



Ask Affy

Need advice? Ask Affy!

Q

Dear Affy:

I know that coaching our agents is beneficial but every time service levels go down, my director cancels our coaching efforts. I can't make any progress with my agents! How do I convince my director that coaching should not be cancelled regardless of service levels?
Signed, Sheila

A

Hi Sheila:

I feel your pain! Having been a team leader in the earlier part of my career, I understand how challenging it is to be the lone voice. Poor service levels create a sense of urgency and cause a knee-jerk reaction to have "all hands on deck" and no off-phone time.

My recommendation is to follow the practices of world-class organizations that are able to meet their service level targets because of regular coaching. They could clearly make a direct correlation between the time spent in regular coaching and stable service levels. Team leaders in these organizations converted the time spent "in the room" coaching, otherwise coined as "offline" coaching, into "side- by- side" coaching sessions at agent workstations. This type of side- by-side coaching had little impact to service levels but made a huge difference to agent efficiency and customer experience.

Typically, productivity increases by a minimum of 10 percent when team leaders are in the trenches with their team. By being with the front line, team leaders understand why call volumes have spiked or why there has been an increase in average handle time – all factors that contribute to driving service levels down.

A great way to get the attention of your director is to quantify the financial returns from an investment in the time spent effectively coaching your agent. Here's one impressive industry statistic about good coaching that may sway your director. Rigorous "side by side" coaching systems return an eight to 18 percent reduction in operational expense and have the same increase in revenue. Use that information to calculate the benefits of side- by-side coaching. Below are other benefits you can add to your business case.

Operational efficiency

Targeted coaching enables each agent to have greater call control, thus reducing the time spent on each call and over each shift worked. It has a direct and immediate effect on profitability because constant improvements in efficiency mean that you need fewer agents (and fewer support roles around them). Reducing agent head count by even five percent provides your organization significant savings.

Operational effectiveness

Coaching helps agents handle the reason for a customer's call during that first call, without errors and with high customer satisfaction. These effectiveness elements together reduce expense by reducing repeat calls. Many non-coaching organizations experience a 40 percent repeat call rate on the same issues, which dramatically drives up their operating costs.

Revenue generation

Coaching supports and improves the advanced selling skills of agents, including how to identify customer needs and offer additional products to the customer. An agent's ability to sell, especially on service calls, allows organizations to transition from cost centre to profit centre, which can easily pay for the investment in coaching effort. With a lot of companies pushing many contacts to self-service (such as interactive voice response or the Web), every live contact with the customer needs to provide an opportunity to sell, as well as to service.

Customer satisfaction and retention

With the high cost of customer acquisition, you must retain the right customers if you want to succeed. Exceptional customer service is the only sustainable competitive advantage in businesses. Ongoing coaching helps keep the importance of every customer interaction front and centre in every agent's mind.

Employee engagement and retention

You want to keep proficient agents and team leaders engaged and in the organization for a long time. Often, agents leave your call centre because they feel stressed, unsupported, and inefficient. Sustained coaching can easily produce a 25 to 50 percent reduction in the number of agents leaving your call centre for jobs elsewhere.

Sheila, I hope you have enough ammunition to move forward with a solid business case to allow you and other team leaders to consistently coach. Last word on this topic for your director - the longer-term benefits of regular coaching outweigh the short-term pain felt when service levels are low!

Afshan Kinder

Mahatma Gandhi said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world". This resonates for me in the work I do and hopefully for the people I touch. Looking back at 20 years of running operations, there was always this excitement to initiate change, create innovative strategies, and build agile teams who can execute.

What has me jump out of bed in the morning (somewhere in the world!) is working with fast paced companies with complex problems to solve. Proudest moments? In the mid-1990's, we were voted Canada's #1 customer service centre at Sprint Canada at a time when we could barely catch our breath during double digit growth. Then more fun at ING DIRECT hitting Top Box customer satisfaction 6 years in a row. This Daniel Pink quote feels right on: "Meaningful achievement depends on lifting one's sights and pushing toward the horizon."

I live in Toronto, Canada with my husband, two children & two bossy cats.

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