

By Al Vanderberg and
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The “Ottawa Way” Thrives

A Michigan county adopts a
customer-centric culture

Does it really make a difference if a local government adopts a customer-centric culture? Yes, say government officials in Ottawa County, Michigan, who have undergone training to learn “The Disney Way” of providing quality customer service.

Ottawa County, Michigan, is located in the southwestern section of the state. Located 174 miles west of Detroit and 150 miles northeast of Chicago, the county includes six cities, 17 townships, and one village within 565 square miles. More than 272,000 residents enjoy famous Lake Michigan beaches and 7,000 acres of county parks.

Ottawa County is also a vacation destination with Holland, Michigan’s Tulip Time festival and Grand Haven’s Coast Guard Festival held during the summer.

Some may wonder about a possible disconnect between the public sector and a Disney-like customer-centric culture. At least in the private sector, competitive forces provide an incentive to emulate outstanding customer service icons like Disney, Starbucks, or Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. Surely, counties already have a monopoly on their services, many of which are regulatory in nature, and Ottawa County is no exception.

Given its assets, why should the county be concerned with customer service? Responding to this question, a county official noted that the county has earned its reputation largely due to the people who live, visit, and do business with it. As such, it owes great service to visitors, residents, and employees. Besides, it’s just good business.

When a new business locates within a region, for example, the effect on employment is: 1) a direct impact from the jobs provided by the business itself; 2) an indirect impact if

the business buys production materials and services locally; and 3) an induced impact or multiplier effect from the flow of wages spent by new employees, which may provide new jobs in other businesses, and in turn, the spending of those wages.

The Michigan Multiplier 2013 (Montgomery Consulting, spring 2013, http://is0.gaslightmedia.com/northern-lakeseconomicalliance/_ORIGINAL_/fs27-1370442191-27000.pdf) reports that Ottawa County's employment multiplier is 2.12. This means that if a business locates within a county and provides 100 new jobs, 212 additional jobs will be created to support the new business.

If a visiting executive who is searching for a new location within a county has a good customer service experience, it certainly may help his or her decision to locate there. A terrible customer service experience, however, could result in a search for another location.

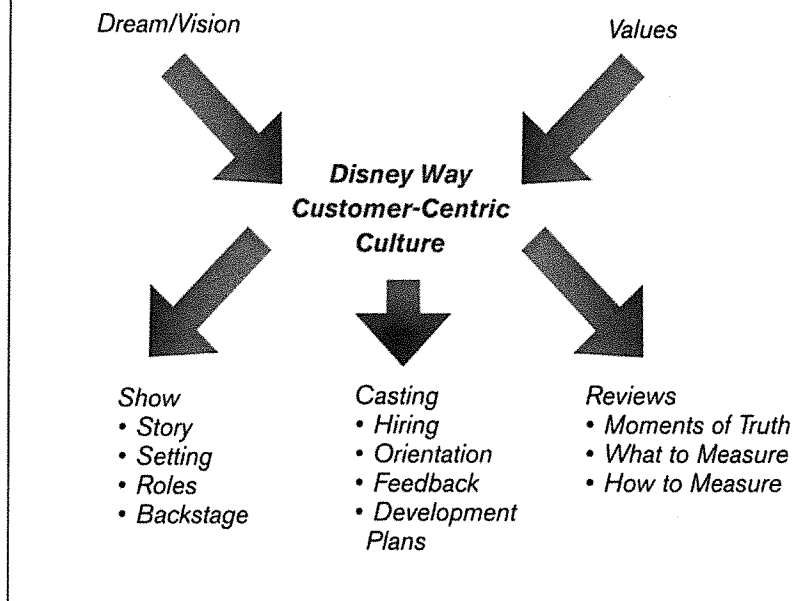
"Ottawa Way" Customer Service Initiative

After reading the best-selling book *The Disney Way*, Ottawa County officials contacted the company created by the book's authors to help the county develop a Disney-like customer service culture. Training began in fall 2012 with the customer service steering team. This group continues to meet monthly to oversee the customer service initiative and to review accomplishments and next steps.

The steering team included key leaders from the 33 departments, offices, courts, and agencies that make up Ottawa County. The first step was total immersion in the Disney Way experience through a series of three, one-half-day workshops over a period of two weeks (see Figure 1).

During initial workshops, the county team came to realize that although the 33 areas ranged from law enforcement to social services, the same Disney Way experience should drive them all. From that point on, Ottawa County's customer-centric culture would be known as the "Ottawa Way."

FIGURE 1. Disney Way Experience.



Here are the steering team accomplishments from its initial workshops:

- Developed preliminary dream and vision. Here is the last paragraph of *The Ottawa County Customer Service Story*: "Imagine a team with a variety of skills—collaborating, engaging one another, and having fun. . . that work to improve, protect and serve their citizens and the environment. This is Ottawa County and you are the Ottawa Way!"
- Identified preliminary values. The customer service value statement reads: "Empowered to Solve Problems with Integrity and Empathy to Inspire Trust."
- Established preliminary codes of conduct. Examples of Ottawa County codes: "We live the Golden Rule." "We take accountability for our actions and decisions." "We create a culture of service in which every customer is valued!"
- Storyboarded potential barriers to the implementation. A storyboard is a visual display and problem-solving technique that captures, organizes, and prioritizes the thoughts and ideas of everyone on the team. This tool was developed by Walt Disney.

- Developed a road map for change. One of the main tasks was the commitment for everyone in the organization to experience the three-day, customer-centric culture training.

Management Buy-in

The next step to implementing the Ottawa Way was a three-day leadership workshop for 100 front-line leaders.

Becoming customer-centric is not an activity to be checked off during an annual strategic planning process or a performance review, or briefly communicated in a retreat setting. An organization-wide cultural change driven by top management is required for success. Front-line leaders must not only embrace the new culture, they must also believe they have ownership in its development and results. This was the main focus of the leadership workshop.

Here are the front-line leaders' accomplishments from the three-day workshop:

- Finalized dream and vision.
- Finalized values.
- Finalized codes of conduct.

- Storyboarded potential barriers to the implementation.
- Understood road map for change.
- Understood the Disney Way experience, which means beginning to live the dream, believe, dare, and implement principles.

The Rollout

Upon completion of the leadership workshop, the steering team planned a three-day "Ottawa Way" experience for all employees. For the ensuing year, approximately 60 to 100 employees per session participated in the training that was facilitated on a monthly basis, with a total of 973 employees completing the training.

Local government managers might question why the training needed to be conducted for three days. Couldn't the principles required for any new culture be communicated in less than a day? If it was that simple, however, countless organizations would be as magical as Disney.

When employees arrive at the three-day training, they do so with a set of values that has been ingrained in them over the course of their careers. Now they are expected to embrace a new set of values, yet they need time to realize that the old values are no longer the best for the organization as a whole.

Here are the employee accomplishments from the three-day training:

- Participated in the Disney Way Experience.

- Storyboarded potential barriers to the implementation.
- Storyboarded solutions to eliminate key barriers.

The Hot Seat

During the afternoon of the second day of training, participants experienced the "Hot Seat" segment. The county administrator and two of the steering team department heads were members of the Hot Seat panel. Participants were invited to ask the panel any questions pertaining to the Ottawa Way or to County operations.

How the "Hot Seat" benefits the staff: 1) top leaders being available, displaying candor, and demonstrating support to employees; and 2) trust and open communication established between management staff and the workforce.

A question asked at every session was "How can we provide excellent customer service when in government the answer is not and cannot always be yes?"

The answer: It is all about how you treat someone. We use the Golden Rule that stresses that people treat others as they wish to be treated.

Storyboard Treasure Trove

Something of extraordinary and unanticipated benefit resulted from the training. As many as 480 storyboards provided a wealth of information about what county employees think; 452 storyboards displayed concerns that pertained to management and leadership. Lack of

trust in management, poor communication, and little coaching and feedback were a few of the topics of concern.

Participants, by way of 1,406 storyboard response cards, communicated that improvements in leadership, empowerment, accountability, encouragement, and setting clear expectations and direction were needed. Lead by example, live the Golden Rule, and provide more feedback were some of the ideas for improvement.

The Leadership Challenge

The storyboard process is an ideal way for leaders to gain anonymous feedback and to engage their entire teams. A powerful way to begin helping leaders to become more effective, which was one of the concerns that emerged through county employee storyboards, is to conduct a leadership storyboard.

As an author of this article and the workshop trainer, I challenged Al to allow his direct reports to participate in this exercise in which they answered the question, "What is the ultimate leader?" After an initial briefing with staff, Al left the room so that they would have total freedom to continue the process by ranking what is most important to them, what Al "does best," and which areas are "opportunities for improvement."

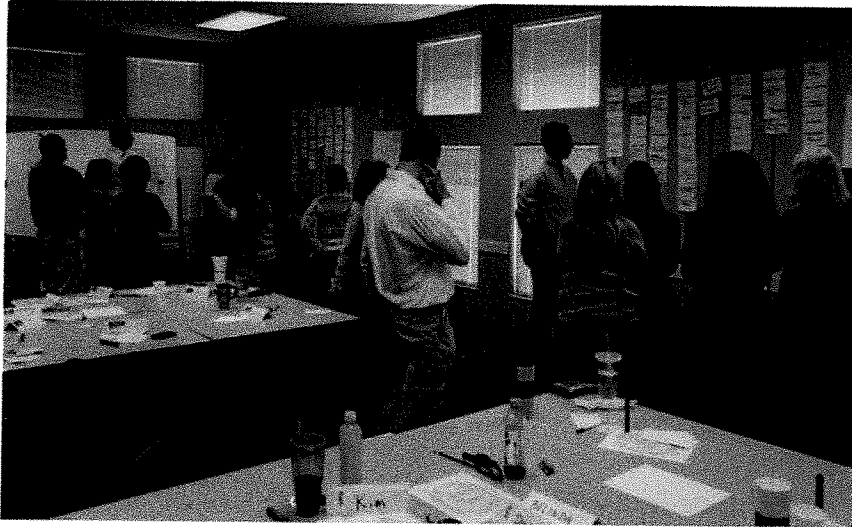
Al admitted being a little nervous with the process, but he saw great value in the results. As a next step, both elected and appointed county leaders completed the leadership storyboard process within their own departments.

Brain Trust Follow-up and Next Steps

Ed Catmull, president of Disney and Pixar Animation Studios, was quoted in the book as saying that "A hallmark of a healthy creative culture is that its people feel free to share ideas."

One of the best ways to produce this type of environment is by establishing a brain trust, which is a group of people who assist, advise, and support one another but do not have authority to make decisions for each other's teams or departments. In

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One of the 480 storyboard sessions held with Ottawa County employees.

A quarterly Outstanding Customer Service Award that began in January 2014 has netted an average of 70 employee nominations each quarter.

general, the members also help each other become more effective leaders.

The county is on the verge of creating a leadership brain trust, which will be seven groups composed of 15 to 20 middle-management leaders and one facilitator, along with one group of upper management with a facilitator.

Like the leadership storyboard, the brain trust is intended to improve county leaders' effectiveness. Each leader will complete a self-assessment customer service implementation questionnaire by rating teams in these categories:

- Constant purpose and improvement and forever using the system of customer service.
- Institute training in codes of conduct, customer service values, and quality.
- Believe in elements of the show or customer experience.
- Eliminate fear.
- Break down barriers between departments.

- Remove barriers to pride of workmanship.

Every 10 weeks after the initial meeting, brain trust meetings will be held to provide updates on the progress of implementing Ottawa Way and to help leaders identify and solve problems.

The Future

After the Ottawa Way training sessions were completed in the fall of 2014, the county created an 18-member customer service team with representation from county department operations. With the same lead facilitator, the team can coordinate with the brain trust. Here are team initiatives:

- Determine next steps to customer service training.
- Determine ways to help customers better navigate county buildings and the phone system.

- Find ways of providing more services to residents with the use of technology.
- Implement customer service best practices.
- Implement an ambassador program to assist new employees with on-boarding as they transition to county employment and to create a network, which provides a resource to all employees seeking information on programs, departments, people, buildings, and more.

Early successes have been amazing, particularly considering that the Ottawa Way is still relatively new. A quarterly Outstanding Customer Service Award that began in January 2014 has netted an average of 70 employee nominations each quarter.

A sheriff's deputy was nominated for a customer service award after issuing a traffic ticket to a motorist. The Public Health Department's restaurant inspection division, heavily criticized by many restaurants just three years ago, has received 87 customer service nominations from the private businesses they serve. Businesses praised the transition from a highly regulatory "gotcha" attitude to more of an attitude of educating and coaching, thus becoming a valued partner.

These are just a few examples of great stories emerging that celebrate county employees going above and beyond the call of duty. The county references achievements on its website at http://miottawa.org/CustomerService/outstanding_current.htm.

A few years ago, the notion of having the 33 different areas of the county singing the same customer service tune seemed like an impossible dream; however, as Walt Disney said, "If you can dream it, you can do it." That is the Disney Way, and now it is the Ottawa Way, too. **PM**



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