

customer service rather than a strictly shift-centric one. Finally, by building a stronger sense of team and cohesion in the center, norms were embraced in which the lack of schedule adherence was considered not just a violation of the company, but of the people working in the center.

2. YOU CAN'T WIN WITHOUT LEADERSHIP FROM SUPERVISORS.

Several years ago, Marshall Doney, AAA's vice president of Automotive, noticed that the results of the annual associate opinion survey revealed several problems in the Heathrow, Fla., member services call center. Located at the association's national headquarters, the site is a showcase for the AAA's call center capabilities, and is responsible for taking overflow calls from designated clubs across the federation.

In survey feedback, staff reported growing issues stemming from poor communication, lack of teamwork across areas and shifts, the need for better technology, and supervisor bias. Understanding that the survey results were indicators that downward spirals in customer satisfaction and revenue would not be far behind, Doney asked our firm to determine the root causes of these problems, and to design a program to address them. We conducted a series of "personal-sensing" interviews with a stratified random sample of call center staff. The results were eye-opening.

Communication breakdowns occurred between the director and the supervisors, resulting in different directions being given to different shifts. Communication between shifts was ineffective; discussion of problems or issues that arose on a shift was limited, and the next shift would come in with little if any briefing. This contributed to a lack of teamwork. In addition, CSRs' computers were slow, and the database frequently contained errors (e.g., inaccurate membership numbers, misspelled names). Finally, there was an emerging sense among CSRs that the processes weren't fair. Many felt that it wasn't what you knew but who you knew that determined promotions or advancement, that younger CSRs were favored, and that pay grades didn't equate to job responsibilities.

After conducting leadership and team development sessions with the call center director and management team, they defined a clear mission for the center, set strategic priorities for improving operations and practices, and each manager developed individual development goals. Action teams of two to three supervisors across areas and shifts were created to follow through on achieving the strategic priorities with firm deadlines and strict metrics for measuring success. On a parallel track, the director underwent executive coaching and clear individual performance expectations were established. Finally, an outside audit of personnel practices, including pay grades, was conducted.

The center made progress over the next quarter: adjustments were made in pay, communication increased between shifts, new computers were purchased and the director communicated more on a face-to-face level rather than by email. Despite these improvements, complaints

from staff continued and those from customers increased. It was clear from internal interviews, as well as from onsite observation, that the center's director consistently engaged in two practices that undermined her ability to lead. First, she often operated in crisis mode. Everything was a "code blue" situation, which eventually wore out her people. Even worse, she practiced a culture of favoritism holding particular supervisors and senior CSRs to a different set of standards than others. It was clear that the only way to truly turn around the center was to dismiss the director.

This was done, and within three months the energetic, experienced replacement had capitalized on the foundation of improvement that had been laid. Scores on the next annual survey jumped from 15 percent to 37 percent depending on the issue. Complaints dropped to a handful.

Customer satisfaction increased and revenue numbers rebounded from six-figure red to black over the next year. Why? As VP Doney says: "You simply can't win today without exceeding your customer's expectations. And that requires leadership from top to bottom. If the vision for why we are here and where we are trying to go beyond just picking up the next call isn't consistently communicated throughout the enterprise, and if the troops don't feel that they have fair ownership in the process as well as the outcomes, then you're not going to exceed expectations. Everyone needs to see how their job contributes to the successful execution of the strategy of the organization. You just can't get it done by managing people; you need to lead them."

3. BUILDING A CULTURE OF COMPLIANCE IS EASY; BUILDING ONE OF COMMITMENT IS HARD.

Developing a culture of compliance is relatively straightforward—the hardest part is deciding on and defining the metrics you want to use, then holding people accountable for meeting them. The aim is to build in individual and shift accountability that will lead to higher performance and more productive (i.e., efficient), better quality service.

Let's look at AAA's Brookfield, Wis., call center as an example. As a new facility, the center was often referred to within the company as "Brookfield Suites" because it offered a comfortable, pleasant work environment with the latest technology. It was located in a safe, upper-end business park; CSRs didn't even need to lock their car doors. In late 2000, the center started experiencing lower morale, higher turnover and declining customer/member satisfaction scores. The Brookfield site had declined into the bottom 10 percent of all centers in the federation, which was comprised of more than 80 clubs nationwide. This poor performance put the club's accreditation status at risk and negatively impacted retention and revenue. As Vice President of Marketing and Member Services Tim Bannon put it, "We can't continue on this path. The market is too competitive and the stakes are too high. This has got to be fixed, regardless of what it takes."

An assessment uncovered several underlying causes for

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the problems, including increased call volume and, more importantly, increased call complexity. In addition, there was a pronounced lack of teamwork across areas and shifts. In fact, rather than working collaboratively, supervisors and CSRs seemed to be working competitively in the “we’re better than you” mode. Finally there was a lack of consistency across supervisors—some allowed longer breaks, interpreted the dress code leniently and were easier “graders,” while others towed the line.

The culture transformation began by forming and training cross-shift process improvement teams comprised of CSRs. The teams, which were given team problem-solving and process-mapping tools, came up with a list of over a dozen process improvements, including: using a standardized script in quoting the ETA of a service vehicle (usually a tow truck), designating a direct access line for high-priority calls, allowing five-minute stress-relief breaks for agents who had experienced a particularly difficult call, and implementing performance ratings for individual CSRs. In addition to these improvements, call-back training was provided for all staff, and a traveling trophy was awarded each shift to the CSR who had fielded the most challenging call.

On a parallel track, the director, managers and supervisors attended leadership and team development sessions, which focused on building a collaborative environment around a culture of commitment.

Within six months, the decline in customer/member satisfaction scores had been reversed, and within the year,

the center was above the median for the entire association on this metric. In addition, staff turnover decreased by 11 percent. As Gary Meister, director of Human Resources, observed: “Associate complaints and grievances at the center have significantly declined over the last year. People are exercising real leadership there, problems are being solved as they arise, and the overall climate is much more positive and healthy. It shows that it can be done—even in a tough place like a call center.”

It All Comes Down to Leadership

The lessons learned that we have discussed in this article focus on a distinct type of call center environment—but regardless of the business, product or service, the majority of call centers face common issues.

We have seen the demonstrable impact that lack of leadership has had on failing call centers, and the central role it plays in successful centers. Leadership is about the actions you undertake and whether or not, when you look over your shoulder, anyone is following. It’s not title, tenure, position, gender or any other demographic factor. It’s about what you do.

Call centers are a rapidly growing business solution that will continue to cut across more markets, utilizing even more channels (i.e., Web, phone, virtual and the like). Their fundamental business model, based on the mixed metrics of volume and quality, will likely continue to be a challenging one. The centers that prevail will be the ones that address this challenge by deploying multiple responses to elevate performance in a systematic way. The key to meeting that challenge is a dynamic leadership team. ■

