THE *NEW*
TALENT
PLAYBOOK
Podcast

Action Kit

How to get your team to treat clients the way you would.

Episode 3 - Season 8

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New Talent Playbook

Dawn Cunningham • S8E3

You just listened to Dawn Cunningham, master trainer at Nexstar Network with more than four decades in customer service, share a clear reminder for anyone leading a customer-facing team: great service is built on human connection, hiring for the right instincts, and turning good intentions into repeatable processes. The big takeaway is simple but powerful—when your people feel seen, prepared, and supported, they can deliver better experiences with less friction. This playbook will help you turn the themes of connection, empathy, and process into practical habits you can use right away in your business or leadership role.

Use the prompts below to audit your team and commit to one improvement this week.

1. Lead With Connection, Not Just Transactions

Dawn made it clear that speed matters, but people still want to feel connected. The goal is not to eliminate efficiency; it is to combine efficiency with genuine presence and trust.

☐ Our team responds quickly without making people feel rushed

☐ We regularly show customers that we know, hear, and value them

☐ Our managers model calm, respectful communication under pressure

☐ We actively look for moments to acknowledge people, not just solve problems

Short answer: What is one moment in your customer journey where a warmer human touch would make the biggest difference?

_____

_____

_____

2. Hire for Empathy and Service Instincts

Dawn stressed that the best customer-facing people are often identified by how they naturally treat others. Skills can be trained, but empathy, patience, positivity, and a heart to serve are the traits that create a strong foundation.

Hiring lens:

Trait to look for	How you will test it	What a strong answer looks like
Empathy	Ask a scenario question about an upset customer	Listens first, validates feelings, responds calmly
Communication	Observe how they explain something simple	Clear, warm, and easy to follow
Patience	Ask how they handle a repeated question	Does not sound annoyed or rushed

Fill-in-the-blank: We will hire for _____ first, then train for _____.

_____

3. Turn Good Intentions Into a Repeatable Process

One of Dawn's strongest messages was that process becomes muscle memory. Scripts may feel rigid, but a clear process gives people confidence, keeps them on track, and helps them recover when customers go off script.

Rate your team from 1 to 5:

We have a simple process for common customer situations 1 2 3 4 5

New team members can learn our expectations quickly 1 2 3 4 5

We review calls or conversations and improve the process over time 1 2 3 4 5

People know how to set expectations before a customer gets frustrated 1 2 3 4 5

Action step: write the three steps of your best customer conversation below.

_____

_____

_____

4. Be Present, Coach Often, and Keep Learning

Dawn described the power of a leader simply walking the floor, saying hello, and making people feel recognized. She also pointed to peer learning and manager alignment as practical ways to raise performance without creating more complexity.

☐ I make myself visible to frontline employees on a regular basis

☐ I ask questions that help people feel seen and heard

☐ We learn from peers, coaches, or other businesses instead of figuring everything out alone

☐ We keep a bench of talent so we are not caught off guard

Short answer: What is one leadership habit you will practice weekly so your team feels more supported?

_____

_____

5. Build a Team That Fits the Work and the Person

Dawn's hiring advice extends beyond the interview room: think strategically about the right seat, the right schedule, and the right level of responsibility. The best teams are flexible enough to match the work to the person when it makes sense.

Team design worksheet:

Role / Need	Best format	Why it fits	Any risk to manage
Customer support overflow	Part-time or flexible coverage	Needs coverage at peak times	Training consistency
Specialized projects	Contract / project-based	Expertise without long-term overhead	Communication cadence
Core operations	Full-time	Requires ownership and continuity	Burnout if understaffed

Final thought

"Be present. Say hello. Let them know that you acknowledge them."

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