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Bridging the gap – interpersonal communication orientation to improving customer service

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Abstract

Purpose – *Training in interpersonal communication helps in enhancing customer service experience. The Functional Fluency model of transactional analysis provides training inputs by which employees can monitor their response with the customers and thereby improve this customer experience. The paper aims to discuss this issue.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The integration of the Functional Fluency model with “Gap 3” of the SERVAQUAL model.*

Findings – *The “Gap 3” in the SERVAQUAL model is about service delivery affected due to poor interpersonal communication by employees. Here the Functional Fluency model helps in identifying the dominant response style and the variables emergent for a group of frontline staff. This can help in designing training programs that will assist in employees enhancing their interpersonal communication from positive functioning and being cautious or exercise restraint on the negative functioning of Functional Fluency model.*

Research limitations/implications – *The research limitation is that since the model provides a pen-picture on the communication response style of a large group of employees on the 54 descriptors of the Functional Fluency model, a broad training program may be designed for the group. Second, a large group is sought for implication to take shape.*

Practical implications – *General communication response style may be identified for different groups and based on this a training module or program based on Functional Fluency may be designed specific to each group.*

Originality/value – *The importance of the Functional Fluency model in providing an evaluation and resolve on the nature of communication responses, during customer-employee interactions, to enhance service delivery in bridging the Gap 3 of the SERVAQUAL model.*

Keywords *Training, Factor analysis, Service quality, Functional Fluency, Transactional analysis*

Paper type *Conceptual paper*

Customer service focusses on the encounter between the employees and the customers on interpersonal elements (Bitner *et al.*, 1990). Customer service is an essential part of customer value proposition. This results in customer experiences regarding a product, brand, interaction with representative, promotional messages, etc. At the social benefit side customer service is important in building and retaining customers by understanding their needs and building the service offer around them as an important part of customer service delivery. Thus customer care becomes an important part of customer service. The trust with the customer can be broken by a lack of or poor customer care. Hence the right communication message strengthens the service delivery and can result in building customer relationship.

The customers are impressed when service employees are kind and polite to them, exhibiting good interpersonal behavior (Kim and McLean, 2007). The author further opines that the customers felt good if the employees were good listeners, patient enough to provide the information.

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Conversely speaking, poor interpersonal skills will result in the customers remembering the poor service or treatment meted to them. Interestingly, Bitner *et al.* (1990) state that customers remember the responses of a poor service more than the service itself, hence it becomes important for organizations to improve the responses. Since, this will amplify any negative impression that the customer holds about the service. Therefore, as the dependency on interpersonal relation increases, organizations look for advantages in both verbal and non-verbal interactions with their customers. Gountas *et al.* (2007) state that there is greater service satisfaction and the intent to return is due to affective displays toward the customers. Thus, good interpersonal communication can result in better and empathetic understanding of a customer resulting in improved customer service.

Service quality

In marketing literature, use of service quality to bring about a competitive edge has been dealt with rather extensively (Bitner *et al.*, 1990). The SERVQUAL model represents service quality as the discrepancy between a customer's expectations for a service offering and the customer's perceptions of the service received, requiring respondents to answer questions about both their expectations and their perceptions (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). The development of SERVQUAL by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) as a generalizable measure of service quality was a seminal contribution that has been adapted and widely used across industries around the world (Dabholkar *et al.*, 1996).

The above model of SERVAQUAL, identifies five gaps (Figure 1) that cause unsuccessful service delivery. The gaps focus on:

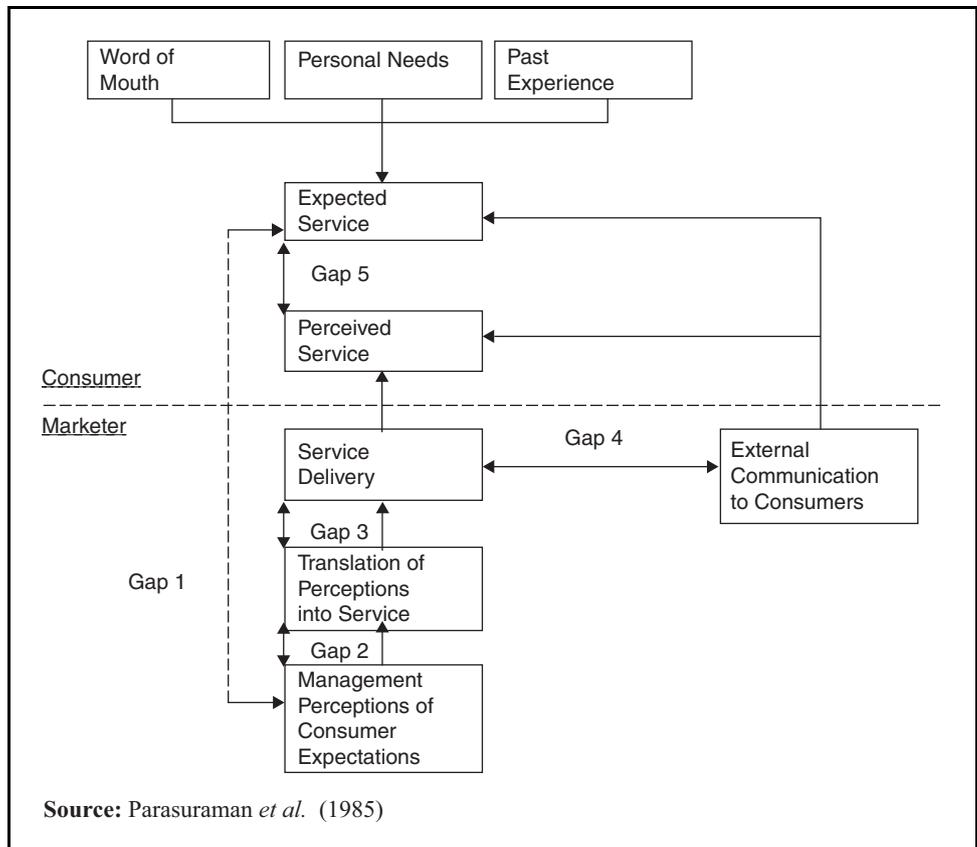
1. the difference between actual customer expectations and management's idea or perception of customer expectations (Gap 1);
2. mismatch between manager's expectations of service quality and service quality specifications (Gap 2);
3. poor delivery of service quality (Gap 3);
4. difference between service delivery and external communication with customers (Gap 4); and
5. differences between expected and perceived quality (Gap 5).

The Gap 3 in the above SERVAQUAL model finds relevance in this study, since the poor delivery of service may be attributed to poor interpersonal communication skills of the employees. The gap may be bridged by enhancing the positive communication interaction with the customers. The basis is to understand and evaluate the messages of a customer and accordingly monitoring the appropriate response for an improved interpersonal relationship. This perceptiveness about the other person and accordingly bringing about changes in the responses emitted by self is an important function of human functioning or Functional Fluency.

Functional fluency

Functional Fluency promotes effective ways of behaving socially in many contexts along with other transactional analysis models and concepts (Temple, 2009a). Transactional analysis as a theory of personality is of great use for educators, psychotherapists, counselors and business consultants (Steiner, 2005). It has been used by organizations in the areas of departmental

Figure 1 The Service Quality Model (SERVQUAL)



efficiency, improvement in group processes and increase in empathetic discrimination (Neath, 1995). The Functional Fluency model is about human functioning with dimensions from ego state and other theories. This is in stark contrast to using the traditional functional ego states with their functional characteristics in transactional analysis. The Functional Fluency model helps in behavior diagnosis and also may be used for personal development. It helps in understanding the manner in which we respond to situations. "It is a model for mapping patterns of communication [...] it is about how to choose "responses" rather than just react automatically" (Temple, 2009b).

The Functional Fluency model conceptually moves away from the analysis of certain types of ego states categorized by particular functional characteristics in the theory of transactional analysis and rather focusses on human functioning (Temple, 2002). However, it is consistent with the fundamental nature of the original ego state theory of transactional analysis on which it is based.

Temple (2002) has proposed the name Functional Fluency which describes the behavioral manifestation of the integrating adult ego state. This term has been used to suitably describe the ability to effectively and flexibly respond by using a range of ego state manifestation (Stewart and Joines, 1987). One can engage clients, catch the attention, and understand their difficulties

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by communicating with them on subject matter with energy and enthusiasm. The model focusses on responding positively and avoiding the contaminated behaviors of either the Parent or the Child, therein the description of the integrated adult manifestation (Temple, 2002). It expresses full maturity having taken the learning's from both the Parent and Child ego state. The model emerges from the structural model of transactional analysis (Temple, 2002). The model describes the nine manifestation of human functioning, which arises from the adult ego state. This includes the negative sets of contaminated behavior from the Parent and Child ego states as well.

The model uses the term functioning rather than ego states. Primarily related to the analysis of behavior, the way we use our energies and it gives the opportunity to people to own their behavior (Temple, 2002). Hence, if we were to relate it to the basic model of transactional analysis, we will notice that the model has the basic three categories of functioning (Figure 2). Category 1 on the use of our energies on behalf of others (social responsibility), Category 2 on responding to the present moment (reality assessment) and Category 3, which is using our energies on our own behalf (self-actualization).

Functional Fluency model has three constructs. The first level has three categories of functioning namely, being socially responsible, reality assessment and self-actualization. The second level further breaks down the socially responsible and self-actualization category into two each. This makes the level have five groups of functioning; control, care, accounting, socialized self and natural self. The third stage further divides control, care, socialized self and natural self to each possessing a positive and a negative expression. Accounting is more a “reality check” hence indicative of more or less than any subjective manifestation. Now, this gives us the nine elements or modes of human functioning (as shown in Figure 3: Functional Fluency construct). The nine modes have both effective and ineffective expressions of functioning.

Elements of Functional Fluency modes in action

Dominating mode

Here it is about us believing that we are right and assuming a “me” stand on situations and issues. It being a negative mode, we notice mistakes in others and demand certain obedience

Figure 2 Three categories of human functioning as informed by ego state theory

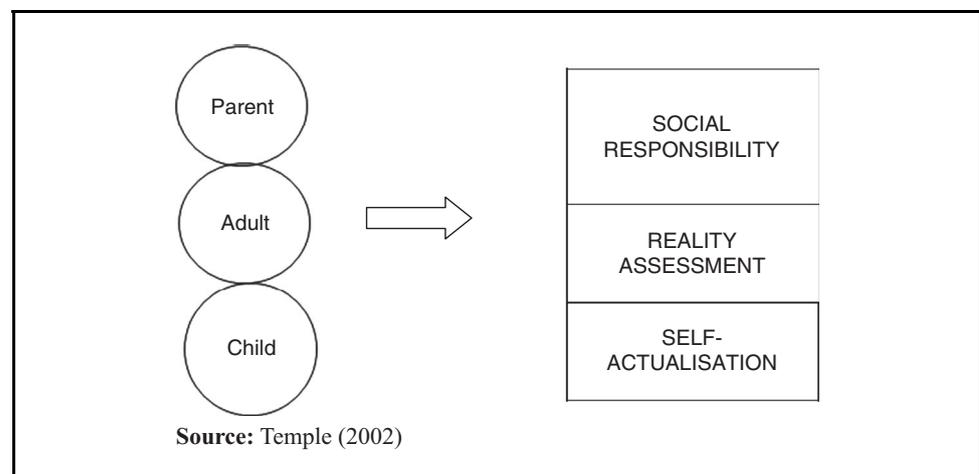
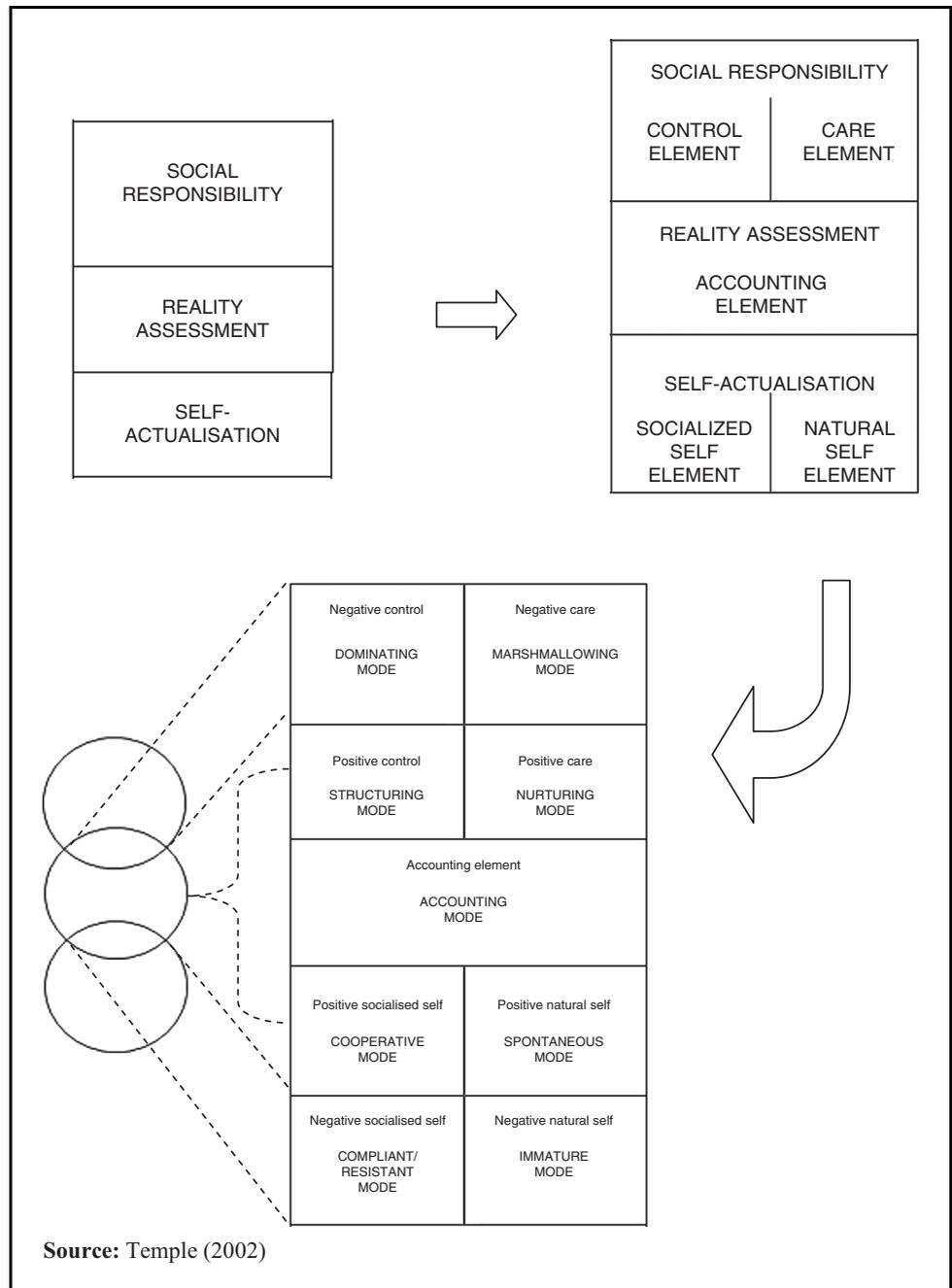


Figure 3 Functional Fluency constructs



from people. Warning, using threats and even coercion are few of the persuasive tactics that are used.

Marshmallowing mode

“Over the top” care and affection meted to someone becomes the hallmark of this mode. We become increasingly protective of the others and as a result contain the other person into feeling restricted in their thoughts, feelings and action. Thereby there is more of sadness and anger in the recipient resulting in confusion and frustration on both sides.

Structuring mode

Setting rules and boundaries is the key to this positive mode. It is firm and gives people the potential to grow and learn. Building self-confidence and competencies, this mode helps in establishing that with the right amount of support.

Nurturing mode

Empathy is an important ingredient here in this positive mode of functioning. Using understanding and kindness to encourage people to be more fully themselves. Acceptance and being non-judgmental are two cornerstones to this mode.

Accounting mode

“Here and Now” is the main principal philosophy to this positive mode. We tune in to ourselves and are at the same time are receptive to the stimuli from others. It is an objective mode and “good sense” prevails upon us in decision making wherein we effectively use the positive modes of structuring, nurturing, cooperative and spontaneous modes as well.

Cooperative mode

In this positive mode there is friendliness and consideration for others. There is confidence in handling social situations. You rely on skills of being diplomatic and assertive in handling people and situations. We enjoy company of others whether at personal or professional level.

Spontaneous mode

There is a playful attitude attached to this positive mode. There is originality and uniqueness to the manner in which we use our energies. The freedom of expression is without any inhibition and well within acceptable boundaries. Vivacity can be infectious and all pervasive.

Compliant/resistant mode

In coping with the demands of a situation we use one of the two negative modes, which is much dependent on our own past conditioning. We either conform and relent let our nervous energies flow or there is a rebel streak in us whereby aggressive energies are apparent.

Immature mode

In this negative mode we are not ready to assume responsibility and not willing to see the grown up point of view. There is no sharing and simply want our way. Emotional outburst may be pronounced and lack of consideration for others.

The nine modes have five modes that represent our positive energies and four modes that characterize our negative ones. Hence, by analyzing the nine modes of human functioning, we will ascertain the use of the modes by people in their relationship. Therefore, people could understand which positive modes they must use more often and the negative modes they must contain. This provides the base for understanding the modes that work best for people in different situations. So, as a model of human functioning (Temple, 2004) Functional Fluency's importance in customer service delivery lies at three categories:

1. guiding, directing and looking after people (Positive Care and Control element);
2. collaborating with others (Positive Socialized Self-element); and
3. staying objective and considering all factors before any intervention (Accounting element).

Descriptors of Functional Fluency

Table I below shows the six-picture words or adjectives or descriptors for each of the nine modes (Temple, 2002). This makes it a total of 54 descriptors on which the Functional Fluency is based.

Table I Mode descriptors

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Negative control | Blaming Bossy Dominating Fault-finding Judgmental Punitive | Dominating mode | Marshmallowing mode | Inconsistent Overindulgent Overprotective Overtolerant Self-denying Smothering | Negative care |
| Positive control | Authoritative Consistent Well organized Firm Helpful Inspiring | Structuring mode | Nurturing mode | Cherishing Compassionate Empathetic Encouraging Accepting Understanding | Positive care |
| Accounting element | Alert Aware Evaluative | Accounting mode | | Grounded Enquiring Rational | Accounting element |
| Positive socialized self | Adaptable Assertive Confident Considerate Friendly Resilient | Cooperative mode | Spontaneous mode | Creative Curious Expressive Imaginative Playful Zestful | Positive natural self |
| Negative socialized self | Anxious Defiant Inhibited Placating Rebellious Submissive | Compliant/resistant mode | Immature mode | Egocentric Inconsiderate Infantile Reckless Selfish Unorganized | Negative natural self |

Source: Temple (2002)

The above six descriptors for each of the modes provides the set of word pictures that are representative of human functioning for a particular mode. Their relevance becomes important in understanding the response style that is representative of a group of frontline staff interacting with the customers.

Functional Fluency and customer service quality

The frontline staff of an organization maintains the first contact with their customers. Their interactions go long way in building a relationship. Positive interactions or responses by the staff tend to create a lasting impression on the service quality perceptions by the customers. Kim and McLean (2007) says that customers were more impressed by the extra help provided. On the other hand, negative responses can not only irritate the customer but also break the relationship. Hence, it becomes important to monitor the responses in the most appropriate manner. This can be achieved by understanding the manner in which we respond to customers. The frame of reference here is pointing toward the elements of human functioning or Functional Fluency and its orientation in customer service.

Taking a cue from the nine elements of human functioning (Temple, 2002), the customer service may be improved by either responding through the five positive modes (Figure 4) or by being cautious of the responses through the four negative modes (Figure 5) of Functional Fluency.

Now, having laid out the basic premise, it will be interesting to see a pen-picture on the set of responses that is representative of the frontline staff on their human functioning. It can be a combination and not necessarily independent emergence of both negative and positive descriptors of the nine modes. So, the response pattern may have a “well-organized” descriptor of positive mode of structuring emerge with that of “anxious” descriptor of negative mode of complaint/resistant. In this manner various factors based on the combination of the 54 descriptors would indicate the response style that is predominant of a group of frontline staff. It will be interesting to see not only the interplay among the descriptors but also on the

Figure 4 Positive modes of Functional Fluency model and customer service

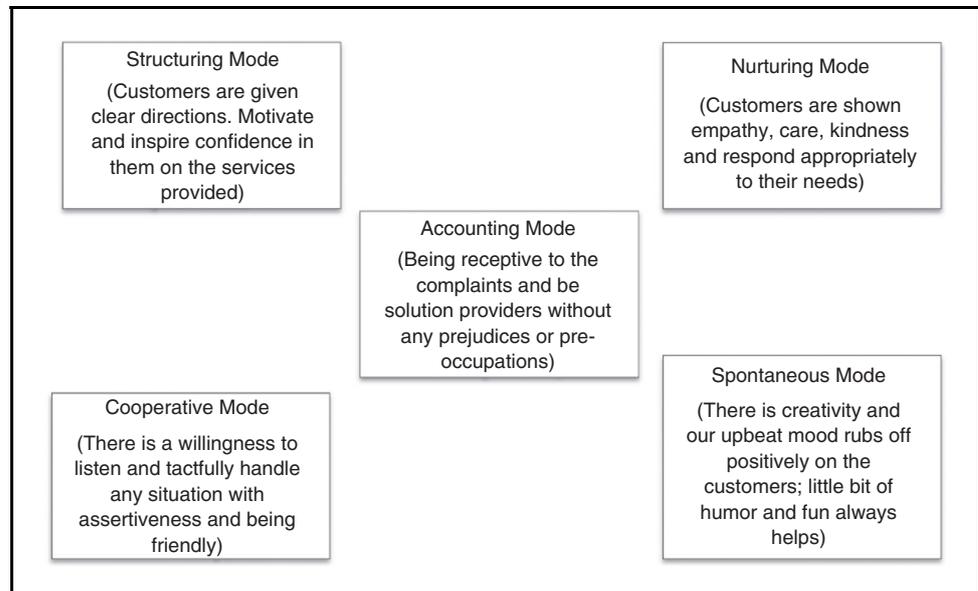
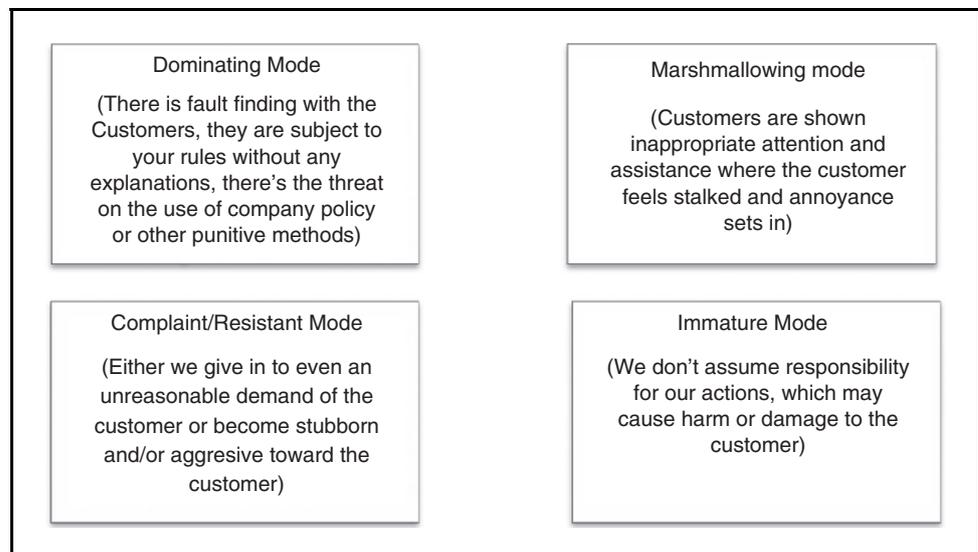


Figure 5 Negative modes of Functional Fluency model and customer service



statistically reduced set of descriptors that emerge as factors for a group of frontline staff. It will also be reflective on the ones that did not emerge as a result, more importantly so for the positive modes' descriptors. The factors and descriptors will be different for different groups and as a result a unique pen-picture emerging for each of them.

Hence, the bridging of the Gap 3 in the SERVAQUAL model, the Functional Fluency model is helpful in two ways. One, as can be seen in the Figure 6 below, that the customer service may be enhanced by responding through the five positives modes of human functioning and caution/restrain shown on the four negative modes.

Second, as shown in above Figure 7, which shows the further break down of the nine modes with descriptors pertaining to each of the modes, a Factor Analysis on the descriptors will provide a dominant response style picture on the emergence of the various factors and the interplay of variables or Functional Fluency descriptors that attribute to customer service for a

Figure 6 Mapping responses in bridging Gap 3

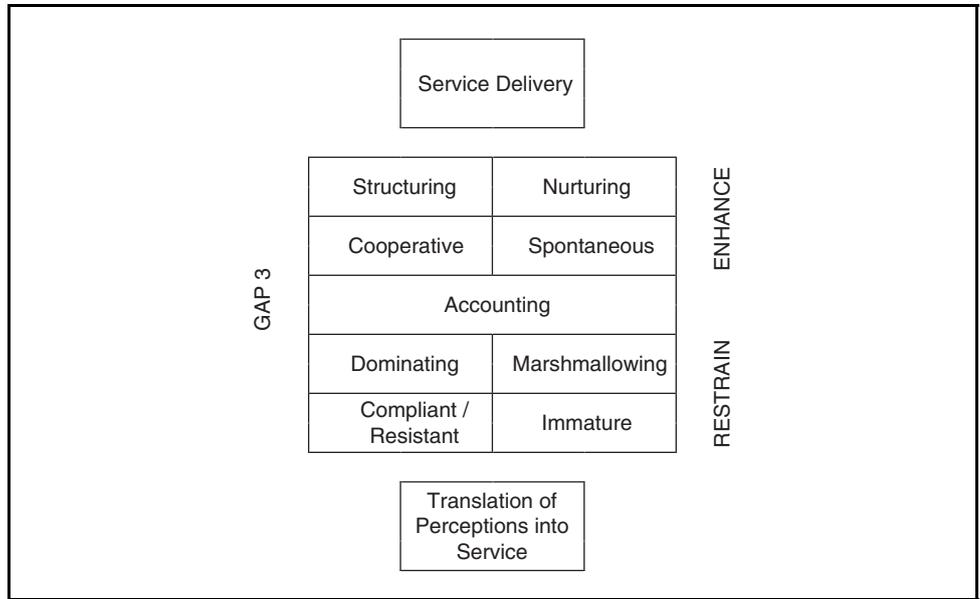
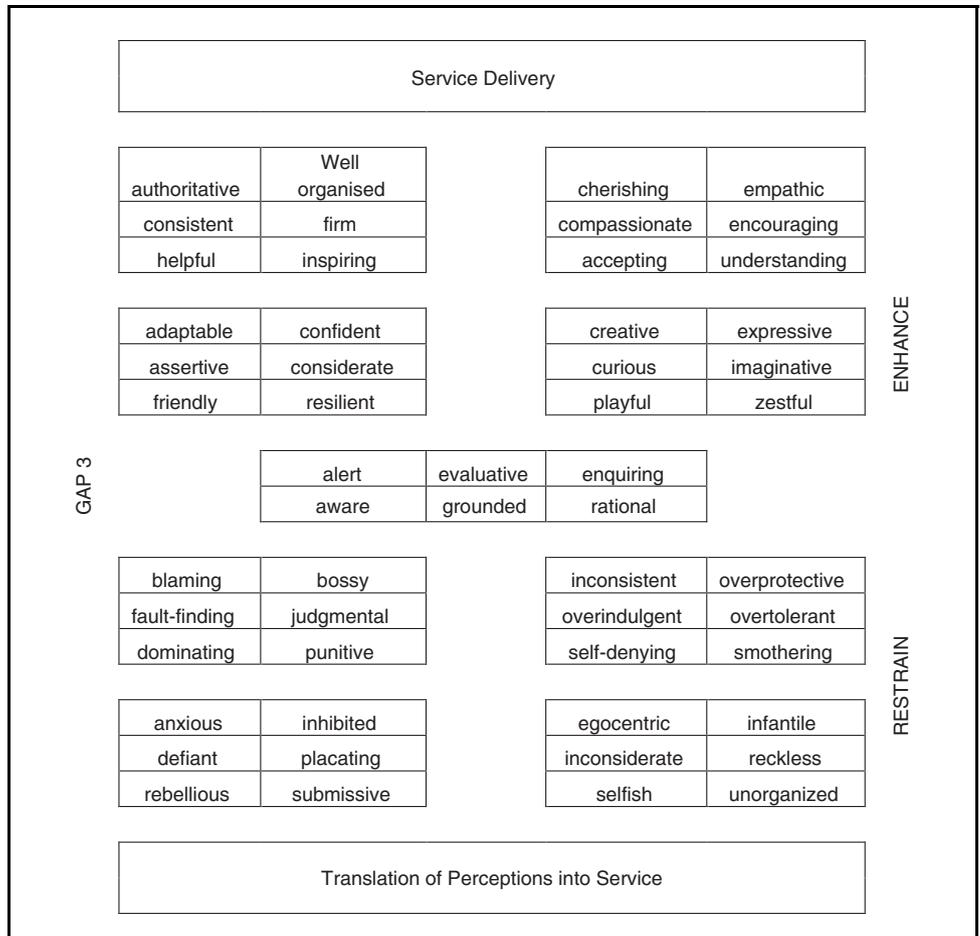


Figure 7 Emergence of pen-picture on responses based on descriptors



group on response style. For example interplay of descriptors in a factor could be “Inspiring”, “Confident”, “Encouraging” and “Unorganized”. The first three are from positive modes whereas the third one from a negative mode. Thus the pen-picture for the said factor maybe someone who is “Enthusiastically Confused”. In this manner for the various factors a pen-picture may be established based on the variables that emerge for the said factor. Additionally, a general pen-picture on the nature of response will appear for the group. Moreover, it will also throw light on the positive descriptors that did not emerge due to low statistical significance in the factor analysis and thereby help in proving training to enhance those descriptors.

Limitation

The emergence of the pen-picture based on the 54 descriptors of the nine modes of human functioning on the dominant functioning style requires the group size to be large. Since, there are 54 variables and the minimum sample size required to conduct a factor analysis is five times the number of variables, the size comes to be 270. Hence, for a pen-picture on the interplay among the variables to emerge, this minimum size is required.

Second limitation is that based on the pen-picture for the large sample size, a generic training module or program could be created for all the members in the sample size instead of a more personalized training program. Although, each group's training module/program will be personalized according to the pen-picture that emerges.

Conclusion

In the service industry the differentiation tool to achieve a competitive edge is the high service standards. Toward this much is dependent on the manner in which the employees interact with the customers. Positive verbal and non-verbal communication ensures that the customers go back satisfied, whereas non-chalant, abrasive, immature behavior can put customers off. The service experience getting marred by simply the responses made by the employees. The implication for the industry high on service delivery becomes important since it provides a generic picture on the way their employees especially the frontline sales staff are responding to the customers. It can hold a comparative understanding on the response style of the frontline staff in varied locations, businesses, hierarchy levels and even demographic profiles. Training modules or programs specific to each of the groups can be created. On the social side, it is helpful in the self-development of various groups in order that they can improve their interpersonal skills for an improved customer service.

Successful interpersonal performance entails adaptive skill in adapting one's performance to novel situations (Yelon and Ford, 1999). This forms the basis of Functional Fluency and for designing training programs on this model of human functioning. Hence, by putting our energies into the positive modes and less into the negative modes (Temple, 2009a, b), we can learn to communicate better and recognize the nine modes of Functional Fluency model to achieve the desired interpersonal success. This becomes important in managing relationship with an organization's customers. Functional Fluency can help in bridging the Gap 3 of the SERVAQUAL model in not only providing self-development improvement but can provide a larger picture on the nature of response style on customer service for a specific group.

Note

Although the Temple Index of Functional Fluency (Temple, 2002), a 108-test item psychometric tool that assesses individuals on an index score on each of the nine modes for personal

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counseling on self development is created. However, a variant shorter questionnaire may also be developed keeping in mind just 54 test items for the 54 identified variables. The response by the frontline staff on the 54 items may be assessed as a composite for the pen-picture to emerge based on the relationship among the 54 descriptors or a smaller set thereof.

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