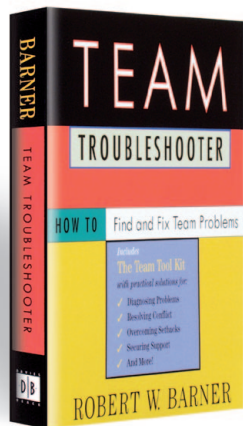




# Executive Book Summaries®



By Robert W. Barner

## How to Find and Fix Team Problems

# TEAM TROUBLESHOOTER

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

There is no denying that organizations are becoming increasingly team-oriented in their approaches to doing business and managing their customer relationships. Accomplishing this, of course, is easier said than done; sometimes teams hit roadblocks that can sabotage their success.

In this summary, Robert W. Barner lays out some of the most common pitfalls for teams, such as conflicts between team members and the team leader, poor relationships between corporate teams and customers, and the inability of a team to anticipate problems.

Specifically, Barner offers the symptoms and then the treatments to help your team overcome challenges in four key areas:

✓ **Improving internal relationships.** Wherever two or more team members are gathered, there's bound to be conflict at some juncture. You must keep minor conflicts within the team from escalating into major ones and proactively address and resolve inevitable leader-member conflict before turning your attention outward.

✓ **Strengthening team focus.** It is important for your team to be able to anticipate challenges and to distinguish changes that threaten the team from those that provide opportunities for growth. It is also important to find and maintain a clear sense of direction, minimize change anxiety and establish focused priorities.

✓ **Dealing with the challenges of change.** Teams that respond to changes with flexibility will be better equipped to face the future than those that are too brittle to be effective. Keeping your team flexible is a major challenge, to be addressed with coordination and innovation.

✓ **Mending external relationships.** Without external partners, such as senior managers and customers, teams would have no reason for being. Yet, among the most contentious of relationships your team will have will be with those two groups. Differences must be addressed and fences mended before too much damage is done.

Are you ready to do some team troubleshooting? Turn the page and get started ...



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# TEAM TROUBLESHOOTER

by Robert W. Barner

## — THE COMPLETE SUMMARY

### PART I: IMPROVING INTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

## Recognize Problems Within Your Team

It would certainly be a lot easier if we could lead teams as though they were some kind of logical, predictable machine. Unfortunately, that's not the way things work; teams are composed of people — unpredictable, contradictory, sometimes uncooperative people. Pressures to succeed in the team environment are many, and they come from outside the team (in the form of deadlines, productivity standards, etc.) as well as from within (in the form of burnout or the simple inability to forge a common approach to a task or project).

The question you must consider is not whether the members of your team sometimes find themselves enmeshed in conflict; at times, all teams experience internal conflicts. The true question is whether these conflicts are so pervasive and damaging that they could pose a serious obstacle to your team's long-term success.

### *Signs of Trouble*

As team leader, you must not allow yourself to think the burden of resolving conflicts rests solely on your shoulders. In doing this, you are placing yourself in a patronizing, parental position that encourages your team members to abdicate personal responsibility for resolving conflicts — and denies them the chance to develop necessary skills to do otherwise. Your team must learn to detect and avoid potential conflicts and successfully manage those that cannot be prevented.

Some symptoms to look for are:

● **Rapid escalation of minor conflicts.** If relatively small, one-on-one disagreements swiftly expand to engulf other team members, the team leader or senior management, your team has a serious problem that demands prompt attention.

● **Self-imposed isolation.** Some team members may choose isolation in order to remove themselves from conflict situations, causing communication disconnects, work bottlenecks and turf wars.

● **Breakdowns in communication and personal relationships.** When there is little or no quality communication between team members, work processes are interrupted and people tend to look out for their own

interests only, as opposed to their team's.

● **Use of intimidation.** Instead of refusing to engage one another, some team members may try to force co-workers to give into their demands by using arguments, veiled threats or other forms of intimidation. These tactics will often result in what looks like agreement, but which ultimately can lead to manipulation or withdrawal of support.

● **Formation of cliques.** Some team members may form alliances with other, strategically positioned co-workers, in order to out-manuever or overpower opponents, or to isolate them from the rest of the team.

### *Treating Team Conflicts*

While it is certainly true that teams can expect to, at some point, encounter issues that are potential sources of conflict, the things you do to promptly control the situation can make the difference in how the conflict is ultimately resolved, and how much productivity is sacrificed in the process. Consider these methods for treating team conflict:

**1. Develop and model guidelines.** Set the tone for preventing and resolving conflicts by laying down ground rules for your team members to follow. Some of those ground rules may include the following:

- **No personal attacks.**
- **No heated outbursts.**
- **No backbiting.**
- **Never assume hostile intent.**

Once you and your team have formulated guidelines, model them for the rest of the team, to show that you take the guidelines seriously.

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### Recognize Problems Within Your Team

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**2. Identify areas of possible conflict.** Map out locations of “organizational quicksand” — issues and areas within your team’s objectives and projects where problems are most likely to occur. Once you’ve identified those areas, invite your team to discuss ways of addressing them.

**3. Act immediately to control conflict.** When conflicts arise, make an effort to contain them before they spread beyond your control by: reminding team members about the guidelines they developed; meeting with team members involved in conflicts to make sure they’re trying to address the issue; and cautioning team members against inflammatory e-mail or voice mail.

**4. Recognize agreement as it occurs.** Each time your team reaches agreement on a point, summarize it verbally; it’s easy for team members in the heat of discussion to forget points on which they’ve already agreed upon.

**5. Perform periodic check-ins.** When facilitating a conflict, stop periodically to determine how the team members think the resolution is progressing, and whether they feel their views are being heard. ■

### Managing the Virtual Team

While we still tend to think of teams as groups of people occupying the same time and space, factors indigenous to modern business are increasingly causing teams to be constituted at least partially by virtual members — those who communicate via computer, fax, phone and other means, rather than being physically present with the team. Unfortunately, not all work professionals make an easy transition to the unique demands of virtual teams.

#### Signs of Trouble

If you’re leading or participating in a virtual team, the following symptoms may indicate that your work group is experiencing transition trouble:

● **Communication problems.** Virtual teams that have not yet developed solid communication methods often find their decision-making process spotty, sometimes to the point in which they feel the need to go outside the group to get information on the group’s internal activities. When this happens, your team is definitely moving toward a chaotic state.

● **Ineffective coordination of internal and external activities.** If effective check-and-control mechanisms are not built into a team’s planning process, it is easy for virtual team members to unknowingly duplicate one another’s actions, allow tasks to fall through the cracks, or grind to a halt because they don’t know how far they can stray from the group’s plans without problems

### Use All Electronic Tools Available

Many team leaders are unfamiliar with electronic tools that can help them manage virtual teams. For example, many e-mail systems feature an electronic prompt that automatically notifies team members of important dates, such as the date of an executive debriefing. Another tool: an electronic whiteboard that displays written information at both ends of a videoconference.

occurring.

● **Lack of core identity.** Virtual teams that are also cross-functional sometimes have difficulty defining who constitutes the actual team. In these situations, multiple management layers typically feed into the team’s decision-making process, leaving members confused about who reports what to whom. This renders them unable to establish the types of solidarity-building boundaries that build and maintain a team’s identity.

#### Overcoming Challenges of Virtual Teams

When you see in your team effort the symptoms listed above, act quickly to address them by adapting your communication and planning process to the unique challenges encountered by virtual teams. Some suggestions include:

**1. Ask your team members to provide input on the following communication issues:**

- What communication avenues (for example, phone, videoconferences or face-to-face meetings) would work best for them?
- When can they make themselves available for regularly scheduled e-mail or phone discussions?
- What are the potential obstacles and challenges ahead in working together as a virtual team?

**2. Develop ground rules for individual accountability.** Work with your team members to generate a list of useful ground rules for keeping project activities on track when members are widely dispersed. Some of these rules may include the following:

- No team member should change milestone dates without first consulting the team leader.
- Determine which team members will keep executive stakeholders updated on team activities.
- Don’t tolerate after-hour or weekend “hit and run” e-mails informing you that a portion of the project will not be completed as scheduled.

**3. Develop a core team identity.** Designate a core team that remains committed to the team throughout its life cycle, with support members (technical and knowledge experts) flowing through as required. ■

## Resolving Conflicts Between Members and Leaders

Even if team members have friendly personal relationships with the team leader, the team may still be headed for a conflict. The reason is that the member-leader relationship is not just based on personal issues, but also on issues such as:

- **how to balance member autonomy with leader control, and**
- **how to balance the need for fast decision making with the desire to achieve team consensus.**

In addition to these pressures, other factors can cause a deterioration in the relationship between a team leader and the members of the team.

*Inappropriate leadership style* is one such factor. Different leadership styles are suited to different work environments and cultures. For example, a leader who comes from a more formal frame of reference will likely have a difficult time handling employees who are

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*A leaders who comes from a more formal frame of reference will likely have a difficult time handling employees who are used to a more laid-back management style.*

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used to a more laid-back management style. *Limited accessibility* can be another problem. Team members and leaders sometimes have difficulty developing strong relationships because they are separated

by geography, work shifts or schedules.

Relationships can also deteriorate because of a *lack of internal alignment*. Team members are not always aligned with their leaders regarding the value or feasibility of business objectives, the relative priorities that should be placed on competing projects, or the performance expectations used for member evaluations.

### Signs of Conflict

Here are some signs that a team is headed for a conflict between its members and the leader:

- **The team leader practices micromanagement.**
- **The team leader communicates poorly with the team**, offering insufficient direction or vague instructions (this would be the opposite of the first symptom).
- **The team stress level rises**, which eventually leads to signs of burnout (for example, a low energy level).
- **Team members mistrust the leader**, greeting every suggestion or explanation with skepticism and suspicion.
- **The team acquires an “us versus you” mentality**,

## Establishing Leader Expectations

One of the underlying causes of member-leader conflict is that members lack a clear understanding of the leader's performance expectations.

The following are seven performance areas in which a team often has difficulty discerning those expectations:

**Work methods.** Do your team members understand the work methods and procedures you expect them to follow when completing their jobs or projects?

**Time frames.** Do you communicate the due dates for completion of projects? How do you determine when dates have slipped, or which completion dates are final and non-negotiable?

**Work responsibilities.** Does each team member understand his or her role when he or she is assigned to a given job or responsibility?

**Customer/supplier interface.** Do your team members understand your expectations when dealing with supplier problems or customer complaints or requests? Do they understand how far they should go to build effective relationships with other work groups?

**Work priorities.** Do your team members understand which jobs take priority, and when those priorities change?

**Performance expectations.** Do your team members understand what you expect in the way of desired outcomes, what it means to do a good job, and the degree of effort expected to be put into a job?

**Resources.** Do your team members understand what resources (facilities, support staff, equipment, etc.) have been allocated to perform a job? Do they know how much control they have over resource decisions?

as team members no longer consider the leader as part of the team.

### Preventing a Deteriorating Relationship

Here are some of the steps you, as a leader, can take to ensure an effective and productive relationship between you and your team members:

**1. Recognize the needs of team members — and your needs.** As circumstances change, team participants should continually redefine the support and assistance they offer each other. For example, if experienced members join the team or the team takes on a difficult project, the leader must be present and active. On the other

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### Resolving Conflicts Between Members and Leaders

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hand, if work procedures are familiar to the team or the team has built support networks in the organization, the leader can loosen his or her control.

**2. Resolve personal conflicts.** Act quickly, so that personal conflicts between individual team members do

not draw in other neutral members.

**3. Identify communication hot spots.** For example, do team members believe that you act fairly when assigning choice tasks, allocating work and distributing resources? Find out.

**4. Obtain feedback on your leadership style.** Leaders are sometimes unwittingly creating problems. Feedback from team members can be an important wake-up call. ■

## PART II: STRENGTHENING TEAM FOCUS

### Developing Better Foresight

It's not uncommon for teams to run into occasional unanticipated challenges. However, if your team is repeatedly ambushed by unforeseen events, you may need to develop stronger skills in the areas of foresight and planning, and in recognizing significant changes as threats or opportunities.

Teams can be categorized by their ability to anticipate change. *Entrenched* teams live in denial, either ignoring major changes or convincing themselves the change is a temporary aberration. *Reactive* teams are slow to respond to change and usually take action only after the situation is obvious. *Proactive* teams try to get out ahead of change and consider the possible implications of events that are just starting to take place. Finally, *pre-emptive* teams have long-term vision, scanning the horizon to track trends and changes that affect both their own operations as well as the overall performance of their companies.

#### Which Type Are You?

Is your team a reactive team, or worse, an entrenched team? Here are some indications that you may have a problem in this area:

- Your team has a difficult time approaching problems or opportunities.
- Your team tends to focus on past situations, rather than the future.
- Your team members are unable to assess the impact of change on your team.

#### Why Teams Become Entrenched

● **They fail to establish or utilize a sensing array.** Some teams are heavily networked within their industries and thus wind up anticipating key trends in their fields. Others are detached from their industry and lose sight of the bigger picture.

● **They have victim mentalities.** Some teams talk as if they are passive victims of forces beyond their control. Their “woe-is-us” approach eventually renders

them less prepared to anticipate change.

● **They resist new information.** Some teams hesitate to share new information that contradicts old information and might be contrary to the team's set objectives.

● **Their planning is static.** Lack of foresight may also be found in teams that formulate thorough plans by considering only a very narrow set of contingencies. Your team must understand that a plan is a living document, which should be continually reexamined in light of changing business conditions.

#### Improving Foresight

Team members and leaders can improve their team's ability to foresee and handle problems, and to take full advantage of opportunities, by implementing several strategies:

**1. Create an early warning system.** Help your team prepare for large-scale changes and possible associated problems by tracking emerging trends as well as business and organizational developments that could affect your team's performance.

**2. Expose your team to other points of view.** Create situations that force team members to question their assumptions about the future. Encourage them to attend meetings at other departments, or invite outside consultants in to troubleshoot team practices and processes.

**3. Implement a thorough troubleshooting process.** Identify the preventive and corrective actions your team should take to plan for the future, allowing you to shape the outcome or affect the likelihood of an event and manage changes once they are underway. ■

### Finding a Sense of Direction

In today's volatile work environment, teams often must juggle hefty loads of projects and accountabilities and deal with internal and external changes — all within the context of a fast-paced organization that is rapidly changing its markets, services and structures.

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### Finding a Sense of Direction

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These undeniably difficult tasks are ameliorated somewhat when the team has targeted long-term goals and clear priorities. On the other hand, when a team tries to function without a sense of long-term direction, the future can appear murky and uncertain.

#### *Symptoms of a Broken Compass*

Here are some symptoms that can indicate your team is navigating with a broken compass:

- **Big-picture blur.** If your team members are unable to visualize a scenario for success, they don't understand how their separate day-to-day activities feed into larger team objectives. They cannot respond to questions or address issues that lie outside their immediate field of vision, thereby discouraging team accountability in favor of more compact, personal projects or activities.

- **Excessive dependence on the team leader.** Team members who lack a sense of direction are forced to stop frequently and wait for marching orders, rather than taking the initiative on a task.

*If team members feel they are working at cross-purposes, they may push personal objectives at the cost of the team's success.*

- **High anxiety.** Because the team's future appears unpredictable and chaotic, members may experience a high degree of stress, anxiety and helplessness in the

face of a bewildering future.

- **Conflicting priorities.** If team members feel they are working at cross-purposes, they may push personal objectives at the cost of the team's success, or hesitate to commit themselves to their projects because they don't see how those projects fit into the bigger picture. Because they are torn between these decisions, they tend to achieve very few of their goals.

#### *Establishing a Sense of Direction*

To help your team establish a clear direction, consider the following action steps:

- **Create a blueprint.** Get away from your daily routine. Take other members of your team off-site to exchange views on your team's core mission, its long-term vision, and your strategies for attaining success. From that dialogue, construct a four-part blueprint for guiding long term efforts consisting of a team mission statement, a mission document, team objectives, and written criteria for sorting team priorities. Once these

## How to Create A Scenario Forecast

1. **Identify influencing factors.** With your team, brainstorm a list of external factors that are likely to shape your company's business environment.
2. **Rate influencing factors.** Rate each factor on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the highest) in terms of degree of impact (how intensely changes may affect performance) and scope of change (the amount of change the factor is likely to undergo in the next 10 years).
3. **Identify key influencing factors.** Multiply each factor's rating for degree of impact with that for scope of change, and select the two factors with the highest overall scores – these are your key influencing factors.
4. **Create alternative scenarios.** Describe two other possible scenarios for each factor – one optimistic and one pessimistic.
5. **Combine scenarios.** Integrate your scenarios in a combined matrix, creating titles that best describe the combined scenario represented in each cell of the matrix.
6. **Describe each combined scenario.** Create a short summary describing details of each combined scenario.
7. **Assess probability.** Use all available information to assess the relative probability for the occurrence of each combined scenario.
8. **Assess the implications.** Ask team members to jointly identify the implications of the combined scenarios for your business strategy.

elements are in place, your team can audit itself to determine whether projects and activities are aligned with the long-term strategy.

- **Audit performance criteria.** By what criteria does your team track its performance? As a standard rule of thumb, 80 percent of your team's efforts should be focused on no more than three criteria.

- **Create a scenario forecast.** This tool (see box above) encourages your team to think outside the box by trying to anticipate a variety of large-scale changes that could affect your organization and team. It also provides a valuable tool for building alignment among managers on future opportunities and threats, and helps team members better understand how their different assumptions about the future form the basis for team-stopping disagreements. ■

PART III: DEALING WITH THE CHALLENGES OF CHANGE

## Keep Your Team From Getting Brittle

Teams can react to change with flexibility (brought about by leaders who successfully manage change that they know they cannot control) or they can be brittle, lacking the resilience and tenacity to cope effectively with change. Certainly, within every team the inability to adapt to change reveals itself in many different ways.

### Signs of Inflexibility

If your team has experienced the following, it probably lacks flexibility in dealing with change:

- **Anxiety about an unknown future.** While stress is a common factor for all teams, brittle teams exhibit an excessive amount of stress due to their anxiety over an uncertain and possibly threatening future. This anxiety becomes their prevailing, habitual response to any new and demanding situation.

- **Cognitive denial and self-imposed isolation.** Some brittle teams respond to change with a blanket denial, in spite of abundant information that a change will take place. Once the change does occur, they respond to the resulting stress by trying to ignore the process and cutting themselves off from the organizational flow of information. They're like organizational ostriches, their heads buried in the sand.

- **Slow or poorly coordinated response to change.** Members of brittle teams do not take the time to analyze changes, determine the factors behind them, or learn to adapt as a result of them. They are slow to respond to change and, when they do, their responses are weak and ineffective.

- **Active resistance to change.** Members of a brittle team have a difficult time distinguishing between changes that are just beginning to surface (and which, consequently, are most controllable) and those that are under way. Inevitably, the team fails to note (or ignores) an emerging change event until it is bearing down on them, at which point they leap into action and try to resist it — a futile action if ever there was one.

### Making Teams More Adaptable

How do you remedy a brittle team? Here are some suggestions.

1. **Conduct frequent fire drills.** You can't prepare for every eventuality. However, you can help your team develop preventive and corrective actions for events that are highly probable and represent threats or opportunities.

2. **Avoid creating unnecessary stress.** If you're a type A person, make an effort to reduce your aggressiveness.

Otherwise you may appear highly stressed and out of control — and the team, taking its cue from you, will begin to doubt its ability to handle change and adversity.

3. **Learn from others who have been there.** Most events have been experienced by other organizations. Use their experience whenever possible.

4. **Overcome resistance to change.** Some of the ways you can reduce resistance is by: building ownership and support; lowering the risk level for change; doing your homework; and choosing the right time and place for your battles. ■

## Stuck in a Rut? Learn to Foster Innovation

Chances are, your team has exhausted its problem-solving resources or is overly complacent when it exhibits any or all of the following behaviors:

- **Loss of confidence when addressing new challenges.**
- **Ignorance of cutting-edge technology and work methods.**
- **Redundant actions and humdrum solutions to problems.**
- **Missed opportunities for new business.**
- **Defections from the team.**

### Making Your Team More Creative

You can combat these and other limiting behaviors by fostering a spirit of innovation on your team. Among the ways you can accomplish this are the following:

1. **Set the stage for creative thinking.** Sit down with the members of your team and describe a work function or project that requires their full creative efforts. Let them know you encourage and welcome their ideas by asking to hear more; by recording ideas for later review; by giving everyone the opportunity to contribute; and by holding back on your own input until everyone else has had a chance to speak.

2. **Brainstorm, but in a structured manner.** When we think of brainstorming, we tend to think of a mighty rush of ideas emanating from team members, with each idea considered equally for review. As an alternative, ask your team to present only a single idea at a time; after multiple ideas have been discussed, see if there's any way to combine or modify certain ideas to create new ideas.

3. **Import a fresh pair of eyes.** Bring in an outsider — someone who has not been influenced by the team's thinking process — to ask questions that nudge team

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### Stuck in a Rut? Learn to Foster Innovation

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members beyond their problem-solving assumptions. Focus on a problem or challenge facing your team, in order to get everyone to see that circumstance in a new light.

**4. Review best practices.** As a team, take a look at

the best work processes, methods and procedures of world-class organizations, in order to discover those that can be imported into your own company.

**5. Ask for more than one solution.** Encourage creative thinking by asking for multiple solutions at the start of your discussion; usually the first solution will be routine while subsequent ones will be unique. ■

## PART IV: MENDING EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

### Improving Relations with Management and Customers

You cannot overestimate the importance of both senior management and customers as factors in a team's success. Senior managers supply essential coaching and guidance for projects, and often have an in-depth understanding of the inner workings of your organization, giving you a big-picture view and even, on occasion, running interference for your team. Customers, on the other hand, are practically your entire reason for existence in business, whether they are internal or external. At the end of the day, the only way you can honestly assess the true value your team brings to the table is by determining whether it is meeting the needs of your customers.

While it's simple to surmise why those relationships are so important, the question of how to improve them is anything but simple. By focusing on the unique needs of each group, certain treatments make themselves apparent.

#### Senior Management

It is imperative to secure firm senior sponsorship if your team is attempting to implement major projects that are complex, address sensitive work issues, or require resources from other corporate units. The following approaches may prove useful in building that support:

● **Identify senior-level stakeholders.** You need to quickly identify those senior-level managers who are directly responsible for and have the greatest stake in the work your team is doing. These stakeholders may be actively or passively supportive or resistant of your efforts; it is important to determine where they stand, and adjust your team's direction accordingly.

● **Determine potential sources of resistance.** Resistance can come in many forms, and might not always be readily apparent; some people are very forthright about their criticisms, while others are reluctant to do so, or feel their opinions are self-evident. Unless you are able to detect pockets of resistance, you could be facing a few nasty surprises when it's time for your team to implement its objectives.

● **Keep your sponsors informed.** Once you have sponsorship from senior-level management, keep them

informed of the issues and challenges facing your team. To do this, you must meet regularly with them; share important correspondence; ensure adequate lead time to support difficult issues; encourage senior managers to troubleshoot with you; and manage your team's relationship with senior management with sensitivity and respect.

#### Customers

Weak relationships between teams and their customers (whether internal or external) tend to develop from problematic work processes and attitudes — from a failure to understand the effect of a process on customers to downright team arrogance (taking a “we know what's best for you” approach to the relationship). There are just as many approaches for improving customer relationships, including the following:

● **Create opportunities for customer feedback.** Invite customers to your team meetings, and ask customers for permission to attend theirs. Create social gatherings or focus groups that enable your team members to solicit honest customer feedback on performance issues and products, and to share suggestions for improving that performance.

● **Put yourself in the customer's shoes.** Encourage your team members to do what they must to achieve a customer's-eye view of your products and services. This could mean using your own products, employing mystery shoppers to evaluate your service, or creating mock test areas for customers to use your products.

● **Keep track of your customers' customers.** Your customers' needs are largely determined by the requirements of their own customers. Staying informed about changing needs or markets for these groups will enable you to anticipate new developments of your own customers' expectations.

● **Audit your customer service regularly.** Sometimes, complaints are not caused by performance issues within your team, but by a lack of skill in forming positive relationships with customers. Get your customers' feedback on a number of relationship-related issues, from accessibility and responsiveness to requests to listening skills and conflict resolution. ■