

Part One

**FUNCTION VS.
ESSENCE**



1

Three Truths of Exceptional Customer Service

If you want to find out just how bad customer service is, go buy something. It hardly even matters where you go, whom you call, or which website you visit. Sure, there are exceptions—those fabled companies that come to mind when one thinks about legendary customer service, like Zappos, Disney, L.L. Bean, Nordstrom, and Ritz-Carlton. But even then, the quality of your service experience hinges on the one-on-one interaction you have with a service provider, despite the company's acclaimed service culture.

But if you are not dealing with an exceptional company or an especially customer-focused service provider, chances are you are dealing with an average company or an indifferent employee in terms of customer service.

In my customer service seminars, I distinguish between the two aspects of every employee's job role: *job function*, the duties or tasks associated with the employee's job roles, and *job essence*, the employee's highest priority at work. Recognizing the difference between these two aspects is central to understanding why customer service quality is so

predictably poor. In my seminars, I also share three truths that are common to all exceptional customer service experiences:

1. It reflects the essence—the most critical aspect, the highest priority—of every service industry employee’s job role.
2. It is always voluntary. An employee *chooses* to deliver exceptional customer service.
3. In most cases, it costs no more to deliver than poor customer service. In other words, it’s free.

Awareness is key. People don’t know what they don’t know.

The first thing to do to increase awareness and improve the quality of customer service delivery in any business is to ask employees this question: “Would you describe for me, from your perspective, what you do—what your job entails?”

When I pose this question to employees I encounter in hotels, shopping centers, supermarkets, or airports, the responses I receive almost always apply exclusively to their job functions.

Here’s how my latest conversation with a supermarket employee went:

ME: “Pardon me. Do you mind if I ask what you do—what your job entails?”

EMPLOYEE: “Are you from corporate headquarters or something?”

ME: “No. I’m just interested in what you do.”

EMPLOYEE: “Well, my job is to sack groceries, but when we’re not busy, I bring in shopping carts from the lot and sweep the store. Sometimes I have to check prices or clean up spills. That’s about it.”

Every action mentioned has to do with job function. Rarely do employees reference actions or behaviors pertaining to job essence, which, ironically, should be their highest priority at work.

This brings us to the first truth of exceptional customer service.

Exceptional Customer Service Reflects the Essence of Every Service Industry Employee's Job Role

While employees consistently execute job function, they inconsistently demonstrate job essence. That's a problem, because job essence reflects an employee's highest priority at work. For employees at most service-oriented companies, this priority is, by his or her actions, to create a *promoter*. A promoter, according to the consulting firm Bain & Company, is a customer who is less price-sensitive, has higher repurchase rates, and is responsible for 80 to 90 percent of the positive word-of-mouth about a company or brand.



Promoter attributes:

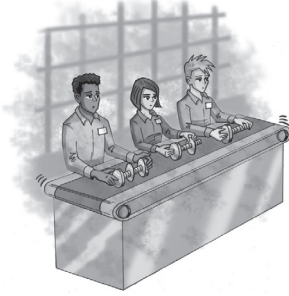
- less price-sensitive
- higher repurchase rates
- account for 80–90 percent of the positive word-of-mouth about a company or brand

The challenge for employers is that, oftentimes, employees think that the functions and essence of their job roles are one and the same. When this happens, employees become transactional and process-focused, treating each customer like the last customer. A factory mentality ensues. In the short term, this practice may be highly efficient (employees process more customers more quickly), but in the long term, it is ineffective. It does not fulfill the organization's highest priority: to create promoters.

Consider your own organization. Do employees really know the difference between their job functions and the essence of their job? If you're not sure, just ask them. My hunch is that you will be met with blank stares. This then becomes an opportunity for you to have a meaningful conversation with your employees about the difference between

Job Function

The duties or tasks associated with a job role



Job Essence

Employees' highest priority at work: to create a promoter



the tasks they are responsible for executing and your organization's highest priority.

Job function includes employees' job knowledge (what they do) and job skills (how they do it). Most employees are aware of their responsibility to execute job function and are proficient in this aspect of their work. And managers can recite job functions for most job roles in their sleep.

Consider the supermarket employee discussed above, and his list of what his job entails:

- Sack groceries (job function)
- Bring in shopping carts (job function)
- Sweep the store (job function)
- Check prices (job function)
- Clean up spills (job function)

Note that these are all job functions, the duties or tasks associated with his job role, and that there is no mention of any attention to job essence.

Job essence reflects employees' motivation (why they do it). Employees are typically less clear about this dimension of their job roles, mainly because they are focused on job function. What motivates employees

individually—their unique purpose or vision for their lives—is beyond the scope of this book (although the most effective leaders do engage their employees to glean insight into what motivates each of them *as individuals*). For our purposes, we are simply considering the organization's priorities: Why does the organization exist? What is its purpose? And what role does the employee play in contributing to this purpose?

For example, Zappos has aligned the entire organization around one mission: to provide the best customer service possible. Everything its employees do—from receiving a merchandise order at its contact center, through order fulfillment, to (when required) product returns—is geared toward providing the best customer service possible. This is the essence of every Zappos employee's job role, and it informs every decision employees make. This is especially critical when employees are faced with a decision of whether or not to express genuine interest in a caller or to pleasantly surprise a customer by expediting the shipping of her order.

I work with a shopping center in Denver that defines its purpose as: *to create promoters of [the shopping center]*. This is a very effective purpose statement or vision because it is simple and concrete. Similar to the Zappos example, every shopping center employee can understand and remember it.

A lack of clarity of purpose exists whenever employees know what to do and how to do it, but do not know why they are doing it. Most often, this is the case.

When I ask five employees with the same job title what they do and how they do it, 80 percent of the responses are similar. This is no surprise since these employees are simply describing their job functions. However, when I ask the same five employees why (from the organization's perspective) they do it, 80 percent of the responses differ.

Most of the time, an organization's "why" is unknown to its employees. Or, the "why" is known but is misunderstood or misinterpreted. There are a variety of reasons for this incongruence, including lack of communication, awareness, understanding, credibility, or interest.

Let's say the organization's purpose (its "why") is reflected in this vision statement:

We will strive to provide exceptional customer service to our customers, coworkers, vendors, and other stakeholders in order to create promoters of our company.

That may be the organization's *stated* purpose—you know, the one that is framed and displayed in the executive offices and perhaps is referenced during the company's new-hire orientation—but it cannot inspire employees unless it is reflected in the culture, policies, and practices of the company, and unless it is brought to life daily in the words and actions of company leaders.

In his book *Start With Why*, Simon Sinek writes:

To inspire starts with the clarity of WHY . . . When a WHY is clear, those who share that belief will be drawn to it and maybe want to take part in bringing it to life . . . Average companies give their people something to work on . . . (The best) organizations give their people something to work toward.

What are your people working toward?

Although it didn't come up during my informal interview with the supermarket employee, the essence of his job role might be to create promoters of his supermarket. In order to create promoters, the employee must execute his job functions in addition to demonstrating job essence. There are countless ways to achieve this, such as:

- Expressing genuine interest in customers
- Displaying a sense of urgency
- Paying attention to detail
- Anticipating the needs of customers
- Conveying authentic enthusiasm for serving customers

Table 1-1 shows examples of job function and job essence for a supermarket employee.

Job function is indicated in job descriptions, policies, procedures, protocol, and checklists. Job essence is reflected in employees' personality, creativity, enthusiasm, passion, and unique flair.

TABLE 1-1 Job Function vs. Job Essence

JOB FUNCTION	JOB ESSENCE
Sack groceries	Express genuine interest in customers
Bring in shopping carts	Display a sense of urgency
Sweep the store	Pay attention to detail
Check prices	Anticipate the needs of customers
Clean up spills	Convey authentic enthusiasm for serving customers

It's not enough to demonstrate attention to job function while ignoring job essence. For example, most parents appreciate a photographer's authentic enthusiasm for photographing their children (job essence), in addition to high-quality photos that reflect proper exposure, aperture, and shutter settings (job function).

It's also insufficient to demonstrate job essence in the absence of job function. An outgoing hotel front desk agent who pleasantly surprises a couple with a spontaneous upgrade to a premium room with ocean views (job essence) ultimately disappoints if she checks them into a dirty room (job function).

In order to provide exceptional customer service and create promoters, employees must exhibit both job function *and* job essence. I recently went to Jimmy John's Gourmet Sandwiches, which emphasizes "freaky fast" speed of service. Upon delivering my order (job function), the employee said, "Sorry you didn't have to wait for that" (job essence). I laughed. By simply interjecting humor, he enlivened what could have been a routine and ordinary transaction.

Figure 1-1 illustrates the necessity of demonstrating both job function (knowledge and skills) and job essence (purpose, one's highest priority at work) in order to provide exceptional customer service and create promoters of a company or brand.

Recently, I spoke with Zane, the manager of a fast-casual restaurant. During our conversation, he shared some of the recurring challenges he faces in trying to elevate customer service at his restaurant.

One frustration he mentioned was the inability of his staff (with the

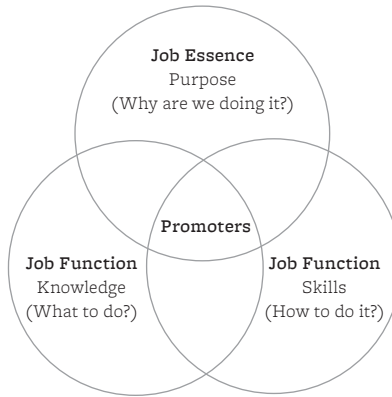


FIGURE 1-1 Three overlapping circles demonstrating job function (knowledge and skills) and job essence (purpose).

exception of one or two “superstars”) to consistently provide exceptional customer service. According to Zane, when he challenges employees to “try a little harder” to provide such service, the majority reply, “But I do everything I’m *supposed* to do.” This response is telling and may hold the key to whether or not customer service quality will improve at the restaurant.

The employee lament above highlights the mandatory aspect of job functions that are required of employees’ job roles—those duties or tasks that are expected by supervisors and customers alike. These are responsibilities that employees are “*supposed* to do.” Absent from this remark is anything that is not required, is unexpected, and is voluntary—anything that reflects job essence.

Most employees consistently execute mandatory job functions but inconsistently demonstrate voluntary job essence—behavior that is not required and is often unexpected, actions that employees *choose* to do. This explains why you and I seldom receive exceptional customer service: because employees don’t *have* to deliver it. And most don’t.

There is one reason why Zane is challenged by staff who consistently deliver hot food hot and cold food cold (job function), but inconsistently express genuine interest in customers or convey authentic enthusiasm in serving them (job essence). It is because most operations, and the supervisors who oversee them, focus predominantly on job functions and the

efficiencies associated with them in order to reduce costs and increase profits.

In Zane's restaurant, it's not uncommon for employees to receive feedback on and be held accountable to menu knowledge, following procedures, completing their side work, and other job functions. And it's unlikely that a day goes by that he doesn't scrutinize operational metrics associated with job function: average check, food costs, productivity, profitability, etc. That's what managers do, right?

I told Zane that I understand the importance of job function. Really, I do. You can't run a business without it. And you can't provide exceptional customer service without it. No guest at his restaurant wants an undercooked entrée delivered with a smile. But job function is only *half* an employee's job. The other half, job essence—which is often neglected by employees and managers alike—is missing in most employee interactions that customers would describe as routine and transactional.

Managers must remind employees daily through modeling, feedback, pre-shift meetings, etc., that excellence lies not in what's expected and required (what employees are *supposed* to do) but in what's unexpected and voluntary (what employees *choose* to do). These unexpected and voluntary actions include anticipating customers' needs, paying attention to detail, displaying a sense of urgency, and following up.

And therein lies the second truth of exceptional customer service.

Exceptional Customer Service Is Always Voluntary

Consider the illustrations mentioned earlier in this chapter: Does a photographer *have* to convey authentic enthusiasm for photographing children? Of course not. It's optional. Does a hotel front desk agent *have* to provide a pleasant surprise by spontaneously upgrading guests to a premium room with ocean views? No. Her decision is voluntary. What about a sandwich maker at Jimmy John's? Does he *have* to use appropriate humor with his customers? No. His choice to use humor is voluntary.

Most people don't choose to deliver poor customer service. They just don't choose to deliver exceptional customer service. Most employees are content to simply occupy a customer service role and execute job functions, blissfully unaware of the opportunities they forfeit daily to

demonstrate job essence by taking the initiative to do the little things that leave big impressions on customers.

I recall once saying to a client, “Exceptional customer service is *always* optional.” Upon hearing this, his eyes narrowed as he leaned forward across the conference table. His voice lowered as he retorted, “Not around here! In my building, exceptional customer service is *mandatory*!”

I disagreed but, in his defense, most general managers would say the same thing: “Of course exceptional customer service is *not* optional. We don’t permit employees to provide substandard customer service!”

In theory, they’re right. But in practice, they’re kidding themselves.

The reason that you and I as customers rarely experience the “exceptional” customer service that these business leaders claim is mandatory is *because* it’s optional. An employee *chooses* to make eye contact, smile, or add a bit of enthusiasm to her voice.

Can you recall a recent interaction you’ve had over the phone or face-to-face with an employee who you sensed was apathetic, bored, or indifferent toward serving you? Of course you can. It happens all the time—even in work environments where exceptional customer service is “mandatory.”

Employers can mandate many aspects of an employee’s job role: the protocol required to complete a task, the employee’s wardrobe and grooming standards, or the time the employee begins or ends her shift. But they cannot mandate the attributes that influence whether or not customers receive exceptional service.

An employee’s personality, disposition, uniqueness, creativity, or engagement level is determined by the employee, not her employer. She *chooses* to smile. She *chooses* to refuse to banter with a coworker in front of a customer. She *chooses* to go the extra mile to serve a customer.

While employers cannot mandate these attributes, they can hire for them. That’s why the companies that consistently produce the highest levels of customer satisfaction also invest the most in their employee selection efforts. Leaders at these companies are not kidding themselves. They recognize that employees *choose* to provide exceptional customer service (or, as is often the case, choose *not* to), and they establish their employee selection criteria accordingly.

Southwest Airlines is a company that is renowned for its highly selective hiring process, which searches for applicants with the perfect blend

of energy, humor, team spirit, and self-confidence to match its famously offbeat and customer-obsessed culture.

This colorful, customer-focused culture is showcased in the following true story received from a blog reader:

CASE STUDY: CUSTOMER FOCUS AT SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

We were traveling on vacation from Denver to Phoenix when Southwest Airlines lived up to its reputation for spontaneous entertainment and pleasing service. (I love the line, “If you are not pleased with our service, we have six emergency exits throughout the plane. Please locate the one nearest you.”)

Approximately halfway through the flight, Nancy, the flight attendant, announced on the intercom: “We have a very special guest onboard named Spencer who turned five years old today. Spencer, could you please join us at the front of the cabin?”

As Spencer made his way forward, a bashful little girl who appeared to be about eight years old emerged from behind the flight attendant, toting a flute.

Nancy explained, “Spencer’s sister, Elisa, would like to play ‘Happy Birthday’ for her brother on the flute.”

Elisa sporadically blew her best “Happy Birthday” song and the passengers clapped. Then, the whole cabin, led by Nancy, sang the birthday song to Spencer, who delighted in all the attention!

Next, Nancy placed a crown on Spencer’s head. The crown was made of clear Scotch tape, Southwest Airlines peanut packets, and red plastic olive skewers.

As King Spencer marched down the aisle proudly, I noticed the crown—an unnecessary, spontaneous, free, yet brilliant example of customer enthusiasm that cannot be mandated but cannot be overvalued.

No doubt, Spencer ate part of his crown before his parents retrieved their bags, but he won’t soon forget that flight. Neither will I.

This story illustrates the third truth of exceptional customer service.

Exceptional Customer Service Typically Costs No More to Deliver than Poor Customer Service

It's true. When you break it down to its fundamental components, exceptional customer service typically costs no more to deliver than mediocre customer service (or at least no more than the cost of some peanuts, olive skewers, and Scotch tape).

How much does it cost to express genuine interest in customers or to anticipate their needs? Does it cost more to display a sense of urgency or to pay attention to detail? Do you pay your employees more to smile, to make eye contact, or to add energy to their voices? Of course not. These qualities, in addition to most actions associated with exceptional customer service, are free.

Recall the illustrations mentioned earlier in the chapter. What does it cost the photographer to convey authentic enthusiasm for photographing children? Nothing. Enthusiasm is free. What does it cost the hotel to upgrade the guests to an unoccupied and available premium room with ocean views? There is no cost. This pleasant surprise is free. What about the Jimmy John's employee? What does it cost him to use appropriate humor with his customers? Nothing. A sense of humor is free.

In order to understand what extraordinary customer service is, it is helpful to contrast it with typical customer service quality. Below are five distinctions that separate exceptional customer service from the bland and ordinary service that customers typically receive.

1. **Function vs. Essence.** Exceptional customer service requires that employees both execute job function *and* display job essence. However, most employees are blissfully unaware of the distinction between the two.
2. **Mandatory vs. Voluntary.** Job functions tend to be transactional. They are also required: Employees must perform them. This explains why many customer service experiences are described as process-focused and robotic. Delivering exceptional service is voluntary. It requires a deliberate choice by the service provider. This explains why you and I as customers seldom receive it.

3. **Obligation vs. Opportunity.** Employees are obligated to execute mandatory job functions. They don't have a choice. It's what they were hired to do. Just read their job descriptions. It's all right there. These same employees, however, have an opportunity to display voluntary job essence: to express genuine interest in customers, convey authentic enthusiasm for serving others, provide pleasant surprises, etc. But these opportunities are often squandered in the name of operational efficiency or some other management priority.
4. **Results vs. Relationships.** Mandatory job functions that employees are obligated to execute yield predictable results that are measured and scrutinized by management. If employees do receive feedback on their job performance, it generally relates to job functions. By contrast, voluntary job essence that employees have an opportunity to demonstrate develop relationships with customers that inspire loyalty, repeat purchases, higher profit margins, and enthusiastic referrals.
5. **Cost vs. No Cost (or negligible cost).** Mandatory job functions that employees are obligated to execute in order to achieve certain results require compensation. This is what they are paid to do. Voluntary job essence that employees elect to display in order to develop relationships with customers costs nothing—or the cost is negligible when compared to the lifetime value of a loyal customer. There is no additional cost for a service provider to smile, offer a sincere and specific compliment, or share unique knowledge.

A typical manager's routine involves job functions, mandates, obligations, results, and costs. It's no wonder customer service tends to be transactional and uninspired.

What is needed is a different approach—one that reinforces job essence, voluntary decisions to delight customers, capitalizing on opportunities, building relationships, and a recognition that it costs no more to smile and greet customers than it does to ignore them.

Table 1-2 distinguishes between attributes of ordinary and extraordinary customer service.

TABLE 1–2 Ordinary Service vs. Extraordinary Service

ORDINARY SERVICE	EXTRAORDINARY SERVICE
Job functions: The duties or tasks associated with a job role	Job essence: An employee's highest priority at work (i.e., to create delighted customers!)
Mandatory: Job functions are required	Voluntary: The decision to express genuine interest in a customer, convey authentic enthusiasm, or go the extra mile is a choice
Obligation: Employees are obligated to execute job functions	Opportunity: Employees have the opportunity to do the "little things" that will leave lasting positive impressions on customers
Achieving results: Executing job functions produces predictable results that are usually objective and easy to quantify	Building relationships: Demonstrating job essence develops relationships (this is generally subjective and difficult to quantify)
Cost: Employees are paid to execute job functions	Little or no cost: Taking the initiative to leave a lasting positive impression costs nothing
Indifferent: Describes customer service that is bland, uneventful, and forgettable	Different: Describes customer service that is unique, refreshing, and memorable
Efficient: Doing more things more quickly	Effective: Doing fewer things well
Transactional: Process-focused, treating each customer like the last customer	Experiential: People-focused, treating each customer as an individual
Short-term view: "How much did we make on that transaction?"	Long-term view: "What is the lifetime value of a delighted customer?"
Yields passives: Satisfied but unenthusiastic customers who can be easily wooed by the competition	Yields promoters: Loyal customers who are less price-sensitive, have higher repurchase rates, and account for 80–90% of positive word of mouth about a company or brand

Typical customer service is routine, expected, and ordinary. It is process-focused and transactional and tends to yield passive customers, who are defined by Bain & Company as “satisfied but unenthusiastic customers who can be easily wooed by the competition.” You can’t build a business on a foundation of passive customers who base their buying decisions on convenience or whether or not they are able to obtain your product or service at a discount.

Employees who work in these environments tend to maintain the status quo by doing what is expected of them—what they are told to do by management. It’s not uncommon for these employees to describe their jobs as boring and routine. In the absence of job essence, all that exists is a transaction. Transactions are not memorable. Transactional service does not make a lasting positive impression or inspire loyalty.

Early in this chapter, I observed that when asked to describe what their job entails, most employees list only job functions—the duties or tasks associated with their job roles. Why is it that employees rarely mention job essence?

Consider this: Job function is results-oriented. Managers are interested in results. Job function is doing what you are told. Managers appreciate compliance. Job function is doing what’s expected. Managers don’t like surprises.

Until managers actively model, recognize, and reward job essence, achieving results will take priority over establishing relationships, compliance will trump initiative, and customer service will be characterized by routine and predictable transactions.

Energy flows where attention goes. And most employees see job function being recognized and rewarded over job essence.

For instance, let’s go back to the supermarket employee we met at the beginning of this chapter. Let’s assume that during his new-hire orientation program, he was told how important it was to provide exceptional customer service. Perhaps he read a mission statement, was shown a poster, or was given a button to wear that touted the company’s customer service slogan. He was also made aware of his job duties that include gathering the stray shopping carts from the parking lot.

Being enthusiastic about his new job and wanting to perform well, the employee is conscientious when bagging groceries. He is careful to

handle delicate items such as bread and eggs gently and to bag frozen food together to prevent it from thawing too quickly. He also insists on helping customers to their cars—especially when the weather is bad—even though most of his coworkers avoid this step.

During his first several weeks in his new position, the employee is routinely approached by his manager, who asks, “Hey, why are there so many carts in the parking lot?” But he never receives any feedback about the exceptional customer service he provides to shoppers.

So he’s conflicted. He says, “During orientation, they told me how important it was to take care of the customer. I try to do that, but no one seems to notice or care. The only thing I ever receive feedback on is the number of shopping carts in the parking lot.”

It doesn’t take him long to learn that the way he’s going to earn the favor of his manager is by spending more time in the parking lot, away from customers, retrieving shopping carts.

I recognize that job function is necessary—even critical (i.e., the shopping carts must be retrieved from the parking lot, and the floor needs to be swept periodically)—but it does not represent the *totality* of an employee’s job role! It represents only *half* of it. The other half of his job, which is often neglected, is job essence. His highest priority at work is to create promoters.

When employees are made aware of the essence of their jobs and it is reinforced (i.e., modeled, recognized, and rewarded) by their immediate supervisors, then customer service quality improves, fewer eggs get broken, and more lasting positive impressions are made on customers.

GETTING FROM ORDINARY TO EXTRAORDINARY

- There are two aspects of every employee’s job role: job function and job essence. *Job function* refers to the duties or tasks associated with a job role. *Job essence* is the most critical aspect—the highest priority—of every service industry employee’s job role.
- Job function includes employees’ job knowledge (what they do) and job skills (how they do it). Most employees are aware of their responsibility to execute job function and are proficient in this aspect of their work.

- Job essence includes employees' motivation (why they do it). Employees are less clear about this dimension of their job roles, mainly because they are focused on job function.
- Job function is indicated in job descriptions, policies, procedures, protocol, and checklists.
- Job essence is reflected in employees' personality, creativity, enthusiasm, passion, and unique flair.
- A promoter, as defined by the firm Bain & Company, is a customer who is less price-sensitive, has higher repurchase rates, and is responsible for 80 to 90 percent of the positive word of mouth about a company or brand.
- The first truth of exceptional customer service is that it reflects job essence.
- The second truth of exceptional customer service is that it is always voluntary.
- The third truth of exceptional customer service is that it typically costs no more to deliver than average service. In other words, it's free.
- While employees consistently execute mandatory job functions for which they are paid, they inconsistently demonstrate voluntary job essence for which there is little or no additional cost to the employer.
- The reason that you and I as customers inconsistently receive exceptional customer service is because it's voluntary. It's left to chance. Employees don't *have* to deliver it, and most don't.
- Most people don't choose to deliver poor customer service. They just don't choose to deliver exceptional customer service.
- Energy flows where attention goes, and most employees see job function being recognized and rewarded over job essence. Job function is results-oriented. Managers are interested in results. Job function is doing what you are told. Managers appreciate compliance. Job function is doing what's expected. Managers don't like surprises.
- Until managers actively model, recognize, and reward job essence, achieving results will take priority over establishing relationships, compliance will trump initiative, and customer service will be characterized by routine and predictable actions.

Applying Three Truths of Exceptional Customer Service

In the space provided, record examples of how you can apply concepts from the chapter to raise customer service quality that you deliver or influence from ordinary to extraordinary!

ORDINARY	EXTRAORDINARY
Make employees aware of the mandatory job functions for which they are responsible to execute.	Reveal to employees that their jobs are made up of two parts: job function and job essence.
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•	•
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