

Guide Dogs NSW ACT

Customer listening to drive culture and performance

Context

At Insync, we help purpose-driven organisations listen to their customers and employees to improve service quality and performance. We partnered with Guide Dogs NSW/ACT (GDN) to support their evolution towards a more structured and meaningful client feedback approach.

GDN is the leading provider of Guide Dogs and vision rehabilitation services, enabling people with low vision or blindness to choose the lives they wish to live. Each year, GDN work with over 4,000 people of all ages to help them achieve their goals.

GDN's guiding principle is: **“Our clients come first in everything we do.”**

To this end, understanding and responding to the customer's voice is imperative. In more recent years, their approach to customer listening has evolved from an internally run exit survey to a more comprehensive program facilitated externally and focused on capturing everyone's voice at key points in time.

As an organisation determined to deliver the best customer service possible, GDN is an exemplar of embracing customer listening and using it to drive continuous improvement. GDN has distilled the key ingredients to an effective listening program and uses customer feedback to enhance organisational culture and performance.

Overcoming barriers to feedback

A few years back, there was a concern that GDN customers weren't being forthcoming with complaints, that feedback was implied rather than explicit, and that they were missing important opportunities to understand and improve customer pain points. By refining data collection methods and maintaining a more neutral feedback process (providing third-party provider options), GDN has more confidence that customers feel comfortable being open about their experience and are more willing to provide constructive feedback.



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Use multiple avenues and methods to gather feedback

To truly understand its customers, GDN uses multiple channels to receive customer feedback, including structured surveys, routine clinical conversations, and anonymous submissions. Large-scale research initiatives, such as consultant-led focus groups, have also helped identify unmet needs and optimise services. Flexibility is always key, offering various options to capture the maximum amount of feedback. No matter how the feedback is received, there are processes and practices in place to respond to the feedback and ensure a consistent approach and action.

“We want to be as flexible as possible for clients to give us the feedback... it can be in-person, in writing, or to another person. We build a picture from every input to see whether the feedback is consistent across all the channels where we’re gathering data from our clients.”

Embedding a culture of feedback

It’s crucial to the success of the feedback program and organisational culture in general to foster an environment where all feedback, positive and negative, is seen as a gift and a learning opportunity. At GDN, the CEO encourages employees to speak up without fear and view mistakes and criticisms as opportunities to learn and improve. Leadership at all levels demonstrates this message clearly. Education around receiving feedback and aligning messaging to company values (encouraging curiosity, exploration, and not fearing failure) also forms an integral part of GDN's growth mindset.

“There is a real focus on seeing feedback as a gift to learn from and to make things better. Culturally, now there is less fear of saying when things haven’t gone right because it’s seen as an opportunity to grow, rather than an opportunity to be punished.”

Defining and demonstrating success

GDN worked directly with the Client Services Team to explore and describe what the customer journey looks like: what customers want, what they expect and how they want to feel. These powerful conversations led to the creation of Practice Standards, which outline the tangible and visible behaviours that shape a positive customer experience at GDN. The Client Services Team has embedded these Principles and Standards (nine categories in total) within their operations. Customer-facing staff are held accountable for these standards through supervision and observations. This is a significant investment for the organisation, yet it plays a vital role in upholding standards of behaviour and high-quality services.

“Our cultural values set the scene organisationally. We’ve also done a lot of work with our clients to understand how they want to receive services. The resulting practice standards build on top of the values to define how GDN customer service should be demonstrated.”

Prioritising the employee experience

At GDN, there is a substantial investment in workplace culture to ensure an exceptional employee experience and a clear commitment to caring for and developing their people. These practices are evident from recruitment and onboarding practices all the way through to celebrating the tenures of many long-serving staff. When new service delivery employees start, they undertake an intense six-week onboarding plan (which includes understanding the Practice Standards), followed by a 12-month training plan (which includes having technical competencies witnessed). The company maps out learning pathways, knowledge and practical competencies, and upskilling opportunities, providing a clear outline of the expected trajectory to competent service delivery at GDN.

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Prioritising the employee experience

For all intents and purposes, service delivery staff represent the GDN brand. This highlights the importance of their role in maintaining the organisation's positive brand sentiment and the crucial link between positive employee and customer experiences.

“If our staff aren’t looked after, they can’t be expected to look after our clients, from a professional development perspective but also a culture perspective. For example, one of my top priorities in the evaluation of office sites is staff amenities. If employees are happy, they’re going to be productive. And if they’re happy and productive, they’re going to be delivering a great service to our clients”.

Monitoring and measuring impact

GDN's Service Quality Framework maps out what it looks like to deliver safe and effective services and overall positive customer experiences. These service delivery expectations align directly with questions asked in GDN's ongoing Net Promotor Score (NPS) survey, providing clear metrics for the extent to which GDN is achieving its service delivery goals. The Practice Governance Team monitors the NPS survey results, checks for any changes, and delves into detailed feedback as needed. These metrics are also regularly reported at the executive team and board meetings, providing oversight of performance.

“If you set standards, you need to check that they’re being met”.

Embedding customer feedback in decision-making

Every few years, GDN reviews its service offerings based on customer feedback to ensure they’re fit for purpose. This extensive exercise involves external consultants who help gather insights directly from customers about the services they need. Recently, over 400 GDN clients (via an online survey and multiple focus groups) had their say.

This information is highly valued by the GDN Executive Team, as well as the Board, to help inform and support decision-making and guide service delivery changes and enhancements. Customer feedback is also often used to support decision-making in operations. For example, suppose the NPS is consistently lower in a particular service area, and its long response times are driving this. In that case, customer feedback plays a crucial role in highlighting the need for increased staffing levels.

“[In conducting the client focus groups] We left services out of the picture and we talked about, what are your needs? Forget what we do and don’t do; just tell us - because of your low vision or blindness, what are the barriers you’re facing to living a full and inclusive life? Our clients were very pleased with the offer to be involved and to give feedback in such an extensive way.”

Balancing quality with operational demands

Maintaining high service quality while managing operational constraints is a delicate balance, especially in a not-for-profit setting. The Client Services Leadership Team plays a crucial role in aligning efficiency with client outcomes, ensuring there is a clear and compelling narrative for service delivery staff. Managing the delicate balance involves some level of compromise and ongoing discussions anchored in the organisation's shared vision and goals.

“There’s always tension when there’s operational demands. We want to get through a quantity of work, but then we want to do that to a particular standard of quality, and that quality takes time. It’s no good delivering a brilliant service to one person, and it’s no good delivering a crappy service to 10,000 people. That bit of tension sits with the services leaders.”



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Celebrating success and continuous improvement

Celebrating successes along the way is vital in reiterating GDN's customer-centric culture. The service delivery team celebrates each client, acknowledging their personal goal achievements. This celebration brings personal satisfaction to the individual practitioner working with the clients and also provides an opportunity for the broader team to celebrate and recognise each other. This celebration is also elevated, with regular reporting at a team level on how many clients have reached their goal achievements. It is also supported by sharing individual stories and reflections across the organisation, aligning client outcomes with GDN's mission and purpose. The General Manager of Client Services regularly travels around to the regional teams and will provide an update on customer feedback, celebrating great results and what's working well and sharing opportunities for growth.

"We celebrate every client saying they've reached their goal achievements – practitioners get that personal joy from being able to say, we were a part of that. Then it's about how we elevate that."

Lessons for other organisations

GDN has always embedded and focused on what the client wants and then built the program and services around this. GDN exemplifies true customer-centricity. If we are to summarise how you can embed a customer-centric culture, make sure to:

- ✓ Define and communicate a clear vision of success
- ✓ Regularly seek customer feedback and be prepared to act on it
- ✓ View complaints as a gift and opportunity for growth
- ✓ Maintain humility and openness to change at all leadership levels
- ✓ Foster a continuous improvement mindset throughout the organisation

Guide Dogs NSW/ACT shows how listening to customers can improve both culture and performance. By removing barriers to feedback, acting on what clients say, and supporting staff to deliver high-quality services, they've built a strong, client-focused organisation. Their approach is a practical example for others looking to embed customer feedback into everyday decision-making and service delivery.

