

BEYOND FITSM:

WHY TRUE SERVICE CULTURE IS SO MUCH MORE THAN MEETING 82 REQUIREMENTS

Picture this: You walk into two different offices seeking IT support. In Office A, the technician barely looks up from their screen, asks a few curt questions, fixes your problem efficiently, and sends you on your way with a ticket number. In Office B, the technician greets you warmly, listens carefully to understand not just what's broken but how it's affecting your work, keeps you informed throughout the process, and follows up later to make sure everything is working well for you.

Both offices might have perfect FitSM® compliance. Both might meet every single one of those 82 requirements. But only one has a true service culture.

Here's what I've learned after working with hundreds of IT organizations: frameworks like FitSM are absolutely essential. They provide the structure, processes, and standards that make good service possible. But they're just the foundation. The real magic happens when you build a culture where exceptional service becomes as natural as breathing.



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What Organizational Culture Really Means

Before we dive into service culture specifically, let's talk about organizational culture in general. Culture isn't your mission statement on the wall or your company values in the employee handbook. Culture is what happens when nobody's watching. It's the unwritten rules about how things really get done around here.

Edgar Schein, one of the pioneering researchers in organizational culture, described it as having three levels. **At the surface**, you have artifacts – the visible behaviors, office layout, dress code, and processes people can observe. **Dig deeper**, and you find espoused values – what the organization says it believes in. But **at the deepest level**, you find basic assumptions – the unconscious beliefs that actually drive behavior.

Here's why this matters for IT service management: you can have perfect processes documented (artifacts) and beautiful service level agreements (espoused values), but if your team's basic assumptions are that users are interruptions to their real work, you'll never have great service culture.

True culture change happens when you align all three levels. When your processes, stated values, and unconscious beliefs all point in the same direction – toward genuinely caring about the people you serve.

The Leadership Foundation

Culture starts at the top, but not in the way most people think. It's not about executives giving speeches about customer service (though that helps). **It's about leaders demonstrating through their daily actions what they truly value.**

I remember working with an IT director who transformed his organization's service culture with one simple change. Instead of starting team meetings with operational metrics, he started every meeting by reading a positive customer feedback email. Within six months, his team was actively competing to get their own customer compliments shared in meetings. He didn't change any processes or requirements – he just changed what got attention and celebration.

Effective service culture leaders share several characteristics. They make service excellence a personal priority, not just a business objective. They invest time in understanding the customer experience themselves



- they regularly use their own services and interact with customers directly. They recognize and celebrate service behaviors just as much as technical achievements. And perhaps most importantly, they create psychological safety where team members feel comfortable speaking up about service issues without fear of blame.

Leaders also need to be comfortable with vulnerability. When something goes wrong, service-oriented leaders focus on learning and improvement rather than finger-pointing. They model the behavior they want to see by taking responsibility for failures and sharing credit for successes.

The Power of Role Models and Influencers

While leadership sets the tone, **culture is really built by the everyday influencers in your organization** - your process owners, service owners, and subject matter experts who interact with customers regularly. These are the people who turn abstract values into concrete behaviors.

The most effective service culture influencers have a few things in common. They genuinely enjoy helping people and see customer interactions as opportunities, not interruptions. They take ownership of problems even when they're not

technically responsible for them. They communicate proactively and transparently, especially when things go wrong. And they continuously look for ways to improve the customer experience, even in small ways.

I've seen subject matter experts transform entire service cultures by doing things like creating simple video tutorials instead of just sending documentation links, or by setting up regular "office hours" where customers can drop by with questions. These aren't FitSM requirements - they're expressions of a service mindset.

Process owners and service owners play a particularly crucial role because they can influence the design of customer experiences. The best ones regularly walk through their processes from the customer's perspective, looking for friction points and opportunities to delight rather than just satisfy.

What Service Culture Looks and Feels Like

A true service culture has a distinctive feel that you can sense almost immediately. **It's in the energy of the team, the language they use, and the way they approach problems.**

In a strong service culture, problems are viewed as opportunities to demonstrate value rather than unwelcome interruptions. Team members



naturally think about customer impact when making decisions, even small ones. There's a genuine sense of pride in the service they provide and disappointment when they fall short of their own standards.

You'll hear different language in a service-oriented organization. Instead of "That's not my job," you hear "Let me find the right person to help you." Instead of "The system is down," you hear "I know this is frustrating - here's what's happening and what we're doing about it." Instead of "Did you try restarting it?" you hear "Let's figure out what's causing this problem for you."

The physical and digital environments also reflect service culture. Self-service options are designed for user success, not just efficiency. Communication is clear and jargon-free. Follow-up happens automatically, not just when customers complain.

Perhaps most importantly, in a true service culture, exceptional service feels effortless from the customer's perspective, even though it requires significant effort and intention behind the scenes.

Recognizing True Service Culture

How do you know when a service culture has truly taken

hold? There are several reliable indicators.

First, look at how the team responds to unusual or difficult requests. In a compliance-focused culture, unusual requests get pushed back or handled reluctantly. In a service culture, they're seen as interesting challenges and opportunities to go above and beyond.

Second, observe what happens during crises. Service-oriented teams instinctively focus on customer communication and impact mitigation, not just technical resolution. They take ownership of customer experience during incidents, even when the root cause is outside their control.

Third, pay attention to voluntary behaviors. In a true service culture, team members do things that aren't required because they care about the outcome. They follow up on tickets they've closed, they proactively reach out when they hear about potential issues, and they share knowledge freely with colleagues and customers.

You can also recognize service culture in the metrics people care about most. Compliance-focused organizations obsess over SLA adherence and ticket closure rates. **Service-oriented organizations pay equal attention to customer satisfaction, effort scores, and qualitative feedback.**



How Customers Respond to True Service Culture

The customer response to genuine service culture is unmistakable and powerful. Customer satisfaction scores are consistently high, but more importantly, the variance is low – customers have reliably positive experiences rather than just avoiding negative ones.

Customers become more collaborative partners rather than skeptical requesters. They provide better information when reporting issues because they trust that it will be used effectively. They're more patient during outages because they have confidence in the team's competence and communication.

Perhaps most significantly, **customers start proactively seeking opportunities to work with service-oriented teams.** Business units begin asking IT to take on additional responsibilities and projects because they trust the service experience will be positive. This leads to expanded influence and budget for IT organizations with strong service cultures.

Word-of-mouth recommendations also increase dramatically. Happy customers become advocates who share positive experiences with colleagues and in professional networks. This

organic marketing is incredibly valuable for IT service providers, whether internal or external.

Real-World Service Culture Champions

Let's look at some organizations that have built legendary service cultures that extend far beyond their documented processes.

Zappos remains the gold standard for service culture. Their approach goes far beyond their famous "deliver happiness" motto. They hire for cultural fit first and train for skills second. Customer service representatives are empowered to spend as much time as needed with customers and are encouraged to create personal connections. The longest customer service call in Zappos history lasted over 10 hours – and management celebrated it as an example of commitment to customer success.

Southwest Airlines built their service culture around the idea that employees come first, customers come second, and shareholders come third. Their reasoning: happy employees create happy customers, which creates happy shareholders. Their service culture is evident in everything from their hiring practices (they hire for attitude and train for skills) to their response to service failures (they often go above and beyond to make things right).



Ritz-Carlton empowers every employee to spend up to \$2,000 to solve a guest problem without manager approval. But more importantly, they've created a culture where employees actively look for opportunities to create memorable experiences. Their service culture is built on personal pride and ownership – every employee considers themselves responsible for guest satisfaction.

Amazon built their service culture around customer obsession as a core principle. Jeff Bezos famously left an empty chair in meetings to represent the customer voice. Their culture of working backwards from customer needs has driven innovations like one-click ordering, Prime shipping, and their legendary customer service recovery stories.

Nordstrom has built their reputation on a service culture that empowers employees to use their best judgment in serving customers. Their employee handbook famously contained just one rule: “Use good judgment in all situations.” This trust-based approach creates a culture where exceptional service becomes the norm rather than the exception.

In the IT services world, **IBM's Global Services division** transformed their culture by implementing what they called “client value realization” – focusing not just

on delivering contracted services, but on ensuring clients achieved their desired business outcomes. They changed performance metrics, compensation structures, and even office layouts to reinforce this client-first mindset.

Critical Success Factors for Building Service Culture

Based on studying these successful organizations and working with IT teams worldwide, several critical success factors emerge for building true service culture.

Leadership commitment and modeling is absolutely essential. Culture change cannot be delegated. Leaders must personally demonstrate the behaviors and priorities they want to see throughout the organization.

Hiring and onboarding practices must prioritize service orientation. Technical skills can be taught; service attitude is much harder to develop. Organizations with strong service cultures often use behavioral interviews and scenarios to assess candidate fit with service values.

Recognition and reward systems must align with service culture goals. If you want exceptional service behavior, you need to celebrate and compensate it. This might mean changing performance reviews



to include customer feedback, creating service excellence awards, or including customer satisfaction metrics in bonus calculations.

Psychological safety is crucial for service culture development. Team members need to feel safe reporting service failures, suggesting improvements, and taking reasonable risks to serve customers better. Cultures of blame and punishment kill service innovation.

Customer feedback loops must be robust and actionable. Service culture thrives on regular, specific feedback about customer experiences. This means going beyond annual surveys to create ongoing dialogue with the people you serve.

Continuous learning and improvement should be embedded in daily operations. Service-oriented organizations are constantly experimenting with ways to improve the customer experience and sharing successful innovations across the team.

Empowerment and autonomy enable front-line service providers to solve customer problems without bureaucratic barriers. Clear guidelines combined with decision-making authority create the conditions for exceptional service moments.

Measuring Service Culture Success

How do you know if your service culture initiatives are working? Traditional IT metrics won't tell the whole story. You need a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures that capture the human elements of service experience.

Employee engagement surveys specifically focused on service pride and customer connection provide important leading indicators. Questions like "I feel proud of the service we provide to customers" and "I have the tools and authority I need to solve customer problems" reveal culture strength.

Customer effort scores and satisfaction ratings show the external impact of culture change. But look for improvements in the qualitative comments and feedback, not just the numerical scores. Customers start using different language when they experience true service culture.

Voluntary service behaviors can be tracked through observation and customer feedback. How often do team members go beyond minimum requirements? How frequently do they follow up proactively or provide additional value without being asked?



Internal collaboration

metrics often improve when service culture takes hold. Teams start working together more effectively because they're focused on customer outcomes rather than departmental boundaries.

Innovation and improvement

suggestions from front-line staff increase when service culture is strong. People who care about customer experience naturally identify opportunities for enhancement.

Retention rates for both employees and customers typically improve with strong service culture. People want to work for and with organizations that genuinely care about service excellence.

The Journey Beyond Compliance

Building true service culture is infinitely more challenging than achieving FitSM compliance, but it's also infinitely more rewarding. **Compliance gets you to "good enough." Culture gets you to exceptional.**

The organizations that stand out in today's competitive landscape aren't just those that meet requirements – they're the ones that create experiences people genuinely appreciate and remember. They turn routine IT interactions into moments that strengthen relationships and build trust.

This transformation doesn't happen overnight, and it doesn't happen by accident. It requires intentional leadership, systematic culture development, and persistent focus on the human elements of service delivery.

But here's the beautiful thing about service culture: **once it takes hold, it becomes self-reinforcing.** Teams that experience the pride and satisfaction of delivering exceptional service don't want to go back to just meeting requirements. Customers who experience genuine service culture become partners and advocates. Leaders who see the business impact of service culture become its strongest champions.

Ready to Build Your Service Culture?

If you're ready to move beyond compliance and start building a true service culture that differentiates your IT organization, we'd love to help you on this journey. Every organization's culture transformation is unique, requiring careful assessment of current state, thoughtful planning, and sustained support throughout the change process.

[Book a free consultation](#) with our ITSM experts to discuss your service culture aspirations and challenges. We'll help you assess where you are now, identify the



most impactful culture development opportunities, and create a practical roadmap for transformation that goes far beyond any framework requirements.

Because at the end of the day, people don't remember organizations that simply met their SLAs. They remember organizations that made them feel valued, heard, and genuinely cared for. That's the power of true service culture - and that's what will set your IT organization apart.

Ready to transform your service culture? [Book your free consultation today](#) and let's discuss how to build something truly exceptional.

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