

Client care

by Paul Menniss

This article is based on a talk given at the IATEFL Conference last year in Brighton

Eurocentres UK regularly carries out an internal 'corporate health check'. Three years ago the customary check revealed that many of the causes and much of the tension underlying the issues current at the time actually emanated from the customer, staff and organisation inter-relationship itself. Poor rapport between these three groups seemed to result in their often feeling that they were not valued by others, that their status was being eroded and that the common perception was that no change or innovation could be brought about to improve the situation. It was the success or failure of this crucial relationship, locally or globally that seemed to be deciding the level of each individual's or group's satisfaction, and hence the fortunes of the company.

The Client Care Concept was developed with the aim of improving that relationship, by encouraging people to accept, enjoy and transcend their personal differences, find common ground and thereby contribute to Client satisfaction. It was envisaged that many of the by-products of such a framework would include a positive work climate, improved commitment and motivation, areas of Client satisfaction and dissatisfaction being identified, organisational paralysis being attacked, autonomy increased, better quality and more accessible information being available, and the large scale investment of resources in people.

What the 'Client Care', as opposed to an exclusively 'Customer Care' concept tried to point out was that self-interest and the greater good could be served simultaneously by serving one's customers. In other words, if we could get the services right to the customers then we would generate resources that would enable the company to meet the needs of its other clients. By 'other clients' I mean people who are normally called staff, the union, host families, suppliers and management, in fact anybody who is actively involved in the organisation.

Although we researched a number of well-known customer care concepts we found that they often had at their heart the notion that the customer is king, and that staff and other resources should be subjugated to the achievement of this sole aim. That customers should feel like kings while they are with an organisation is unquestionable. That they are the 'raison d'être' of why the organisation is there is also unquestionable. They constitute the main influence on it. However, they will only feel like kings if the people who are delivering their services are also having their needs and objectives identified and met by the organisation. If at the front line the teacher or the host family is feeling undervalued or ill at ease with the organisation, this might communicate itself to the customer in the form of low quality service. The end result being the customer feeling a poor second best to the preoccupations of the staff member.

Quite simply we felt we all had to recognise that these 'other clients' had not joined Eurocentres UK solely to serve our customers. They had their own identifiable objectives and needs, they too desired to feel valued, and they too merited increased status within the organisation. However, getting the balance right between the needs of the customers and the 'other clients' was a delicate one.

In the early 1980's, I had come into contact with many people in different ELT organisations, who actually talked about the 'students' as if they were something that almost should not be there, that got in the way of achieving the other more interesting things like staff development or teacher training. So one of the starting points for the development of the concept was to make clear what the attitude of the organisation was to its various clients. We started by examining the status of the language learners and Consultants/agents, and found ourselves saying 'look these are the most important people, if they are not, then we just don't exist, we can't do anything. So let's get the service to them right first.' We then looked at the aspirations and needs of staff, host families, departments, Union and suppliers, and found no reason why resources generated through achieving success with the customers should not be used to meet those valid secondary objectives.

Thus the Eurocentres UK Client Care Concept evolved as an attempt to meet and satisfy the needs of all those involved in the organisation by raising the status of everybody to the level of **Client**. The one distinction made being between those who constitute the major external influence on the Company (**Primary Clients**) and those who formulate and supply its services (**Secondary Clients**).

The term 'Client' was chosen because it:

- raises the status of each individual;
- stops those who require or who offer services being taken for granted;

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- implies and indeed places a premium value on all input into the organisation;
- suggests in our context that learning can be a two way process. Clients educate, and are educated by the organisation;
- when juxtaposed with 'care' stresses that people, above all, should be given maximum consideration within the operation.

But the concept goes much further and attempts to widen the definition of Client and conceptually link it with terms such as benefactor, supporter, champion and mentor. Mentor in turn can lead to counsellor, guide and back again to teacher. The word when used this way thus enshrines the Eurocentres UK world from paying customer and benefactor to paid employee, and is suggestive of the services and philosophy that bond them together.

Initially there was a lot of resistance to this priority order that was in fact being stated openly for the first time. Of course the idea of a Primary Client is nothing new to ELT or any other industry and is known under various terms such as 'customer' or 'external clients'. But I felt that there was a major issue to be tackled here. Many of our Primary Clients were not recognised as such. Agents merited increased status and care, as did our sponsor organisation which required us first and foremost to meet objectives of international understanding. There were also Secondary Clients within Eurocentres UK who regarded themselves as 'Primary' ones, or further internal pecking orders that tried to award more status to managers or teachers than to administrative staff. Others on the other hand went to the other extreme and talked in terms of being 'one of them' (i.e. a manager), or 'just a teacher' or 'only one of the administrative staff'. Entities such as a "Head Office", were viewed as dehumanised "centres", which did not understand what was going on, which had a very cold relationship with the schools. So again they became a secondary client. If we treated them well, they gave us good quality information, they helped us out and so on, and if we had problems we could look at them together and work out how we could solve them.

PRIMARY CLIENTS
LANGUAGE LEARNERS
FOUNDATION
CONSULTANTS & PARTNERS

SECONDARY CLIENTS
All staff, Host Families, Union
Learning Service, Head Office
other Eurocentres and Migros

Whenever we do something we start with the Primary Clients. If they want things we listen to them and we try to change the rest of the organisation to give them what they want. If we are successful in this we generate enough

resources to address the Secondary Client's objectives and needs, whether it be staff development, something for the host families, or increased time for the Unions. If we then start to fulfil some of the Secondary Client objectives we hope that we begin to close a virtuous circle, as they start to feel they play a bigger part in the organisation and in turn provide a better service to the Primary Clients.

'Care' was another highly emotionally charged word which we decided to define so as to not raise undue expectations. Eurocentres UK holds that it is wrong to separate customer care from employee care. Employees who feel motivated, valued and cared for will value their customers and care for them. Such an aim it was felt was difficult to achieve, but not impossible. It is not about trying to make people 'happy', as the organisation recognises its limitations and that 'happiness' is a state contributed to by many other areas of one's life, work being only one of them. 'Care' therefore, means in the professional context of Eurocentres UK:

- confronting important organisational problems in an open and consultative way;
- being specific in what we say and do;
- setting high standards in every aspect of our business and personnel practice;
- ensuring our staff have the best tools to do the job and are provided with up-to-date information so that they can deal effectively with Primary Clients;
- ensuring that all Clients have a comfortable environment within which they can perform effectively;
- giving Clients all available information, no matter how 'raw' it is, so that they always know what the organisation is doing and where they stand with it;
- giving Clients regular feedback about their performance, thanking and complementing them on their successes and being open and honest when their performance deteriorates;
- requesting similar performance feedback from them on line management structures;
- giving Clients time, listening to them, counselling them about the problems they encounter, supporting them and taking an interest in them;
- ensuring that staff do not work excessive hours, take their allocation of leave and go home on time or take appropriate Time Off In Lieu;
- giving personnel real accountability - real scope for making decisions, for developing within their jobs, for taking initiatives;
- openly admitting errors, learning together about mistakes, taking responsibility for rectifying them and never resorting to blaming ourselves or others;
- having open and fair policies related to quantifiable resources.

What follows is a complete description of the concept as it currently stands.

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THE EUROCENTRES UK CLIENT CARE CONCEPT

AIM

Client Satisfaction

THE CONCEPT

Eurocentres UK consists of Primary and Secondary Clients who supply and receive services. The satisfying of these Clients' needs form the central concerns of the UK schools.

Recognising the interdependence of Clients; ensuring the development of strong professional relationships; addressing both group and individual needs; promoting Client autonomy; increasing Clients' influence; establishing professional accountability; creating a transparent, coherent and information rich environment; the setting and auditing of Service Standards; and adopting a team and project ethos in relation to resources and development opportunities contributes to achieving Client satisfaction.

Client satisfaction is continually measured and re-defined through feedback systems.

SOME OF THE NOTIONS THAT MAKE UP THE CONCEPT

THE PRIMARY CLIENTS Language Learners, Consultants and the Foundation are the Primary Clients.

THE SECONDARY CLIENTS Migros, Staff, Management, Host Families, Departments, Agents, Union, Learning Service, Head Office, other Eurocentres, and Suppliers are the Secondary Clients.

INTERDEPENDENCE The quality of service offered to the Primary Clients depends on the professional well-being of the Secondary Clients, while the extent to which Secondary Client needs can be met depends on the scope and range of Primary Client needs and the success with which they are fulfilled. Primary Clients will not receive the quality of service that they require if the Secondary Clients lack professional fulfilment. Equally, resources for Secondary Client motivation will be sparse or non-existent if the Primary Client's needs remain unsatisfied. Eurocentres UK believes that self-interest and the greater good can be served simultaneously by serving one's customers.

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT Eurocentres UK is a learning and language community that thrives on effective personal communication. Primary and Secondary Clients appreciate and warm to personal contact in their classes or daily work lives. It is direct and swift, enables discussion, questioning and feedback to take place on the spot and helps forge strong professional relationships. The opportunity to talk to people face to face, discuss at first hand important information and feel that one is an active and valued contributor is at the very heart of what we do. To this end we make every effort to reduce administrative tasks so as to release staff to spend more time with other Clients.

GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL NEEDS The notion of students or staff or an organisation as undifferentiated mass with identical interests and aims is not a valid one in Eurocentres UK. All Clients want to be consulted, informed, and treated individually as well as in groups. A measure of our success is the extent to which our Client services are individualised and personalised.

AUTONOMY One of our beliefs is that autonomy and independence in professional activity should be encouraged. This involves the promotion of autonomous language learners, schools, departments and employees through the provision of clear information, delegated authority and the expansion of professional choice.

MAXIMUM CLIENT INFLUENCE We encourage our Primary and Secondary Clients to reflect on and influence our course programmes, services and infrastructures. We do this by actively listening and responding to their feedback.

PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY Named individuals are professionally responsible for all aspects of the UK operations and allow Clients to identify and work with those responsible for making decisions.

TRANSPARENT, COHERENT & INFORMATION RICH ENVIRONMENT

Well-presented, as well as 'raw' data will be regularly supplied to all Secondary Clients. Such an approach demands on the part of the Clients an appreciation of the instability and changeable nature of information, but allows them to influence its evolution through analysing pros and cons at an early stage, propose alternative strategies to deal with it, and gain time to become 'psychologically comfortable' with its content. The process also helps remove information bottlenecks, sensitises Clients to emerging or fledgling organisational or language learning issues, extends the organisational knowledge base and makes it more accessible.

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REGULAR FEEDBACK The question 'How well am I doing?' or 'How well is my class, department, school or organisation doing?' is often at the forefront of our Clients' minds. How well we answer it depends on the frequency, clarity and quality of our feedback.

Feedback can come from below and sideways, as well as from a line manager and should inform all Clients about their performance, being open and honest when that performance deteriorates, and thanking and complementing them on their successes.

THE SERVICE STANDARDS These are the benchmarks of the organisation which substantiate the quality and extent of the services supplied and received by Clients, and present it in measurable form. They represent the baseline of Client needs and the limit of expectations. They must always be a reasonable expectation of the organisation and its Clients, and through regular auditing be made compatible with current resources. They are constantly evolving to reflect changing needs and circumstances and allow clear understanding of where and how the organisation surpasses, meets or falls short of Client expectations. Respect for the Standards' integrity is crucial to the continuing success of Eurocentres UK.

TEAM AND PROJECT APPROACH We must constantly explore ways of using the finite resources of money, staff and contractual and course time more efficiently. Eurocentres UK activity is funded and structured on a project basis wherever possible, to ensure efficient utilisation of resources and the creation of the maximum opportunities for learning, participation and personal development, for as wide a range of staff as is commensurate with the requirements of the project.

Projects also enable Clients of all abilities, disciplines and status to work together as a team of equals for common goals. Flexibility of role is therefore a crucial factor in the project approach.

Another feature of projects is the use of the 'Beta' phase to bring them into line with real Client needs. This is basically a period of time when the aims and structure of the project are openly 'played with', without any limitations being placed on the nature of the input or criticism made of the contributors, and during which the original idea and scope of the project may change drastically. At the end of this period, as a result of 'Beta' input, a firmer proposal or structure will then be available as the project starting point. An example of the practical standards and services provided for staff can be seen in our 'Commitment to Permanent Staff at Eurocentres UK'.

The Client Care Concept has now been running for three years and it is interesting to review its current status and success within the organisation. First of all it is clear that it is not a panacea for remedying every single defect within

the company, but varying levels of success have been achieved.

The term 'Secondary' Client still annoys a number of our staff who feel it equates with the idea of second class citizen, while some complain of 'Client Care fatigue' The latter being a result of the huge amounts of information that have avalanched on many of them, and the despair that some of them feel at having so much raw and often contradictory data presented to them. Certain groups have reacted to the label of Client as an insult rather than an increase in status, and there is still a suspicion, based on conspiracy theory, that the concept is just a screen for something more sinister.

However, many staff feel that Eurocentres UK is a maturer company as a result of the application of the concept. They appreciate that the whole organisation has lowered its frontiers on information and allowed staff to access a wide range of documents and data, and so get an understanding of the 'bigger picture', and be as much 'in the know' as the managers. This has led to a greater degree of confidence and assertiveness, enabling staff to feel comfortable about challenging and verifying organisational policies and data, or simply questioning traditional ways of doing things. This has in turn led to higher quality data being available as a better basis for making decisions, and less resort to rumour and gossip as a means of informing oneself.

The project ethos has also opened up a wide range of development opportunities for teaching and admin. staff rather than concentrate them in a few key hierarchical positions. Side benefits of this include the formulation of new training programmes, as staff identify gaps in their skills or new skills associated with being a project leader. Other themes have also been identified such as the professional isolation of the schools, and the need to find reasons for staff to move between them as much as possible, thereby further spreading information and expertise, as well as contributing to the sense of one team, with one mission.

But perhaps the most important benefit for the organisation has been the realisation by everybody that our Secondary Clients are our greatest asset, that we cannot afford to lose their expertise and talents. As a result of the concept staffing levels were retained even during relatively bleak enrolment periods, and enabled Eurocentres UK to be in the strong position of having sufficient experienced staff to work on and improve the customer, staff and organisation inter-relationship, the original 'raison d'etre' of the Client Care Concept. It is the success of this crucial relationship, locally and globally that now seems to be raising the level of satisfaction of many individuals and groups, and hence the fortunes of the company.

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