

# AMAZON

BY MIKE  
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A FEW YEARS AGO IN A VIDEO, JEFF BEZOS SUMMED UP "EVERYTHING HE KNOWS" WITH GUIDANCE TO EMPLOYEES TO "OBSESS OVER CUSTOMERS, INVENT AND THINK LONG-TERM." WITHIN AMAZON, THESE IDEAS SERVE AS GUIDES TO ACHIEVING OUR MISSION OF BEING EARTH'S MOST CUSTOMER CENTRIC COMPANY.



# Obsess Over Customers

I have the honor of being part of the customer service leadership team at Amazon. I joined Amazon two years ago after a 13-year career in the financial services industry. While my entire career has been engaged in customer support roles, Amazon has offered the opportunity to think differently about the customer and customer service leadership by constantly obsessing over customers. It's difficult to distill the keys to great customer service in just a few points. Many books have been written on the topic over the years. A quick search on Amazon.com for books on "customer service" returns over 72,000 results.

When I attended Baylor, I never really thought about a career in customer service. However, I now realize that service orientation

was instilled in me from an early age. Many of the ideas that are foundational in my approach to service came from my dad, Dan Gathright. My dad was a hospital administrator and had a 35+-year career in healthcare. He was a relatively quiet man, and I don't remember him ever sitting down with me and saying, "Son, let me tell you the secret to great customer service." However, throughout my career, I've often found myself in situations and quickly realized I was mirroring a behavior or idea that I had learned from a very early age. January 2012 marks five years since my dad lost his battle with cancer, so the sharing of these ideas feels very appropriate.

## THE FOLLOWING ARE SOME KEY CONCEPTS THAT HAVE BEEN IMPORTANT IN MY APPROACH TO SERVICE FOR YOU TO CONSIDER.

### CONNECT WITH THE CUSTOMER

My dad always called this "management by wandering around." At an early age I always enjoyed spending time at the hospital with my dad. On our visits, we would "wander" through the cafeteria, admissions, ER...everywhere "customers" experienced the service. While at the time I may have thought he was just "walking around and chatting," I now realize how important those interactions were to understanding the customer's view. The Japanese have a term, *gemba*, meaning "the real place," and lean manufacturing adopted a *gemba* walk similar to my dad's, where leaders go to the front line to look for waste and improvement opportunities.

At Amazon, we spend a lot of time seeking to better understand our customer's experience. One program that aids in this awareness is called "Customer Connection." This program allows leaders from all functions of the organization to spend time in the customer service and fulfillment operations. It is designed to help Amazon leaders become more experienced with how their decisions impact the customer. There are many different ways to connect with the customer, but the intention and activity is the key. Whether you conduct *gemba* walks or just "wander around," by observing what's going on you will gain a better understanding of your customer.

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### EMPOWER THE ORGANIZATION TO FIND SOLUTIONS


In customer service, as in life, at times you need to be willing to listen in order to

find solutions. My dad's approach to life was to be very collaborative and solution-oriented. One of the memorable stories I can share to illustrate this comes from when I was a teenager. Like most teenagers, I had all the answers. One night as I was leaving the house, I was arguing with my mom about whether I needed to wear a jacket. Of course, I didn't think I did. After a few minutes, my dad chimed in with, "Put the dang jacket on...you can take it off in the car." I don't know why this memory has stuck in my head for so many years, but it comes back often when I feel I'm at an impasse on something.

In business, it's impossible to listen if you are creating organizational barriers. One of the first things that people comment on when they join Amazon is how solution-oriented our customer service agents are. This is not by accident. Many organizations spend time creating hierarchy, policies and procedures that impede their customers' ability to get their problem solved. We spend great energy to remove traditional organizational barriers that prevent solutions. We also ensure there are mechanisms in place to allow customer service agents to prevent problems from continuing until the root cause can be researched and resolved.

"Work hard, have fun, make history" is a slogan you'll see often around Amazon. To me, having fun is really about being passionate about your work. When do you do your best work—when you're really engaged and passionate about something or when it feels like work? You've likely heard this many times, but it's so true and fundamental. I watched my dad drive ambulances, deliver mail, pick up employees during ice storms and other tasks that some might not consider the job of the hospital administrator. However, he did it because he loved patient care and he loved the hospital. I also watched my dad dress as a cheerleader, complete with pom-poms, and lead his team in cheers and put together a quartet of singers, delivering a quarterly update with a little song. Now these activities may not be for everyone, but they were indicative of someone who was passionate about his work.

I find that every day provides new opportunities to think differently about how best to support our customers. Obsessing over customers is an action that many companies strive for, but very few achieve in practice. I'm grateful to be in an organization that treats customer obsession as more than just a slogan on the wall. I'm also blessed to have had a positive influence that helped form a strong foundation from such an early age. Whatever field or role you're in, I challenge you to take a fresh view of your customer. I hope some of these ideas help you to think about new ways to obsess over your customer.

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