence is the lynchpin of ownership. Team members' commitment to processes, goals, measures, and more is heightened when team members have had a say in creating the processes, goals, measures, and more. Employees are simply more likely to back decisions they have made rather than decisions someone else has made.

Appreciation is both the simplest and complicated pillar. At one level, employees will be more committed to an endeavour when they feel seen, heard, and valued as people first and as employees second. Simple, right? Where it gets complicated is that every employee responds to a manager's acts of appreciation differently. One may want public recognition when they do something well; another may be embarrassed beyond belief to have public recognition. An employee takes a "thank you" from a manager at face value and feels recognized; the employee's teammate doesn't trust the manager and hears the same "thank you" as lame and annoying.

The components of commitment interact with each other. Increased competence can lead to employees wanting and being able to provide better perspectives and ideas. Listening to their ideas and implementing them (influence) will be seen by some employees as an acknowledgement of their value (appreciation). Feeling appreciated may motivate some employees to seek more guidance about what's possible and what's not (clarity). This conversation may lead to changes to the goals of the endeavour. What started as a manager-led initiative can soon become a team-led initiative.





Worksheet 4: Creating the Groundwork to Unleash Change

Commitment Component	Key Message(s)	To Watch For
Clarity	<i>To get this rolling, I'm going to let you know my values, intentions and goals in relationship to service. I'll also provide a sense of what's in and what's out in terms of what we can do to enhance service. Starting with this meeting, though, the nature of this initiative will be shaped by all of us.</i>	<i>Being clear about boundaries while keeping open to ideas.</i>
Competence	<i>Some of us, myself included, have had our heads down trying to keep up with contractual expectations that we haven't had to think or act in terms of "service." We'll need to think about the skills and knowledge we want to acquire to make this work.</i>	<i>Going down a rabbit hole of all the training they need – they probably need very little.</i>
Influence	<i>I'd like to create a space where each of you can explore your own ways of enhancing service, drawing on your unique strengths and perspectives. Also, service is only really service if it's genuine. I'm hoping we all find ways to actually want to enhance service. I'll be open to suggestions and will handle them respectfully.</i>	<i>Making promises I can't keep</i>
Appreciation	<i>I know you're in this field because you're genuinely committed to supporting others in meaningful ways. While there may be times when organizational constraints—or even my own decisions—limit what we can do, I want you to know that your efforts are truly valued and appreciated.</i> <i>We may not be able to do everything we envision, but every step forward matters, and I believe we can create real impact together. I also understand that you might have questions or reservations about how this will unfold, and I welcome those perspectives with openness and respect.</i>	<i>Being disingenuous – sincerity is key</i>





Step 3. Nurture the Change, Sustainably

Unless your team is extremely skeptical about your motives or ability to support the team, you will have already heard ideas about what could be done and what will be needed after the first meeting. You will want to respond to these ideas reasonably quickly and, hopefully, positively.

You will not be able to fill every need that is suggested nor permit every idea to be executed. Get yourself ready to respond to suggestions that are not viable, doing so in a way that:

- helps the employee get further clarity about the initiative (clarity)
 - Your clarity may increase, too, as employees raise issues you hadn't thought of
- identifies the employees' competency gaps, if there are gaps and/or develops the employees' problem-solving skills (competence)
 - Problem-solving can be developed via a basic coaching approach in which the employee is encouraged to generate alternate ways of getting to similar outcomes
- generates alternatives to the idea (influence in a different way than proposed)
 - As mentioned above, this could be done via coaching but could also involve other team members
- recognizes the employee's effort and intention (appreciation)
 - Appreciation will be shown simply by taking the employee's perspective seriously and treating their input as valuable, even if it needs adjustments. It's still a good idea to express appreciation explicitly, however.

There is no worksheet associated with Step 3. You will be improvising, as will employees. However, you need to be ready to make mental and actual notes about the many things you will learn about employees as they work to enhance service. Perhaps a whiteboard or flipchart where you can gather ideas, organize them, and reflect them back to the group would be helpful. You will find out, on an employee-by-employee basis, what they know about the organization and how they view it; where their strengths are and are not; what they are motivated by; and possibly where they see their career path going. This information is golden and can sometimes be difficult to obtain directly.

Step 4. Develop and Implement an Evaluation System

It is very likely a team member will have already suggested the idea of measuring changes due to enhanced service. If so, Step 4 will have been merged with Step 3 and the team will have taken on the task of creating the system.

If evaluation has not been proposed, it would be good to get the team thinking about evaluation sooner than later. Evaluation enhances clarity regarding intentions and aims as well as effectiveness. Evaluation can point to competence gaps as well.

Ideally, evaluation should be employee-driven, with your role being the convenor of meetings about it and possibly bringing in some outside expertise to help.





Step 5. Be Part of the Team

Even though team input, influence, and involvement have been emphasized here, do not infer that you shouldn't contribute to improvement efforts. Once the team is engaged in the service enhancement process, start doing what they're doing – generating service enhancement ideas. These can come in various forms, described below.

- *Questions for the team.* You are well-positioned in your role to see things that apply to the whole team and to see things from a different perspective than the rest of the team. This puts you in a position to ask interesting questions that the team hasn't considered:
 - Where are we wasting the client's time?
 - e.g., waiting for an appointment
 - How could we either reduce the time wasted or change it so that the client is doing something useful so it's not wasted?
 - What do we ask the client to do that's repetitive?
 - e.g., providing their address to two people
 - What do clients say to their partners or friends about our service?
- *Different perspectives.* You can stimulate the team to generate service ideas by providing different viewpoints:
 - Shift from how to change the client to how to change the environment. Lead the staff to review the unit's processes to find areas in which great effort is made trying to increase the client's skills or alter their perspective, but the real problem is a system issue, either internally or externally.
 - Shift from holding beliefs because they are true to holding beliefs because they are useful.
 - For example, "the customer is always right" is patently incorrect, but it's a very useful belief to hold.
 - Shift from staff's view of the client to actual client experience.
 - Have staff watch "Undercover Boss" or rotate being a client for a day to get a sense of what the client's experience is.
 - Shift from employment to other businesses.
 - Provide instances of exceptional customer service in other workplaces simply to stimulate staff's thinking.
- *Provide your own suggestions.* You may be able to see some low-hanging fruit where simple changes could make things better for clients, or where two staff members communicating better would really help the client. Once you are convinced the team is doing more thinking about service than you are, don't hold these back.
- As the team becomes increasingly engaged, perhaps team members can facilitate these discussions so you can participate, too.



**Step 6. Keep Things Fresh**

The last step is to monitor staff's energy around service enhancement and find ways to re-invigorate it when it lags. Or, have the staff focus their energies elsewhere that is new and exciting, knowing they will bring back what they do to the act of service. Your staff want to do good work and be seen as doing good work. Occasionally, they will need prompts, reminders, and nudges to remember that they want this. They will also need your help in removing the barriers that prevent them from doing what they see to be "good work." Don't forget your regular one-on-one meetings; you can check in with employees individually, recognizing their efforts, checking in on their energy and hearing their concerns. The more you get to know them through initiatives like service enhancement, the easier that will be.

