

## Flying Solo podcast – Monique Richardson

### Building the best customer service culture for your business

Cec Busby [00:00:00]:

You. Hi everybody. I'm Cec Busby, editor of Flying Solo. Welcome to our weekly podcast where we step inside the minds and lives of soloists and small business owners.

Monique Richardson is a customer service expert who has spent decades helping businesses big and small deliver exemplary customer service. She works with organisations across the globe and her book on dealing with obnoxious customers, *Managing Difficult Customer Behaviour: A Practical Guide for Confident Conversations* is a bestseller. Her latest book, *They Serve Like We Lead*, takes a deeper look at how your business culture impacts your customer service and explores how caring for your people ultimately leads to an exceptional customer service experience. She's here today to unpack the do's and don'ts of great service and explain how you can deliver it in your business.

Cec Busby [00:00:56]:

Monique, welcome to the show. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Monique Richardson [00:00:59]:

Thank you so much, Cec. It's great to be here with you.

Cec Busby [00:01:02]:

Now you have a new book coming out, so we're going to have a little bit of a different focus with you this time. We're going to be talking about customer experience, customer service. So firstly, can you tell me where did that interest spring from? What first got you so in love with the whole idea of customer service and customer experience?

Monique Richardson [00:01:23]:

Well, it actually started off a number of years ago. So I was 14 years and nine months old when I was able to have my first job working in customer service. So that was way back then at the supermarket delicatessen. And it was then that I absolutely fell in love with customer service and worked in many different roles then over the year. And then over time, then moved into training and development and working with different organisations on looking at any training around all aspects of customer service, customer experience and particularly service leadership in the later years. So it's been my lifelong passion and my life's work to date.

Cec Busby [00:02:04]:

So what makes for a great customer experience?

Monique Richardson [00:02:09]:

There's so many things that can impact on a customer's experience and I think we're also seeing with so many changes, particularly with technology and automation and when that's very human and customer-centred, that can make it a really positive experience. But one of the things that we know that is just so important is the power of human connection and people. And so when customers talk about what great experiences look like, it's really highly responsive, it's often very personalised to the customer, really takes into consideration their preferences, but also ease of customer experience and particularly reducing customer effort. So customers just want things to be as simple and as painless and as easy as possible, as well as creating really positive emotions as part of that experience. But we're definitely seeing that ease of experience as being a really important factor for customers and looking at how we can combine that high tech and also high touch when required to make it a great experience. And also empathy is becoming increasingly important in our world.

Cec Busby [00:03:18]:

Well, sounds like a lot of boxes to tick there.

Monique Richardson [00:03:22]:

It is. I've always said working in customer service is not for the faint-hearted. There's certainly a lot that goes into customer experience and I've always said it's not by default, it's always by design. So how do we design that customer experience to make sure that we can make all of that happen?

Cec Busby [00:03:40]:

I think you did hit the nail on the head with one thing though. That pain point of friction. No one wants any kind of friction in their customer experience, do they?

Monique Richardson [00:03:50]:

No. And if we think about how we go about our lives and how we engage with different organisations, in whatever way that's going to be, through human or through technology that we do, we just want things to be really easy. So there's a massive correlation between ease of customer experience and also customer satisfaction. So anything that can be done to remove that friction or remove those pain points does make an enormous difference to a customer's experience.

Cec Busby [00:04:17]:

Now, you've got this interesting theory that customer service also comes down to leadership and that it's how you operate with your staff and how you service your staff and act as a leader with your staff, then goes onward, it flows onward to then how your staff actually service other people. So can you kind of dive into that a little bit for me?

Monique Richardson [00:04:40]:

Sure. Well, when I first started doing training and it was all around customer service excellence, and I did a lot of work with the frontline, and what I just kept hearing was the difference between really exceptional people, leaders, and how much they helped and inspired and helped to be able to create those great experiences, and those less than ideal leaders that really had a negative impact on the team and the customer experience. And it was after hearing that just far too often about the impact of that negative leadership on the front line and on the customer experience that I really started to delve into that concept of service leadership. So it is my absolute fundamental belief, and certainly from many, many years of research and experience, that it's actually leadership that will make the biggest difference to the customer experience because they have such a huge impact on enabling the team to be able to do what they do with customers every day. So there's so much within that. But that's where my passion really began, as well as obviously looking at what can be done to support the front line and those who work with internal teams, but really focusing on leadership and ensuring that leaders have that mindset, that if we want to take care of our customers, that we actually have to take care of our people first.

Cec Busby [00:05:59]:

So what does a service-driven leader look like?

Monique Richardson [00:06:03]:

Service-driven leaders have many, many roles. And I think one of the biggest things that they do is the way that they lead by example. And I just look at some of the most incredible leaders that I have known personally, met, researched, studied, that they really do lead by example with their teams. They also have really clear standards for the team as well. So I think one of the important things that team members need to know is exactly what is expected of them. So what are those standards, what are those behaviours, so that then it's really clear to the team what it is that they need to be able to deliver on. We know that great service leaders are also very visible. They're often with the team, supporting the team, just making sure that they have those opportunities to connect, as well as then looking at things like coaching and feedback and recognition, reinforcement. So that they are just doing everything that they can to support and enable their people every single day. So it's a really big role, the role of a service leader. And they do have such an integral role to be able to play in any organisation.

Cec Busby [00:07:12]:

If I'm wanting to improve that customer experience and I haven't really done much training with my staff and I'm an okay leader, what's the first steps I need to be taking? Is there kind of a roadmap to becoming a better service leader and then also a roadmap for your staff?

Monique Richardson [00:07:34]:

And that's one of the reasons too, Cec, why I wrote the book, was to be able to provide a really practical roadmap for a leader to be able to look at where am I now and where do I need to be? So I think one other really great characteristics of service leaders is that they are really self-aware and they can also identify, these might be my real strengths as a service leader and these might be my opportunities for improvement. So I always like to ask leaders to even reflect on their own leadership skills, to be able to think about what are the things that I'm doing to support my team and where are my opportunities for improvement? So the service leadership is certainly a mindset, but there's also a lot of skills. Skills around coaching, it's also around mindset as well, about looking at how we can recognise people and catch people doing the right thing and being able to give them positive feedback. So looking at those developmental opportunities. And then starting with leadership, but then also looking at the team and looking at where are those gaps with the team and what training do they need to be able to then be able to provide the best experience possible? So is it interpersonal skills that the team need? Is it that they need some training around managing difficult customer behaviour, understanding communication preferences and really looking at the team to be able to look at what training they need because training and development of people is another really core part of that leadership focus.

Cec Busby [00:09:05]:

Is there any kind of initial training that you would always recommend?

Monique Richardson [00:09:10]:

I would always recommend in any organisation that there is induction training and part of that induction training, including an element of customer service. So this is something that whether or not it's a large organisation, small business, but if we want people to be truly customer focused, we want that to be part of that initial induction. I've always said on the first day that somebody joins an organisation, it might be some time spent with the leader, it could then be looking at the more formal induction and orientation programs that people have. But it is always talking about customer, the importance of customer, and also people being able to see the significance and the importance of their role in those first days, that first week. So looking at customer service training twelve months or two years down the track, it's great to have those refreshers. But initially, as part of the whole onboarding experience for a team member, I absolutely strongly encourage every organisation to have a separate component of customer service training as part of that induction process.

Cec Busby [00:10:20]:

Does that then help embed that service culture as part of the business?

Monique Richardson [00:10:25]:

Yeah, it's definitely where it starts and it's also looking at every single team member. One of my favourite quotes is that customer service is an attitude, not a department, by Tony Shea. That quote strongly resonates with me and the way I also recommend organisations approach that customer service induction training, that it's not just the front line, it's

leadership, it can be finance, it can be people and culture, it can be IT, internal facing roles - it's everybody. So that the whole culture starts with everyone having a shared understanding of the importance of customer service to the organisation. So it's a company-wide culture and that certainly is the start. And then there's ongoing reinforcement as we look at the other areas of service leadership.

Cec Busby [00:11:14]:

So if you went in to consult with a business and they had really pretty mediocre customer service, what would be the first tactic that you would take to help them improve that? And would you do it as a whole team exercise then?

Monique Richardson [00:11:32]:

It really depends on the scope of what it is that they're looking for. But I always look at that one towards - a great insight and question too Cec - that when you look at that very first one, if there's mediocre service, my very first question is why? So I always like to look at if that service is being delivered and it's not where it needs to be, what is the reason for that? Because it's always my fundamental belief too, that people don't turn up to work to deliver poor customer service. There's things that can get in the way. So sometimes that poor service can be even things like lack of technology, it may be lack of training. I find often lack of standards or behaviours or clearly defined standards and behaviours is another key thing. That's often where I start, particularly if there's none. It could be other blocks and barriers that are getting in the way. So I always like to start with a diagnostic that if we're looking at the service level and it's not where we want it to be, we start looking at the reasons why. Because sometimes even before the training, there can be other areas that need to be addressed prior to that. And interestingly, that's where a lot of my service leadership work started. I would be asked to come into the organisation to do some training with the front line. But as we delved and went deeper, it was actually the leadership that was the biggest thing that we had to start with. Or it may be that it was technology that was just getting so much in the way of people being able to deliver a great experience. Let's look at that first. So for me, it's really going deep with every organisation I work with to really understand why is that level of service where it is and what needs to be done to be able to look at addressing that, to elevate that, to that next level.

Cec Busby [00:13:17]:

So would you advise that perhaps businesses do a bit of an audit on their customer service, make that something that they do, I don't know, every six months, once a year, whatever, that it's something that you do keep top of mind?

Monique Richardson [00:13:33]:

Yes, absolutely. And there's many ways that can be done looking at the way that that's being assessed. And that can also be through looking at customer feedback, it might also be looking at reviewing complaints, it can be looking at data as well as that, looking at things like even employee engagement. So looking at all of those different factors. But I think that it

is that top of mind. It can't just be something that's done every five years or so on - that it just has to be an everyday focus. But particularly looking at it from that holistic perspective, whether it is every six months or twelve months, to then be able to look at where are we now and where do we need to be, what are the gaps and what do we need to close those gaps? Because customer needs keep changing, customer preferences change. So we need to also be on top of what our customers are thinking and feeling about that experience, to identify those opportunities for improvement.

Cec Busby [00:14:29]:

And obviously customer complaints are the first sign that there needs to be some improvement. So how do you suggest tackling customer complaints?

Monique Richardson [00:14:39]:

Well, customer complaints is a huge area and there's some customers that complain and some that just walk away and we never hear from them again. So I always recommend starting with a really clear complaints policy. So that that's also really clearly defined for the customer and also the team, so that they do know exactly what to do if they do have a complaint. And that also can then outline time frames, getting back to people, responses. And then there's the tracking and the measuring and the analysis of customer complaints, because if we just hear complaints and don't do anything with them, those complaints will just keep repeating. So it's back to that whole definition of insanity is doing the same thing and expecting a different result. So the root cause analysis of complaint handling is absolutely critical. So looking at that data; why are they complaining? What are the things that we can improve, what are the things that we can do something about to reduce those complaints? So it's the policy, the analysis and then the training around complaint handling. It's not always easy dealing with complaints. And so looking at how we can ensure that the team have got the training in how to resolve complaints is absolutely critical, because it's often that way that that complainant feels or what's referred to as that interactional justice, like how they feel when they have a complaint, that will often make a huge difference to that outcome. So it's a really important part of that customer experience, really looking at complaints, at making sure that that's a really important part of an overall customer strategy.

Cec Busby [00:16:16]:

That also leads me on to, you mentioned briefly customer aggression because I think that's something that people are facing more often these days. Particularly during the pandemic, there was like a real sat of aggressive customer behaviour. But how can we deal with an aggressive customer and how do we make sure that our staff feel protected if they're dealing with an aggressive customer?

Monique Richardson [00:16:42]:

And it's a really interesting and very important observation Cec, when we're looking at how it did increase during the pandemic. And one research from the National Retailers

Association found a 400% increase in customer abuse and aggression during COVID. Certainly in my observations and discussions across multiple industries, it certainly hasn't eased off. We are seeing and hearing reports, be it in the media, of some horrific incidents of people that are just turning up to work to be able to do their job, to serve customers, that are being faced with abuse and aggression. And there's a real difference between being able to de-escalate somebody who's angry and then looking at that customer aggression. So my recommendation with customer aggression is always three-pronged approach. The first one is around having a very clearly defined unacceptable customer conduct policy. And that needs to be on the website. In particularly face to face environments, we'll often see in healthcare or in retail, there'll actually be signs just asking people to treat the team with respect and aggression won't be tolerated. So the team need to have a really clear understanding, and the organisation needs to really clearly define, what is unacceptable customer conduct. So that can include everything from customer abuse, customer aggression, swearing, it can be yelling, screaming, anything, of course, physical, threats, as well as homophobic, racist comments. So there needs to be a really clearly defined unacceptable customer policy so that the customer is aware and also the team are aware. Then when we look at customer aggression, while there's a whole lot of de-escalation techniques that we can use, what's also most critical is a clear escalation path for the team so they know exactly what to do in that instance. And that can be face to face, that can be via telephone, email, live chat - but the team need to know exactly what to do. And particularly when they can disengage or exit, because their safety and wellbeing is always number one. So when I look at that call, when can I end that call if somebody's being aggressive? Or if I'm feeling unsafe, when do I press that duress button, or in really serious cases, call the police? No team member should ever be wondering at that time what should I be doing right now? It needs to be really clearly defined, that really clear escalation path for all communication channels, and then we can start looking at some of those de-escalation techniques. So if somebody is being particularly angry or abusive and so on, if we've asked them to be able to, if we feel comfortable and safe to do so, to refrain from that behaviour, we can then start looking at some of those de-escalation techniques of hearing them out and the listening and looking at proactive problem solving. But with aggression, it needs to start with is the team member safe? And are they able to continue to engage in that conversation, first and foremost, before we even go into those de-escalation techniques. And I think for me this is sometimes missed because I ask far too many team members do you know what the unacceptable customer conduct policy is? Or do you know what that clear escalation path is? And there are still so many team members that don't know. So even before looking at de-escalation, we need to protect people and keep them safe, first and foremost.

Cec Busby [00:20:10]:

Yeah, you need to have those guidelines in place, otherwise how can your staff know what to do?

Monique Richardson [00:20:15]:

Absolutely, yeah. And I'm really passionate about that because it's the protection and wellbeing of our customer service community and our community that I deeply care about.

And I just think we need to really stand up and have these conversations, that it's not going to be tolerated, and putting things in place to make sure that we are protecting our team.

Cec Busby [00:20:36]:

And then I guess that goes back to that whole idea of the great leader makes for great customer service as well. So if you were a good leader, you would have had those things in place, wouldn't you, to help your staff?

Monique Richardson [00:20:49]:

And that's where it is a real - I always talk about when we're looking at customer aggression or angry, upset customers, there's three areas of responsibility. And the first one is the leadership responsibility to make sure that these policies and escalation are actually in place. There's then the team member responsibility for how we respond. And then there's the customer responsibility so that they also know what is acceptable and what is unacceptable customer conduct. So even sitting above, often that leader is the organisational responsibility for making sure that these policies are in place. So that's often something I help organisations with. If it's not in place and if it's not there, let's look at that first and foremost and then we can look at managing the anger and aggression training from there. But that's where it's always got to start.

Cec Busby [00:21:38]:

What about the other end of the scale? We've created an environment where our customers are super happy. How do we continue to drive that so that happy customer continues to be a focus and continues to create business success for us? If we're delivering great service, how do we make sure that we continue great service and keep improving on the great service?

Monique Richardson [00:22:05]:

There's also, as much as we can capture complaints, I'm also a huge fan of looking at what we can do to collect compliments and making sure too as a service leader, that we are also sharing that feedback. We're also making sure that we're sharing that with the team and that's where the recognition comes in. So we have to be able to also make sure when customers are happy, whether it's as a team, we've got great satisfaction results, an individual that may have done something great with a customer, that the leader is then making sure that they are sharing that, because we want people to feel appreciated and recognised so that they also feel really motivated to be able to continue. And then continuing to look at what we can do to create that great service. It's also about looking for those opportunities to make that experience even better. So that can come from often customer feedback, customer ideas. But also I'm a huge advocate for asking the team about what they can do to be able to continue to be able to bring in ideas about how we can keep improving that experience. Particularly the front line, they often have so many great ideas because they speak to customers, they hear from customers, so they've often got a lot of great ideas about what else we can do to keep elevating that experience. But one of the things that often will keep customers really happy is just that consistency of that delivery of



service. Just delivering on those fundamentals and then looking at what we can do to make sure that our customers continue to feel cared about and particularly nurtured in some of those relationships as well.

Cec Busby [00:23:43]:

So you also talk about the difference between servant versus service leadership. Can you explain that a little for our listeners as well?

Monique Richardson [00:23:53]:

So this whole concept of servant leadership has been around for years and something that when we look at the whole concept of servant leadership, it really is about I'm here to serve first and to lead second. So it's a leadership philosophy that I strongly believe in and am certainly very aligned with. And what I was then looking at when I was continuing to research servant leadership is really looking at how can we practically apply the theory of servant leadership to service leadership? So it's really looking at the practical application of the concept of, well, if we're talking about what do we do and how is it that we make sure that we are serving first and leading second, what does that look like? So it's a philosophy that I think sometimes too, sometimes people hear the word servant and sometimes there can be some negative connotations associated with that word. So I do unpack that in my book to be able to look at if we're really looking at the whole concept of what servant leadership means, that's really what it comes down to. But it's also looking at the organisations that have adopted servant leadership as a philosophy and recognising too, there was a recent study that did just come out that actually proved the profitability and business success of having that leadership style. So it really is one that can have enormous positive impacts on people, organisations, culture, customer experience. But it's the practical application of the theory of servant leadership.

Cec Busby [00:25:32]:

Yeah, I think there's a great Aussie example of that with Canva. Like their whole philosophy is that servant leadership model, I think. And they're like Australia's unicorn, aren't they? So certainly if you adopt it, I think good things can happen for your business.

Monique Richardson [00:25:49]:

Absolutely. And that's where I love, and I have been for many years, when you look at the research of the best of the best, and whether it's looking at a Zappos or the Marriott and the Ritz Carlton and many really successful organisations in terms of looking at both their customer experience but also employee experience. They all have that in common, the way that they have servant leadership as a core of what they do. And that really strong focus on taking care of their people, and having that as the first mindset that then enables people to then be able to take care of the customer. So, yeah, it's really interesting, particularly looking back historically of just how long this has been in existence.

Cec Busby [00:26:34]:

So do you have any final tips for our listeners on how they can create that service culture that not only their customers will be happy with, but their staff too?

Monique Richardson [00:26:46]:

The culture for me is really about looking at how do we make sure this just becomes part of what we do every day? And if I look at the most successful organisations that I research, organisations that I work with, it is part of that culture. And that's built into everything, even going back to recruitment and how we recruit people into that culture that have got that service mindset. Looking at the induction, the onboarding, looking at the training, looking at the development. It's then looking at the coaching, but also particularly the reinforcement. And so that can be even in our team meetings, customer being brought into every single team meeting. It can be in those daily line ups or it can be in our weekly catch ups or our huddles, but it's about keeping the theme of customer alive every single day. So it's not just something that we talk about every twelve months or at the start when you join. It is about really bringing that into the culture of what we do every day. And there's a culture of taking care of customers and there's a culture, first and foremost, of taking care of our people. And so that's when I see again incredible organisations where it is just part of that DNA, it's part of what we do every day and it's what we live and breathe. And that's what I would really encourage if we're looking to have those sort of outcomes. That's the level of commitment that has to be there, that commitment to excellence and that commitment to every single day, that absolutely unrelenting focus on the customer and our people.

Cec Busby [00:28:22]:

So true. Put the customer first, put your people first. They can't both be first, make them equal first.

Monique Richardson [00:28:31]:

That was exactly one of the models that I ended up doing because they are inextricably linked. So when you look at employee experience and customer experience, they are so linked and so that's why I ended up putting them together. So when we look at linking those, that's when we're going to get the absolutely the best outcomes.

Cec Busby [00:28:47]:

Thank you so much, Monique. It's been such a pleasure having you on the show today. If you want to hear more about how you can put the customer first in your business, well, I strongly suggest that you check out Monique's new book. It's called *They Serve Like We Lead*. Where can we find it, Monique?

Monique Richardson [00:29:04]:

You can find it on my website, which is [www.moniquerichardson.com.au](http://www.moniquerichardson.com.au). And also for our Kindle lovers, it's on Amazon as well. So thank you so much, Cec. It's been awesome

speaking with you today. And thank you for having me to share my great passion and my great love. It's been really a joy speaking with you today.

Cec Busby [00:29:28]:

Thank you so much, Monique. I'll speak to you again soon. No doubt. Bye.

Monique Richardson [00:29:32]:

Thanks again. Bye bye.