

REFLECTIONS OF A CONTACT CENTER LEADER

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REFLECTIONS OF A CONTACT CENTER LEADER

A love letter to those who serve others.

BY GERRY BARBER, CONTACT MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS



Recently retired (OK, mostly retired), I felt the desire to reflect on a wonderful and challenging 40-plus-year contact center career. Numerous technological changes have taken place in the industry during that time. We have gone from cord switchboards, ACDs and IVRs to sophisticated omnichannel technologies. The introduction of the web and smartphones, along with artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities, have had a major impact. These innovations have dramatically changed the customer experience; however, contact centers continue to be a viable service option regardless of the many self-service channels now available.

Like most individuals who take up contact center leadership roles, I never raised my hand to do so nor had an inkling to make it

my life's work. Yet, as I look back, I am grateful to have taken this journey. I believe I have developed into a better leader over time, and I attribute my success to a number of things. I have had the pleasure of working for two Fortune 100 best places to work. I have learned much from great leaders and peers. I have been blessed to have had access to great training organizations, communities of learning and rich content resources to act as my compass or north star. However, there was a point in my career when it became clear that success hinged not only on those opportunities but on my degree of passion, commitment and love for contact centers as well as for the people I served.

Here are my five contact center leadership keys to success:

#1 Leadership is a privilege

It's not about the leader, and it's definitely not about the title. It's about creating a compelling vision. It's about caring for and cherishing your team. It's about servant leadership and building honest relationships. It's about leading with confidence while acting in the best interest of all constituents. It's about teaching from the heart.

The key lesson for me is that, in the end, people will gladly follow a confident and caring leader—one who delivers a strong vision while helping the team create clear and concise goals at all levels of the contact center organization to achieve extraordinary results.

#2 Develop team and self on contact center acumen and create leaders at all levels

According to Mahatma Gandhi: "A sign of a good leader is not how many followers one has, but how many leaders you create." John F. Kennedy also said, "Leadership and learning are indispensable of each other."

Many of us were not entirely prepared for the contact center career we embarked upon. Therefore, it is important to educate and immerse oneself, as well as one's team members, in contact center acumen. In addition, building strong leadership skills across the entire team is vital to creating a stronger team.



#3 Master your technologies to enable the center to achieve its customer experience goals

Technology choices must be customer-centric, or they have no reason to exist. All too often, contact center leaders leave the sole responsibility of providing contact center technologies to their IT brethren. While partnering with IT is important, it has been my view and practice to invest time and energy in the selection, implementation and enhancement of the technologies enabling my centers and people to operate effectively. Simply put, take ownership of your technology.

#4 Achieve continuous improvement through the right metrics, quality processes, knowledge management and rewards

Choose metrics that will drive your center's performance wisely. An example of a metric often misused is average handle time (AHT).

Over time, I came to the conclusion that AHT is actually a quality issue. Numerically speaking, discussing AHT as a time element with an agent will lead to agent frustration with little improvement in the customer experience. Rather, AHT, be it high or low, is a red flag to trigger leadership review to drill down into the agent's call control, questioning techniques, use of systems and knowledge tools to proficiently improve productivity performance.

Also, consider breaking the mold on quality evaluation processes. I avoided the "check the boxes" or "school-like" scoring practices to achieve distinctive service as it simply didn't materialize using those methods. To raise the bar, I took a more continuous improvement approach to contact quality reviews. Contacts were divided into interaction attributes for analysis. Rather than specifying an overall score, I focused on specific performance attributes that the agent had delivered well and then zeroed in on the attributes in need of development. Creating a mutually agreed-upon action plan between agent and leader achieved better results overall.

In addition, consider allowing agents to listen and review the selected contacts just

prior to the time they meet with their team leader or quality review expert. In my experience, agents appreciated the opportunity to critique their work and were more willing to create and execute a meaningful continuous improvement plan.

Knowledge management is key to overall accuracy and agent professionalism. Investing in and maintaining a robust, evergreen and easily accessible knowledge base will increase an agent's accuracy, quality, confidence and engagement. Caring agents with the ability to access accurate information at the speed of conversation drive higher customer satisfaction.

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—MAHATMA GANDHI

Agent recognition and rewards are important but don't have to break the bank. I found that a combination of recognizing work anniversaries along with frequently sending complimentary notes based on customer survey feedback helped agents understand their value. And personal notes from leadership achieved greater engagement because agents felt good about their role and the contributions they made to the center's success. These practices also helped agents achieve a better understanding of how customers truly define distinctive service.

#5 Adopt a workforce management discipline

Center costs are best controlled through a

disciplined workforce management practice where every event and resource is carefully scheduled. Choosing the right service level for the business is only the starting point. Driving accuracy in forecasting and scheduling takes dedication and precision. However, I have found that managing in real-time through good intraday and adherence reporting is key to achieving consistency in the desired service level, thus avoiding higher costs, increased customer wait times, staff burnout and turnover. Another key to success is making the right choice in a WFM leader. Choose a WFM leader that is both numbers-wise as well as sensitive to agent scheduling needs.

The Bottom Line

Contact centers are in the business of providing "peace of mind." One thing is certain: New technologies like AI will continue to augment aspects of the customer experience. However, for the foreseeable future, contact centers that focus on the customer relationship will continue to add value. Delivering "peace of mind" uniquely through the human connection generally results in lasting customer relationships and greater satisfaction.

It is my hope that I have contributed to positive changes within the industry that I love. I have poured out my passion and heart into each challenge that came along. I strived to leave things operationally better and my teams stronger. At the end of the day, this is what matters most.

In sharing my reflections, I hope to inspire other leaders. How will you make a difference today? What will your contact center legacy be? •



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