CHAPTER

3

PROBLEM SOLVING

- Role of Problem Solving in Customer Service
- Creativity and Problem Solving
- Problems as Opportunities
- Confronting Conflict
- Problem-Solving Process
- Problem-Solving Strategies
- Developing Negotiation Skills
- Professional Approaches to Apologizing and Conveying Bad News
- Barriers to Problem Solving and Decision Making
- Importance of Follow-Up in Problem Solving
- Skill Building: Problem Solving and Decision Making
- Opportunities for Critical Thinking

REMEMBER THIS

We are continually faced by great opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems.

ROLE OF PROBLEM SOLVING IN CUSTOMER SERVICE

Most individuals encounter the need to solve problems frequently. In many instances problems are challenges that we would prefer to avoid, but, in most cases, this is not a possibility. One of the most important activities in which most customer service providers participate is helping to solve customers' problems. *Problem solving is an active resolution to a challenging situation.*

Many individuals dread problem solving. It can add considerable stress to an otherwise peaceful work environment. One of the main reasons problem solving is perceived as being unpleasant is because the average business professional has not worked to develop the skills necessary to accomplish it effectively and efficiently. The only training that some people have is their observations of their own families dealing with problems as they were growing up. This example is frequently not transferable to a business environment. Most individuals in an organization are aware of the repercussions that can result from an incorrect resolution to problems. Because of this they may be reluctant to take the responsibility that accompanies problem solving.

To actively confront the challenge of problem solving, organizations must prepare employees with training. They must create a safe environment, which encourages employees to develop solutions that are positive for both the customer and the company.

Problem solving and decision making are individualized processes. Every individual may have his or her own method of determining an appropriate course of action. What is important is the end result, not the process of determining the solution. As long as the solution is timely, the process is less important.

One significant challenge to problem solving when interacting with customers is the speed with which decisions must be made. When a customer calls with a question or problem, the customer service provider may only have a few seconds or minutes to provide an answer. Unfortunately, this does not allow for much time to examine possible solutions. Customer service providers must become highly proficient in listening to a customer's explanation of a situation or problem, in asking pertinent questions to clarify the information, and in providing the customer with an appropriate solution. The solution must be one that they are willing to share regardless of the possible repercussions.

Customer service providers can effectively equip themselves to make decisions and to solve problems by learning problem-solving strategies, developing negotiation skills, learning how to deal effectively with conflict, and recognizing the importance of follow-up.

CREATIVITY AND PROBLEM SOLVING

When individuals incorporate creativity into the process of problem solving, positive challenges result. Creative problem solving suggests that through an open approach to finding solutions, an appropriate and innovative result may be discovered. Creative problem solving requires that employees work in a culture that allows new ideas to flow freely and to be considered realistically. When the same problems consistently arise and are resolved in the same established manner, the opportunity for new and more creative resolutions may exist.

Customers appreciate creativity. Creativity requires effort and commitment to creating a new idea or solution. The individuals in an organization who are the closest to the pulse of the customers are those individuals who interact with them on an ongoing basis. In many organizations these individuals are the customer service providers. By offering suggestions to customers and to management about innovative ways of solving challenges, customer service providers can share their creativity with others.

PROBLEMS AS OPPORTUNITIES

Criticism provides an opportunity to obtain information. When customers express problems or frustrations, it is easy to become defensive. A productive method of response to criticism is to consider the criticism as productive input to the creation of a problem-solving environment. A customer complaint is really a request for action.

Customers frequently have ideas about how a problem might be avoided in the future. Offering them the opportunity to share their ideas gives customers the opportunity to participate in the process of improving a situation or system that has disappointed them. This allows a team effort that creates unity between provider and customer.

CONFRONTING CONFLICT

Conflict is a reality of most approaches to problem solving. Problem solving and decision making involve the consideration of possible alternatives and the selection of the alternative that is viewed by the decision maker as the most appropriate. This does not mean that all of the parties involved will agree that the chosen course of action is the best. This may create conflict in some situations. *Conflict is a hostile encounter that occurs as a result of opposing needs, wishes, or ideas.* Conflict can occur in even the most cohesive

employee team or with our most faithful customers. When faced with conflict and disagreement it is important to proceed with caution! Many words have been spoken in anger, creating difficult-to-correct damage. The goal in any problem-solving environment, even when anger is present, is not to win an argument, but to resolve a conflict.

When encountering conflict, remember the following suggestions:

1. Listen to the other viewpoints that are being presented.
2. Do not bring up old problems from the past or assign blame.
3. Use tact as you respond to others.
4. Do not repress your own anger; instead, use it productively. Take advantage of the opportunity to share other related concerns in a positive manner.
5. Focus on finding the best solution to the conflict.

Problem-Solving Process

Numerous approaches may be taken when attempting to solve problems. After determining that a problem exists, it is helpful to respond to the following guidelines. The guidelines are represented as they occur in the problem-solving model shown in Figure 3.1.

1. **Identify the problem.** Attempt to recognize and understand what the real problem is. Sometimes the true problem will be difficult to identify because of other variables that are more recognizable, but that do not represent the problem that requires solving.
2. **Understand the problem's unique characteristics and the possible outcomes.** The problems that must be solved by customer service providers are frequently confounded by unique characteristics. These unique characteristics may have no bearing on the eventual solution, but they must be considered while a solution is being developed.
3. **Define the requirements of a possible solution considering the company policies currently in place.** Frequent requests may have resulted in policies being developed to promote consistency in solutions. The requirements of the solution must be determined and the policies considered. Policies that are flexible should be considered as opportunities.
4. **Identify possible solutions.** Frequently, the success of a problem's solution has to do with the generation of more than one possible solution and the selection of the best solution. As possible solutions are considered, they should reflect an array of alternatives and the individuals who will be affected.
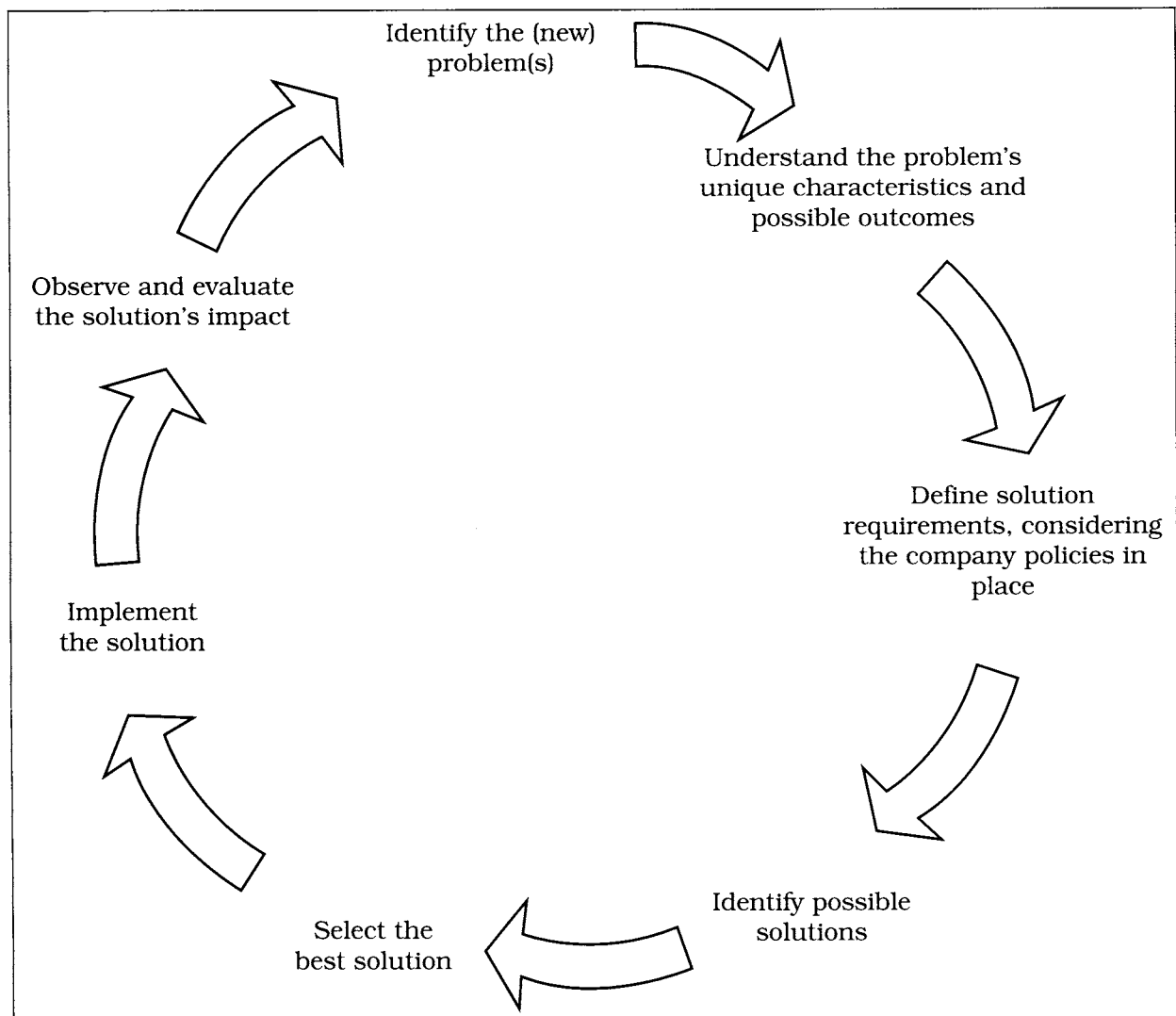
Identify the (new)
problem(s)

Understand the problem's
unique characteristics and
possible outcomes

Observe and evaluate
the solution's impact

Define solution
requirements, considering
the company policies in
place

Implement
the solution

Select the
best solution

Identify possible
solutions

Figure 3.1
The Problem Solving Model

5. **Select the best solution.** Selecting the best solution may be the most challenging aspect of the problem-solving process. The positive and negative results must be considered from both the company's and the customer's perspective.
6. **Implement the solution, informing the customer of the details and how the customer will be affected.** Putting the solution into place is an integral part of the problem-solving process. From the customer's

viewpoint, nothing has been done until the solution is implemented. The most creative solution has little value if it is not put into action. Communication is important at this time. Everyone who will be affected by the solution must be informed of its implementation and of any responsibility that they may have in contributing to its success.

7. **Observe and evaluate the solution's impact.** After a solution has been implemented, it should be observed and evaluated to determine whether it was successful. Observation can occur on an ongoing basis, but a formal evaluation should be scheduled to take place at a designated time.

The problem-solving process should follow the guidelines included in the model. If steps are skipped or overlooked, serious errors may occur in the solutions. For example, a courier company's delivery people did not have time to read their mail. Important information was not getting to the appropriate people because of the problem. Members of the management team called a meeting to attempt to resolve the situation. After hearing a brief explanation of the problem, members of the group began sharing their solutions. Some of the ideas were to begin forwarding all the employees' mail to their homes so that they would have more time to read it, to purchase laptop computers for all of the couriers so that they could receive electronic mail, and to reprimand the employees for their oversight. The most popular solution was to forward the mail to the employees' homes. At this time the management team began discussing how to print address labels and what type of envelopes to use.

One of the managers believed that the solution of mailing materials twice was premature. She suggested that although mailing material twice would guarantee that the employees received their mail, it would not guarantee that they would actually read it. She suggested finding out *why* the employees were not reading their mail. This provoked a more focused approach to problem solving. The group began to follow the problem-solving process as they attempted to understand and to solve the mail problem.

Upon further analysis it was determined that employees received as many as 100 documents daily. Every memorandum circulated in the company was sent to every employee, even when it did not directly affect him or her. A courier's main function is delivering materials; it was difficult for couriers to read mail and to drive, especially when much of the mail was useless to them. The managers began to see that the problem was not just with the employees; the management team shared the responsibility. A solution to the problem was developed to meet the needs of all involved. If the manager had not voiced her concerns about the original solution to what was perceived as the problem, the company would have been spending a lot of money on postage to send mail to employees who did not need to read it.

When approaching the challenge of determining a solution for a problem, individual strategies or a combination of strategies may be used. To effectively determine solutions it may be helpful to follow methods that have been proven to create positive results. The two common strategies of problem solving are brainstorming and diagramming.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a problem-solving strategy that can be used by groups of two or more. The premise behind brainstorming is that the more ideas that are shared in an open and accepting environment, the more creativity will result. As ideas are shared, other ideas may develop. A group approach like brainstorming to problem solving can create a unique and creative opportunity to generate solutions.

To begin a brainstorming exercise, a group gathers willing to share ideas. A specific problem is identified. One individual is designated as the recorder; he or she is responsible for recording the ideas shared.

The next step is for someone to share the first idea. Other ideas should follow. The more ideas shared, the better, as ideas frequently stimulate other ideas. It is mandatory for the leaders facilitating the exercise to create an accepting environment in which the participants can operate. If individuals are afraid that their ideas will be rejected or that they will be ridiculed for their suggestions, they will be less likely to participate.

When several ideas have been generated, a master list is prepared. It can be displayed immediately on a flipchart or chalkboard. The master list can also be compiled and distributed to group members for later discussion. The members can review the ideas and make additions. A second meeting should be held to recommend the most appropriate solutions. Allowing group members to review all the ideas that were shared makes it easier to determine which ideas are possible solutions to the problem. Implementation of the chosen solutions can begin, and hopefully the problem is on its way to being resolved.

Diagramming

Diagramming is a strategy for problem solving that provides a visual representation of the problem and the facts related to it. Visual representations are easy to work with because they allow visual examination as well as discussion. There are four main methods of diagramming problems in search of appropriate solutions: pro/con sheets, flowcharts, organizational charts, and mind mapping.

1. **Pro/con sheets:** A simple approach to diagramming a problem is the use of pro/con sheets (Figure 3.2). Pro/con sheets are best when used to choose a specific course of action as the resolution to a problem. To create a pro/con sheet, write the problem and the possible solution on a sheet of paper. Then draw a line down the center and write the word *pro* on one side and *con* on the other side. Write all the positive reasons that the solution would work on the *pro* side of the line. List all the reasons why the solution would not be appropriate on the con side. When all the reasons for and against a possible solution are listed, it can be determined whether the solution is appropriate or not. Pro/con sheets are simple, but this is one reason that they can work well in choosing a solution.
2. **Flowcharts:** When using flowcharts in the problem-solving process, it is helpful to diagram what the process or flow of a problem is (Figure 3.3). Sometimes just listing how a situation is processed and who must be involved is enough to identify why a problem is occurring. To create a flowchart, include in a box on the top of a sheet of paper the point where a process begins. An example might be: Who has to authorize an extension on a payment for a customer? If the beginning of the process starts with the customer making the

Pro (Arguments for)	Con (Arguments against)

Figure 3.2
Pro/Con Sheet

Customer requests
payment extension

Customer Service
Provider collects
information
from customer

Customer payment
history is reviewed

Positive
payment
history?

Yes

No

Customer is informed
that request
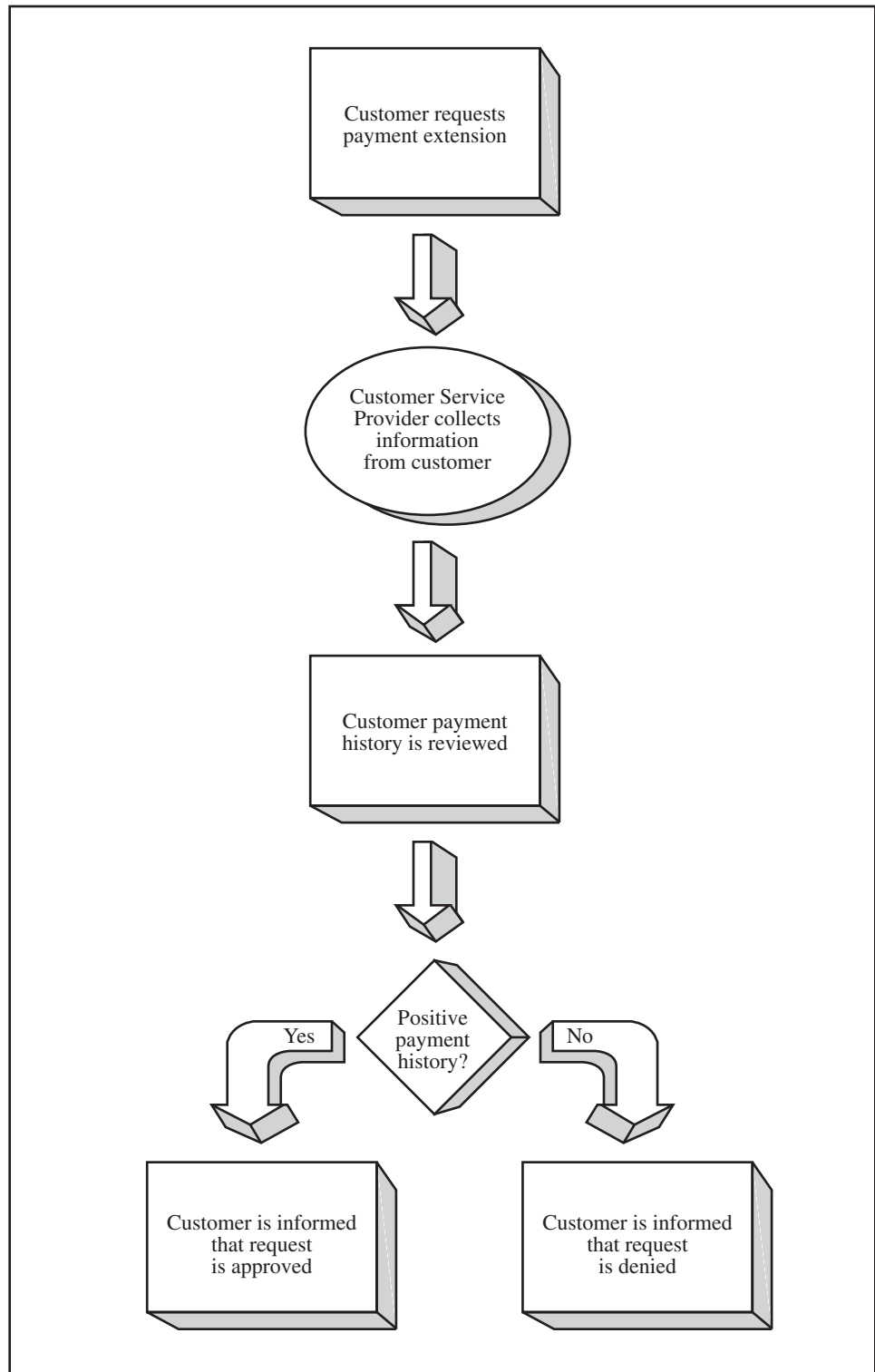is approved

Customer is informed
that request
is denied

Figure 3.3
Flowchart

request, this goes in the first box. The person whom the customer calls goes in the second box. The third box is for the person whom the employee must ask to gain approval for the payment extension. If the customer's records must be retrieved from another department, this goes in the next box. The process continues from there.

Diagramming the current system for responding to the customer's request makes it easier to understand why the process takes longer than might be considered appropriate. Flowcharts are helpful in identifying unnecessary steps in a process. They can also assist in identifying who would be affected by a change in the method of processing information.

3. **Organizational charts:** A commonly used method of illustrating the hierarchy of a company is with organizational charts (Figure 3.4). An organizational chart is a diagram of who reports to whom within an organization or department. While organizational charts will not assist in solving specific problems, they can provide a visual illustration of areas of employee overload and can reveal possible snags in a system's success. If someone is required to give authorization to a new project, but is involved in managing another area of the business, he or she may not have the knowledge to make the most effective decisions. In addition, if the person is not involved in the same part of the process, he or she may not be aware of the day-to-day challenges encountered by employees.

4. **Mind mapping:** An extremely creative approach to diagramming a problem is mind mapping (Figure 3.5). The concept of mind mapping was developed in the 1970s and is still popular today. Mind mapping involves the practical aspects of traditional problem solving while incorporating the opportunity to freely approach new ways of thinking.

To begin a mind-map, place the problem or decision in an oval in the center of a large piece of paper. The center placement symbolizes that the problem or decision is the core of your map. After creating the center, place lines going out of the center in different directions. On the lines write important words or phrases that pertain to finding a solution to the challenge. Add additional branches coming off the important words or phrases. These branches should list ideas or thoughts that relate to the solution of the problem. Try to come up with ideas as quickly as possible; the more outlandish and creative the ideas are, the better. Quality is not important at this point in the process. If visual images can illustrate ideas, it is appropriate to use them. Record as many ideas as possible. Review the ideas and make additions if any are suggested. Try putting aside your mind-map for an hour or even a day,
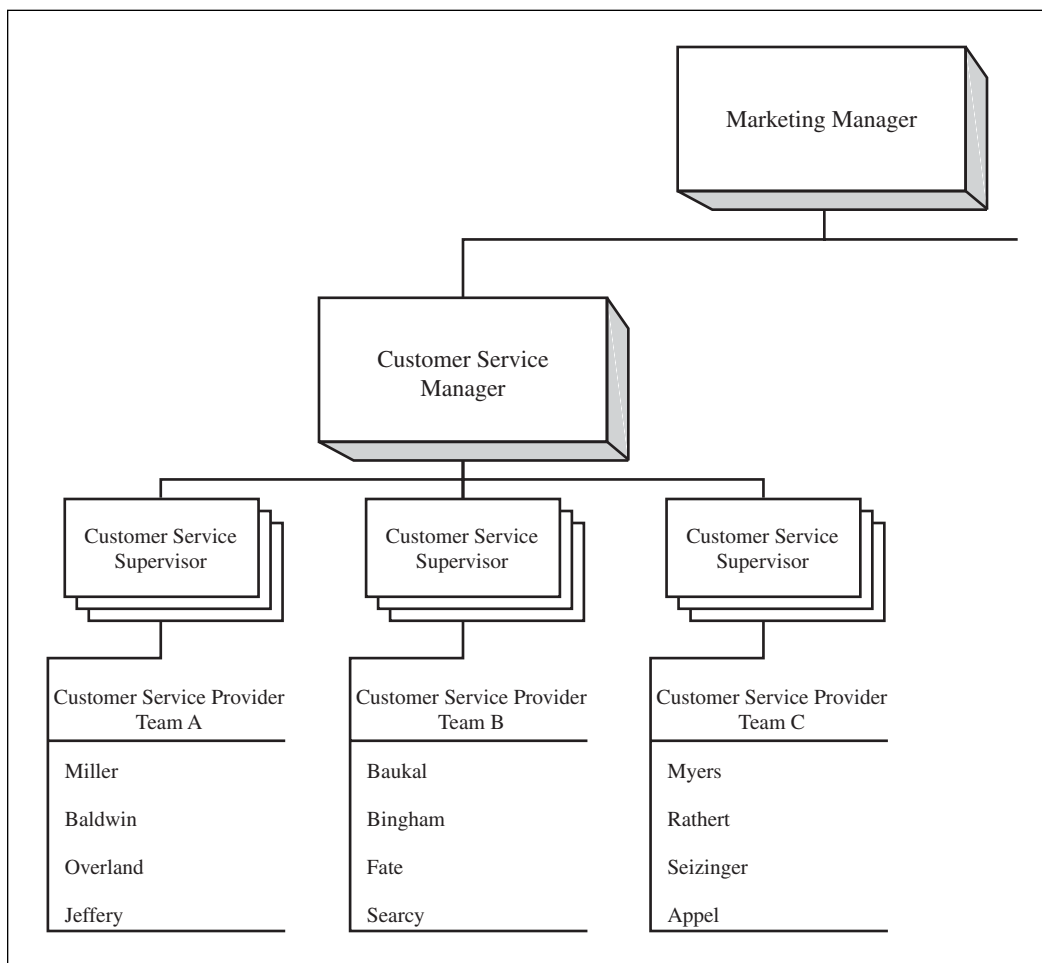
Figure 3.4
Organizational Chart

and then review what you have written. Make any additions that you can. Then begin drawing conclusions from your "map." What solutions have been diagrammed that could possibly be implemented? Share your ideas with others and seek their feedback.

When mind mapping, it is important to approach the exercise with an open mind and a willingness to think creatively. Mind mapping is not meant to be neat and orderly or even consistently realistic. It is meant to stimulate ideas and to help individuals consider what might be possible. Many people write speeches and plan meetings by creating mind-maps.
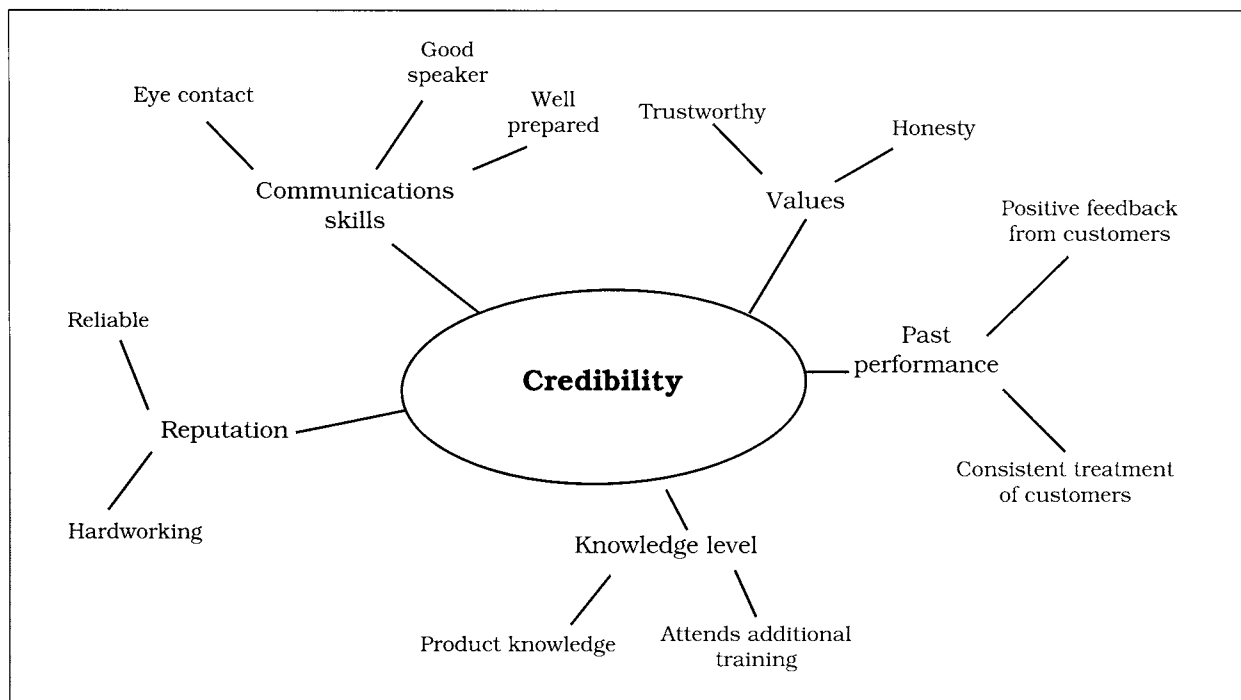
Good
speaker
Eye contact   Well
                    prepared   Trustworthy
                                                    Honesty
    Communications   Values
        skills

Reliable   Positive feedback
                    Credibility   from customers
    Reputation   Past
                                        performance
Hardworking

                                                    Consistent treatment
                                                      of customers

                    Knowledge level

        Product knowledge   Attends additional
                                training

Figure 3.5
Mind Mapping

DEVELOPING NEGOTIATION SKILLS

There may be no easy solutions to problems in a professional environment. Customer complaints, requests, and problems must be resolved in an efficient manner. A constructive method of problem solving is to ask the customer what will resolve the situation. While this places responsibility on the customer to share what he or she sees as a satisfactory resolution, it also places a significant responsibility on the individual whose job it is to decide what an appropriate resolution would be. At this time the art of successful negotiation is necessary.

Negotiation is the evaluation of the possible solutions to a challenge and the selection of the solution that is mutually beneficial. Negotiation requires discussion between the two parties involved. It suggests that a resolution can be reached that everyone involved considers fair and reasonable. Negotiation must allow for give and take on both sides of an issue. To improve negotiation skills as a customer service provider, remember the following suggestions:

1. **Know your customer.** Anyone involved in solving a problem must know the parties involved. Past relationships can shed valuable light

on how a customer may approach a current situation. New customers have unique qualities that we have yet to discover. The more familiar we can become with our customers, the more likely we will be to recognize what their real problems or concerns are. Some customers may make outrageous requests initially, and then lessen their demands. If this tendency has been noticed previously, it is helpful to recall it at the beginning of the negotiation process.

Customers are unique individuals with their own sets of needs, motivations, and fears. The greater our awareness of their needs, motivations, and fears, the more effectively we can begin to solve their problems. Customers want to know that they are important to us and to our business. They also want to know that we remember them from one interaction to another. Any details that we can draw on about specific customers can help us to solve their problems appropriately.

2. **Ask questions and listen to the spoken and unspoken messages.** By asking questions of our customers and actively listening to their responses, we can develop an informed understanding of the situation at hand. The more information that can be collected, the more accurately we can help to solve the customers' problems. Customers are not always eager to share all the details of a situation. Effective questioning requires that the customer service provider continue to ask questions until he or she believes that all of the pertinent information has been collected. Once questions have been answered, it is helpful for customer service providers to clarify their understanding by reviewing what they have interpreted from what the customer has shared.

Customers may have unspoken messages that they are unwilling to share with others without some type of encouragement. Customers who are unable to pay their bills because of sudden changes in their lives may not feel comfortable sharing their problems with someone else. In this situation, the customer service provider must "listen" to what the customer is not saying. This can be done by listening to the hesitation that a customer may have in responding to a question, attempting to detect anxiety in the voice, or by asking non-threatening questions that convey to the customer that meeting the current needs is of utmost importance. Although customers who are having cash flow problems may be reluctant to share the details of their situations, they will be pleased to learn about a company's special payment opportunities or other possible alternatives.

Sometimes asking a customer questions creates tension in a conversation. Customers may not want to share more information than they think is necessary. By asking well-presented questions, the customer service provider can create an environment in which the

customer may be more willing to share the details that can lead to problem resolution. Questions must be asked with a tone of empathy. Customers need to know that they are important and that their best interest is the company's concern.

3. **Know the policies of your organization and in which areas flexibility is allowed.** When attempting to negotiate with customers, it is especially important to be very familiar with your company's policies. It is hard to coordinate a resolution to a situation if you are uninformed about what will be allowed. Not knowing company policies may make customer service providers appear unprepared or as though they have little or no authority. No customer wants to hear that the reason that his or her requests cannot be granted is because it is against "company policy," but in many cases this is the only response that is accurate. Knowing what is not allowed is not enough. Customer service providers can go into a negotiation situation ready to negotiate if they also know what the policies allow. Unfortunately, all too often human beings focus on what cannot be done, rather than what can be done.

    Most policies have been developed to establish a consistent method of responding to a common situation. In this respect, policies are a positive measure that a company has taken so that it is not accused of showing favoritism among its customers. Customers may not always think of the existence of policies in this way. Customer service providers should know where and when flexibility is allowed with regard to policies. If customer service providers are trained and empowered, they will comprehend the amount of flexibility that they can exercise on behalf of their customers.

4. **Demonstrate the willingness to be flexible.** The ability to react to situations as they occur is important in demonstrating flexibility. It is not enough to want to grant the customer's request; customer service providers must be able to convey that desire to their customers. By asking customers how they would suggest that a situation be resolved, an opening for their input has been suggested. If their suggestions can be entirely or even partially implemented, the customers may feel as though they have created a positive solution that the company was flexible enough to agree to. Flexibility can also be expressed through the words used in interacting with customers. Encouraging words that express appreciation for the customers' ideas are always a plus. Whenever possible, allow customers to participate in the problem-solving and negotiation process. Their ideas may be inspired because of their involvement in the overall situation. Their approach to the problem resolution may even be more conservative than the one that the company might have offered.

5. **Learn to handle your anger and your customer's anger appropriately.** In a situation in which negotiation is taking place, anger is always a possibility. Something has taken the situation to the point of requiring negotiation. When anger is revealed, it is best to defuse it as subtly as possible. Anger may express frustration, anxiety, or unmet expectations. It may also be a result of circumstances totally unrelated to the situation being discussed.

   To defuse a customer's anger, try to anticipate the cause and to confront it carefully. Anger that is defused quickly is less likely to build in intensity. The customer service provider can acknowledge that a change in the situation could occur and could offer some type of compensation. A customer who is annoyed because he or she has been waiting in line at a drive-up window at a fast food restaurant may angrily ask the manager what the holdup is. The manager may respond by saying that several employees called in sick and that they are understaffed. This response alone might make the customer even angrier, but when the manager offers free food or drinks to compensate for the customer's inconvenience, the anger may begin to diminish. By offering the apology and the free items the manager is acknowledging that his company is in error, but he is minimizing the effect of the error.

   Whenever possible, shift responsibility for the customer's anger back to the customer. This must be done with care, but it can have positive results. A customer may call his or her lawn care company, ready to cancel the contract because of recurring weeds. When the company owner hears that the customer is concerned about the weed problem, he or she can respond immediately by saying that if the customer will call in the future, the company will provide an additional application at no cost. Although the owner does not say it, he is reminding the customer that it would be impossible for the lawn care company to recheck all of the customers' lawns to determine the effectiveness of each application. By encouraging the customer to share in the responsibility, anger may be defused and the business relationship may continue. This approach would not be effective if frequently repeated; however, if used periodically, it could be effective.

   When customer service providers find that they are becoming angry, they should consider the role that they are playing as representatives of their company. Every individual must take responsibility for his or her own anger. A company's reputation will not be enhanced if the employees allow their anger to be shown to customers. When you feel yourself becoming angry, move quickly to resolve the challenging situation.

6. **Consider what the customer may lose in the negotiation process.** The nature of negotiation involves give and take. Customers may feel that they are doing all of the giving and that the company is doing all of the taking. Try to understand what the customer will see as a compromise. A customer who is delinquent in bill payment may be seeking to be relieved of some of the financial responsibility. Although this may be an unrealistic solution from the company's viewpoint, the customer may not see it that way. A modified payment schedule may be the solution to the situation, but the customer still must pay. When negotiating with customers, stress that the goal is a positive resolution for all.

7. **Determine mutually beneficial solutions to challenging problems and situations.** When completing a negotiation with a customer, seek solutions that will benefit both the company and the customer. No one gains if the customer leaves the interaction angry, vowing never to do business with the company again. By creating a win-win situation that both sides can live with, potential future business relationships can be a possibility. Even if it has been determined that a company no longer wishes to do business with a customer, it must be remembered that possible business contacts with others who are acquainted with the difficult customer are probably desired.

    Explain to the customer exactly how the agreed-upon solution will work. Seek feedback from the customer so that additional information can be provided, if necessary. Stress that the solution allowed both sides to compromise, but the result will have a positive benefit for all.

PROFESSIONAL APPROACHES TO APOLOGIZING AND CONVEYING BAD NEWS

As customer service providers attempt to assist their customers in problem solving, they may become aware of errors or oversights that were made by their own company, co-workers, or by themselves. Effective problem solving acknowledges the fact that the customers may have legitimate concerns and that the customer was treated inappropriately. At this time, an apology is due to the customer. Apologies are not signs of weakness, but instead they are productive methods of continuing the opportunity to communicate.

Apologizing to customers is a reality of professional life. While customer service providers should not apologize without justification, they should be prepared to do so when appropriate.

When apologizing to customers, consider the following suggestions:

1. **Acknowledge customer's feelings.** By indicating to customers that we recognize their feelings and emotions, we send the message that we care.

2. **Express to the customer that you share the responsibility for the problem.** Even if you and your company were only loosely associated with the problem, you are a part of its diagnosis and resolution.
3. **Convey sincerity.** When apologizing to customers, it is important to convey care and concern. If we say that we regret that an error was made, the manner in which we say it should demonstrate our regret.
4. **Ask for the opportunity to correct the problem.** Just apologizing for a problem has little impact if we do not offer to correct the error or to make changes in the future. Saying "May we correct the error for you?" expresses the desire to continue doing business with the customer.
5. **Request the opportunity to continue doing business in the future.** By asking the customer if we can still consider him or her an active customer, we suggest to the customer that we are willing to correct the error and would like to go forward in a positive business relationship. This request also gives the customer the opportunity to share other concerns that might keep him or her from doing business with us.

BARRIERS TO PROBLEM SOLVING AND DECISION MAKING

A number of barriers may exist that affect the actuality of problem solving and decision making. Decision makers may not be aware that barriers are detracting from the decision-making process. Some of the most common barriers to problem solving and decision making are:

- **Resistance to change:** People are often reluctant to change from the time-honored way of doing things. Resistance to change can prevent people from taking chances and from considering new possibilities.
- **Habits:** Habits limit our vision of what can be accomplished and many stand in the way of solving a problem. Habits may go undetected by an individual and may be a tremendous deterrent to correcting a problem. For example, receptionist who is having difficulty in completing his or her work may be unaware that the habit of taking personal calls is taking the bulk of work time.
- **Individual insecurity:** Individual insecurity may deter individuals from taking risks or from pursuing behavior that may require them to take a stand. Individual insecurity may come from past experiences or from an overall lack of self-confidence.
- **Past history:** Knowing what has happened before and what worked and did not work can inhibit an individual's desire to try new methods of problem solving or decision making. Past history is frequently an excuse for not making changes. The individual, who may not wish

to approach a situation in a new way, may remind others that a similar idea failed in the past.

- **Fear of success or failure:** At some time, everyone experiences some type of fear. The fear of success or failure may be viewed as unreasonable, but it can greatly deter the confrontation of problems. The unknown can be a frightening thing. When a new way of doing something is attempted, the possibility exists that it may work well or not at all. In either instance, changes may result. While some people thrive on recognition, others shy away from it. These fears may cause people to avoid the possibility of success or failure altogether.
- **Jumping to conclusions:** When problems must be solved and decisions made, it is easy to jump to conclusions. When someone jumps to conclusions, assumptions are made about what might or might not work or the possible results; assumptions may frequently take on negative perspectives.
- **Perceptions:** As we have stated, perceptions are the ways that we see things based on our experiences. We may be unable to see something from another perspective because we are so blinded by our own perception.

By developing an awareness of some of the barriers to problem solving and decision making, customer service providers can attempt to overcome the obstacles before they occur.

IMPORTANCE OF FOLLOW-UP IN PROBLEM SOLVING

Once a problem or problems have been solved or decisions have been made, it is vitally important to follow up. *Follow-up is checking back to determine whether or not a situation is operating according to the initial plan.* Effective follow-up requires that the original problem solver or decision maker check back with the customer to determine whether or not the original plan of action actually took place. The most effective approach to problem solving has little value if the solution was never fully implemented or if it has run into some type of difficulty. Customers remember the end of their interaction, not the beginning or the middle. A customer may have been treated in a friendly manner, had questions answered quickly, and been highly satisfied with a solution that was created to correct their problem; however, if for some reason the solution never took place, the customer will not remember the friendly treatment. The customer will remember that he or she still has a problem that needs to be resolved. Anytime a solution to a problem requires the involvement of someone other than the person making the commitment, follow-up should occur.

Keeping customers informed about the status of their order or problem even when there is no news to report can be an excellent public relations

tool. A periodic call just to let the customer know that you have not forgotten them or their concern can be a refreshing change from the treatment that the customer may be accustomed to receiving. Their response may be, "I cannot believe that you called me back! Your company really does provide excellent customer service." Follow-up is a safeguard to ensure that customers continue to be satisfied with a company and its ability to meet the needs of its customers.

Through effective preparation, the reality of problem solving and decision making in customer service can become an active opportunity to convey to customers how valuable they are to the success of a business and that satisfying their needs is a part of the accomplishment of a company's goals.

SKILL BUILDING:
PROBLEM SOLVING AND DECISION MAKING

Most customer service interactions require that problems be rectified and that decisions be made. Customer service providers have to equip themselves to analyze situations and to efficiently determine appropriate solutions.

Using the problem-solving strategies, determine your own solutions to the following "What would you do?" scenarios.

- The accounts receivable department that you manage has been having problems with customers not paying their bills on time. An additional problem is that numerous customers are sending the wrong portion of their bill with their payment. It has been suggested that the real problem is that the billing statement needs a new, more readable look.

  Applying one of the problem-solving strategies, determine the most appropriate solution to this problem.
- You have recently been feeling dissatisfied in your position as a reservation associate at a nationally recognized car rental company. There are opportunities for advancement at your current company, but you might like to look elsewhere for a new opportunity.

  Applying one or more of the problem-solving strategies, determine an appropriate direction to take.
- In your position of corporate trainer, you have noticed that many of your trainees/customers are not following through with the assignments that you give them and that frequently they are not prepared for presentations when they are due.

  Consider the problem-solving strategies and use at least one to determine a solution to this situation.

1. Explain the problem-solving model and the seven steps to determining and implementing a solution.
2. How can brainstorming provide the opportunity for creative problem solving?
3. Why is it helpful for organizations to train their employees in possible approaches to problem solving?
4. How can the use of creativity in problem solving more effectively address unique situations?
5. A positive way to view problems is to think of them as opportunities. How can this approach reduce the temptation to respond defensively to customer's problems or frustrations?
6. Discuss some guidelines to follow when encountering conflict.
7. Why is a simple approach to problem solving, like the use of pro/con sheets, frequently the most productive?
8. Select a problem or decision to be made and create a mind-map to explore possible solutions.
9. Why is an understanding of your company's policies important when negotiating a solution to a challenge?
10. How important is follow-up to the solution of a problem?