Contact Center Coaching Best Practices: Outstanding Agents
Strengthen Your Brand

2010

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I. Executive Summary

Coaching is a highly effective tactical activity that has powerful strategic implications for contact centers. At a fundamental level, coaching is a supervisory function that has a direct and immediate positive impact on agent performance. It also plays an important role in agent satisfaction and retention, as it shows that managers value their contributions. From a strategic perspective, coaching improves service quality and the overall customer experience. It also improves agent productivity and reduces operating expenses by teaching agents to perform tasks and respond to inquiries more effectively. However, the most significant contribution from coaching is one that is often difficult to measure: its impact on customers and the company’s brand. Agents who are clearly satisfied bring a level of energy to their job that is reflected in their voices and how they treat customers; they make callers want to do business with a company that employs such highly satisfied and dedicated employees. Implementing a winning coaching program requires commitment, dedication, best practices and the ability to deliver it fairly and consistently on an institutionalized basis.

II. Coaching is Not as Easy as it Looks

Coaching is the process of providing agents with timely feedback about their performance. It is generally customized to address a specific situation and delivered on a personalized basis in person or by a system. Coaching is considered the most effective method for training adults, particularly when the session is delivered in real or near-real time.

This paper addresses four best practices that, when applied consistently, lead to more successful coaching programs. These four fundamental best practices are:

1. Building a winning coaching program
2. Selecting the right mix of coaching techniques
3. Measuring the effectiveness of the coaching program
4. Creating a systems environment that supports coaching goals

Coaching methodology, best practices and systems are all essential for building an effective coaching environment, but the keys to success are giving highly trained and motivated coaches the time they need to work with their agents and the tools to support the process.
III. Building a Winning Coaching Program

There are two fundamental phases in building a successful coaching process:

1. Defining, documenting and institutionalizing the coaching building blocks and process, and
2. Establishing an infrastructure that supports the coaching process on an ongoing basis.

Coaching Building Blocks

Figure 1 shows the five core steps for instituting a coaching program. Ensuring that coaching is addressed consistently and delivered on a timely and continuous basis is essential for the credibility and effectiveness of the program. The best coaching sessions are instructive, supportive, collaborative and motivating, not confrontational or admonishing.

Figure 1: Coaching Program Building Blocks

- Identify underlying performance issues
- Create an action plan
- Communicate with the agent
- Provide consistent and timely feedback and reinforcement
- Monitor and track improvements

Source: DMG Consulting LLC, February 2010
Step One: Identify underlying performance strengths and weaknesses: Analyze the agent’s quality assurance evaluations and other relevant key performance indicators (KPIs) to identify performance opportunities and trends, or conduct a side-by-side session with the agent to view where and when challenges arise, and determine if work habits are causing performance issues.

Step Two: Create an action plan: Once it’s clear where the agent needs help, create an action plan to address the underlying issues. Identify all relevant resources that can be used to support the agent’s development.

Step Three: Communicate with the agent: The QA specialist, supervisor or coach should discuss performance issues with the agent in a private setting. Be sure that the session is constructive and recognizes the agent’s strengths as well as performance improvement opportunities. Review the action plan with the agent and emphasize that it is intended to provide help and support.

Step Four: Provide consistent and timely feedback and reinforcement: The most effective improvement programs foster ongoing communication. Conduct routine evaluations of the agent’s calls and offer timely feedback. Provide targeted coaching that addresses the agent’s specific needs, and reinforce what he/she is doing right.

Step Five: Monitor and track improvements: Use KPIs to monitor the agent’s performance and progress. Motivate the agent by recognizing and praising incremental improvements, and continue to provide coaching and support for performance enhancement opportunities.

Establishing Coaching Infrastructure

For coaching to have a lasting impact, it must be delivered consistently. This requires a manual or automated mechanism to ensure that all agents are treated consistently and fairly. The program infrastructure should be designed to measure the same number of calls or transactions per agent, per week. The program structure should lay out specific steps for recognizing and rewarding outstanding performance and for delivering enhancement recommendations.

Action: Formalize and document the coaching program. Get buy-in from all supervisors and coaches. Managers need to actively and visibly support the coaching initiative so that agents and supervisors appreciate its importance to the success of the contact center.
IV. Selecting the Right Mix of Coaching Techniques

There are sixteen common techniques for coaching in contact centers, as shown in Figure 2. Leading contact centers provide best practice guidelines and then invite their supervisors and coaches to use the techniques they find most effective for each situation. They also invest in programs to "train the coaches," to teach them how to deliver effective coaching sessions. (These training sessions always involve role playing, which is the most effective way to address the difficult challenge of delivering constructive feedback.)

Some of the techniques in Figure 2 can be delivered without automation, while others require a coaching solution. Contact center management must track the frequency, quality and effectiveness of coaching sessions delivered by supervisors to ensure that they are being done properly and consistently. DMG research has found that coaching sessions are often skipped because supervisors claim to be too busy. While this may be true, leading contact centers ensure that supervisors have dedicated agent coaching time and schedule coaching sessions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coaching Technique</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whisper coaching</td>
<td>Real-time. Supervisor coaches agent while handling an inquiry. The supervisor whispers into agent's ear and is not heard by the caller.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barge-in coaching</td>
<td>Real-time. Supervisor joins a call and helps resolve an issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferencing</td>
<td>An agent brings another person into the call who knows how to resolve the situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-on-ones</td>
<td>Supervisor or coach conducts a formally scheduled face-to-face review session with agent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-the-spot</td>
<td>Supervisor listens to agent when walking around or live-monitoring in the contact center, and provide immediate feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer-to-peer</td>
<td>&quot;Buddy system&quot; where agents coach each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side-by-side-shadowing</td>
<td>Supervisor sits with agent during a pre-scheduled time to listen, observe and provide immediate feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-assessment</td>
<td>Agent is given the opportunity to review and critique their own transactions and to identify where they would like coaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real-time-aided pop-ups</td>
<td>Automated feedback that pops up onto the agent’s screen and suggests the appropriate action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IM/Chat</td>
<td>Supervisors can type an IM or chat message to agent to provide instructions. Alternatively, agent can ask supervisor for assistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast messages</td>
<td>Supervisor delivers a message to all of their staff via a system</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2: Common Coaching Techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coaching Technique</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personalized message</td>
<td>Supervisor sends a personal message to one person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best practice clips</td>
<td>An ideally handled call is shared with other agents to show them how to properly address a similar situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching packages</td>
<td>Supervisor shares a packaged PowerPoint presentation covering a specific policy/procedure with agent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simulation</td>
<td>Agent is given practice calls that mimic live customer interactions. Can be done via a system or role playing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team meeting</td>
<td>Group of agents meet to discuss an important topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiz</td>
<td>A quiz is used to reinforce information and measure content retention.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DMG Consulting LLC, February 2010

Action: Identify the coaching techniques that are available to the organization. Invite supervisors to select techniques with which they are comfortable in order to optimize coaching effectiveness. Ensure that all supervisors have dedicated time assigned for delivering coaching sessions.

V. Measuring the Effectiveness of Coaching Programs

It is essential to measure all aspects of a coaching program to help evaluate whether it’s being applied consistently and fairly throughout the contact center, as well as to determine what is working for each supervisor, coach and agent. As part of this effort, every contact center should compile a list of KPIs to use in measuring their coaching program’s effectiveness. See Figure 3.

The two most important measures are satisfaction scores from external customer surveys and agent retention numbers. While it is best to be able to track customer satisfaction scores back to individual agents, a capability that is available from the more advanced surveying solutions, the aggregate department ratings are helpful in assessing the performance of the contact center as a whole.

Well-delivered coaching is key to retaining agents. Most agents welcome feedback as long as it’s constructive and delivered with their best interests in mind. Many agents say that they welcome even poorly delivered feedback over no information, as there is nothing worse than not knowing at all how they are doing. Lack of feedback is one of the top reasons agents give for quitting. When a contact center sees its agent retention numbers drop, it’s a clear indication that they are not doing...
a good job of coaching their agents. There are likely other causes for increasing agent attrition, but the quality of coaching should never be ignored.

**Figure 3: Coaching KPIs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KPI</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average QA scores</td>
<td>Average team QA scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of coaching sessions</td>
<td>Number of completed coaching sessions per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of action plans</td>
<td>Number of action plans administered per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team % KPI improvement after coaching</td>
<td>Percentage of improvement on KPIs for which the team received coaching/action plans</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DMG Consulting LLC, March 2010

Managers should select a few agent-related KPIs to use to measure the effectiveness of their coaching program, such as first call resolution rate, number of complaints and customer survey scores. Regardless of the selected KPIs, supervisors, coaches and agents should be able to review these KPIs on a daily basis. This will help maintain consistency and provide transparency so that agents feel that the program is designed to help them instead of being used punitively.

**Action:** Select 5 or fewer KPIs to measure the effectiveness of the coaching program. Share KPI results with all contact center team members – agents, supervisors, coaches, trainers and managers.

VI. Creating a Systems Environment to Support Coaching Goals

Coaching can be delivered without automation. Some of the best coaching takes place on a one-to-one basis, in person. However, as contact centers grow beyond 100 agents, it becomes difficult to deliver coaching consistently to all agents without some form of automation to track the frequency and effectiveness of coaching sessions. This challenge grows as contact centers become multi-channel, and more so as they become virtual, with agents working at home or in remote locations, like retail branch stores.

Coaching solutions are among supervisors’ favorite tools because they empower them to do their jobs more effectively while improving the customer and agent experience. Coaching tools have been proven to make supervisors more productive and more satisfied with their jobs. These solutions free supervisors from some of the administrative tasks that often pull them away from assisting
agents and customers, allowing them to provide more frequent and constructive feedback to their agents.

Below is a list of leading capabilities for contact center coaching applications:

- An application designed specifically for contact centers that comes with pre-built workflows and standard coaching packages to address the basics. (Coaching packages should also be easy to modify so that they can be customized to meet the needs of each contact center.)

- APIs that allow the coaching application to easily integrate with the other departmental systems that deliver essential KPIs to the coaching process. These include: the automatic call distributor (ACD), quality assurance application, surveying/enterprise feedback management solution, workforce management, customer relationship management (CRM)/case management/servicing/ sales/collections application, etc.

- Portal-based dashboard technology with standard views for managers, supervisors/coaches and agents. Contact center managers should be able to easily incorporate the KPIs that they want reflected and reported in their dashboards. The dashboard views should be customizable by function.

- Coaching packages that can rapidly and easily incorporate a best practice call or example document from a third-party application. This should include the ability to annotate the call or document using voice or text.

- Capability for supervisors to identify the specific areas where agents need performance improvement.

- Ability to support and track a variety of automated and manual coaching techniques so that managers can determine which approach works for each supervisor, coach and agent.

- Ability to assign coaching sessions when interaction volume is slow.

- Agent option to start a coaching session, stop when necessary and then restart where they left off when they have time to finish.

- Self-assessment capability for agents, where they can evaluate their own performance and self-select appropriate coaching content/action for areas where they need help.

- Closed-loop performance metrics that track agent needs, the actions they take to improve and the impact of coaching over a period of time.

- Customizable KPIs

- Flexible reporting that easily receives data feeds from or shares information with third-party applications.
There are many other functional requirements for coaching solutions, but if the solution addresses the needs mentioned above, it will position the contact center to implement all of the best practices discussed in this paper, empowering the organization to build a highly effective and productive coaching program.

**Action:** If you have more than 100 agents and/or operate a multi-site or virtual operating environment, invest in a coaching application. Select a coaching solution that is designed for contact centers and comes with best practice workflows and customizable coaching modules.

**VII. Final Thoughts**

Coaching is a tactical activity that has significant and lasting strategic implications for enterprises and their contact centers because it impacts customer perception and retention. On a tactical basis, coaching makes major contributions to supervisor and agent satisfaction, reduces operating expenses and improves the customer experience. Coaching sessions can be delivered by supervisors without the benefit of automation, but systems-enabled coaching facilitates standardization, a key element of any successful coaching program.
About Knowlagent

Knowlagent is the only talent management software solution specifically developed to meet the unique training, coaching, and hiring needs of the 10 million call center agents around the world. By automating traditional call center management processes, Knowlagent's solutions for training, coaching and hiring enable clients to hire the right agents and make them better by pushing training and communications when call volumes are low. Knowlagent's solutions are on-demand, easy to use and require no capital expenditures. Over 200,000 agents and managers around the world use Knowlagent’s talent management software solutions every day. For more information, call 888-566-9457 or visit us online at http://www.knowlagent.com.

About DMG Consulting

DMG Consulting is the leading provider of contact center and analytics research, market analysis and consulting services. DMG's mission is to help end users build world-class, differentiated contact centers and assist vendors in developing high-value solutions for the market. DMG devotes more than 10,000 hours annually to researching various segments of the contact center market, including vendors, solutions, technologies, best practices, and the benefits and ROI for end users. DMG is an independent firm that provides information and consulting services to contact center management, the financial and investment community, and vendors in the market.

More information about DMG Consulting can be found at www.dmgconsult.com.