

the customer **imagination**

songbook

from *Inside Your Customer's Imagination:
5 Secrets to Creating Breakthrough
Products, Services and Solutions*



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The Customer Imagination Songbook: The Backstory

You gotta read a little
before you can sing!!

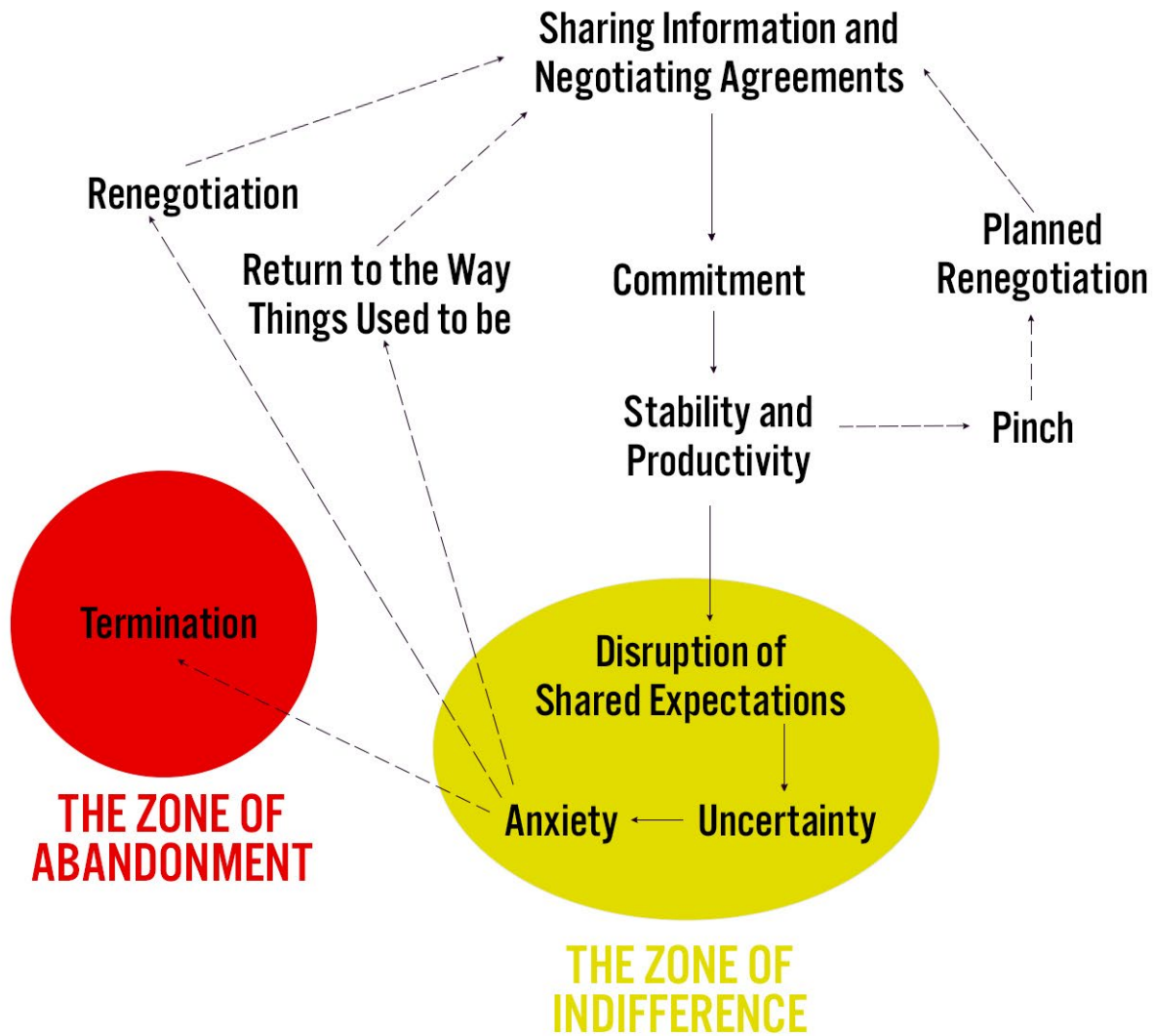
Contingency plans are the staple of firefighters, emergency rooms, and smart businesses. They are the “what if” scripts that guide rehearsals, dry runs, fire drills, and a host of preparedness scenarios. They are the antidotes to spur-of-the-moment improvisations that can falter or fail under the weight of poor discipline. Think of them as symbolically the orange caution lights that warn us that a red-light danger zone is just ahead.

Human relationships are complex and fraught with unexpected twists and turns. They can never be (nor should they be) programmed to become completely error free. Part of their charm is their unpredictable nature and potential for serendipity. We love for our relationships to be teeming with surprise and freshness, not boringly robotic and automated. Consider the difference between experiencing a scripted contact center operator and one that sounds like a friendly neighbor.

Building into the relationship warning signs and agreed upon expectations related to the predictable type of “what ifs” gives the partnership a sense of security. It provides the comfort that says, “We thought this might happen and at calmer times we talked it through precisely what we would do if it does.” Plans for calamity help relationships pursue wisdom instead of falling back on emotional predispositions.

In 1971, two really smart professors John Sherwood at Purdue University and Jack Glidewell at the University of Chicago, crafted a white paper called “Planned Renegotiation: A Norm-Setting

OD Intervention.” It serves as a powerful framework for crafting a strategy for the likely “what ifs” in a partnership.



THE PLANNED RENEGOTIATION MODEL

(Based on Sherwood and Glidewell, 1971)

The model states that all partnerships go through stages. The first stage, “sharing information,” is aimed at creating a focus while “negotiating agreements” that will guide the work of the partnership. After establishing commitments, partnerships enter a period of “stability and productivity.” But inevitably a “disruption of shared expectations” occurs which, if not dealt with, can lead to

“uncertainty,” “anxiety” and one of three decision points: 1) terminating the partnership, 2) going back to the drawing board, or 3) starting again with new expectations.

Most partnership breakdowns are driven less by a single event and more by a combination of factors that ultimately reach a dark tipping point. The spark that ignites “terminating the partnership” might be a small, seemingly insignificant incident. But, plans for exit really started much earlier when one or both of the parties entered the “zone of indifference.” Once in that zone, partners only need a trigger to push them into the “zone of abandonment” in which they actively plot and/or initiate their exit.

Let’s illustrate with a personal relationship. I have friends who several years ago got a divorce. I was surprised as I had seen no signs of problems. I saw Tom at a shopping center and expressed my regret they had called it quits. “What happened?” I asked Tom, knowing him as someone willing to go public with his personal life. “She said it was because I wouldn’t take out the trash.” His answer surprised me until I saw Ellen a few days later. I asked her the same “what happened” question. “Well,” she said with a deep sigh, “You know Tom. It is always all about Tom. I just got tired of his self-centeredness.”

Rather than realizing there was an early pinch in their relationship that needed resolution and crafting a plan for preventing reoccurrence, Ellen let her angry feelings toward Tom fester in the “zone of indifference” until finally Tom’s refusal to complete a simple household chore pushed her to her tipping point, she entered the “zone of abandonment” and demanded a divorce. To Tom, it seemed an unfair response to a simple dispute about taking out the trash; to Ellen it represented a feature of their relationship she could not continue to tolerate. And, it was clear in conversations with both, the outcome could have been prevented.

Sherwood and Glidewell would contend the Tom and Ellen route to termination could have been avoided if their partnership, at the first hint of a disruption (they refer to that hint as “a pinch”), could have renegotiated a plan for dealing with conflicts early rather than risking the partnership would have an unhappy ending.

Let’s look at the steps for planned renegotiation in a bit more detail.

Share Information and Negotiate Agreements

This step involves more than simply sharing expectations for the partnership, it includes revealing aspects about yourselves that might be beneficial to the other. When I facilitate partnership sessions with clients and their customers, I ask each to disclose to the other answers to these questions:

- What are ways I typically help a partnership?
- What are ways I typically hinder a partnership?
- What are my concerns about being a part of this one?

Often the roles in a partnership between a provider and a customer are quite clear. However, there are formal roles and then there are informal roles. Who will lead the discussion? Who will be responsible for notetaking, record keeping, scheduling, and retaining documents (like flip chart sheets) to be used again in a future meeting? Is there a time-keeper role? What about decision rights? What about inviting guests? What about including a substitute if a key person must be absent?

This is the step in the process where all roles are reviewed, clarified and agreed upon. This is the point at which the partnership proceeds with success and productivity. Productivity is born of discipline, not just passion and commitment.

Discuss the Disruption

You can see on the model, there is a side trip that could occur called “the pinch.” This is that quiet rumbling in your gut that something is not as hunky dory as you had hoped. It could be a loud disruption impacting the partnership not of its own making. It now causes the partnership to operate on shaky ground. We will come back that side trip at the end of this section. Let’s explore disruption (and the rest of the model) before we return.

Disruption is inevitable, only the length of time disruption lingers varies. It leaves the partnership unstable and less than productive because of its unsettling force. Think of it like the impact a first child has on a young couple which can lead to the violation of previously established expectations. According to Sherwood and Glidewell, “Disruption without renegotiation leads to an increasing frequency and intensity of disruptions.” Players in all co-creation partnerships are imperfect people and misunderstandings, mistakes, and miscalculations can plague a relationship, eventually putting it at risk of being derailed.

What to Do in a Pinch

Pinches come in various forms. A pinch could be as small as someone coming in late for a meeting when there is an agreement to always be on time. It could be a new team player introduced into the process due to a resignation, reorganization, or retirement. It could be a shift in the direction of the focus triggered by a change in the marketplace or strategic positioning. The point is that a pinch offers the partnership a choice point. It can ignore it at their peril, return to an earlier step (like refining roles or reclarifying expectations). Unaddressed pinches lead to a crunch—a conflict that can derail the relationship. This is the point where planned renegotiation can help create a bulletproof vest to deal with future disruption.

Let's go back to our new friends, Ellen and Tom. Ellen comes home late from work and finds Tom watching a football game. She notices the trash can in the kitchen is brimming full; the one he agreed to remove before they went to work. "Tom," she calls out to him, "I am getting ready to prepare dinner and I need you to carry out the trash that you promised to remove early this morning." Tom calls out from the den, "I'll get it. But, first let me watch this play. The Cowboys are about to score." After the game, they sit down to dinner. The trash has still not been removed. This is a chance for a discussion of the pinch and planned renegotiation of partnership expectations regarding performance of family chores. If Ellen simply does Tom's chore and ignores the pinch, her anger grows, and Tom never gets to learn how his actions negatively impacted their partnership.

Plan Caution Lights for Contracts

Planned renegotiation uses the incident of the pinch to discuss likely scenarios of partnership disruption down the road and explores how the partnership would likely deal with these incidents. How do we approach conflicts and disruptions in a fashion that does not blame or render guilt? It can be of simple list of "If this, then this." It makes smooth a road to success that might otherwise be rocky. Let's go back again to Ellen and Tom.

Ellen could say to Tom, "When you neglect your agreed-up chores, it makes me angry and I think you have a low regard for our relationship. I don't believe that is true, but you leave me no other interpretation when I end up doing your chores. What suggestions do you have on how we approach this with no conflict going forward? I don't like feeling angry; I know you don't enjoy being badgered."

Now, let's go one step further. When firefighters respond to a fire, their actions reflect pit crew

precision. They did not acquire this level of performance excellence by sitting at the dinner table at the fire station and talking through their actions. They drilled through dry runs and performance rehearsal. It is the same with great partnerships. If Ellen and Tom really wanted partnership excellence, they would take their renegotiation to actual behavioral rehearsal (a.k.a., role play). It helps a plan become more of an instruction manual.

Be attentive to any sense that “things are not quite right” within the partnership. Be bold in saying what you feel and seeking maximum candor in the partnership. Recognize that partnerships are not iron-clad relationships; they work best when they are flexible. Adaptability, like life, is the key to survival (with a hat tip to Charlie Darwin). Don’t band aid conflicts, build in the agreements that keep them from reoccurring. Make sure your renegotiated agreements have clarity and consequences. Effective partnerships depend on discipline.

Disruption

In a ballad style

Music and lyrics by Chip R. Bell

Gm D7 Gm Cm Gm Cm

Some-thing's rui-sed our con - tract, I know not why; You are a

6 Gm A7 D7 Gm D7 Gm

strang - er, the same, to you, am I. Har - mo - ny has van - ished,

11 Cm Gm Cm

where did it flee; What, now, will

14 Gm D7 Gm

hap - pen, we nei - ther can fore - see.

Piano

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