POINTMAN


# Tough Conversations

## Turn Around Problems for Your Customers

By David Thiemecke

# Dedication

This book is dedicated to everyone who answers the phone everyday without knowing where the conversations will go. I hope this book can help bolster your confidence and can help you keep the courage to say “hello” and have productive conversations everyday. This book is dedicated to the people who work in customer service who find work enjoyable and not just “survivable”

# Contents

# Introduction

> “By the time the customer called me, he or she had already exhausted any patience”

When I started running customer service, upset customers scared me. By the time the customer called me, he or she had already **exhausted any patience** with my office manager and my hands-on team.

Not only would the customer surprise me with their original problem, but somehow my team had let them down too. It felt like a **car accident** at the end of my driveway.

Escalating the problem from my technician, up the chain to customer service, and then to me **stretched their trust** in the rest of my staff. It took time, making the solution to their issue late.

How had this happened? Where did reason go? What about all of the policies I put in place? How could I have prevented this?

**Just stop.**

# What does a disgruntled customer want?

In my experience, customers are looking for understanding, an advocate, a way to make their family whole, a way to to save time and their investment, to vent, and sometimes just guidance to solve the problem. By the time their problem landed on the my desk, we had already failed the customer in some way.

When times get tough, you prove your value and show that it's the relationship that matters. **Every problem becomes an opportunity to improve and earn your customer's trust.** It's an honor to serve your customers, even when your company has failed them. They could have already gone someplace else. Take it to heart – Now you need to learn to address both the customer's original problem, and the way that your company failed to resolve it. That knowledge will follow you to every job!

So now is a good time to get better.

## How do I get everyone to calm down?

**Listen**
**Empathize**
**Ask**
**Produce**

When I started, two mentors shared advice with me. The first gave me a sheet with an acronym, **LEAP**, as in Listen, Empathize, Ask, and Produce.

By **listen** I mean to be quiet, take notes, and let the customer tell you everything that's on their mind. Then **empathize**, reflecting back how, given that evidence, you would feel that way too. **Ask** questions, to both clarify and check-down. Then **produce**, telling the customer how you'll handle it and follow through.

Sounds simple, right? I found I could even remember this list when the customer jarred me.

**But it didn't solve all of my customer's problems.**

# The limits of LEAP

I found **LEAP** worked great at calming down the customer and returning to a reasonable tone within a call. It got the customer off the phone feeling like “something” will be done. But that vagueness just sets you up to miss expectations again.

**Produce was the tricky part.**

- What if I discover something after the call that changes my perception of the issue?
- What if we fail to do exactly what was promised on the phone?
- What if it takes more time to understand the issue?

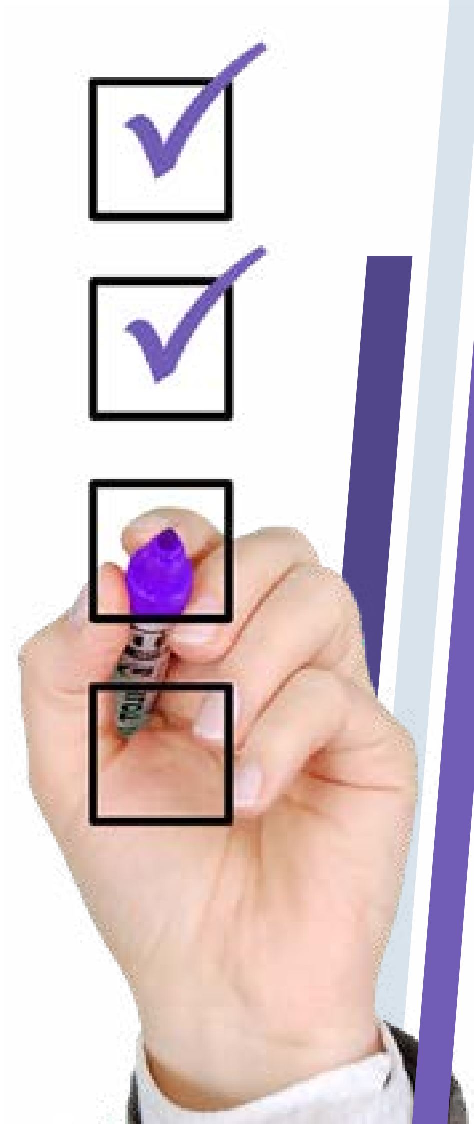
**LEAP** leaves the resolution to one step, failing to guide customer service.

As customer service, do I deviate from our terms and conditions?

- Is this worth going above and beyond?
- What if there’s something I didn’t think of on the phone?
- How do I protect my customer and my job at the same time? What’s fair? Who’s right?

**Exhale and relax.**
There’s more to share expanding the “P” in **LEAP**.

# Getting to "Done"



To start, follow the **LEAP** process – listen without interrupting, empathize with the customer, and ask clarifying questions.

Next, you've promised to Produce on a way to resolve the problem.

But Produce hides a lot of detail, and as the owner, you may very well depend on the actions of your staff to Produce.

## How can you make sure your Team will completely resolve the issue?

# What does it mean to "produce"?

**By the way, this is what I meant by "tough problems."**

You probably see easy problems every day, and have a quick way to confirm them on the phone. You already know the action that clears them up almost every time. That's not a "tough problem."

The tough ones leave you grasping at what the real problem is, hide behind the mask of another problem, come with everyone blaming everyone else, or come with high-stakes for getting it wrong. **Digging into Produce pays off for "tough problems."**

My second mentor shared tools with me to expand on produce. Yes, start each conversation with **LEAP**, but change its goal to get the customer's perspective on the problem. Prioritize the customer's feedback.

- What's the biggest problem?
- What problems have happened since then?
- What remedy is the customer looking for?
- How much time do they have?

Don't take sides. Distill it down to facts from the customer's perspective. **Assuming the issue isn't simple**, resist the temptation to solve it on the phone. In fact, promise to **look into it** in more detail and agree to a time to speak again with an **update**. You're still adhering to the spirit of the produce step, but now we're going to expand on it.

# Establish unbiased facts

What evidence do you have of where the issue went **right** and where it went **wrong**? Don't prejudge, which is to say, don't assume that you or your customer have diagnosed the problem correctly or have a monopoly on the truth.

Start with the **first moment** of the issue and follow it until it left your hands. Granted, you could get into analysis paralysis, diving ever deeper into wasteful facts.

Instead, sample a few **key points** to narrow down the underlying cause of the issue. Dig into that spot. Kindly challenge your team mates, the data in your systems, the paperwork left behind, written communication, and your partner's results.

*You'll likely find things that the customer doesn't know, or didn't share with you.*

See Handouts 1 + 2

# Assess the facts

List scenarios that explain what happened. Eliminate those that don't match the evidence. You may still have more than one possible scenario.

**Where did we deviate?**

**What does the customer believe?**

**How should my team (or I) have acted?**

**What does the customer need to know?**

**Where did the breakdown occur?**

See Handout 3

# Solve the urgent problem

## What needs to be done right away to close this issue?

With facts in hand, explain to your customer an unbiased account of the immediate problem and its underlying cause.

- Remain clinical, and leave emotion out.
- **Do not lie.**
- Answer the question you were asked, and then elaborate.
- Avoid blame.
- Be humble.
- Honor the client by empathizing.
- Distinguish clearly between facts and your opinion.
- Accept blame where it's fairly due.

*You've fixed the source of the leak, now it's time to drain the basement.*

## You've only got two problems left to solve.

**First,** how can we make the customer whole, immediately and fairly?

**Second,** what can we both do to prevent this problem going forward?

We still have to solve the customer's current problem, and they're listening for that before anything else.

To me, "whole" means fair to the customer and fair to your company. I find it helps to begin by establishing some principles, rather than to just split the blame.

The process of solving these two problems is a bit like putting on a pair of pants. You can't put both legs in at the same time or you'll fall on your face. When you're solving difficult problems, realize that there are two steps (the two pant legs). First, solve the problem. Second, make sure it doesn't happen again. You can't do them at the same time, or they will both fail.

## Step 1:
### How can we make the customer "whole", immediately and fairly?

If my team had a **verbal agreement** about something important enough to cost money, and we failed to document it after with the customer, then the verbal agreement doesn't exist and I'll side with the customer. Sometimes it's painful and costly, but it's better for the long-term.

On the other hand, if we followed our process correctly and the **customer missed something**, then I'll suggest that the customer bear the cost to correct it with our help.

If **both sides made mistakes**, then I'll offer to cover my firm's cost to correct our mistake, and suggest the customer do likewise.

For example, if **our mistake** caused one line item on the invoice to grow more than it should, I'll offer to cover the difference on that one item, and not refund the whole invoice. We both followed the terms and conditions together.

## Step 2:
### What can we both do to prevent this problem going forward?

Even if the problem begins entirely with our customer's actions which I cannot control, I'll still propose things we can do to watch the customer's back in the future. That's part of a good working relationship.

Usually, **changes to both sides** of an issue keep it from recurring… until training slips.

So, you need to **document your processes**, update them, and train from your documentation. Does your customer have the power to make the preventative changes? I've found they appreciate the extra effort that you invest.

# What does “Done” mean?

That’s how I often respond to tough customer issues: clarify the problem and then follow two legs, the immediate problem and prevention.

But you could do this all in an email to your customer. Sending an email may solve your  problem, but did it solve the problem? After, did the customer agree with you? Do they believe your remedies will solve the problem?

You can still get derailed. In the next chapter, we’ll talk about that.

# Buy-In and Belief

We started with a disgruntled customer that escalated to a disagreement you have to solve. You followed LEAP, listening, empathizing, asking and producing.
You might already have responded with a lengthy email to your customer, leaving them breathless.

*But do they agree with you? Do you still have time to solve the problem? Do they believe your proposal will solve the problem in a better way?*

**Get customer approval before solving their problem, even urgent ones.**

**Context helps them understand. Include everyone in updates, and position yourself to win.**

## When solving a problem and preventing it in the future isn't enough

That last one is important. If the customer doesn't believe in the process you've suggested, you're wasting their time and yours. You've just bought the whole problem.

Let's go back to when you're establishing facts and assessing them. During that time, keep in contact with your customer. By managing their expectations, you'll make time for yourself to work on the solution. When you reach your conclusions and you know what you're willing to offer, share your thoughts with your customer using the outline:

- Facts
- Conclusions
- Immediate Resolution
- Prevention
- **Approval**

## You've just bought the whole problem.

## When solving a problem and preventing it in the future isn't enough

As an example, a heating and cooling contractor I know recently received a complaint about a brand new high-efficiency furnace short-cycling. The homeowner heard the furnace kicking-on for a few moments and then shutting-off. A technician visited the house and checked that all the wiring was tightly connected to the furnace. The furnace cycled long enough to reach the temperature on the thermostat. So when the tech left, he believed he had solved the problem. The homeowner called back a day later to complain about short-cycling again.

*Was this customer being unreasonable?*

No—because the technician didn't discuss his process with the homeowner and get their approval before starting. It turns out the tech had stopped by unannounced between two calls. He spoke to the homeowner's college-age son on the visit, **who wasn't the decision-maker**. The decision-maker complained because he didn't take part in the process.

Therefore, when the furnace short-cycled again, ***we had an even bigger problem.***

## It’s all about the context

The next visit involved the decision-maker. We discovered the wires on the end secured to the thermostat were loose, cracked, and falling apart.

The tech had only worked on the furnace-side, tugging on those wires. Now we had our facts, we recommended changes to solve everyone’s problems: replace the wiring and the thermostat for good measure.

## At the risk of being bold, thank everyone

In fact, I find that including everyone often suppresses unreasonable behavior. You may need to take a frank aside with an authority figure to handle a sensitive issue. That's OK, as long as both parties return to the whole group with information appropriate to the group members' roles.

In closing each communication, thank the customer for the opportunity to help. Remember, there's still a chance to get back to a good working relationship.

Also, carbon-copy everyone involved in an issue. Why would you (or your customer) leave someone out? It raises political questions, which almost never contribute to solving the problem or returning to a good relationship.

As I mentioned above, if it wasn't written, it didn't happen, so confirm conversations with writing.

Are there new people to the conversation? Are there casual readers who need to be kept informed? Are there some people on either side working against the shared relationship?

For the truly deft, you can position your statements too. I find this handy when used sparingly in politically tough, long-term situations.

# Positioning a statement can help

Positioning helps frame the conversation for secondary readers, and forces the primary recipient to either declare their disagreement aloud or passively accept my assertions. I might say things like:

**As you know...**

**As promised...**

**At the risk of being bold...**

**Clearly you would agree that...**

This is hardball, and again I'd generally avoid manipulating people. But the tool is there if it serves the better interests of you and your customer.

# Is the Customer Always Right?

**Short answer, No.**

If there is little risk involved, and you want to appease a regular customer, you can let them dictate the terms of the condition. However many times that is not a wise business decision, and sometimes maybe be unsafe.

Imagine a customer saying they wanted you to stop working and they would finish the project themselves. If the only thing left was menial, this could be fine, but what if you had just rewired half their house, and they were just going to “finish up” themselves.  That would not be safe or wise.

## Shortcuts can hurt

Let's say that's true – the customer knows what's best for their family, not you. The customer has already been inconvenienced with the problem at hand.
Why waste their time when you could just do what they ask? They'll come back to you in the future, confident that if things don't go well then you'll take care of them.
Also, you'll quickly move on to serving more customers. And, the customer will spread the word about how you took care of them.

Sounds good, right?

In Buffalo we have a fine grocery store chain that appears to follow this axiom. Regardless of the problem, even if you just didn't like a product, they replace the item with something you like on-the-spot.

But not every problem is that simple. Does the customer really know the best way to solve the problem?

# Sometimes the Customer is Wrong, so Mind your T's & C's

You're the expert. You solve similar problems more often and in greater variety. The customer can easily overlook some of the facts. What if you've seen their suggested remedy fail for other customers before?

It is important you always take into account your company's Terms and Conditions. We have legal documents explaining the limits of our involvement, and they are designed for the most difficult situations. So use them.

You honor your customer when you are honest about the best solution. Let them make the decision theirs, and if they're not willing to go along, spell out the limits of what you can do. If you violate your terms and conditions, they cannot protect you later. So make sure every solution presented is within your company's Ts&Cs.

# So, when is the customer always right?

**“The customer is always right”** seems to work in simple situations, where facts can quickly be assessed, the cost to get the facts is much higher than the remedy, or the customer isn’t going to hurt themselves.

**“Propose a better idea”** seems to work best when facts are hard to assess well, the cost of facts is much lower than the remedy, or the customer could hurt themselves unintentionally.

The long term relationship is almost always worth more than the immediate issue, so choose the method that favors your relationship. And, remember to go back and improve your process after.

# Things I've learned along the way

We started with a disgruntled customer, you followed "LEAP", you've produced, and you've kept your customer informed and earned their approval for paths forward. We've talked about when "The customer is always right" benefits everyone, and when "Proposing a better solution" is worth the extra effort.

**What else have I learned along the way that could help you?**

**How do you handle unacceptable behavior from the one person you can't control, your customer?**

# Who's pulling the wool over who's eyes?

Some customers will behave differently depending on who they talk to.

For example, a customer may yell at your office staff or a field service tech, even though they work together daily. But when you call the customer on the phone, they acted as sweet as pie.

## What's really behind this?

*Is a noisy customer worth the extra cost to serve them?*

You may not know if the customer is difficult, or the situation was difficult with your first interaction. The underlying causes will probably be revealed after a few more interactions.

The customer may have been under pressure and they let loose on your staff member. If so, they'll probably apologize quickly to your staff member. But if you've met a narcissist, they may be manipulating you and your team.

# Unacceptable Behavior

As an aside, my office or field team member may not fire a customer.

However, they may recommend this to me, and I would do well to investigate. You may turn up a process problem on your side that irritates many; you'd want to keep that customer and more.

On the other hand, you could turn up an isolated customer who costs you too much to serve well. If they repeatedly hurl personal insults at your team and you permit it, you may lose your staff's team commitment. Only you can weigh the outcomes, but you owe your team the humility of listening to them.

You won't change your customer's personality, but you can coach your office and field teams not to give historically difficult customers **the privilege of spoiling their day.**

Remain polite, spell out what you can do, and escalate where you have to. Also, with customers expressing difficult attitudes, we may team several people to play different roles (e.g. good cop, bad cop; sales vs. service), which I've found is very effective.

# T&C's: Your Shield

Lay out exactly what your team can or cannot do on the phone or in conversations with customers. These boundaries can be laid out in your Terms and Conditions.

Where are the boundaries with unacceptable customer behavior when you're not around? If a customer personally insults a staff member or will not stop yelling, I ask my team to politely state that the conversation will continue at another time, and then to hang up.

This trains customers that difficult behavior just slows them down. You may need regularly scheduled meetings for your office and field staff to vent in-house, up stream, in a safe environment.

# Quick! Get evidence, facts are Insurance

Right after you get off the first tough call from a customer, write down your thoughts. Your facts start with "what's the problem?" Where do you go next to nail down a timeline? Your answer might be "ask my staff, ask my vendors, look for that drawing on the back-of-an-envelope…" That sounds like a heavy lift and memories fade. You may lose your nerve and the customer will grow even more impatient. If you have to ask the customer about your own work, even worse.

Put tools and processes in place beforehand, so you're always gathering facts on every job. Imagine how it would feel to get evidence from a few searches in your software to get proposals, work orders, visits, approvals, invoices, and payments! Show your customer who's on top by sharing facts with them politely as an advisor.

# Disclaimer

Everything in this book is meant to provide information. Any legal or financial opinions are just that… opinions. I am neither a lawyer nor an accountant. This is all based on many years of experience and a big part of experience is knowing that you should check your facts. So make sure you get out there and check those facts with a professional before you leap. In short, do your homework and don't blame me.

So that we're totally clear, I am in business too, so some of the sources referenced in this guide may be things that give me a direct financial benefit. Also, I do not assume responsibility or liability for any Third Party material or opinions and there is no warranty or guarantee from me on anything from a Third Party. It's in here because I believe in it.

Finally, reading any part of this guide means that you agree that both me and my company are not responsible for any decisions you make in your business or personal life.

# About the Author

## David Thiemecke

David launched 12 businesses since 1998 with the same group of close friends as partners. Among those startups were a variety of business models: a software development company, an inner-city youth soccer program, and a light manufacturer.

Today, David brings Pointman's message and products to home services contractors through partners, who profit when their mutual customers do better too.

# About Pointman

## What is Pointman?

Pointman is a SaaS company developing software for the field service industries. Pointman has been helping plumbing, HVAC, and electrical contractors grow their service businesses since 2006 with affordable and powerful field service management software. We've analyzed over a decade of our clients success to provide the industry with the optimal growth platform without unnecessary costs, or frills.

## Always Forward

We believe in moving forward and making progress.  We believe every contractor can succeed with the right tools, training, and ongoing support. We believe treating customers with friendliness and honesty, builds loyalty and long-lasting relationships. We believe contractors can, and should, focus their efforts on developing those relationships. That's how they will propel their business forward.

**We believe in you.**

# Handout 1

## Checklist: Who has touched this problem?

**Directions:** Gather information on who has knowledge of the incident (Technician, Dispatcher, Customer, etc.) Go through this checklist to make sure you have all the information you need to go on to make informed decisions.

**Phone**

- ☐ List all employees who have talked to this customer on the phone
- ☐ Gather all notes available for each call
- ☐ Check Smart Phones for Conversations (SMS or thorough Apps)

**Documents between You and Customer**

- ☐ Gather all proposals presented
- ☐ Gather all SIGNED documents
- ☐ Find any relevant warranty information
- ☐ Check bank deposits and credit card statements for payments or refunds

**Internal Documents**

- ☐ Gather invoices/shipping/purchase orders on all parts
- ☐ Gather job history documentation
- ☐ Print out any emails with the customer

**Visits**

- ☐ List all employees who have visited this customer's home
- ☐ What was their initial assessment? - Gather any pictures or notes
- ☐ What was their assessment upon "conclusion"? - Gather any pictures or notes

**Other Places to Look**

- ☐ Check the trucks
- ☐ The back of the shop
- ☐ Check for reviews on social media/review platforms
- ☐
- ☐

# Handout 2

## Timeline of The Problem

**Directions:** Use the Checklist you created to develop a timeline of what happened. Try to only include facts here. That can be exact quotes from conversations, proposals, or anything else that helps lay out the story. Don't include feelings here, just the cold hard facts. This exercise should help identify when the problem escalated, and should inform on how to go forward.

**First Contact / Phone Call**
Date, Time, Who was Involved

**All Info Gathered / Scheduled**

**Parts Ordered**

**Technician Dispatched for Visit**

**etc...**

**First Conversation About the Problem**

**First Resolution Suggestion**

## What is the life-cycle of a job?

# Handout 3

## Time to Figure It All Out

**Directions:** Use the Checklist and timeline to start to reflect on the deeper aspects of the problem. Here is where you start taking perceptions and emotions into account. This process is a bit like putting on a pair of pants, there are 2 steps. First, solve the problem. Second, make sure it doesn't happen again. You can't do them at the same time, or they will both fail (usually). So as you go through these to sets of questions, know that they can (and should) be done at 2 different times.

### Solve the Problem Now

Look at each bullet on your timeline.

1. Where did the breakdown occur?
    - If it isn't clear, go through each point and write down "Our Expectation" and "Their Expectation" and find where did we deviate?

    Note: You might have several possible scenarios that could have happened. Work to rule out any that don't match the evidence you have.

2. Why do you think this happened?

3. Did the problem ever escalate between your company and your customer?
    - If so, how?

4. How should my team (or I) have acted?

5. What did the customer want before the problem happened?

6. What does the customer believe now?

7. What does the customer want now?

8. What do you / your team want now?

9. What does the customer need to know?

10. Is there a compromise?
    Note: A compromise is not about splitting the baby in half. It's about finding where you agree, where you disagree, and making everyone whole.
    - If you can compromise, set out how far you're willing to go to make up for any mistakes before beginning a conversation with the customer
    - If not, find out how to explain to the customer why they can't get what they think they deserve.

## Prevent This Problem Again

1. You found where the initial breakdown happened. Define what caused this issue, it may be more than one issue. (ex. communication, policies, tone of voice, scheduling error, faulty equipment)

2. Find out different ways others have solved this problem. (You can't be the first one this happened to, ask coaches or alliances if you are members)

3. Get your team together to brainstorm. These types of problems usually take at least two people to find a good solution. Define a new policy that will help resolve this issue.

4. Adjust your process documentation, so as new members come in they know how to properly run the business.

5. Meet with key leaders of your company to explain the solution, and the new policy going forward.

6. If the relationship with your customer is still being worked on as this new policy goes into place, you can show them steps have been taken so this will not happen again.