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# How Customer Service 'Raises the Bar'

I've been in the property management industry for the better part of two decades. When I started my career in the summer of 1989, property management was much easier, the pressure was lower and the expectations were reasonable. Over the years, I have seen the industry grow, change and evolve in many different ways and subsequently, so have the roles and responsibilities of a property manager. Today, property management has become a very challenging and complex (yet highly rewarding) profession. But amid all the changes, there has always been a key discernable constant of the role: you are always dealing with people – all kinds of people. And when you are dealing with people, their homes, and investments, everything becomes personal.

Personal work requires a personal touch. That's why I believe customer service is a skill that is essential to every manager. It is a quality that sets apart a good property manager from a great property manager...but what is customer service?

Well, customer service can mean many different things in many different industries. Depending on the primary goal of the company/organization, the emphasis will always shift. In the property management industry, we do not simply manage properties but we care about the overall well-being of the communities we serve. To provide great customer service, a manager must have good interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skills are the traits that guide our interactions with others. How an interaction

transpires and what you do during it will have a huge impact on how a unit owner or board member perceive your abilities.

Here are the most important customer service skills I believe every manager needs to demonstrate:

### **Empathy**

Empathy is the most important trait a manager can possess and it is also one that can be developed if they don't possess it naturally. How do you know what will make a resident happy if you don't know what happiness means to them? Having empathy not only gives you the ability to understand someone else's perspective, but it enhances your overall communication with them by being able to tune in to their emotional cues. This means you get to the root of the issue quicker, you don't



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take any anger or frustration personally and you gain the perspective to find the right solution for them. On top of all that, empathy will always help create a personal connection, which in turn ensures a more positive outcome to any interaction.

### Clear Communication

Clear communication is not simply broken down into verbal, non-verbal or written, but also refers to the way the message is received or perceived. Therefore, to succeed at communication, you must be as concise as you can in the most positive way that you can. Misunderstandings are costly in both your time and a resident's patience; therefore, know your audience and choose your words wisely. The way you would communicate with one person may be completely different with another, however, you must always keep your phrasing positive and focus on what you can do, not what you can't. It is almost guaranteed that if you use 'no', 'can't', 'don't' etc. when expressing yourself, the message will be perceived as negative.

It is also wise to remember that communication is not limited to what you say but also to what you hear. Active listening is a large part of effective communication. This is fully concentrating on what is being said rather than passively 'hearing'. It involves remaining neutral, being nonjudgmental and most importantly, *patient* by giving a person time to fully communicate what they need to without interruption. Sometimes, all a person needs is a sympathetic ear!

### Be Proactive

Being proactive is sometimes a difficult thing to accomplish, especially when some days it can feel like you're dealing with one unexpected emergency after another. Anticipating issues before they arise is a skill that is difficult to master but nothing says great service more than a manager who can predict, plan and ultimately try to prevent. To do this, you need *knowledge* of your job, a great *work ethic* and the ability to *prioritize your time* effectively.

### Go that Extra Mile

Sometimes – who are we kidding – most of the time our workload is high and the day-to-day demands are tough which doesn't leave much time to spend making each and every person feel like a priority. Actually, making someone feel valued

takes less time than you may think. Show attentiveness by responding to them in a timely manner; Try to keep your promises or, more importantly, don't make promises you cannot keep; Try to follow up with an issue that is not immediately resolved; even if it is just reassurance that you are still working towards a solution. It's the small things that can have a big impact.

Being a property manager can often feel like you are expected to know everything, do everything and be the answer to everything. Most of the time, residents may not remember the issues they have

complained about or the times they've asked for support, but with these customer service skills, they will remember how they felt when they interacted with you and that is you are a manager that cares. ■

**Steven Hill**, RCM is president of Whitehill Residential, a full-service property management company. With over 20 years in the industry he has been active on different ACMO Committees and is President of Resilient Communities of Ontario. [WhitehillResidential.com](http://WhitehillResidential.com)

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