
Fangs of Customers : A Tale from the Frontline

Micheal Sony, Nandakumar Mekoth***

Abstract:

This case study is an analysis from an academic research perspective. In the intention of authors is to focus on the functioning of Goa Electricity Board. In the detail analysis of segment dealing with customers of electricity Department, authors found that frontline employees not only require technical skills but also they need to have understanding of interpersonal negotiation skills. Lack of this may lead to delays, harassments and even tensions. Since the linesman deal with the customer directly and electricity is the essential service product, the quality of service will definitely improve if the employees of this segment gets training in communication and negotiation skills. The authors do not intend to illustrate either the effective or ineffective handling of any situation. The authors have changed names and other identifiable information for confidentiality.

Introduction

John Borges glanced at the clock. It was 10:38 pm on 30th April 2011. He was to attend a complaint immediately as customers were without electricity supply. He checked the status of existing 11 kV distribution lines and found all are healthy. Hence, now John needed to visit the customer premises for further investigation and solve the issues. John worked as a frontline employee in the state owned power utility, the Goa Electricity Department in Goa, India. The customer reports the complaint over the telephone or personally. After getting the information, John had to attend the faults based upon the technical requirements of the fault reported by the customer.

Goa Electricity Department : An Over View

The Goa Electricity Department was formed in January 1963 under the Government of Goa, India. It is the

only licensee operating in the State of Goa for transmission and distribution of Electrical Energy. The Electricity Department of Goa does not have its own Electricity generation. The majority of the power requirement for the State of Goa is met through its share from Central Sector Power Stations of the

***Mr. Micheal Sony**
Maintenance Engineer
220kV EHV Substation
E-mail: michaelsonygoa@gmail.com

****Prof. Nandakumar Mekoth**
Dean and Head, Faculty of Management
Studies, Goa University, Goa- 403206
Email: nmakoth@rediffmail.com

National Thermal Power Corporation as allocated by the Central Government.

The present demand for the State of Goa is restricted to about 500 MW which is being met by power from various Central Sector Power Stations and generating stations within the state. In addition, the department also purchases power from Co-generation (Cogeneration is the use of a power station to simultaneously generate both electricity and useful heat), Independent Power Purchaser (is an entity, which is not a public utility, but which owns facilities for sale of electricity to utilities and end users) and Trader.

There are no direct link lines between the generating station of the central sector and Goa. Hence this power is wheeled through the Grids of the neighboring State of Maharashtra and Karnataka. Electricity Department pays wheeling charges to MSETCL (Maharashtra State Electricity Transmission Corporation Ltd.) & KPTCL (Karnataka Power Transmission Corporation Ltd.) for using their line network for wheeling of the power from the central sector stations to Goa. The power from the Western region is wheeled from the MSETCL's 400 kV Sub-Station at Kolhapur to the 400 kV Sub-Station at Colvale in Goa. The power from these lines is transmitted at 220 kV level to Ponda and Tivim substations of the Department. Similarly the Southern region power is transmitted from Nagjhari to Ponda.

The state of Goa at present faces a shortage of around 50 MW. Electricity supply is shutdown (Load restriction) during the peak electricity consumption period i.e. around 6:30 pm to 10:00 pm for the Extra High Tension Consumers.

The severity of load restriction i.e. from 25%, 50% or 100% depends on real time decision of the state load dispatch center who in turn take decision based on central quota of power allocation. The Department has adopted Voltages of 220 kV, 110 kV and 33 kV for sub transmission and 11 kV, 440 and 220 volts for distribution purpose. The Department has adopted overhead line system for transmission and distribution except for Panaji town where part of the area is covered by underground system. The remaining major towns like Vasco, Margao town and major tourist attractions like famous areas beaches in Goa are now being provided with underground network.

All the towns and villages of Goa are electrified and any intending consumer can avail power supply by submitting requisition in the prescribed form to the appropriate office of the Department. They are granted the power supply subject to fulfilling the required conditions and payment of charges as per conditions of the supply of Electrical Energy and miscellaneous charges. Goa Electricity Department is under control of the State Government. The Electricity Department of Goa caters to around 6 Lakhs consumers (Exhibit 1 for further details) with an annual energy consumption of approx 2900 MUs (Million units, 1 MU = 10⁶ kilowatt hours). The energy consumption pattern of different consumers for the year 2010 -2011 is given in Exhibit 2. The annual revenue requirement for the year 2011-2012 is given in Exhibit 3. The revenue earned from existing tariff structure is given in Exhibit 4 (Exhibits are given in the Appendix).

Goa being one of the worlds best tourist destination, there is huge influx of both domestic and international tourist in the state; the responsibility of supplying high quality, & reliable power supply is being entrusted to the state's only power utility service provider, the electricity department. The electricity department has responded well to it by being the only utility service provider in the entire country to have achieved the distinction of lowest Transmission & Distribution loss of only 16%. It has good infrastructure through out the state and complaint centers are opened in every village.

Working of Electricity Service Center:

In order to provide Electricity services from receiving station to the customer utility point, many branches of Electricity complaint section are placed across the entire state covering urban, sub-urban and rural areas. Different types of faults arise within the transmission and distribution systems. The Department, some times, is compelled to take the measure of power shutdowns for maintenance, repair and renovation works in the electricity lines and substations. A notice of prearranged shutdowns is published in the local newspapers giving details of date, time and areas affected. However, for unscheduled maintenance or repair works of urgent nature, power shutdowns may be taken on emergency basis without any notice to the general public. Even in such circumstances, efforts are made to intimate important consumers such as hospitals, press, continuous process industries etc. on telephone about the emergency shutdown timings and duration.

Apart from shutdowns, if the main service fuse or fuses of Departments fail or the power supply or the quality of power supply to any consumer is affected in any other matter, the customer should give a notice about the same to the nearest complain center of the Department. In the village where no complain center exists, a register is maintained in the Village Panchayat office to lodge the complaint. (Panchayat is the office democratically elected village council in India).

An Electricity service center is headed by an Electrical Engineer supported by skilled crew comprising of a Lineman and Line Helpers. The crew has to carry out the work under the instructions and guidelines of the Engineer. As the electricity services are required by the customer through out day and night, the branch is operational round the clock and the personnel are required to work on shifts. Therefore, it is conforming to the requirements of the labor union.

The complaints can be lodged either in person or over the telephone. Only the authorized Department's person wearing a uniform is permitted to replace fuse or work on the line or transformer centers or attend complaints in customer premises. No person other than Department's authorized personnel is permitted to work on the Department's line or transformer centers and if found are liable for prosecution under the Indian Electricity Act. Upon receiving the complaint, the Linesman, assisted by a helper and a driver visit the place and rectify the fault. In every shift, two sets of such employees have been working. However, there is only one common driver and vehicle to transport the Line staff for commuting to and from the place of fault and complaint center.

John, the Linesman - His Experience on the Job:

John was in the service as a linesman with the Electricity Department for the last 22 years. He possessed a two year certificate in Electrician trade from the state council of vocational training. John says *"My job is very demanding as each day some different problem crops up". "I have to interact with customers". "Sometimes apart from solving their electrical issues, I need to pacify them as they are wild" "I understand them as even I get disturbed when I am at home and there is no electric supply"*. When asked about his nature of work he states that *"My*

role as a linesman is to attend customer complaints regarding electricity problems on the low tension side i.e. 230 and 415V". "We work round the clock in shifts". He is of the view that majority of electrical problems are attended by the linesman and only some faults which are difficult to rectify are attended by consulting the engineers. Upon preliminary inspection, they ascertain whether it is possible with him to diagnose & rectify the customer problems. The department follows the policy of logging in the complaint register entering the time of receiving, attending complaint, the nature of the fault, action taken and remarks. Different types of faults are reported by the customers e.g. meter burnt, fuse failure, over voltage, under voltage, total black out, electricity leakage on equipments, voltage fluctuations, service wire connection damage, leakage on earthing pip, miniature circuit breaker not holding, Earth leakage circuit breaker not holding, single phasing, phase selector sparking or damage etc. The linesman in the respective cases has to ascertain the cause of concerned fault and do the remedial measures immediately to attend the fault.

Attending a customer's Complaints:

The telephone of the Department rang and on the other end there was a consumer. Michael Souza from Mala, Panaji was complaining that there was no power supply to only his house in the locality. He complained that due to severe voltage fluctuations, his Television and air conditioner went out of order. John reached the site along with driver and a line helper. Upon preliminary inquiry, it was learnt that the consumer, Michael was furious as he had just missed an evening soap on the Sony television Channel; to add to his woes the weather was hot and air conditioner was also damaged. John immediately started fault rectification process and he suspected the fault in the service line (Service-line means, any electric supply-line through which electrical energy is supplied to a consumer from the distribution main) coming from the nearest electrical pole to his house. As he was in the process of rectifying the fault i.e. replacing the service wire from the pole to the consumer house, they heard someone shouting *"Don't take the wire through my land"*. It was Samson, a neighbor of Michael and from his countenance any one can infer that there was no love lost between them.

They were good friends at the time of the electrical connection released to Michaels' house. At that time Samson had permitted the service connection wire to be laid through his premises because if it was to be laid along the road than Michael had to erect a pole and it was costly. Also the process was time consuming. Being friends at that time, Samson had permitted to lay the wire through his property.

Now, Samson objected to stringing new connection wire through his premises. He is of the opinion that if the electrical service connection has to be wired it should be done along the public road. The policy of the department is to supply service connection wire free up to a distance of 30 meters and above that consumer has to pay for it. Through Samson property it was less than 30 meters, however, the distance to pull the wire along the road is more than 400 meters. This was not acceptable to Michael as he has to pay for a new pole and also service connection wire. It was also not possible to make payments for the pole on the night and do all the formalities.

Michael started forcing John to pull the new electrical wire the same way it was existing and Samson also threatened John not to pull the wire through his land. All John's attempt to convince either of them was falling on deaf ears.

The Decisive Confrontation:

As the situation was getting out of control, John along with the helper and the driver boarded the vehicle; however the vehicle was blocked by a human chain of Michael and his friends. At that situation, John immediately called to the complaint center and then informed his superiors. They in turn filed a police complaint. The police came and intervened on the site and as the matter was of civil nature they tried to appease both the parties. As Michael and Samson were not reconciling, hence the police finally escorted John and others to leave safely from the site.

The Next Day of the complaints:

Michael came to the complaint center the next morning at around 10:30 am and started shouting at the staff. He complained that John is a lazy employee

and even expressed that he is not a capable employee. He was even of the opinion that John is supporting Samson for some pecuniary gains. In order to calm down the state of affairs, John was summoned by the Engineer in Charge.

John who had finished his night shift, was called back to report to office immediately. Accordingly, he reported to office at 11.20 hrs. Upon seeing John, Michael got infuriated and was hurling abuses and words like "He kept me in dark last night". "He is useless" and demanded action be taken against John.

John explained all that what happened and Engineer in Charge decided to inform police and the local Sarpanch (Elected Village Head). And finally at about 4.10 pm the police, Engineer in Charge, Sarpanch, John, and the concerned linesman on duty, went to the site. Finally after lot of mediation the matter was settled with Samson and at about 17:45 hrs, John and the concerned linesman on duty managed to replace the old service connection wire with the condition that John would pay for the new pole and service wire within seven days. This stop gap arrangement would be removed after John makes the payments.

Repercussions:

At about 18:30 hrs, John reached home. Having not slept the other night and also during the day he was very tired and feeling sleepy. As he lay on the bed, he was thinking "*What should I do in future so that I will not land in such situations again? Whom should I blame for this incident? Is it Michael for accusing me for no fault of mine? Or is it Samson whose inimical terms with Michael lead to the situation out of control? Or is it the power utility or is it the Engineer in Charge who should have acted in a better way to diffuse the situation?*"

Just then the clock strikes nine times and it is time for Mr. John to have dinner in order to go for work. He reported for duty again on that day at 22:00 hrs depressed, tired and sleepy. Again the phone rang but his time it was the Engineer in Charge. He warned John and instructed him to use his presence of mind and settle such problems there and there itself.

Key issues that emerge from the case study

1. In services which are technical in nature or professionally oriented, the selection of employees was conventionally based on technical competence. However, in high contact technical services, many firms do feel the need to look for rewarding interpersonal skills. This results in FLE adaptability along both the interpersonal level and technical service offering level.

2. In electricity services, there are other factors which need to be explored for delivering satisfactory services apart from service provider's intentions. Intra customer cooperation and its impact on service delivery needs further study. Does customer training lead to intra customer cooperation?

3. Adaptability of the front line employee is becoming complex considering that occasionally unrealistic needs of customers surface. Usually, the adaptability issues were considered secondary till the performance dipped. However, there is a phase between noticeable performance dip & compatibility

of the employee. It is during this phase, the employee is under severe stress. Organizations should proactively study dynamics of the employee's adaptability issues.

4. The organization is placing unrealistic demands on employees. Conventionally, negotiation skills e.g extra role behaviors for a technical service employee was desirable. Extra role behavior has become day to day affair thus raising issues of employee adaptability. This calls frequently revisiting job analysis, training & recruitment.

5. The customer misbehavior, abuse, accusations etc are becoming a more common phenomenon. FLE emotional stability is tested time and again. Organization should give employees appropriate training to handle such misbehavior.

6. In services which are of essential in nature, customers need to be educated in the lines of maxim of Vox Populi as their cooperation enables the service provider to serve the customers better.

Appendix

Exhibit 1 : Category Wise Number of consumers as on 2010 -2011

Sr. No.	Consumer Category	Number of customers (2011)
A	Low tension supply	
1(a)	Tariff LTD/Domestic and Non Commercial	446,802
1(b)	Tariff LTD / Low Income Group	17,903
1(c)	Tariff LTD / Domestic Mixed	50
2	Tariff LTC / Commercial	98,318
3	Tariff LTP / Motive Power	10,027
3(a)	Tariff - LTP / Mixed (Hotel Industries)	-
4	Tariff - LTPG / Agriculture	15,298
5	Tariff - LTP / Public Lighting	9,000
6	Tariff - LTPWW / Public Water Works	548
	Total	597,946

Continued

Exhibit 1 : Category Wise Number of consumers as on 2010 -2011

Sr. No.	Consumer Category	Number of customers (2011)
B	High Tension Supply	
7	Tariff HT-Mixed	197
8	Tariff HTI / Industrial	408
9	Tariff H.T. Industrial (Ferro Melting)	28
10	Tariff HTAG / Agricultural	63
11	Tariff EHTI / Industrial	5
12	Tariff H.T. PW / Public Water Supply and	32
13	Tariff H.T. MES / Defence Establishments	11
14	Tariff H.T. Industrial (steel rolling)	11
15	Tariff HT - Industries (IT High Tech.)	8
	Total	763
C	Temporary Supply	420
16	Tariff - LT / Temporary	420
17	Tariff - HT / Temporary	420
18	Total	599,129

Exhibit 2 : Category Wise Energy Sold, Revenue Earned and Average Revenue per kWh

Sr.No.	Category	Energy Sale MJ	Revenue Rupees Crore
A	Low Tension Supply	1,222	257.62
1(a)	Tariff LTD / Domestic and Non-Commercial	712	109.15
1(b)	Tariff LTD / Low Income Group	6	0.43
1(c)	Tariff LTD / Domestic Mixed	2	0.37
2	Tariff - LTC / Commercial	329	103.82
3	Tariff - LTP / Motive Power	104	30.52
3(a)	Tariff - LTP Mixed (Hotel Industries)	7	2.29
4	Tariff - LTAG / Agriculture	17	1.7
5	Tariff - LTPL / Public Lighting	44	8.82
6	Tariff - LT PWW / Public Water Works	2	0.53

Continued Exhibit 2

Category Wise Energy Sold, Revenue Earned and Average Revenue per kWh

Sr.No.	Category	Energy Sale MU*	Revenue Rupees Crore
B	High Tension Supply	1,653	585.39
7	Tariff HT-Mixed	117	49.64
8	Tariff HTI/Industrial	449	194.45
9	H.T. Industrial (Melting/Power Intensive)	575	195.79
10	Tariff-HTAG/Agriculture	8	0.94
11	EHTI/Industrial	152	59.57
12	H.T. PW/Public Water Supply and Sewage	121	43.01
13	H.T. MES / Defence Establishments	30	9.14
14	H.T. Industrial (Steel Rolling)	149	31.85
15	Tariff HT-Industries (IT High Tech.)	1	0.99
C	Temporary Supply	16	10.96
16	Tariff - LT / Temporary	16	10.96
17	Tariff - HT / Temporary	-	-
	Total	2891	853.97

* 1 MU = Million kWh

Exhibit 3 : Annual Revenue Requirement

S.No.	Item of expense	FY 2009-10 (Actual)	FY 2010-11 (Provisional)	FY 2011-12 (Projected)
1	2	3	4	5
1	Cost of fuel	-	-	-
2	Cost of Power Purchase	651.72	786.45	856.05
3	Employee Costs	124.29	123.51	129.71
4	R&M Expenses	16.69	16.55	17.03
5	Administration and general expenses	20.18	17.84	19.30
6	Depreciation	29.69	35.37	42.87
7	Interest charges (incl interest on working capital & interest on Security Deposit)	10.11	12.05	17.04
8	Return on NFA / Equity	-	-	17.18
9	Provision for Bad Debt	-	-	4.27
10	Other Expenses	0.10	0.07	0.21
11	Total Revenue Requirement	852.79	991.84	1,103.65
12	Less : Non Tariff Income	12.76	9.61	21.06
13	Less : Revenue from Sale of Power - UI Pool	70.77	74.61	33.36
14	Less : Revenue from Sale of Power - Power Exchanges	25.33	16.19	97.43
15	Net Revenue Requirement (11-12-13-14)	743.93	891.42	951.80

Exhibit 4 : Actual Revenue Earned

S.No.	Category of Consumer	2011-12		
		Energy Sale/ Demand (MUs)	Revenue (Rs. Crore)	Average Revenue (Rs/kWh)
A	Low Tension Supply	1,222	257.62	2.11
1(a)	Tariff LTD/Domestic and Non-Commercial	712	109.15	1.53
1(b)	Tariff LTD/Low Income Group	6	0.43	0.69
1(c)	Tariff-LTC/Domestic Mixed	2	0.37	2.43
2	Tariff-LTC/Commercial	329	103.82	3.16
3	Tariff-LTP/Motive Power	104	30.52	2.93
3(a)	Tariff-LTP/Mixed (Hotel Industries)	7	2.29	3.50
4	Tariff-LTAG/Agriculture	17	1.70	1.00
5	Tariff-LTPL/Public Lighting	44	8.82	2.00
6	Tariff-LT PWW/Public Water Works	2	0.53	3.00
B	High Tension Supply	1,653	585.39	3.54
7	Tariff HT-Mixed	117	49.64	4.24
8	Tariff HTI/Industrial	449	194.64	3.90
9	H.T. Industrial (Ferro Metallurgical/Steel Melting / Power Intensive)	575	195.79	3.41
10	Tariff-HTAG/Agriculture	8	0.94	1.25
11	EHTI/Industrial	152	59.57	3.92
12	H.T. PW/Public Water Supply and Sewage	121	43.01	3.54
13	H.T. MES/Defence Establishments	30	9.14	3.00
14	H.T. Industrial (Steel Rolling)	149	31.85	2.14
15	Tariff HT-Industrial (IT High Tech).	1	0.99	8.75
C	Temporary Supply	16	10.96	7.00
16	Tariff-LT/Temporary	16	10.96	7.00
17	Tariff-HT/Temporary	-	-	-
	Total Demand / Sale Within State	2,891	853.97	2.95