Communicating with Customers

Situation—A mentor describes some challenges of teaching interns to communicate with customers.
(Read aloud.)

“I manage the technical assistance center for internal employees here. Since our customers are internal employees, if someone comes into their office and their computer doesn’t work, they’ll call us up and say ‘How do I fix this?’ With the interns, the first concern is business communication issues. Make sure they are well spoken. Sometimes they’ll come in and say, ‘like you know,’ and you get the slang and everything. That’s fine in the office, but when you get on the phone with a customer it’s not fine.”

What Do You Think?
(Discuss for 5 minutes.)

How would you teach this intern to communicate with customers?
The Mentor’s Response
(Read aloud.)

1 “I do a lot of just coaching as well. We had a couple situations where, instead of having a customer call us and then you’re on the phone and you have to think right off the top of your head how to resolve an issue, the intern was able to get the information and then call the customer back. And we’ll talk a little bit about that.”

2 “Well, you can monitor E-mail and business writing. So we were working with him on that. Sometimes you sample conversations. I’m very forthright in feedback.

3 “If I hear someone talking inappropriately, I’ll point out, ‘That’s okay for here but that’s really not appropriate if you’re talking to a customer. How would you talk to your grandmother or whomever? Think of someone that you respect, how would you communicate with them versus a peer, because there’s a difference at that age.’”

4 “That was pretty effective as well. Just having that in the back of their mind, ‘Okay, I can get away with this, I can’t get away with that.’ You’re drawing the line for them a little bit as a symbol, making it clear as to what is acceptable and what is not.”

5 “How would you communicate with the customers versus with a peer? I’ll work with them for a while. Then they’ll sit with another person and learn their take and perspective. I think you can really learn a lot more if you’re hearing different perspectives from individuals and then creating, versus saying this is how you do it. As a group we get stronger as well, because it gives you a little bit more diversity.”

6 “A lot of times, I find that kids are just lacking feedback. ‘Listen that’s not okay here.’ They respect it, every time. I’ve never had a problem with it, but they just never get the feedback. It’s tough to know if you’re doing something right or wrong if you don’t get that.”

7 “But even just in the day to day issues, if you work in an office with a set number of people, people get into a rut. It’s part of my job as manager to sort of try to keep people fresh as much as possible. The interns help a lot too because they bring in new perspectives, new energy, and just in the way they approach talking to people on the phone, the enthusiasm rubs off.”

What Do You Think?
(Discuss for 10 minutes.)

- Did you notice any new kinds of responses you might use?
- What teaching behaviors are likely to be effective in this situation?
- Think of two or more reflective questions that would be appropriate.