The Programmer's Lab Podcast: Episode 1

Achieving Customer Satisfaction with a Product Engineering Mindset: A Conversation with Abhijeet Shah

Transcript

Host :

I personally love the no-questions-asked return policy that some e-commerce sites have. It's obviously expensive for the trader, but having a customer satisfaction program in place means bringing in more business, more customer loyalty, and probably even customer referrals. This is the reason why every business, software or otherwise, rates customer satisfaction really high on their list.

Hello and welcome to Nitor Infotech's The Programmer's Lab. This is going to be a show about tech coming from all our thought leaders. Today's topic is somehow related to customer satisfaction and the need to develop a sort of a mental routine, so you as a business can achieve continued customer satisfaction and to discuss that we have someone who does not want to take the usual route with customer satisfaction, someone who wants to challenge conventions, someone with over two decades of experience in the software world, a superstar in his own right, a thought leader and a wonderful human being, Abhijeet Shah, AVP, Projects and Delivery at Nitor Infotech. Welcome to our very first Thought Leadership Series podcast, Abhijeet.

Guest: [Abhijeet Shah , Vice President – Projects and Delivery]

Hello Nalini, it is my pleasure to talk to you as part of Nitor's Thought Leadership Series. I am glad that my recent blog on achieving continued customer satisfaction using a product engineering mindset has been picked as a topic of this conversation. Yes, I want to challenge the conventional paradigm of customer success.

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It is all about the learning and application of an engineering mindset.

[Host]

For those who haven't read the blog, do visit https://www.nitorinfotech.com/blog. Coming to the blog, Abhijit, my first question is, why is customer satisfaction rated so high among businesses?

[Abhijeet]

Extremely relevant question, Nalini, and that is the core of my blog. So, what I would like to say that customer satisfaction is the core ingredient or you can say a catalyst in the process of customer deliverables. So, the customer satisfaction is the primary goal of any business, be it a brick-and-mortar business or a software development business like what we do.

And in that, we need to continue providing satisfaction, do what is not said and evolve around our deliverables. And that is why I have mentioned customer satisfaction is rated very much high for continued business.

[Host]

Now I know the ‘why’, but let's take a step back and start with the ‘what’ part. You said a product engineering mindset is needed to achieve continued customer satisfaction. What exactly is a product engineering mindset?

How do you define it?

[Abhijeet]

Let me put it in simple words. So, what is our goal? Our goal is to deliver value to the customer's business.

That is what we have to achieve at the end of the day. And to achieve that, there has to be an engineering mindset as well as a product mindset. So what is product mindset as per me is that we have to continue providing value, delivering value, rather than thinking of shorter-term goals, thinking of the bigger picture - how the customer will be successful.

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Engineering mindset is to have innovation, take risks, solve complex problems, which seems complex at the start, but as the problem starts unfolding, it becomes simple. So now the product engineering mindset is a mixture of both of these two together, and these two bring customer satisfaction.

[Host]

You make it sound like my favorite Sherlock Holmes: “Elementary, my dear Watson.” But you know what I want to say, for people, leaders especially, what is the first step that they need to take in order to develop a product engineering mindset?

[Abhijeet]

Okay, so like they say in any sport or any game that the captain or the leaders have to lead it from the front. That is what I would say here, too. The leaders are the ones who have to showcase the product engineering mindset, showcase in their daily deeds, words, action, and then it will go down.

So what I mean, it has to be a top-down approach. The leaders have to inculcate it and it gets inducted slowly across the pyramid. So in it, or what we do, leaders or we call them engineering managers, they themselves do deep dive sessions, understand what is going on in the project, understand by seeing the demos, mapping it to customer requirements, and they ensure that the deliverables are as per the customer's need.

They are not just Jira managers or any Excel managers. I hate people who are just thinking of themselves to be Jira managers. Jira does not give the real story.

Jira tells you what is the burn rate. Jira tells you how many hours are burnt. But what is the outcome or effectiveness of the burning of hours is only through engineering mindset.

And that is what I would like to say that leaders have to roll up their sleeves as and when needed and lead by principle.

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[Host]

I could feel that hate come through those radio waves, Abhijit. So now that you say so, never just be a Jira manager. So, you also want to emphasize that it's so important to think about not only a customer but a customer's customer, right? That's doing almost twice the amount of thinking. Why do you think it's important to empathize with customers?

[Abhijeet]

Okay, empathy is a normal human behavior. We empathize with our family. If there is any situation, we always think of them.

And we always think by getting into their shoes. So why do we do something differently with the customer? What we have to do is go into the shoes of the customer, try to think as the customers think.

And that will give more satisfaction to the customer as the family members get. So, customer empathy is nothing but a human behavioral trait. That is what I feel.

So, there are multiple parts to this empathy, Nalini. Let me tell you. The first part is that we have to understand our customers who are our immediate counterparts for whom we are developing the products.

And the second part is to understand the end customers for whom it is not development, but they are going to use the product. They are the end customers, and they don't want a shabby or underrated product. So, for that, I would like to quote a top grossing mobile company.

So what they focus on is ‘why’ and not ‘how’. So ‘why’ is the most important. So we have to always keep on thinking why a person will be using this product.

Why a person will be interested in buying the end product that we are going to develop. And that is what makes the difference.

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[Host]

It does make the difference indeed. Think about why and the hows. So, let's also start thinking.

So now that we know that the organization has taken their first step and they focused on the ‘why’ and not ‘what’ and the ‘how’. And they're also getting their empathy into order. What next?

[Abhijeet]

That is I think I need to go into engineering reviews to answer this question, Nalini. So what we do in Nitor, I will tell you. We have to ensure that the customers get the deliverables in regular and frequent intervals.

It should not happen that you are waiting for a Tesla to come, and it comes after one year. It's true for Tesla, but for the software development industry, it's not true. The customer has to see every week or every sprint: What is going on? What is getting developed? Because the software development industry is an ever-evolving industry.

We have to get the customer feedback earlier in the cycle - that helps. So, what I mean by engineering reviews is that every sprint, be it 2 weeks, 4 weeks, we have to ensure that we are delivering a tangible outcome which can be tried out. It works, it is functionally complete, and it does not have any stubs or any dummy data. And we keep on evolving it, sprint on sprint. If we say to the customer that this is the MVP, that is what the first release will be, so, the customer can try it out, take it to the end customers, get the feedback from the market, and evolve. This is what we do. And this is what is known as ‘engineering review’.

[Host]

Okay. So engineering reviews, I might stress on that. So it's not for KRAs, I guess.

So where do we head next, Abhijeet, after this? Is there some sort of introspection that we need to take after this review?

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[Abhijeet]

Yeah, introspection is the key. As it is rightly said, a successful person has critics around him. He is surrounded, he or she is surrounded by critics.

So, critics or introspection is very important. In terms of reviews, after reviews, what we have to do is, we have to keep on continuously upgrading ourselves. What we do in Nitor is that we continuously keep on unlearning, learning, and relearning.

Some of the technologies that we know, for example, I started 21 years back as a C++ embedded developer. Today, there are no vacancies if I go for a C++ embedded developer. There may be, but not many.

So, today I have to go to the cloud. I have to understand what is known as serverless computing. I need to understand what the benefits are.

For example, it reduces OPEX. It reduces the infrastructure cost. It is just useful in the bottom line of the business because at the end of the day, it is charged only for what we use.

So, such kinds of things, learning every day, understanding what is going on in the market, is very important. And that is the next step, as per your question.

[Host]

Yes, I think that is so important. Learning, unlearning, and relearning. So, what happens after this?

So yes, I know that we need to have a trophy cupboard adorned and all that, right?

[Abhijeet]

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Yes, but the proof is in the pudding. We cannot just say that, “Yes, I know Azure cloud.” Suppose I say tomorrow, and you will not believe me.

So, the proof is in the pudding. We have to get our people certified. There are a lot of certifications provided by cloud providers for an example, or there are a lot of third-party certification companies like Udemy, Pluralsight, even LinkedIn Learning gives certifications.

So, these certifications have to be sought. It has to be a continued process. Like, for example, now Nitor is a SOC 2 compliant company, but we have to keep on getting the SOC 2 compliance every year. It's not that you get it once and that's all. So, continued certifications from a third-party certifying company are the key.

[Host]

So, the pudding has kind of made me hungry. But yes, since we need to continue with our interview, Abhijeet. So, when is that Eureka moment?

You know, when does that microwave kind of ring the bell and tell people that, “Yes, you have used your PE mindset and you've achieved delivery excellence, and you know, ‘Tring’ - here is continued customer satisfaction delivered.” When does that happen?

[Abhijeet]

Yeah. So, I would like to give an example of how we do the engineering reviews, and I would like to have an analogy between the engineering reviews and the effect of a product engineering mindset. So let me give an example of a cause-effect diagram or a fishbone analysis.

There we have causes for any effect, and I would like to have the same cause of product engineering mindset is the cause and the effect of that cause is delivery excellence as well as customer satisfaction. And that is what I would like to say that we have to make course corrections. We have to evolve.

We have to take time if needed. It's not that always it will be done quickly. If it needs time, it needs time.

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But we have to keep on evolving, giving customer satisfaction, learning, unlearning, relearning, and at the end of the day, delivery excellence is the output of product engineering mindset.

[Host]

Yes, Abhijeet. Wrapping up, I guess. So, any concluding thoughts about the product engineering mindset?

[Abhijeet]

I would like to first wish everyone who is listening to this podcast warm wishes for their journey in developing a product engineering mindset. First, keep your customer at the core. Think as your customer does.

That solves half of the problem. Once you start thinking as your customer does, you yourself don't need any inputs from the customer. Even the customer will start believing in your methodology and they will start being less micromanaging.

Come up with proactive solutions. Deliver what is good for them and not what is just told to them. And all of this, as in Nitor, we call it, it is value addition culture.

So, a culture of value addition that we have built over the last 16 years is due to this product engineering mindset and delivering value to the customer.

[Host]

Yes, providing value to customers and the listeners of this podcast, indeed. Thanks a lot, Abhijeet. It was a really illuminating discussion.

I hope all our listeners benefit the same way as I did.

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[Abhijeet]

Thanks, Nalini, for having me.

[Host]

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Thank you. Talk to you next time. Till then, take care.

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