Role-Playing For Support Staff

Support staff (especially those with less experience) can react badly when faced with difficult decisions, or with angry or panicking clients. Role-playing games can help address and explore these issues in a safe environment.

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An effective computer support service needs support staff with adequate technical knowledge. This is then complemented by a searchable database of known problems, a problem-tracking system, automated escalation procedures and so on. It is easy to see support as purely a technical issue, and to take the view that any problems in the service level provided can be easily overcome by the purchase of, say, a better helpdesk system. However, this view can be very misleading, although having the right tools for the job is important. Given a baseline level of technical competence, support is about people interacting with people - not about technology. The most skilled support person in the world, equipped with the best tools in the world, will fail in the support role if he or she is arrogant, rude and unhelpful.

The support service is the public face of a company (or of a department, if we're talking internal support). Paradoxically you'll probably have more contact with dissatisfied customers than satisfied ones - and therefore more chance to turn them into customers with long-term loyalty to your product. Mostly, both the support team and those supported are reasonably content with the process. However, two sorts of support get noticed - the very bad or the very good experience - and in these days of almost universal Internet access a few customers with strong feelings about their treatment can influence a multitude of potential customers. This may sound unlikely but it has been seen to happen. The goal isn't customer satisfaction but positive customer delight, and a prompt and effective response to a problem can, indeed, provide a delightful experience.

Communication

Of course, another aspect of the "people issues" associated with support is simple communication. Getting information out of someone at the end of a phone isn't easy at the best of times, but is even more difficult if that person is panicking or angry. Being helpful, polite or courteous is all very well, but you aren't going to get the problem fixed until, say, your caller tells you that he didn't realise that widgets came with an on/off switch. If the caller is panicking, he may be driving the support contact to wrack his or her brains for all the possible problems with widgets - and overlook the obvious.

Despite the useful role that remote control software can play (if you can operate the caller's PC remotely you can see what they see), the people issues are still best addressed by training. It needs to be a special sort of training, because theory can go right out of your head when faced by a confused operator at 3am or an abusive customer at 18:00 on Friday afternoon. What is required is training based around role-playing techniques. It's a respected method used for training emergency workers, for example.

Role-Playing

Role-playing games can be used in less stressful situations such as IT support, although there may be problems getting hold of case-study material. This is because all the one-off human and political issues which make it a nightmare in practice are probably skirted around when the problem resolution is written up. It's therefore important that the role-playing scenario is designed and managed by someone with real practical experience of the situations being modelled. The idea is to work from an actual incident - an angry customer who then complained

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about your service in the local paper, perhaps, or a database support operation in which the off-site call-out person failed to pick up some key piece of information. Experienced staff members need to analyse the incident and decide on the key things that should be learned from it.

Next, you must put together a plausible scenario, which can be described to the trainees and feasibly set up in a reasonable facsimile of real life. You're really limited to one (or possibly two) people per game, so you will need plenty of room to run games for a dozen trainees. However, if everyone is in the same room it is hard to generate the stress which is part of the learning experience. Also in the interests of realism, it is important to select the right people to play the roles of those interacting with the trainees. The idea is to simulate some of the conditions the trainee will meet in real life - so you don't want inexperienced trainees playing the "angry customer" role.

Example

Perhaps an example will make this clear. One organisation was having trouble with overnight database support during batch processing. The operators would ring off-site support in the small hours of the morning after a failure, leave out vital information about what had actually gone on earlier, and then get the wrong advice from a half-asleep support technician. The database team determined that it was important that off-site support staff actually reviewed all the job output, not just the error message, before recommending a solution or coming on-site. This would not only ensure that any earlier messages were found, but also give the off-site support person being called time to wake up and get their brain into gear. This message needed to be made clear to a less experienced team member through role-playing.

The person playing the role of the operator calling support was primed with actual job printout, and the trainee playing the support person was told to check the job output and suggest a solution to the problem. The job output in this system came in two parts - messages from the job scheduling system and messages from the database itself. The pseudo operator was reading the (generally more helpful) database messages, as an experienced operator would, but the trainee began asking questions based on the job scheduling output. When the answers didn't make much sense, he then panicked and asked for processing to stop while he came on-site. Once on-site, he found he could fix the problem in five minutes, but an hour or so had been wasted, and this would make it impossible to bring the database up in time for start-of-business the next day.

The post mortem on this exercise emphasised the need for a timely fix, but could also be used to point out to the trainee that, when in doubt, the organisation preferred on-site attendance (even at the risk of a late start) to any risk of database corruption - something good to know in advance. It was clear to the trainee, however, that some routine questions, establishing that both parties were focused on the same thing, and checking that no other failures had been corrected or messages noticed that night without calling off-site support, would have actually speeded up the problem resolution. The trainee was encouraged, in the light of his role-playing experience, to write up a guide to other newcomers on the issues which should be borne in mind when supplying off-site support.

"Less stress and better communication lead to fewer mistakes - and it's worth taking some trouble to achieve that."

Conclusion

This example only applies to one particular situation, but the objectives of playing such games are general. The idea is for trainees to experience something of what can go wrong during real-life support experiences before it all happens for real. This gives the team a chance to emphasise three things:

- Good practice, which helps control such situations.
- Policy: whether "playing it safe" is always appropriate; whether more experienced staff appreciate escalation procedures being invoked at 3am and so on.
- The point of view of the person on the end of the phone.

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File: M0171.2
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