

# Customer First, Always

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How often have we seen posters in organizations shouting messages such as “Customer First” or “The Customer is Always Right”? How often, as a customer, have you actually experienced this claim?

I wish to share a story of an expatriate, in India, who actually made it happen.

In the mid-1990’s, India had graduated from a license raj regime to becoming a relatively more liberal economy. Policies had changed that permitted foreign organizations to hold more than 50 per cent shares in the pharmaceutical sector. This is a classic story of an organization that had been led by Indian executives for decades but was now to be led by an expatriate, since the multi-national European parent had opted for 51 per cent foreign ownership in India.

The person appointed to lead was of South American origin, who had had earlier postings in North Africa and South East Asia. He had never before set foot in India. The mandate given to him by his HO was “Transform the Indian operations into a customer-focused one in 1000 days”.

I met this executive (let’s call him Victor Fernandez) in his second week on the job. Victor looked relaxed in his office that overlooked the Arabian Sea. Torrential monsoon rain lashed the windows. After the professional formalities, he explained to me his 1000 days’ mission and what he had already accomplished. He said he had already achieved his goal! How?

Victor taught me the importance of execution. He also taught me the power of simplicity. His prescription was:

1. I (Victor) called all the senior executives to the board room on my second day at work.
2. Next, I asked each executive to take a foolscap sheet of paper and to list their customers on the left of the sheet. Of course, each executive listed the dealers, chemists, etc.
3. I corrected their perception of customers and defined it as the person who receives the output of the work one does. Each executive listed more customers than the others in the room. It seemed a status symbol.
4. A moment of truth followed... “What do you deliver to your customers?” There was silence in the room. “How do you measure your performance with your customers?” Not a clue.
5. “When did you last meet your customers?” Prompt came the answer... “Daily! In the car pool and cafeteria!” “No, no” I said, “when did you last meet your customers proactively?” Heavy silence.
6. “Never mind”, I said, “let’s make a simple plan. I would like you to list your ‘A’ category customers. I would then like you

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