

## **“WHAT IS YOUR CUSTOMER’S EXPECTATION?”**

**By James G. Shaw III cscp**

In the management of a global supply chain it is impossible to achieve success unless you clearly understand what your customer’s expected result is. If we follow the time-tested “7 Habits of Highly Effective People” we know that it is essential that one must “begin with the end in mind.” Clearly, if you don’t know where you are headed just about any direction is as good as another, except in a service industry like global logistics management, you can waste a large amount of time and certainly other needed resources, if you don’t know and have a mutually agreed upon expectation of the final accomplishment as that of your customer. It gets more complicated because in a supply chain there are a series of customers, just as there are a series of service providers.

“Customer Expectations” can present a number of major challenges. This is due to the layers of activity and number of individuals that are involved in the movement and handling of goods. Add in a mixture of languages, cultures, sovereign nations, conflicting regulations, corporate objectives, and one of the most critical; time. Customer’s expectations are a ‘forward looking’ task, something that the service provider must know before commencing their activities and if the definition of a ‘successful end’ is not clearly defined and mutually agreed upon, the chance of meeting your customer’s expectations is pretty close to nil. Perception is reality, a lesson I learned while attending college 30 years ago and never have forgotten. It was only later that I learned that one of the most effective ways of meeting a customer’s expectation is to inquire, ask, discuss, explore, probe, review, analyze, and share information to confirm that the operational perceptions are mutually aligned. This requires additional time, but consider it time well spent.

If possible, when working on a supply chain issue, discussions and interviews with as many participants as practical (and possible) will help identify discrepancies in expectations. In some cases these variances in expectations can be the underlying cause of a violation of United States government law or regulation. When the supply chain crosses a national border the number of issues to address increases, always. Participants become involved, some times beyond what they anticipated when the initial bargain was negotiated, and they must therefore be flexible and adaptable in dealing with the ultimate outcome.

Timelines are an initial element of the planning for programs and are, at best, an estimation on the part of the customer. If these deadlines are firmly fixed then caution is urged. It is better to have a reliable chain of events and activities than to believe that the shortest time frame can be the norm. Participants need to be asked, and the questions must be answered; “How much time will this activity require?” You will also learn that the expectation and definition of what the accomplishment of “customer satisfaction” is not fixed, but rather is a moving target. The requirement then must include communications, both of events planned, and events underway, and accomplishments achieved. I use a modified version of “don’t shoot the messenger who brings you bad news”, to add a small modifying codicil. “unless, of course, the messenger is terribly late in delivering the bad news!” Most business organizations, and certainly almost all supply chain executives, have a “Plan B”, or a secondary way to getting tasks back on line. For example, air freight might substitute for slower surface-mode freight (e.g. truck, rail, ocean) when a deadline is missed. But in cases where the expectation includes elements of compliance (generally in dealing with government licensing, regulations, processing, and clearance) these elements must be fully understood and factored into the definition of an expectation successfully met.

What matters most? Clearly the achievement of the ultimate customer's expectation of a product or program completed to the highest level of accomplishment. Nothing less.

In a competition, and this is what business operations clearly are, it is necessary to "finish first" and the chain of events that lead up to the achievement is measured by the success of each and every element in the supply chain. And when this is done it is clearly on to "What's Next?"

### **Summation**

SolutionsOne is an organization that can establish global supply chains, linking partners and participants around the globe. This can include the training and development of corporate personnel, evaluation of facilities, definitions of processes and practices that are essential for the reliable achievement of the mission: "Deliver The Goods."