

Cooperation vs. Collaboration

Elevating the Relationships Between CSMs and Customers

Without the right tools and processes in place, Customer Success Managers (CSMs) can sometimes find themselves falling into the trap of playing a very reactive role...sort of like glorified tech support. CS leaders are always looking for better ways to ensure Customer Success plays a more dynamic role in meeting customers' needs. Part of ensuring your CSMs' ability to be more proactive and productive involves giving them the space and resources to meet customer needs, while simultaneously working with customers to take the relationship a step further, to drive stakeholder value.

Turns out, there's actually a really handy parallel between this concept in CS and the "Drive Stakeholder Value" Managing Professional Module that is part of the latest version of ITIL, ITIL 4. What is ITIL you ask? ITIL is a leading service management framework that IT service organizations use to ensure the businesses and customers they support are getting the full value of their services. Sounds familiar, right? Much like CS, IT must be concerned about co-creating value with their customers – be it internal or external – and aligning with the needs of the business. When we heard about how useful the ITIL 4 strategic guidance is for measuring and building relationships between IT and their customers, we had to jump in to find out what we could glean from ITIL practices for Customer Success.

So, we sat down with Jeff Jensen, a professional strategic consultant and certified ITIL trainer, to learn more about the ITIL 4 – Drive Stakeholder Value (DSV) model for relationship maturity. Specifically, we discussed the difference between cooperation and collaboration and what it could mean for Customer Success. His company, [I Train IT Leaders](#), provides strategic consulting based upon organizational alignment, stakeholder experience, and continual improvement, and delivers training in ITIL and other related frameworks in partnership with [ITSM Academy](#). Lucky for us, Jeff also has extensive experience as a Customer Success Manager, so he understands the ins and outs of both CS best practices and the ITIL framework.

Let's ask the teacher!

In Jeff's world, ITIL strategy is all about seeing IT as an integral part of the business rather than a stand-alone entity. IT services are all too often siloed from the rest of the business (again, doesn't this sound familiar?!). ITIL helps IT leaders break free from that mindset, plan more strategically, and develop better partnerships with the organizations they serve (aka: their "customers"). In the course, Drive Stakeholder Value, the business relationship model is broken down into stages, and strategies to move from the early stages of engagement to a more mature co-creation and value-adding partnership are provided.

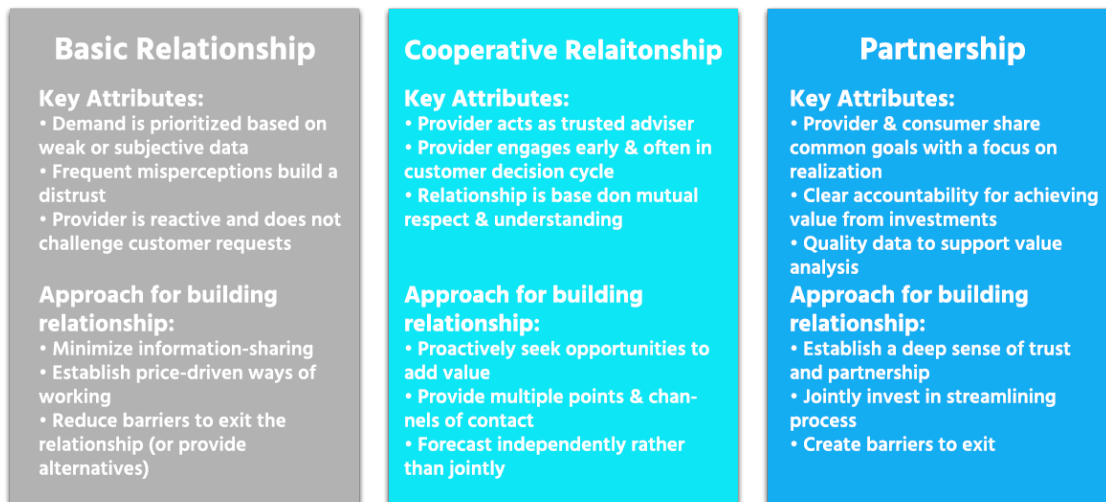
At ESG, we know all about using maturity models to [build the right capabilities](#) and [operationalize your CS practice](#) to ultimately [transform your organization](#) into a CS powerhouse. ITIL 4 has a similar model for moving from a simple relationship of cooperation to a robust one of collaboration. The best part is, we can use it too!

Jeff confirms, "That's part of what is so exciting about this material, the concepts can really help organizations at a strategic level, not just an operational level. It's about broadening the conversation to understand things like customer journeys and value stream maps and service blueprinting and all the things that CSMs need to not just understand but actually go help develop those capabilities inside of the organizations that they are working for and help them be better at what they do."

What's the difference between Cooperation and Collaboration?

In simplest terms, cooperation is about working with others to achieve your own goals. Collaboration, on the other hand, is about working with others to produce something together and achieve shared goals. Great CSMs are always on the lookout for ways to take relationships with their customers to the next level: on the scale from cooperation to collaboration.

The ITIL 4 DSV model breaks this journey down into steps and provides more of a service provider/service consumer context for each step. It defines three levels of maturity within that relationship. The first is Basic. An order taker. A mostly reactive role. The second is Cooperative, which is more of a blend of service provider and trusted advisor. You're still doing things together, but it's more to achieve things on your own, for yourself. Then, you get to Partnership, and that's really the collaborative piece.



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“Cooperation means you’re working together to achieve your own goals,” Jeff explains. “By working together, you might have a goal you can both share but for the most part you’re doing things to meet the needs of your own organization, and things can still be pretty siloed. Whereas, if you’re at the Partnership level of relationship, you’re sitting on the same side of the table and working together to achieve shared goals that you couldn’t achieve if you weren’t working together.”

The most successful Customer Success Managers develop this deeper level of trust with their customers. By becoming true partners, CSMs are able to tackle more advanced problems alongside their customers. They can try new things, fail, iterate, and try again. Testing and refining solutions to problems until new innovations are discovered.

“You still have a relationship in either case, but it’s about how you are working together and increasing that band of visibility inside of each other’s organizations. When you’re sitting on the same side of the table, you can develop strategy, innovate, and experiment and learn. You can apply design thinking and take more risks. All these things are possible when you are on that relationship level of collaborating.”

Crossing from one end of the spectrum to the other by co-creating value

So, what’s the secret sauce for developing a true partnership with your customers?

It starts with evaluating the relationship you currently have. Are you already in the stage of cooperation, or do you have some work to do? You can’t move forward if you don’t have a strong foundation already in place. Talk with your customer, find out where they stand, and look for opportunities to build trust. You both need to be interested in pursuing a more engaged, team-centered dynamic in order for this to work.

“Traditionally, this is where a lot of organizations like IT have fallen into a rut,” Jeff explains. “They’ll sign a contract, they’ll have meetings, they’d do Quarterly Business Reviews and have discussions, but it never translates to really understanding the customer. You want to dig deeper and get to know how they are doing their work, what’s working for them and what’s not, and how they are using your solution to enhance their performance or reduce their constraints. Find out how they are delivering and supporting their own customers. Follow that chain down the line. This discovery process gives you an opportunity to build that trust, build that relationship, and find new ways to enhance your own performance and facilitate more positive outcomes for your customers.”

By taking a more intentional approach to learning about your customers, their processes and procedures, and their own customers, you are crossing over into a more collaborative mindset. Once you’ve engaged at this level, you can take everything you’ve learned and look at it from the perspective of co-creating value together.

“It’s not just about me creating value for my customers, but also about developing and improving my own organizational capabilities to enhance my products and services and make them better,” says Jeff. “The more visibility, the more involvement I have from the other side of the table, the more feedback I have to provide better solutions, course correct, and make sure that I’m hitting the mark for my customers.”

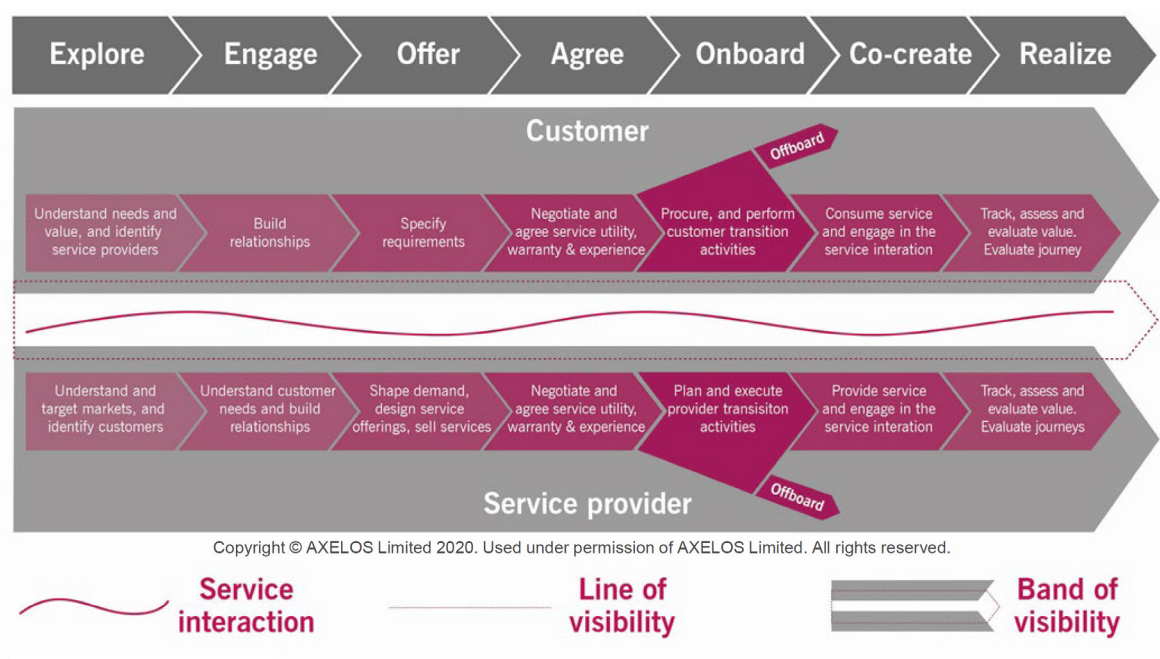
A good example of this is how grocery shopping has evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before, purchasing your groceries meant getting up, getting dressed (the horror!), and driving to the grocery store to do all your shopping in person. But during the changes and upheaval of 2020, grocery chains began developing and enhancing solutions for their customers to make in-person shopping less frequent. Businesses like Shipt and Instacart have taken grocery shopping to a whole new level by allowing customers to order online from multiple stores for pickup or delivery directly to their door. Consumers get a lot more interaction and engagement from these online ordering platforms via personalized deals and one-on-one communication with their shoppers. Customers derive benefits from this enhanced experience, and they will choose the service providers that give it to them. On the opposite side, the businesses benefit from improved insights into customer behavior and getting the jump on their competition by providing better services that differentiate them from the rest of the marketplace. That's value co-creation.

What's the ultimate result? A more collaborative experience.

A model for relationship maturity from “hello” to true partnership

As mentioned earlier, the ITIL customer journey is a model for evolving your customer relationship from a more reactive, order taker role to one of cooperation and then, ultimately, to one of collaboration. As part of delivering the ITIL 4 - Drive Stakeholder Value class, Jeff outlines the seven steps of the ITIL Customer Journey Map to help students understand the different touchpoints and interactions of each stage as they move from one end of the spectrum to the other.

The Generic Customer Journey



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“It’s a way to take this idea of doing a customer journey map and make it more approachable and easier to get started. It takes a look at the roles and responsibilities of both the provider and the consumer to successfully move through each of these different phases.”

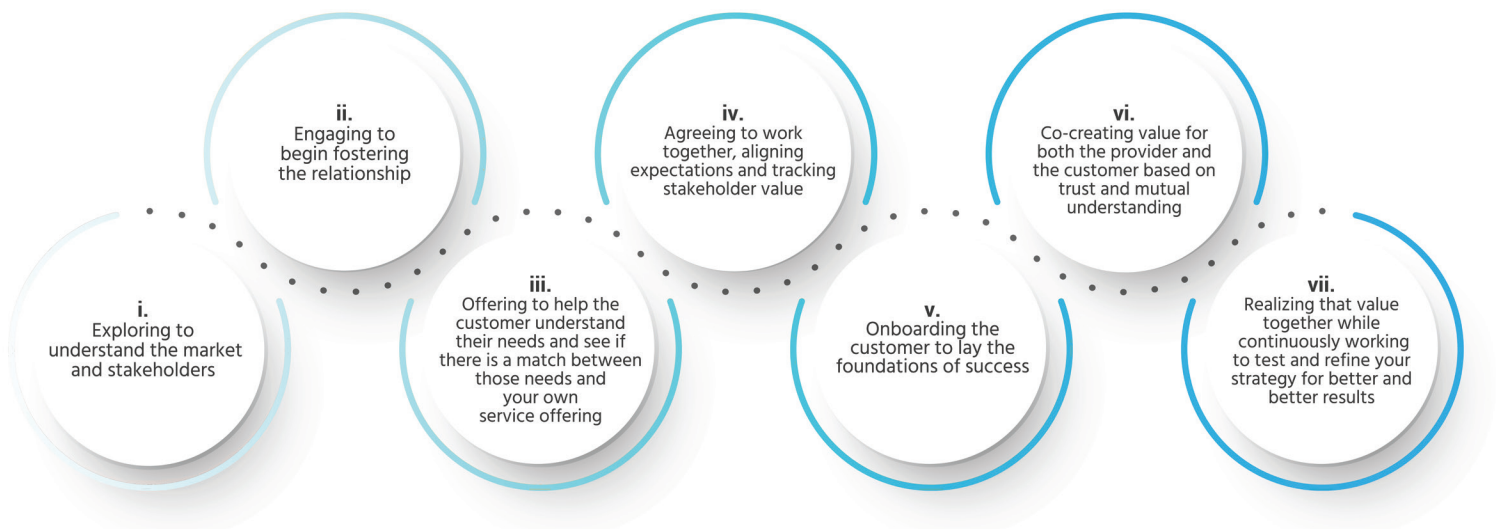
The ITIL 4- DSV customer journey map takes a broad view of the customer relationship going back to well before a customer became a customer all the way to the stage of true partnership. Looking at the journey from this higher level can give Customer Success leaders a different perspective. It really demonstrates the potential for working toward a partnership at a much earlier stage of the customer journey.

Jeff says, “You’re not just starting at onboarding like we typically do in CS. You’re recognizing that there’s all these other steps going on that we can take into account. You can look at all the customer touchpoints and interactions taking place before onboarding and incorporate them into your overall Customer Success strategy. It’s another way to look at the path to partnership, which helps you hit the ground running – getting your customers to see you as a potential partner versus a service provider right from the start.”

It’s important to recognize that CSMs aren’t typically involved until onboarding because that piece usually belongs to sales, marketing, or an **account management** role. But, we could and should start looking at what’s happening with the customer in these earlier stages - asking what can we do earlier on to set our customers up for a collaborative relationship?

Jeff believes this means Customer Success should be involved prior to onboarding. “When your goal is to build a collaborative versus cooperative relationship, getting Customer Success involved early on makes sense. Then, CSMs gain better visibility into the customer’s needs and are able to adapt their approach for the long run.”

When you break down the path of relationship maturity into these steps, you can see the differences in each stage that define forward momentum. Each phase moves you closer to your end goal.



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The link between teamwork and performance: cross-functional teamwork for the win

You don't have to look far for evidence supporting the benefits of collaboration. When organizations within a business transition to a team-based model, their performance significantly increases, according to Deloitte's recent [Global Human Capital Trends](#) report. They looked at high-performing organizations like Cisco and Google and found that promoting team-based thinking makes them more agile and efficient. These studies are supported by [similar findings a few years ago](#) showing companies that promoted collaborative working were five times as likely to be high performing than those who didn't.

In other words, teamwork makes the dream work!

Applying this mindset to the relationship we have with our customers will not only improve productivity but it will enable Customer Success to build mutually beneficial relationships with their customers that stand the test of time. Much like the [ESG Customer Success Maturity Model](#), the ITIL 4 – Drive Stakeholder Value model gives us better insight into each step we need to take as CS professionals to establish better relationships with our customers. We don't need to settle for a relationship of cooperation. We can reach further, build trust with our customers, and take things to the next level – into a truly collaborative partnership where everyone benefits.