REWARDING, COACHING AND GOAL-SETTING

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Contact Center
pipeline

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Do's and don'ts for implementing and maintaining a holistic and programmatic approach.

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REWARDS & INCENTIVES

COACHING

GOAL-SETTING

In the contact center, business is both won and sustained on the front lines, where an organization's two greatest assets come face-to-face: its customer service representatives and its customers.

Good leaders know that the management function is about much more than operations; it's about people—a strategic approach to people management is requisite. However, the nature of contact center operations is one of constant variation; workflow and staffing needs can change instantaneously, which presents managers with unique challenges related to employee engagement and development.

Contact center leadership can mitigate these challenges by employing a holistic and programmatic approach to rewarding, coaching and goal-setting—critical elements to engaging frontline agents and positively impacting the experience of contact center customers.

The following is a series of do's and don'ts for how to successfully implement and maintain these essential practices in the contact center.

Rewards & Incentives

When done right, reward and incentive programs motivate agents, build morale, and contribute materially to a positive work culture and, by extension, a high-quality customer experience.

What's more, there may be a measurable financial benefit to employing a system of rewards and incentives: A 2010 study by Incentive Research Foundation ("Incentives, Motivation and Workplace Performance: Research and Best Practices") suggests quality incentive programs may increase the performance of employees by as much as 44%.

It's up to contact center managers to make sure that reward programs are meaningful, fair and don't have unintended effects on teamwork or employee performance.

■ DO: REWARD AND RECOGNIZE IN PUBLIC.

Managers should make every effort to rec-ognize and praise positive behavior in public forums. This improves customer service agents' confidence, increases motivation and builds morale throughout the contact center.

■ DO: TIE REWARDS TO KPIS, COMPANY VALUES.

Look for opportunities to reward employees for going above and beyond what is expected and for exemplifying the organization's core values. A "job well done" should not merit a special incentive—that is the expectation.

■ DO: MAKE REWARDS MEANINGFUL.

Contrary to popular belief, monetary rewards are less effective than other incentives. In fact, a 2013 research review by Harvard Business Review ("Does Money Really Affect Motivation? A Review of the Research") demon-strates that pay and monetary incentive do little to motivate employees. Rather, managers should think like their employees when deter-mining rewards—simple incentives such as longer breaks, occurrence removals or even a "thank you" can go a long way.

■ DON'T: DON'T SUBSTITUTE INCENTIVES FOR COMPETITIVE COMPENSATION.

Rewards and incentives cannot replace the value of a competitive wage. Regardless of the engagement programs in place, customer service representatives will lose motivation if upfront com-pensation doesn't match the expectations for their position. Due diligence is required to ensure the contact center's pay structure is on par with job requirements.

■ DON'T: DON'T FORGET YOUR CHECKS AND BALANCES.

Protect the integrity of your incentive programs by instituting a system of checks and bal-ances to ensure that customer feedback and compliments are genuine (i.e., not solicited). Routinely pull complimentary calls to confirm that agents are appropriately and positively engaging with customers and that incentive programs haven't become the primary moti-vator for performing to (or above) standard.

■ DON'T: DON'T ALLOW REWARDS TO BECOME A COMPETITION.

Take care not to promote interpersonal com-petition to the degree that contact center agents do not function as a team or collab-orate when necessary. Tap into floor super-visors to continually monitor the sentiment

on the floor to ensure competition is friendly, motivating and to the benefit of the center's customers.

Coaching

Traditionally, the practice of "coaching"—or one-on-one professional development—has been reserved for executives occupying the C-suite. But there is mounting evidence for the benefit of coaching at all organizational levels ("The Effectiveness of Workplace Coaching: A Meta-analysis of Learning and Performance Outcomes from Coaching," *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, The British Psychological Society).

While it often benefits managers to assume the role of coach, there is significant value in peer-to-peer coaching, as well. In the peer-to-peer relationship, both parties benefit materially from the learning that occurs within these networks.

An environment that supports and encourages coaching doesn't arise organically, nor is it always intuitive; instead, contact center managers must build it and commit to sustaining it.

■ DO: FORMALIZE PEER-TO-PEER COACHING.

Formalize peer-to-peer coaching by pairing all new agents with seasoned customer service representatives for routine one-on-one coaching sessions. Then, make every effort to keep coaches and coachees on the same team, which will create ongoing, informal development opportunities. Bonus: These relationships may free up floor supervisors as coaches will likely be a first point of contact for a new agent in need of assistance.

■ DO: OFFER REAL-TIME FEEDBACK, BOTH POSITIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE.

Most employees have a natural affinity to do great work and, as such, they crave honest and immediate performance feedback. A good coach is often categorized by his or her willingness to provide both positive comments and constructive criticism and collaboratively formulate a game plan for how to address areas of opportunity. Further, the best coaches are present—those with a figurative and literal open door who are willing to stop a meeting for an agent in need.

■ DO: EMPOWER EMPLOYEES TO COACH THEMSELVES.

Once customer service agents have demonstrated their competencies, empower them to self-coach. Programmatically, this may include instituting a system where an agent can flag his or her own poor performance on a call and have that call removed from the quality review process without consequence. Or, the contact center may offer its agents the opportunity to work another function on a day they don't feel confident they can perform to standard on the phones. These self-coaching practices simultaneously enhance employee commitment and protect the customer experience.

■ DON'T: DON'T LET COACHING BECOME ONE-DIMENSIONAL.

Effective employee coaching should go well beyond side-jacking and formal one-on-one meetings. Consider engaging customer service agents in the quality assurance process, where they can monitor their peers' calls and offer feedback, essentially becoming coaches themselves, while continuing to hone their skills and grow in their roles.

■ DON'T: DON'T COACH ONLY FOR AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY.

A good coach knows when to offer constructive criticism, but a great coach knows when to celebrate the wins and achievements of his or her team members. Make it a practice to share positive observations and feedback as much if not more than the areas of concern or opportunity. The reward will be positive energy throughout the contact center.

■ DON'T: DON'T OVERLOOK THE BENEFITS OF REMOTE COACHING.

The absence of time and resources for face-to-face coaching sessions should not be a deterrent for a robust coaching program. When resources are light, check in via phone or email with your team and supervisors. Ask questions. Give them a chance to voice concerns. Availability, however remote, is the key to quality coaching.

Goal-Setting

Goal-setting tops the list of the most important activities contact center managers will engage in with their team members. At its core, the practice of asking employees to share their professional goals and motivations demonstrates a commitment seldom found in the fast-paced contact center.

A review of the company job description should not be confused for goal-setting—job descriptions are merely road maps that guide agents toward larger goals that have been collaboratively defined.

Before you begin, keep in mind that quality goals are often S-M-A-R-T: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. This approach to goal-setting will ensure that the exercise is effective and consistent throughout the organization.

■ DO: PERSONALIZE GOAL-SETTING ACTIVITIES.

Team goals are important—call times, hold times, longest call on hold. It's important to remember, however, that each customer service representative likely has a different set of goals and expectations for their contact center employment. Strive to understand the internal motivations of your agents and together set goals that are specific to their needs and career paths.

■ DO: WRITE DOWN AND SHARE GOALS.

A 2015 article in *Forbes* magazine ("10 Things You Should Know About Goals") suggests that, when goals are documented and shared among a peer group, there is a greater chance they will be achieved, underscoring the critical role of the community in goal-setting. As such, managers should build in time during weekly meetings and town hall-style gatherings to allow agents to share their individual goals, report their progress, and discuss any potential roadblocks, a practice that may help inspire or otherwise positively impact goal achievement across the organization.

■ DO: COMMIT TO TRANSPARENCY.

Inevitably, there will be times when the goals your team members have for their employment do not align with the needs of the business. That's OK. Mitigate this sensitive situation and build loyalty by being honest and transparent at all times and by outlining alternative (and achievable) employment goals.

■ DON'T: DON'T BE AVERSE TO ADJUSTING GOALS.

Flexibility is a defining characteristic of successful contact centers—and of successful goal-setting exercises. If goals create unintended consequences—for example, if agents prioritize call times above teamwork—be quick to revisit and revise the goals. Step back occasionally with a critical eye to ensure goals enhance the customer experience, not compromise it.

■ DON'T: DON'T FORGET TO CHECK IN.

Effective goal-setting can be realized only when quality coaching practices are in place. Avoid complacency and the proclivity to set goals and forget them. Instead, during coaching sessions, prioritize the discussion of individual and team goals—progress, obstacles, successes, challenges—and, whenever possible, push employees to set new goals.

■ DON'T: DON'T RESERVE GOAL-SETTING FOR FULL-TIME AGENTS.

Every activity in the contact center is an investment and, as such, requires a return. Avoid reserving goal-setting exercises exclusively for full-time employees—part-time and temporary team members will benefit, and the investment will pay off today with loyalty and commitment, and potentially tomorrow with committed, trained agents willing to return to your organization as business needs arise.

Build a Foundation That Allows CSRs to Succeed

The success of any great organization comes down to one thing: its people. This rings true especially in the contact center environment, where employees of varying tenure, experience and employment objectives serve as the first point-of-contact for an organization's customers.

This can be a daunting concept with which to wrestle, especially for contact center leaders who may have just days to motivate, engage and train a workforce to perform to the high standard they have set for their operations.

By implementing meaningful systems of rewards, coaching and goal-setting, contact center leadership can be confident they have built a foundation upon which their customer service representatives—temporary or full-time—can succeed.

And by prioritizing these systems, they will inspire employees to continually elevate their performance in ways that positively and decisively impact the customer experience. ◉

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