



A STUDY OF THE KEY FACTORS AFFECTING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION WITH SERVICES RENDERED AT SALALAH FREE ZONE, SULTANATE OF OMAN

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1. Introduction

1.1 Prelude

Customer service is set of activities that aim to increase the level of customers' satisfaction. It is also the process of satisfying customers' expectation, needs and want by providing a good quality services which results in customer satisfaction. Customer service makes customers feel they are valuable to the company and helps in forging long term relationships with the customer. Customer service increase customers' loyalty to companies. It also increases the profitability of companies. When the company achieve its customer satisfaction, it is more likely to benefit from its product or services. It is also an opportunity to attract more customers due to the good reputation in customer service.

Now days, customer service has become a criterion for judging the success of companies; a company that succeed in serving and attracting its customers is best able to succeed in its business. It enables companies to classify their business to meet customer satisfaction and maximize the profit. Prabhakaran (2003) mentioned that the customer is the king. High customer satisfaction is important in maintaining a loyal customer base. To link the service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty is important. Kumar et al (2009) stated that high quality of service will result in high customer satisfaction and increases customer loyalty. Heskett et al (1997) argued that profit and growth are stimulated primarily by customer loyalty and loyalty is a direct result of customer satisfaction. Parasuraman et al (1988) and Naeem and Saif (2009) found that customer satisfaction is the outcome of service quality. The available literature points to the fact that there are links between service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. However no studies have been conducted to investigate these links in the context of Free Trade Zones in the Middle East. This study aims to fulfill this gap in the literature. A review of literature has been conducted to explore these relationships and then a research methodology has been proposed. A positive correlation between each of the constructs has been confirmed by the review of literature and the primary analysis.

1.2 Free trade zones

A free trade zone (FTZ) is defined as a “specific class of special economic zone. It is a geographic area where goods may be landed, stored, handled, manufactured, or reconfigured, and re-exported under specific customs regulation and generally not subject to customs duty”. Designed to stimulate economic growth, FTZs are often found throughout the world and around mode of transport hubs like major seaports, international airports, and other locations with strong transportation ties.

The benefits of a Free Trade Zone are several and include deferral, reduction, or elimination of certain duties, duty exemption on re-exports, duty elimination on waste, scrap, and yield loss, indefinite storage facility and Waived customs duties on zone-to-zone transfers. These result in smooth transfer of goods and significant cost savings for clients of these Free Trade Zones. FTZs have come up in several countries like USA, Dubai, India and now , the Sultanate of Oman where two FTZs are now fully functional in Salalah and Duqm.

1.3 Company profile

Salalah Free Zone is a government owned company, formed through a Royal Decree No. 62/2006 to benefit from the strategic location of Salalah city, Sultanate of Oman , which is located at the connection of key east-west



business routes. SFZ strategy is to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) through set of business-friendly incentives. SFZCo's provide different range of products specifically designed to meet variety of business needs which are plot of lands, warehouses, and offices. It provides also many services such as registering the business, issuing commercial register, clearing investor transactions such as visas, labor clearance, custom clearance, etc. that is mean Salalah Free Zone company main activity depends heavily on customer service. Therefore, customer satisfaction is a very important matter to Salalah Free Zone company as there are many competitors such as Sohar Free zone, Al Duqum, Jabal Ali free zone, Al Hamriyah free zone, etc. who offer the same incentives and aimed to attract foreign investments as well.

More than ten years after establishing Salalah free zone, within the period of strong economic crisis and the increased number of free zones in the region, SFZ realized that the competitive advantage can be achieved through providing high quality services and customer satisfaction improvements. Therefore, this study will measure the quality of Salalah Free Zone Company services and the satisfaction level of their customers using the model of SERVQUAL, which will be the most suitable tool to measure SFZ quality of services and the level of their customer satisfaction level. In addition to the aspects that they need to improve to reach the level of competition with other free zones.

There is no doubt, that excellent customer service can be the key to differentiate Salalah Free Zone from others in the region and customer satisfaction will play the role of marketing in attracting foreign investments due to the good reputation and the positive word of mouth.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

As Salalah Free zone is a service provider, it needs to achieve high service quality in order to achieve high satisfaction rates, which mainly depend on customers' expectations and perceptions. A popular tool for measuring customer satisfaction toward services that companies provide is the SERVQUAL model. This model designed to assess the gaps between customers' expectation and perceived service. It also assesses the service quality in terms of Reliability, Tangibility, Empathy, Assurance, and Responsiveness. This study uses the SERVQUAL model to analyze the gaps between perceived service and customers' expectation. The five factors in the model are Reliability, Tangibility, Assurance, Responsiveness and Empathy which have been considered for this research. In order to measure the quality of the services provided by Salalah Free Zone using the SERVQUAL model, each dimension of the model is defined from Salalah Free zone company prospective.

Dimension	Definition
Reliability	The ability of performing the promised services accurately.
Assurance	How courtesy of Salalah free zone employees as well as their Knowledge and ability to convey confidence.
Tangibility	The physical facilities appearance, communication material and equipment at Salalah Free Zone.
Empathy	Caring and provide individual attention to customers.
Responsiveness	Is providing fast services and willingness to help customers.

The Diagram below explain the process of providing services at Salalah Free Zone.



Fig 2.

Service Process at Salalah Free Zone (SFZ)

As the customers interact with Service providers at Salalah Free Zone, they expect certain level of quality, and if they do not find that level of quality, they will be dissatisfied due to the gap between expectation and perceived services.

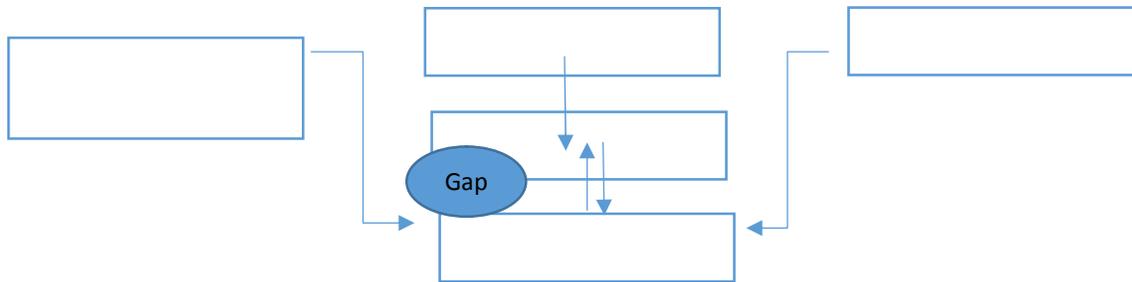


Fig 2. The SERVQUAL Model of Service Quality

1.5 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the quality of Salalah Free Zone's services by using the most widely tool for measuring service quality (SERVQUAL). This study examines the gap between customers' expectation and perceptions regarding the service quality of the case in study (Salalah Free zone). Furthermore, the results obtained with the findings from customer satisfaction survey analyses customer responses with the objective of determining the extent to which the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model affect Customers satisfaction at Salalah Free Zone

The data collected and analyzed can be used to improve Salalah Free zone services. It will help also to understand the most influential factors that contribute to customer satisfaction and what needs to be focused on while improving services.

Literature Review

2.1 Customer Satisfaction

Customer Satisfaction is one of the most important outcomes in the marketing literature. It serves to link processes culminating purchase and consumption with post purchase phenomena such as attitude change, repeat purchase, and brand loyalty (Surprenant and Churchill, 1982). According to Barsky(1992), Customer satisfaction is the most important element in providing service as customer satisfaction plays an influentialrole in increasing market share. It is the ability to satisfy customers' needs and expectation in relation to the service.

Lee and Lee , (1995) studied the relation between customer's satisfaction and profits. They found out that customers' satisfaction can affect the future sales as customers will definitely share their experience with other customers. Numerous empirical studies have indicated that service quality and customer satisfaction lead to the profit-ability of a firm (Anderson et al. 1994; Eklof et al. 1999; Ittner and Larcker 1996; Fornell 1992; Anderson and Sullivan 1993; Zeithaml 2000). Anderson and Sullivan (1993) stated that a firm's future profitability depends on satisfying current customers. Anderson et al. (1994) found a significant relationship between customer satisfaction and return on assets. High quality leads to high levels of customer retention, increase loyalty, and positive word of mouth, which in turn are strongly related to profitability (Reichheld and Sasser 1990).

Kutner and Cripps (1997) indicated that customers should be managed as assets, and that customers vary in their needs, preferences, buying behavior, and price sensitivity. Delivering superior customer value and satisfaction iscrucial to firm competitiveness (Kotler and Armstrong 1997; Weitz and Jap 1995; Deng et al. 2013) .



2.2 Service Quality Concept

Gronroos (2000, p.46) defined service as, “A service is a process consisting of a series of more or less intangible activities that normally, but not necessarily always, take place in interactions between the customer and service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems”. Fogli (2006, p.4) define service quality as “a global judgement or attitude relating to a particular service; the customer’s overall impression of the relative inferiority or superiority of the organization and its services. Service quality is a cognitive judgement”.

Service quality which has been conceptualized as an overall assessment of service by the customers, is a key decision criterion in service evaluation by the customers (Lewis and Booms, 1983; Ganguli and Kumar Roy, 2010). Duffy and Ketchand (1998) defined service quality as customers' appraisals of the service core, the provider, or the entire service organization. Most definitions also focus on the customer, and on the fact that services are provided as solutions to customer problems (Grönroos, 2001). We may conclude that service quality is linked to activities, interactions and solutions to customer problems (Edvardsson, 2005). The service quality in a dyadic service encounter is recognised as dependent upon the interactive process between the service provider and the service receiver (Svensson, 2001). Service quality is a measure of how well the service level delivered meets customer expectations, thereby delivering quality service means conforming to customer expectations on a consistent basis (Lewis and Booms 1983, Parasuraman et al., 1985).

2.3 Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

In marketing literature, Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction have been conceptualized as a distinct, but closely related constructs. There is a positive relationship between the two constructs (Beerli et al., 2004). The relationship between customer satisfaction and service quality is debatable. Some researchers argued that service quality is the antecedent of customer satisfaction, while others argued the opposite relationship. Parasuraman et al (1988) defined service quality and customer satisfaction as “service quality is a global judgement, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service, whereas satisfaction is related to a specific transaction”. Jamal and Naser (2003) stated that service quality is the antecedent of customer satisfaction. However, they found that there is no important relationship between customer satisfaction and tangible aspects of service environment. This finding is contrasted with previous research by Blodgett and Wakefield (1999), but supported by Parasuraman et al (1991). Most of the researchers found that service quality is the antecedent of customer satisfaction (Bedi, 2010; Kassim and Abdullah, 2010; Kumar et al., 2010; Naeem and Saif 2009; Balaji, 2009; Lee and Hwan, 2005; Athanassopoulos and Iliakopoulos, 2003; Parasuraman et al 1988). Yee et al (2010) found that service quality has a positive influence on customer satisfaction. On the other hand, Bitner (1990) and Bolton and Drew (1991) pointed out that customer satisfaction is the antecedent of service quality. In 2004, Beerli et al supported this finding. Beerli et al mentioned a possible explanation is that the satisfaction construct supposes an evaluative judgement of the value received by the customer. This finding is contrasted with most of the researchers.

2.4 Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Model

Parasuraman et al (1985) undertook a Qualitative Research to investigate the concept of Service Quality. They arranged an in-depth interview with the executives and Focus Group interviews with customers to develop a model of Service Quality. They identified ten key determinants of Service Quality. They are: Reliability, Responsiveness, Competence, Access, Courtesy, Communication, Credibility, Security, Understanding, Tangibles. In 1988, Parasuraman et al arranged a quantitative Research. They revealed an instrument for measuring consumers’ perception of Service Quality, after that it became known as SERVQUAL. They collapsed their dimensions from ten to five. The dimensions were:

Tangibles – physical facilities, appearance of personnel and equipment
Reliability – ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.

Reliability – ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.

Responsiveness – willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.



Assurance - Assurance (combination of items designed originally to assess Competence, Courtesy, Credibility, and Security) – ability of the organization’s employees to inspire trust and confidence in the organization through their knowledge and courtesy.

Empathy - Empathy (combination of items designed originally to assess Access, Communication, and Understanding the customer) – personalized attention given to customer.

Organizations can use SERVQUAL in various ways. Parasuraman et al (1988) mentioned that SERVQUAL can help the Service and Retailing Organizations in assessing the expectations of customers and Service Quality perceptions. It can focus on the core areas where managers need to take attention and action to improve Service Quality.

3. Research Methodology

This section discusses the research methodology employed to develop the answers to the research questions. At first the scope and problems are discussed and then a sample framework and data collection procedure has been discussed.

3.1 Scope

This research covers the most important factors related to customer service at Salalah Free Zone Company, which directly affect its customer satisfaction. It will apply the SERVQUAL model to identify and analyze the effect of the Reliability, Tangibility, Assurance, Empathy and Responsiveness on customers' satisfaction and the most influential factor among the aforementioned factors.

3.2 Problem and Hypothesis

The core research problem is to look into the level of satisfaction of Salalah Free Zone company's customers with the services provided in terms of Reliability, Tangibility, Assurance, Empathy and Responsiveness. This problem with the use of structured questionnaires and the SPSS method of Principal Component Analysis has been utilized to find the most significant factors affecting customer satisfaction at Salalah Free Zone .

This research will also determine the most influential factors affecting customer satisfaction at Salalah Free Zone. Essentially, the main areas of research are:

1. Find out the level of satisfaction of SFZ's customers with the services provided.
2. Find out the most influential factor on SFZ's customers satisfaction.
3. Come up with solutions to improve SFZ services.

3.3 Approach

A population size of 58 investors at Salalah free zone was taken for the questionnaire. The minimum responds required is 20 for a valid analysis. The questionnaire was distributed to the customers of Salalah Free zone from different stages (under registration, under technical & construction stage and who already start operations). The questionnaire comprised of 28 questions cover the five main variables which effect customers' satisfaction. 21 responses were received and these were considered for the purpose of the study. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) in SPSS was used to identify the factors with significant factor loadings which impacted the satisfaction levels of the customers of SFZ.

3. Analysis and Discussion

The responses received from the respondents were collected and analysed using PCA and the key findings are as follows.

Table 1.Descriptive Statistics

	Question	Mean	Standard deviation
Tang.1	Salalah Free Zone have modern looking equipment	4.0952	0.624880
Tang. 2	The Physical facilities (land, warehouses or offices) at the Free Zone are well equipped	3.5714285	0.978336
Tang. 3	Employees at Salalah Free Zone are neat in their appearance	4.0000	0.77460
Tang. 4	Materials associated with the services (Registration forms, fees, Rules & regulations) are visible, accessible and clear at Salalah Free Zone	3.3810	0.80475
Rel.1	Salalah free zone fulfills its promises	3.1429	1.06234
Rel.2	Salalah free zone shows interest when customers have a problem.	3.4762	1.07792
Rel.3	Salalah Free Zone do the right services from the first time.	3.1429	0.96362
Rel.4	Salalah Free zone provides the service at the time they promise to do	3.0476	1.07127
Rel. 5	Salalah Free Zone insist on error-free records	3.1429	1.01419
Resp. 1	Employees of Salalah Free Zone tell customers when service will be performed.	3.1429	0.91026
Resp. 2	Employees of Salalah Free Zone give prompt services to customers	3.5238	0.92839
Resp. 3	Employees of Salalah Free Zone are always willing to help customers	3.7143	0.56061
Resp. 4	Employees of Salalah Free Zone will not be busy to respond to customers	3.6667	0.65828
Ass. 1	The behavior of employees at Salalah Free zone instill confidence in customers	3.8095	0.67964
Ass. 2	The customers of Salalah Free zone feel safe in transactions	3.8095	0.81358
Ass. 3	Employees of Salalah free zone are consistently courteous with customers	3.6190	1.16087
Ass. 4	Employees of Salalah free zone have the knowledge to answer customer questions	3.2857	0.90238
Emp. 1	Salalah Free zone company provide individual attention to customers.	3.5714	0.87014
Emp. 2	Salalah Free zone's operation hours are convenient to their customers.	3.4286	0.92582
Emp. 3	Salalah free zone company will have employees who give customers personal services	3.3333	0.96609
Emp. 4	Salalah Free zone has the customers best interests at heart.	3.2857	1.00712
Emp.5	The employees of Salalah Free zone company understand the specific needs of their customers	3.4286	1.02817

Table 1 shows that the means of all responses were quite high thereby indicating that the questions were relevant and significant for the purpose of identifying the customer satisfaction level with the services provided by SFZ.

Table 2. Communalities

The following table shows the Extraction communalities which estimates of the variance in each variable accounted for by the components. The communalities in this table are all high, which indicates that all extracted components represent the variables well.

	Questions	Extraction
Tang1	Salalah Free Zone have modern looking equipment	.885
Tang2	The Physical facilities (land, warehouses or offices) at the Free Zone are well equipped	.855
Tang3	Employees at Salalah Free Zone are neat in their appearance	.863
Tang4	Materials associated with the services (Registration forms, fees, Rules & regulations) are visible, accessible and clear at Salalah Free Zone	.642
Rel1	Salalah free zone fulfills its promises	.927
Rel2	Salalah free zone will show interest when customers have a problem.	.906
Rel3	Salalah Free Zone do the right services from the first time.	.810
Rel4	Salalah Free zone provides the service at the time they promise to do	.867
Rel5	Salalah Free Zone insist on error-free records	.938
Resp1	Employees of Salalah Free Zone tell customers when service will be performed.	.894
Resp2	Employees of Salalah Free Zone give prompt services to customers	.790
Resp3	Employees of Salalah Free Zone always willing to help customers	.853
Resp4	Employees of Salalah Free Zone will not be busy to respond to customers	.830
Ass1	The behavior of employees at Salalah Free zone instill confidence in customers	.774
Ass2	The customers of Salalah Free zone feel safe in transactions	.765
Ass3	Employees of Salalah free zone are consistently courteous with customers	.957
Ass4	Employees of Salalah free zone have the knowledge to answer customer questions	.851
Emp1	Salalah Free zone company provide individual attention to customers.	.919
Emp2	Salalah Free zone's operation hour convenient to their customers.	.749
Emp3	Salalah free zone company will have employees who give customers personal services	.806
Emp4	Salalah Free zone will give customers the best interest at heart.	.775
Emp5	The employee of Salalah Free zone company will understand the specific needs of their customers	.727

4.1 Factor Loadings in PCA

PCA is a dimension-reduction tool that can be used to reduce a large set of variables to a small set that still contains most of the information in the large set. The first principal component accounts for as much of the variability in the data as possible, and each succeeding component accounts for as much of the remaining variability as possible. Factor loadings are the correlation between the original variables and the factors, and the key to understanding the underlying nature of a particular factor. In the following factor matrices, the first component of each of the 27 variables in a product factor loading sequence is taken into consideration to understand the correlation of each variable with every other variable in the questionnaire and find out the true significance of overall responses.

4.1.1 Factor Loading for questions regarding the tangibility

		Component
Tang1	Salalah Free Zone have modern looking equipment	.077
Tang2	The Physical facilities (land, warehouses or offices) at the Free Zone are well equipped	.498
Tang3	Employees at Salalah Free Zone are neat in their appearance	.217
Tang4	Materials associated with the services (Registration forms, fees, Rules & regulations) are visible, accessible and clear at Salalah Free Zone	.394

•Among four questions relating to the Tangibility, the physical facilities at Salalah Free has scored the highest load among other variables. Salalah free zone customers definably believe that the physical facilities can affect the Tangibility factor.

4.1.2 Factor Loading for questions regarding the Reliability

		Component
Rel1	Salalah free zone fulfills its promises	.695
Rel2	Salalah free zone will show interest when customers have a problem.	.735
Rel3	Salalah Free Zone do the right services from the first time.	.842
Rel4	Salalah Free zone provides the service at the time they promise to do	.345
Rel5	Salalah Free Zone insist on error-free records	.458

•With a load of 0.842, SFZ customers consider that performing the service right at the first time which can affect SFZ reliability.

4.1.3 Factor Loading for questions regarding the Responsiveness

		Component
Resp1	Employees of Salalah Free Zone tell customers when service will be performed.	.041
Resp2	Employees of Salalah Free Zone give prompt services to customers	-.108
Resp3	Employees of Salalah Free Zone always willing to help customers	-.148
Resp4	Employees of Salalah Free Zone will not be busy to respond to customers	.435

•From the responsiveness point of view, the variable of "Employees of Salalah Free Zone will never be too busy to respond to customers' requests" has a strong association with the "Responsiveness" factor.

4.1.4 Factor Loading for questions regarding the Assurance

		Component
Ass1	The behavior of employees at Salalah Free zone instill confidence in customers	.405
Ass2	The customers of Salalah Free zone feel safe in transactions	-.038
Ass3	Employees of Salalah free zone are consistently courteous with customers	-.439
Ass4	Employees of Salalah free zone have the knowledge to answer customer questions	-.048



•The behavior of employees at SFZ instill confidence in customer has got a correlation of 0.405 with the factor of Assurance

4.1.5 Factor Loading for questions regarding the Empathy

		Component
Emp1	Salalah Free zone company provide individual attention to customers.	.056
Emp2	Salalah Free zone's operation hour convenient to their customers.	.240
Emp3	Salalah free zone company will have employees who give customers personal services	.720
Emp4	Salalah Free zone will give customers the best interest at heart.	.654
Emp5	The employee of Salalah Free zone company will understand the specific needs of their customers	.755

With a correlation of 0.755, understanding customers' specific needs has the highest load among other variables. This would be considered a strong association with "Empathy factor

4.2 Interpretation

From the results of the above analysis, we can see that the Satisfaction rate of Salalah free zone customer is 68% and it became clear that the factor of Reliability is the most influential factor that affect customer's satisfaction at Salalah Free Zone company, followed by Empathy, Tangibility, Responsiveness and Assurance sequentially respectively.

For Reliability, the analysis results showed that the variable of providing the service correctly from the first time is more affecting the quality of services at Salalah Free Zone and greatly affects their customers' satisfaction, followed by attention to finding solutions to customers' problems. The variable of understanding customer's specific needs and satisfy them comes at the forefront of variables affecting the quality of services and customers' satisfaction in terms of Empathy.

The data also shows that the Physical facilities (land, warehouses or offices) at the Free Zone needs to be well equipped before selling as it affects also customer satisfaction. The analysis also showed that customers would like to feel that SFZ employees will not hesitate to serve them no matter how busy they are. they would also feel that employees at SFZ instill confidence in them.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

From the results of the above analysis, it becomes clear that the factor of Reliability especially in terms of providing the right promised service from the first time is the most influential factor that affect customer's satisfaction at Salalah Free Zone company, followed by Empathy, Tangibility, Responsiveness and Assurance sequentially respectively.

In order to enhance the customer experience and improve the level of customer satisfaction with the services provided by SFZ, the researchers suggest adopting a project of "Building Customer-focused culture" within Salalah Free Zone. This is a program that works in changing employees' behavior, mindset and provides employees with knowledge and passion towards customer satisfaction. The cultural change program is a group of activities designed to change the mindset of SFZ employees and their behaviors toward customers in an encouraging way. It will also standardize the level of services provided by SFZ and increase motivation.



The outline of the program on “Building a Customer- Focused Culture At SFZ” is as follows:

Activity	Description
Issue SFZ new Culture Components and Standards related to customer service.	Create a clear document that will communicate to all employees about the customer service standers and behaviors expected of them as employees of the SFZ.
Establish a Champion of Corporate Culture Award.	Announce the creation of an award that would be given to the person or team that best displays the SFZ new standers
Create a recognition board that acknowledge employee achievement	Section heads will thank their employees through it if they notice a good behavior. This will appear to all
Launch the program of changing culture"	A ceremony in which the start of the program will be announced. The new culture components booklet will be published by email, listed on the SFZ portal, giving to each employee as a laminated card
Deliver Training on the new culture components and standards	Alpha start international training center will provide a customize training
Conduct Learn Sessions	Service providers, first line employees will tell the best and worst experience with customer and how he/she handle it. Customer service manager will advise on the best practice of each situation and will encourage the best experience. Meeting outcome to share with all employees.
Share Tip of the week on SFZ new customer service culture	Every week employees will receive the tip of the week
Publish internal articles recognizing employees or teams	Based on indoor and outdoor surveys.
Include implementing the new culture components in employee's appraisal	
A strong customer experience to be discussed in every training courses if possible.	Each training course SFZ employee will attend in 2019, customer experience topic should be discussed by agreement with training institution.

It is expected that the implementation of this program will help in promoting a culture of customer service amongst employees of the Salalah Free Zone and will also sensitise them towards the requirements and demands of customers. This will go a long way in building a customer focused culture in the organization.



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