Quality of customer service

Before I begin I'd like to mention that during this seminar you keep your mind open and try to understand my point of view before you criticize it.

No matter how advanced technology gets, we - the IT professionals - still have to deal with humans, their personalities and attitudes.

But first, I'd like to give you some background information about this communication workshop.

2006. It was my temporary job in SF while I was looking for a full time in-house IT position (which is more my style). This job turned out a great school for me.

It was an IT support company, 10 people IT staff + administration, Mann Consulting - 15 years in business. Survived .com boom crumbling down, kept clients, gained great reputation in SF area and Silicon Valley. A couple major advertising companies, 2 medical research labs, Levi's Jeans creative office, law offices, two large art design studios, whole bunch of private clients.

We - the new staff, before we were allowed to talk with the clients we had a talk vice-president.

He said: you are very knowledgeable in technical field and if there's something you don't feel comfortable with you ask the team, look it up on the Internet, read a manual - you all know how to resolve issues.

Today we will be talking about our relationship with our customers. Studies show that good communication with client contributes 80% to a company's reputation, and only 20% of the credit for good work we get for actually resolving issues. It is a fact and it has to be taken seriously. Many businesses went down even though everyone on the helpdesk was a genius - it was enough only for those 20% of what actually had to happen to stay in business.

Basically, there is a discipline of communication with clients. Discipline comes with rules. Luckily, there are a few rules and they are easy to keep in mind and follow - they turn "unprofessional" communication into very "professional".

1. I => We
   Let client know that your whole team is working towards a resolution of the issue. Sounds like a silly idea, but it really works and there's hardly ever a time when you really have to say "I" when you speak with a client.

2. I don't know => We have to look to it. We will be able to answer this later.
   Instead of telling the client that you actually don't know (which is true but not what the clients wants to hear) tell the client "we'll have to look into it and get back to you" (and you're not lying) and give them an estimate when.

3. Unfortunately, Sorry=> dev/null
   Clients want you to fix things. They don't need you to sympathize, unless they are in tears, of course. Cheer them up and then...it's time for cold hard facts. If something is impossible to do, or is beyond our control - it is not our fault - do not take the blame for it - no "sorry, this spreadsheet cannot be recovered" Why are we sorry? Because they said no to backup erased it two months ago and only told us now? Or "unfortunately, there's no one available at the moment to come to your office". It's not unfortunate, it's not anybody's fault. Just state is as a fact: "there's no one available at the moment to come to your office. Please call us back in an hour or we can call you, if it's more convenient". They want to be taken care of, so give them care instead of your insincere apologies - it's not that hard.

4. Don't let users make choices you are supposed to make.
   "Can I install the updates? They are very important and will take just a minute." - WRONG! The right way: "There are critical updates, we have to install them, the server will be down for one hour (give yourself a lot of room) when can we do it?" Yes, client can decide the time sometimes, but not the importance of updates.
   Tip: if it was a big job and there was a chance of people losing productivity because update/upgrade didn't go smoothly and you will need four hours instead of one - book a Friday afternoon - you have the whole weekend to make things right by Monday.

5. Setting client's expectations not too high. It is your breathing space. It's better to overestimate and ask for 3 hours than having a client expecting the work to be completed in one hour and giving you stress because it's not. You wanted to impress them by how quickly you can fix something - they won't be impressed if you do, but they will definitely pissed off because it's taking you longer then you said. You have set their expectations too high and now they are disappointed, olfaced.

6. Don't go into technical details.
   This is our WORST sin ever. We are techies, we love technology, we are passionate about it.
   Not everybody is like that. Actually a few people care about computers (oh my god!), very few. And they don't usually call us for tech support.
   It happened to all of us - we all had to listen to someone talking about something we just couldn't care less for 10 minutes straight - how did it make us feel?
   So, stay in check with reality when you are about to open your mouth and dump all your IT wisdom on a blissful in his ignorance user. They are already somewhat intimidated by you, they will even often open a conversation with you by saying that they don't know anything about computers - which means that they want you to go easy on them. Yes, you know a lot about computers, and that's why they came to you for help - not to hear your preaching.

7. We'll get back to you in an hour / by the end of the day.
   If you have to follow up on the issue then say when. And do it then, on time. Even if there has been no progress, call them when you are supposed to, tell them that for instance the cable is still broken and the phone company is not in a rush, or the shipment of new equipment is still running late. Tell them you'll keep them posted. And don't forget - no "sorry" or "unfortunately" - if it is not our fault, don't make it look like it is.

8. Report your "backstage" work (if there's such) and its importance to the contact person there.
   Situation: "Our IT guy just comes in, clicks a few buttons and goes, I don't know what we pay/need them for. Can't they train someone else on staff do it instead?" - This is what you get for being too modest and too quiet.
   You can casually mention to contact person or shoot them a quick email saying, "We have checked all your systems, have run regular maintenance, installed pending updates and checked error logs - no errors found. See you in a week". You don't even have to change this text for months but make sure they keep getting it. It's a formality, yes, but it should be done if you work behind the scenes.

9. Don't try to do many things at once. Take a note, prioritize.
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   Now I'm going to give you a good example of a bad case and later we will have to edit it according to the discipline:
   Client: Hi, Is there anything wrong with the internet? I can't go to any websites....
   IT: Hi, I think your connection is down. Sorry, your provider's DNS server might be down this time, again. Do you want me to try OpenDNS? It's a cool DNS service, so when you provider's DNS is down your computer can still resolve the host names to IP addresses. I love it. Let me change that setting in your router and I'll call you back as soon as possible.
   Client (totally confused now): Ok...
Next morning:
Client (sounds a bit pissed off): WTF?.. You promised to call back? What's happened?

IT (tired after a sleepless night spent replacing a burned out network hub and some wiring in client's office): Ahh.. yeah.. There was a problem. There's a new manageable Netgear gigabit network switch with fiber uplinks in your networking closet, you'll feel a serious bandwidth boost on LAN - just plug it into an outlet, I forgot to do it before I left...
Client: Damn.. Ok, hold on.....yeah, the Internet is back, finally, bye (Hangs up)...
Let's go over it and fix it now! =)