

Why Client Centered Organizations are Failing

By Wayne McKinnon

Many organizations talk about being “client centred” yet have no real understanding of what that means. In other cases the term has lost it’s meaning. In real terms, being client centred means that you put the needs of the client ahead of your own needs. More effort is spent delivering services than feeding your own bureaucracy and administrative requirements.

Unfortunately a strategy of being “client centred” often results in a complex or time consuming reporting structure or series of data collection exercises meant to measure the level of service that the client is receiving, but these are not measures of business results. Instead, they simply become a means of saying “see, look how busy we are” while only providing minimal value to the client. This isn’t to say that measures are not important, they are, but measures can get out of hand and poorly defined measures simply produce the wrong results.

An interesting exercise is to facilitate a discussion among the troops to find out what their definition of client centred really means in their eyes. For instance, to some people, client centred means “client driven.” The connotative meaning that emerges is one of subservient to the client. Your wish is my command.

For internal service divisions of organizations as well as in my own consulting business I strongly believe that quite often what the client wants is not what the client needs. Rather than looking at performing specific tasks or providing certain services that the client has requested, it is far better to first identify the outcomes that the client is seeking.

An alternate view of what client centred means is “Responsible to the client.” This often summons up an entirely different meaning whereby your actions are meant to improve the client’s situation rather than just give into their demands. A sort of tough love emerges since as we discussed, what the client wants is often not what the client needs.

This approach can be taken too far though. For instance in many IT shops, this is taken to mean “we know what’s best for you so play by our rules.” This is the classic situation where a need has been identified by the client but cannot be fulfilled due to stringent internal controls.

Impeding a Client's Performance

One organization had safety inspectors who went on-site armed with a clipboard and a form to fill out. If areas of non-compliance were identified, they were noted on the form. If the inspector identified something unusual, he or she documented it as best they could using descriptions and hand drawn images. Once back at the office, the inspectors would write up their report and enter the data they had collected on the computer system.

When palm top computing began to make sense for certain applications, the branch bought a half dozen Palm Pilots for their safety inspectors, complete with photographic capabilities. The result was an immediate improvement in efficiency, allowing inspectors to spend less time administratively.

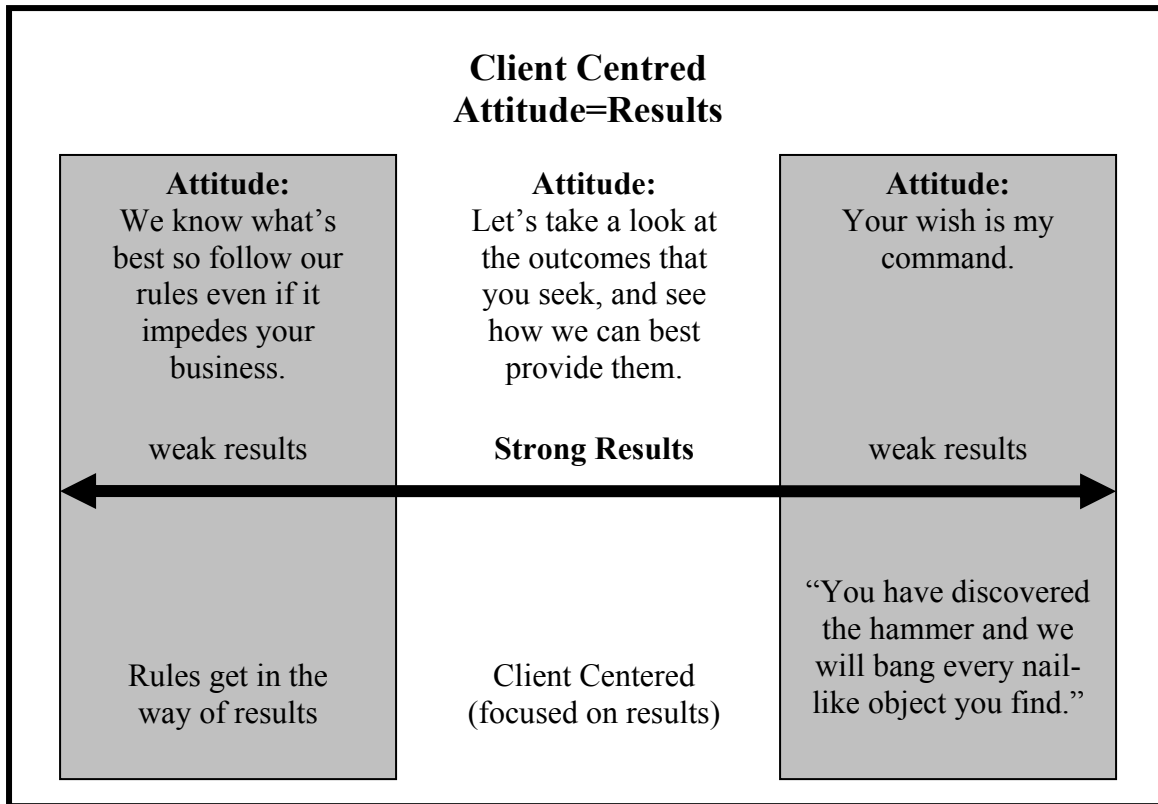
Once the IT shop caught wind of this initiative they quickly put an end to it since the corporate computing standard did not include any palm computing devices let alone the Palm Pilot brand.

A more client responsible approach would have been to let the palm work continue, and meanwhile work with the client to identify the processes that could then be applied to any future implementation of these type of devices regardless of brand.

You can't come to us asking for that, you have to go through the proper channels!

Is your client even aware that there are channels, and what is being done to assist them in preparing their request?

Getting Results



If it wasn't for users my network would be just fine!

Does attitude really make a difference?

Summary

Being client centered used to be a worthy goal, but in later years it has become something that many organizations simply pay lip service to and though your organization may be different, in many organizations there are no real client centred results to show for it.

For client centred to be effective, there must be a common attitude towards what this means not just as the senior levels, but at all ranks throughout the organization.

Responsible to the client	
Does mean	Does not mean
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ Set common priorities √ Know who the real client is √ Driven by client strategy (direction) √ Having a process for identifying new client service to provide √ Providing for outcomes rather than simply focusing on inputs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × Saying yes to everything × Being all things to all people × Being reactive rather than proactive × Using measures that simply identify how busy you are on activities that you believe the client wants.

Wayne McKinnon helps improve decision making and competitiveness through consulting, coaching, professional speaking and writing.

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