EVALUATING, ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING A POSITIVE CONTACT CENTER CULTURE

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Contact Center
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How to affect the type of lasting change that drives commitment and results.

BY Brian Burke, GCG

For most contact center managers, the first quarter of any new calendar year represents a unique opportunity to evaluate and revamp the policies and procedures that support operations. It's also the perfect time to assess the culture within the contact center and the role it plays in guiding employee behavior.

The concept of culture is one that is often discussed but rarely defined, likely because of its elusive nature. Corporate culture is difficult to describe and even more difficult to direct, especially from the top down. That said, a positive contact center culture can—and should—be facilitated by top management if it is to permeate the organization and impact the customer experience.

The first step toward establishing a positive contact center culture is to have a concrete understanding of what culture is, the functions it serves, and how it is constructed, maintained and evaluated. Armed with this information, contact center managers will be poised to affect the type of lasting cultural change that drives commitment and results in 2018.

What is Culture?

Edgar Schein, the father of modern organizational culture, defined the concept as *a pattern of assumptions adopted by a group as it solves problems and, therefore, is taught to new members as the appropriate way to react to those problems*. In essence, culture is the driving force behind how employees feel about—and react to—their work and the situations they encounter in the workplace. It is a byproduct of the day-to-day norms and values shared by its members.

From this definition, it's clear why culture is so important in the contact center. After all, the manner in which customer service representatives react to their work environment influences how they react to their customers.

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The Function of Culture

Culture serves several important functions within the workplace: it creates behavioral consistency, it generates commitment, it helps define roles and boundaries, and it functions as a system for regulation.

Team members, especially those who are new to the organization, look to cultural cues for guidance on what is appropriate within the company. Importantly, when the day-to-day norms in the contact center are misaligned with the documented rules or regulations, most often the cultural norms will prevail. Depending on the culture, this could be good or bad for contact center managers.

Evaluating Culture

It's easy to assume that managers know the culture of their contact centers; after all, they live and breathe the organization day in and day out. In reality, however, when people are embedded within a culture, defining and evaluating it becomes a challenge.

To evaluate culture, managers first must understand it. Start by identifying the physical, social and behavioral clues throughout the contact center that comprise culture. These may include:

1. **PHYSICAL:** Is there physical evidence of the organization's mission and values, such as a posted mission statement or employee goals? What would a new team member glean from an initial visit to the contact center? Does the contact center look like a fun place to work?

2. **SOCIAL:** Do team members and managers collaborate at work? Is there social interaction among employees outside the four walls of the contact center? Is there evidence of camaraderie among staff during heavy volume?

3. **BEHAVIORAL:** Are team members on time for shifts? Does staff take ownership over their work product and customer outcomes? Do employees seek increasing responsibility?

Understanding the existing culture provides a framework for guiding the organization

toward a more positive work environment. Without this knowledge, any efforts to create change will likely be met with resistance.

Establishing and Maintaining Culture

Merriam-Webster defines value as the *relative worth, utility, or importance* of something. From an organizational perspective, values translate into the tangible and nontangible behaviors and actions that enable employees to successfully execute their job functions and to achieve business objectives. In the contact center, values may align with themes such as empathy, accuracy, genuine care, composure under pressure and having fun.

Strong cultures exist when the organization's core values are understood and accepted throughout the ranks. The role of the manager should not be to force employees to memorize and repeat corporate values on a daily basis, but to embed the values into every aspect of contact center operations so they become synonymous with the organization, organically. The following are the most impactful ways your organizational values can come to life through operations.

RECRUITMENT

Values are held by individuals, not corporations. To that end, the contact center's recruitment efforts must support the core values you want to resonate with employees even before they join the company.

1. Convey your organization's core values to third-party recruitment agencies so they can vet potential candidates within that cultural framework.
2. Tailor interview questions to uncover candidates' personal and professional values, and inquire about what attributes candidates deem most important in an organization. This may help to illuminate any cultural differences prior to employment.
3. Take care not to overlook this process in quick ramp-up events; a handful of employees whose values do not align with those of the larger group can cause dissent and, ultimately, damage to an organization's culture.

TRAINING AND ONBOARDING

The training and onboarding stage is where new team members come face-to-face with the reality of the contact center. You don't get a second chance at a first impression, especially when it comes to cultur e.

1. Choose trainers and training managers wisely. Those who live out the organization's values and believe in the culture will be your best assets when it comes to assimilating new employees.
2. Allocate time during training for informal, peer-to-peer interaction among trainees and existing agents. Culture is transmitted through open, honest communication between peers much more than through training manuals or seminars.
3. Build time for storytelling during training and onboarding. Celebrating and sharing the stories of the successful enactment of core values by team members will make the culture memorable and relatable for new-hires.

NORMS AND BEHAVIORS

Culture is sustained through norms and rituals, so maintaining a keen awareness of what is happening on a day-to-day basis is key to building and maintaining a positive culture.

1. Create a positive, fun environment whenever possible. Contests, challenges, and a system of reward and recognition all reinforce your commitment to culture. After all, you can't expect your agents to be upbeat and engaging with customers if they are not encouraged to be upbeat and engaged in the building.
2. Managers must make it a priority to exhibit care and concern for employees. Take time for social interaction, spot training and coaching; only then will agents recognize the importance of exhibiting care and concern for their customers and work product.
3. Promote that which differentiates you from other contact centers, whether it be the accessibility of management or the prioritization of teamwork above individual performance. There's real value in employees knowing that "the way we do things here" is unique.

PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

The manner in which customer service agents are evaluated is a direct reflection of what matters most to an organization and its leadership, so be sure the evaluation metrics align with the culture of the contact center.
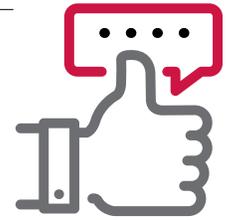
1. Associate KPIs to specific organizational values whenever possible. For example, if you espouse values of empathy, but evaluate agents solely on call time, you promote conflicting priorities, which will cause confusion among your team members.
2. Turn the tables on performance evaluation by allowing top performing team members the opportunity to annually "evaluate" the culture of the contact center and provide feedback on what's working and where opportunities exist.
3. Consider breaches of cultural commitment to be grounds for corrective action. An adherence to the company's values is as important as adherence to its written policies as they guide behavior in a similar manner.

Model the Culture Every Day

Evaluating, establishing and maintaining a positive contact center culture can be a challenging undertaking, one that requires an intimate understanding of the intersection among individual values and company operations. Managers whose goals are to affect lasting cultural change should ensure organizational values influence operations at every turn, from recruitment to employee evaluation. And when faced with resistance, a focus on changing the norms and day-to-day behaviors of employees will, over time, promote shifts in attitude.

Above all else, contact center leadership should be accessible, visible and accountable. Employees will emulate the behavior of their supervisors, so they, too, must live the culture day in and day out. ◉

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