

“I am sure many of you share my frustration when inundated with Freedom of Information requests, which generally do little other than eat up resource. However, customer complaints are a different matter.”

Agar the Horrible ...not really!



Sean Langley urges everyone to be on the lookout for continual learning ■



I have just witnessed on television an extraordinary debut in international sport: **Ashton Agar**, a virtually unknown 19 year old, playing for Australia in the first Ashes Test in Nottingham. Agar’s selection as a bowler raised a few eyebrows, but what was even more remarkable was his performance as a batsman.

The toiling England bowlers failed to recognise that Agar was more talented than his batting position indicated, as he notched 98 runs and recorded the highest score by a number eleven batsman in Test match history. **Sir Ian Botham** remarked in commentary, “Will they never learn?”, as yet another ball was smashed to the boundary.

Sir Ian’s observation applies as much to **business** and **service** as it does to sport. In order to develop and improve, all organisations (and individuals employed within them) need to **learn**.

I am sure many of you share my frustration when inundated with **Freedom of Information** requests, which generally do little other than eat up resource. However, **customer complaints** are a different matter. They are potential gifts from which an informed organisation can learn.

It is often said that, as a nation, we do not complain enough. I would urge people to complain more often. I am talking about **objective complaints**, not whingeing. The reason being that all organisations can benefit from the feedback that proper complaints afford them.

For example, my son Jack last week complained to **Hampshire County Cricket Club** after he had glass bottles containing soft drinks confiscated at the gate. He immediately complained to the club that nowhere was this stipulation made clear, only that alcohol was not permitted. Commendably, they quickly responded with free tickets, but have they really learnt from the incident?

This week, I also picked up a transcript of a tongue-in-cheek complaint to

Tesco, about cherry bakewells, on www.moneysavingexpert.com. What I found interesting was the customer engagement, which illustrated to me that the company was an organisation that took customer complaints very seriously, warmly responding with humour.

Recently, I have had cause to escalate, to **OfCom**, a complaint I had about my mobile phone supplier – name withheld! In the investigation, the Ombudsman has found the supplier guilty of inadequate operational practice.

In all these examples, the feedback is a gift to those organisations, should they choose to use it, and all point to a concept first articulated by **Peter Senge** in his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* in 1990.

Learning organisations, as defined by Senge, are, “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.”

He further argued that there are five components to an effective learning organisation. Whilst I won’t delve into all of those here, the cornerstone of his strategy was **Systems Thinking** – at the core of which is that organisations should look at their processes as a **whole system**, rather than as individual parts.

Consequently, what might appear to be a straightforward improvement to an element of the process, may end up disrupting the whole, leading to a negative rather than positive outcome. In other words, look at the whole system, rather than just a part.

What Senge went on to explain was that **feedback** is an essential element of good Systems Thinking, as it is often possible to overlook something simple that can make a difference, but it is important to take

context into account before rushing into decisions of change.

The significance of this is that you might rapidly respond to a complaint – in the way that **Hampshire County Cricket Club** did in the example I gave above – but, you should take appropriate time to consider what learning can be gained from the feedback received, before committing to a particular outcome.

An organisation has to recognise and accept the need to change. Pressure for change is not enough in itself, nor is the recognition of that pressure. The necessity of **responding** to the pressure is what’s needed. Once that is evident, attention can be paid to the **options** for change.

Rather than simply responding to problems by corrective action in respect of existing operational practices, the learning organisation will consider the context which is leading to such problems. It will question the operating practices and procedures, and explore the policy and cultural framework.

Do not forget one other critical aspect of Senge’s concept, which is the **collective approach** to problem solving. The consideration of change, and solutions development, needs to be done as a ‘**community**’ within organisations – collective learning! Only then will there be a lasting improvement in performance.

The learning organisation can build, in a proactive way, the need to recognise and respond to the driving forces for change into its culture and structures.

I wonder if my mobile phone supplier is one of those?

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