Putting Customers Before Politics and Building an Integrated Customer Operations Model

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Introduction

The Chief Operating Officer faced a problem that initially appeared technological but was fundamentally organizational. Sales orders repeatedly contained incorrect customer information, unsuitable products, incomplete service details, and inaccurate item specifications. These mistakes frustrated customers, increased the amount of rework required from employees, delayed order fulfillment, and weakened confidence in the company.

The organization attempted to solve the problem by investing in technology. However, the new tools failed to produce the expected results because employees continued following inconsistent processes. Departments collected information differently, interpreted policies according to their own priorities, and transferred incomplete orders to other teams. Instead of designing one reliable process around the customer, the company attempted to automate several conflicting ways of working.

This situation illustrates why organizations must put customers before internal politics. The expression does not mean that legal requirements, financial controls, technical limitations, or departmental expertise should be ignored. Rather, it means that decisions should be evaluated according to their contribution to customer value and the organization’s long-term performance, instead of being controlled by departmental competition, personal influence, or the desire to protect existing practices.

Customer centricity requires more than a friendly attitude toward buyers. Shah et al. (2006) argue that becoming customer-centered requires leadership commitment, organizational realignment, supportive processes and systems, and performance measures that reward customer value. Technology is important within this model, but it should support a clearly designed operating process rather than determine how the organization treats its customers.

This essay argues that the company should replace its technology-first response with an integrated customer operations model. Such a model requires an end-to-end view of the sales process, cross-functional stakeholder involvement, evidence-based customer personas, realistic service scenarios, explicit process ownership, value-based prioritization, aligned technology, and a structured approach to organizational change.

This approach is explored further in a. customer-centric operating model.

The Customer Problem Behind the Sales Errors

The reported mistakes should not be viewed as isolated employee failures. When the same types of errors appear repeatedly, they usually indicate weaknesses in the system through which work is performed.

A salesperson may enter incorrect customer information because mandatory data fields are unclear. An operations employee may provide the wrong service because product definitions differ across systems. A finance team may reject an order because pricing rules were not communicated to sales. The legal department may request changes after the customer has already approved the transaction. In each case, an employee may appear responsible for the immediate error, but the wider problem involves fragmented procedures, ownership, and information.

The company's difficulty can be understood as an end-to-end process failure. A customer does not experience the organization as separate departments. The customer experiences one relationship that may include advertising, an initial inquiry, a sales conversation, contract approval, payment, delivery, customer support, and renewal. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) explain that customers interact with organizations through numerous touchpoints and that delivering a positive experience requires coordination among several business functions and external partners.

As the authors observe, "understanding customer experience and the customer journey over time is critical for firms" (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 69). The quotation is especially relevant because the company's errors cannot be corrected by concentrating only on the moment when a salesperson enters an order. Management must examine the complete journey through which customer expectations are created, translated into internal requirements, fulfilled, and evaluated.

Why the Technology-First Solution Failed

Technology can automate data entry, validate required fields, improve reporting, and reduce repetitive work. Nevertheless, automation does not automatically create a good process. When an organization digitizes a poorly defined process, it may simply produce mistakes more quickly and on a larger scale.

The company's technology initiative failed because the business had not agreed on a standard way of working. Different departments maintained their own definitions, approval rules, customer records, and performance priorities. The system was therefore expected to reconcile disagreements that management had not resolved.

For example, sales may have prioritized rapid order submission because employees were rewarded

for closing transactions. Finance may have prioritized payment security and margin. Operations may have focused on delivery capacity, while legal personnel concentrated on contractual risk. Each priority was reasonable within its own department, but the organization had not established a shared mechanism for balancing them.

Information technology and business processes must be aligned dynamically. Research on IT–business alignment emphasizes that technology creates value when technological decisions are connected with organizational strategy, process requirements, leadership, and changing business conditions.

The correct sequence is therefore:

1. Understand what customers require.
2. Map the existing end-to-end process.
3. identify recurring failure points.
4. Define the desired process and decision rules.
5. Assign clear accountability.
6. Configure technology to support the redesigned process.
7. Train employees and monitor adoption.

Beginning with software selection reverses this sequence. It encourages departments to debate technical features before they have agreed on the problem they are attempting to solve.

Putting Customers Before Internal Politics

Organizational politics arises when individuals or departments use influence, information, relationships, or authority to protect preferred outcomes. Politics is not always dishonest. Departments may genuinely disagree because they have different professional obligations. Legal personnel must consider regulatory exposure, finance must protect profitability, and operations must avoid promising services that cannot be delivered.

The problem occurs when departmental interests become more important than the organization's shared purpose. A manager may oppose a process change because it reduces departmental control. Another may hide performance problems to protect a budget. Teams may blame one another rather than investigate how the complete process is failing.

Putting customers before politics creates an external reference point for resolving these disagreements. Instead of asking which department should win, leaders ask which option delivers the greatest sustainable value while satisfying legal, ethical, financial, and operational requirements.

Customer centricity does not mean agreeing to every customer request. Some requests may be unsafe, unlawful, unprofitable, or inconsistent with the company's strategy. A customer-centered

organization understands customer needs, makes deliberate promises, communicates limitations honestly, and fulfills approved commitments reliably.

Shah et al. (2006) identify several barriers to customer centricity, including organizational culture, functional structures, processes, financial measures, and information systems. They conclude that the path toward customer centricity requires coordinated changes rather than an isolated marketing initiative.

The company should therefore define a shared purpose such as:

To deliver accurate, appropriate, and timely customer solutions through one accountable end-to-end process.

This purpose should guide decisions concerning procedures, systems, staffing, performance measures, and departmental responsibilities.

Developing an End-to-End Customer Operations Process

The company should map the full sales order process from the customer's first contact through delivery, invoicing, support, and renewal. This process may be called lead-to-order, order-to-cash, or customer-to-fulfillment, depending on the organization's terminology.

A traditional functional structure divides work according to departments. Sales completes its task and passes the order to operations. Operations passes information to finance, legal, logistics, and support. Every transfer creates the possibility that data will be lost, misunderstood, duplicated, or delayed.

End-to-end process management treats the entire sequence as one connected system. Hammer (2007) argues that strong organizational processes require appropriate design, capable performers, clear ownership, supporting infrastructure, and reliable performance measures.

The organization should appoint a senior process owner with authority to oversee the complete sales order journey. This person should not replace functional managers. Instead, the process owner should ensure that all departments contribute to the shared outcome.

Responsibilities would include:

- defining process standards;
- resolving cross-departmental disagreements;
- approving changes to customer data requirements;
- monitoring errors and delays;
- coordinating training;

- reviewing technology requests;
- and leading continuous improvement.

Current-State Process Mapping

Before proposing a new process, the COO should document how work actually occurs. The current-state map should not reflect the official procedure alone. It should show the practical steps employees take, including informal spreadsheets, emails, manual approvals, repeated data entry, and workarounds.

Employees from each function should describe:

- what information they receive;
- what information is missing;
- which decisions they make;
- which systems they use;
- where they wait for approval;
- which errors frequently occur; and
- how they correct those errors.

Customer complaints, order corrections, billing disputes, returns, delivery failures, and service tickets should be connected to specific process stages.

The mapping exercise should distinguish among:

- value-creating activities;
- necessary control activities;
- avoidable duplication;
- delay;
- rework;
- and activities that exist only because departments do not trust one another’s information.

This analysis creates the factual foundation needed to redesign the process.

Developing Customer Personas

Customer personas are evidence-based representations of important customer groups. A persona may include goals, behaviors, decision criteria, preferred communication methods, technical confidence, risks, frustrations, and service expectations.

Bradley et al. (2021) observe that “a persona is a tool for designing human-centred services and systems, using the qualitative and quantitative data collected about users to construct archetypes.”

This quotation emphasizes that personas should be based on research rather than stereotypes.

The company could develop personas such as:

- a small-business owner who needs rapid service and simple product explanations;
- a corporate procurement manager who requires detailed specifications, compliance documents, and predictable approval;
- a long-term customer who values continuity and expects the company to remember previous purchases;
- a new customer with limited product knowledge;
- and a technically experienced customer who requires advanced customization.

Data sources should include interviews, complaint records, purchase patterns, service histories, website behavior, support calls, and input from employees who interact directly with customers.

A persona is not a complete description of every individual customer. It helps teams discuss common needs without assuming that all customers are identical. Personas should be reviewed regularly and revised when evidence changes.

Creating Service Scenarios

Scenarios describe realistic situations in which customers interact with the organization. Each scenario should identify the customer's goal, the sequence of touchpoints, the information needed, the employees involved, likely failure points, and the expected outcome.

Examples include:

- a customer requesting a standard product with routine delivery;
- a customer needing a customized technical solution;
- an urgent order requiring expedited approval;
- a customer changing specifications after an order has begun;
- a pricing exception;
- a customer returning an unsuitable product;
- and a renewal involving products purchased through several departments.

Scenarios can be tested against the current process. If departments disagree on how a scenario should be handled, the process is not yet sufficiently defined.

The organization should develop both normal and exception scenarios. Designing only for standard transactions creates confusion when unusual but predictable cases arise. Exceptions should not depend solely on personal relationships or political influence. They should follow clear rules, decision rights, and documentation requirements.

Cross-Functional Stakeholder Involvement

A customer-centered transformation must include representatives from all functions that influence the customer journey.

Sales

Sales employees understand customer requirements and the practical difficulties of gathering complete information during commercial discussions. They should help define realistic data requirements and identify where policies interfere with legitimate customer needs.

Operations

Operations employees know whether promised products and services can be delivered. They should identify capacity limitations, implementation requirements, lead times, and recurring causes of rework.

Finance

Finance personnel should provide pricing controls, credit requirements, profitability analysis, tax rules, and billing standards. Their involvement prevents the organization from promising transactions that create unacceptable financial risk.

Legal and Compliance

Legal personnel should identify contractual, regulatory, privacy, and liability requirements. They should also help simplify language and create standard terms rather than reviewing every transaction from the beginning.

Marketing

Marketing should align external messages with operational reality. Advertising and campaigns should not promise experiences that sales and operations cannot consistently deliver.

Audit and Quality

Audit and quality functions should test process controls, verify data integrity, and examine whether failures are being reported accurately. They should support learning rather than merely assigning

blame.

Information Technology

IT should translate approved process requirements into usable systems, integrations, data controls, and reports. IT should not be expected to decide business policy without functional ownership.

Customer-Facing Employees

Customer support, account management, and service employees often understand problems that senior managers cannot see. Their participation is essential.

Research on information-system implementation has repeatedly shown that user participation should be understood in relation to organizational context, power, responsibility, and the practical consequences of the new system (Markus & Mao, 2004).

Governance and Decision Rights

The transformation requires a cross-functional governance council led by the process owner. The council should have authority to approve standards, prioritize improvements, resolve cross-departmental disputes, and review performance.

Decision rights should be explicit. For example:

- Sales may own the accuracy of customer requirements.
- Operations may approve service feasibility.
- Finance may approve pricing and credit exceptions.
- Legal may approve nonstandard contractual terms.
- IT may approve technical architecture and security controls.
- The end-to-end process owner may resolve disputes that affect overall customer value.

A responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed matrix can be used, but it should not become a substitute for judgment. The central question is whether every important decision has one clearly accountable owner.

Prioritizing Requirements

The organization is unlikely to implement every requested improvement immediately. Requirements should therefore be prioritized according to transparent criteria.

A useful evaluation model includes:

- customer impact;
- frequency of the problem;
- financial value;
- legal and safety risk;
- strategic alignment;
- implementation effort;
- technical dependency;
- employee impact; and
- measurability.

Items associated with incorrect products, regulatory violations, or major customer harm should receive urgent attention. Low-frequency cosmetic requests may be deferred.

Prioritization should use shared evidence rather than the status of the department making the request. A requirement should not become important merely because a senior manager supports it. This approach reduces the effect of internal politics.

The MoSCoW method may help classify requirements as must have, should have, could have, and will not have at present. However, the classifications should be linked to the evaluation criteria above.

Redesigning the Future-State Process

The future-state process should simplify work, standardize essential information, and create controlled flexibility.

Potential improvements include:

- a single customer record;
- standard definitions for products and services;
- mandatory fields based on transaction type;
- early checks for feasibility and credit;
- approved pricing and discount rules;
- standard contract templates;
- automated routing for routine approvals;
- clear escalation procedures for exceptions;
- and real-time visibility of order status.

Controls should be placed as early as possible. Discovering an unsuitable product before the customer signs an agreement is less expensive than correcting it after delivery.

The future-state design should also reduce the number of handoffs. Where possible, one role or

coordinated team should manage the transaction across several stages. Customers should not be required to repeat the same information to multiple departments.

Change Management

The transformation will alter responsibilities, performance expectations, systems, and departmental influence. Resistance should therefore be expected.

Kotter (1996) argues that successful organizational change requires a sense of urgency, a guiding coalition, a clear vision, communication, empowerment, short-term wins, consolidation, and institutionalization. Later research confirms that change success depends on leadership, communication, participation, readiness, training, culture, and reinforcement (Errida & Lotfi, 2021).

The COO should explain why the current process is unacceptable using evidence such as error rates, complaints, delays, and rework costs. Employees should understand how the new model will improve their work as well as the customer experience.

Managers must also examine incentives. If sales representatives are rewarded only for order volume, they may continue submitting incomplete or unsuitable transactions. If operations is rewarded only for cost reduction, the department may resist necessary customization. Shared measures are required.

Training should be role-specific and scenario-based. Employees should practice entering orders, handling exceptions, correcting data, communicating with customers, and escalating concerns.

Pilot programs can produce short-term wins. A selected product line or region can test the redesigned process before full implementation. Lessons from the pilot should be used to improve the model.

Performance Measurement

The organization should measure both customer and operational outcomes.

Customer measures may include:

- customer effort;
- complaint rate;
- first-contact resolution;
- order accuracy;
- on-time delivery;
- retention;
- and satisfaction with important journey stages.

Operational measures may include:

- first-time-right orders;
- rework hours;
- approval cycle time;
- billing corrections;
- return rate;
- cost per order;
- exception frequency;
- and employee adoption.

The company should avoid relying on a single customer score. Aggregate satisfaction may conceal serious problems in particular segments or stages.

Measures should be used for learning rather than punishment alone. If employees hide errors because reporting lowers their performance rating, the organization will lose the information needed for improvement.

A balanced scorecard can connect customer, process, employee, and financial outcomes. For example, reducing rework should improve employee capacity, shorten fulfillment time, reduce cost, and increase customer trust. These connected effects should be measured.

Technology as an Enabler

Once the organization has defined its desired process, technology can provide significant support. Appropriate capabilities may include:

- one reliable customer record;
- standardized product and service information;
- automated validation of required fields;
- workflow-based approvals;
- pricing and discount controls;
- contract templates;
- integration among sales, finance, operations, and support systems;
- real-time order status;
- exception alerts;
- audit trails; and
- performance dashboards.

Technology should reduce unnecessary effort without removing appropriate human judgment. A system can prevent submission when a required field is missing, but a trained employee may still need to determine whether a proposed service genuinely fits the customer’s circumstances.

The organization should test new tools with actual users before full implementation. Pilot testing can reveal confusing fields, unrealistic workflow assumptions, and unintended workload increases. Employees who will perform the process should participate in testing, training, and post-implementation review.

The company should also avoid assuming that every failure requires a new application. Some problems can be corrected by simplifying a policy, clarifying decision rights, removing duplicate approval, or improving employee knowledge. Technology investment should be justified by the value it adds to the redesigned process.

A Practical Transformation Roadmap

The COO can organize the transformation into the following stages:

Stage	Principal activity	Main output
Diagnose	Analyze complaints, errors, delays, data, and employee observations.	Evidence-based problem statement
Map	Document the current customer journey and internal process.	Current-state map
Govern	Appoint a process owner and cross-functional council.	Clear accountability
Understand	Develop evidence-based personas and scenarios	Defined customer needs
Redesign	Remove duplication, clarify rules, and standardize essential steps.	Future-state process
Prioritize	Compare requirements by value, risk, effort, and strategy.	Approved improvement portfolio
Enable	Configure appropriate technology and data controls	Supporting systems
Prepare	Train employees, update incentives, and communicate changes.	Organizational readiness

Stage	Principal activity	Main output
Pilot	Test the new process with selected teams or customers.	Validated improvements
Scale	Extend successful practices across the organization	Enterprise adoption
Sustain	Monitor performance and continue improvement	Lasting customer-centered culture

The roadmap should not be treated as completely linear. Testing may reveal the need to revise personas, requirements, or process steps. Continuous learning is part of the transformation.

Expected Organizational Benefits

An integrated customer operations model should reduce incorrect orders, duplicated work, approval delays, billing disputes, service failures, and customer complaints. Employees should spend less time correcting avoidable mistakes and more time delivering useful services.

The organization may also experience improved customer retention and trust. Customer experience management research emphasizes that customer value is created through coordinated cultural mindsets, strategic direction, and organizational capabilities, not through a single campaign or department (Homburg et al., 2017).

Clear process ownership can improve accountability because problems are no longer abandoned at departmental boundaries. Shared metrics can reduce blame by giving teams one view of performance.

Stakeholder participation can also increase commitment. Employees are more likely to support a new process when they understand its purpose, have influenced its design, and believe that management has considered its practical effects.

Nevertheless, improvement should not be assumed. The company must measure actual outcomes. A transformation that creates attractive journey maps and new software but does not improve accuracy, timeliness, customer effort, or employee adoption has not succeeded.

Risks and Limitations

Customer-centered transformation carries its own risks. Excessive standardization may make it difficult to respond to unusual but legitimate customer needs. Leaders should standardize routine work while providing controlled procedures for exceptions.

Customer personas may become stereotypes if they are based on assumptions rather than research. Journey maps may oversimplify complex relationships. Cross-functional committees may create additional meetings without clear decisions. Technology may introduce privacy, cybersecurity, or dependency risks.

There is also a danger that “putting customers first” could be used to pressure employees into accepting unreasonable workloads or inappropriate customer behavior. Sustainable customer value depends on trained, respected, and adequately supported employees. The organization should not promise experiences that its workforce cannot deliver safely and consistently.

Internal politics cannot be removed entirely because organizations naturally contain different interests. The aim is to manage those interests through transparent governance, shared evidence, and agreed decision criteria.

Conclusion

The company’s sales errors were not primarily caused by inadequate technology. They resulted from fragmented processes, inconsistent information, unclear ownership, conflicting incentives, and weak coordination among departments. The unsuccessful technology initiative treated the symptoms while leaving the operating system of the business unchanged.

Putting customers before politics requires the organization to view sales, delivery, billing, service, and support as one connected customer journey. Sales, operations, legal, finance, marketing, audit, and IT must contribute their expertise without allowing functional priorities to overwhelm the shared outcome.

Personas and scenarios can help the company understand who its customers are, what they are trying to achieve, and where the existing process creates difficulty. These tools should be based on evidence and connected to an end-to-end process map.

Requirements should be prioritized according to customer impact, risk, value, cost, and feasibility. This approach replaces political influence with transparent decision criteria. A process owner and cross-functional governance council should then maintain accountability across departmental boundaries.

Technology remains essential, but it must be introduced after the business has defined a consistent

and valuable process. The correct role of technology is to standardize data, automate appropriate controls, connect functions, and provide visibility. It cannot independently resolve disagreements about policy, ownership, or customer value.

Finally, lasting transformation requires effective change management. Stakeholders should be involved early, employees should receive practical support, leaders should communicate honestly, and progress should be reinforced through shared performance measures.

A customer-centered culture is created when departments stop asking how to protect their individual procedures and begin asking how they can collectively fulfill the organization's promises. By placing customer value ahead of internal competition, the COO can reduce errors, improve productivity, control costs, rebuild trust, and create a more resilient organization.

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