

Book Review: “Human Sigma: Managing the Employee-Customer Encounter”

By Carrie Cavanaugh

For years the “six sigma” have been applied to reduce variability in processes and systems, and proving very effective. Now, however, the rewards of a “six sigma” focus are marginal as processes can only be perfected to a certain extent. John H. Fleming, Ph.D., and Jim Asplund, both Principals of Gallup and Chief Scientists, suggest the realm now most opportune for improvement is the interaction between employees and customers, which they have coined the “human sigma.”

The book is based upon substantial research, but also includes specific stories to illustrate particular points. Fleming and Asplund present a convincing case in the general, but sometimes lack in specific application. Additionally, the material could have been presented in a more condensed format to greater effect.

Fleming and Asplund charge managers with the task of more effectively managing their employees and focusing on their interaction with customers. This is because employees are the de facto brand representation. Although some managers will take on the “Terminator” mentality that the best employee is one that comes with his hands, but not his heart, this is denying your organization of a key asset – the talents, heart and imagination of each employee. In fact, it is these intangible assets that produce profits that “better predict stock market returns than either accounting earnings or cash flows” (35).

In order to utilize employees’ talents, they must have the freedom to do things their way. That is, rather than having to follow a script, it should be acceptable for employees to use their own means of accomplishing an outcome. This is more than just blind trust however. Fleming and Asplund emphasize the importance of regular, focused evaluation always followed up by an action plan. Additionally, managers need to get to know employees well enough to know what they are naturally good at and then put them in the positions that best fit their strengths.

Although the “Human Sigma” may seem to some to be beyond their control and immeasurable, Fleming and Asplund assert that neither is true. They devote part of the book to exploring research that has been done to determine how people make decisions. This chapter is rich with insight. One interesting element of this insight is that people often make decisions based in part upon emotions. It is thus essential that organizations realize this as employee-customer interaction is one of the main ways of shaping the emotions customers feel regarding the organization.

Like employees, a customer’s engagement level can be gauged. And Fleming and Asplund have found trends in the engagement level of a customer and their financial significance to an organization. And just as employee engagement is to be regularly tracked, so too is that of customers. One caution in looking at these reports, however, is that the customer encounter with the organization will vary on the micro level, as



each person (customer or employee) is unique. Therefore, results should be viewed not as an average for the whole organization, but on an individual branch basis. It is essential that organizations work towards a more homogenous experience for the customer so that they know they can trust an organization.

As I read "The Human Sigma", I came across statements that rang true as something the scriptures teach. For example, in chapter eight, Fleming and Asplund assert that, "employees have a need to belong to something bigger than themselves" (165). Christian organizations should be able to more directly address this issue and its ultimate solution.

Also, in chapter nine we read, "how poor most of us are at judging our own performance. This reinforces how crucial it is to have trusting relationships with coworkers; it can help each member of a team be accountable to an objective standard and help them maintain a focus on the right outcomes" (184). This idea of accountability and spurring one another on towards greater excellence is certainly a Biblical model.

It is not surprising that this book drew upon the thesis presented in Gallop's previous publication, "Strength's Finder", but it certainly goes further. This book is not revolutionary in its emphasis upon the human component of business, but it is of value in its research and breadth of analysis.