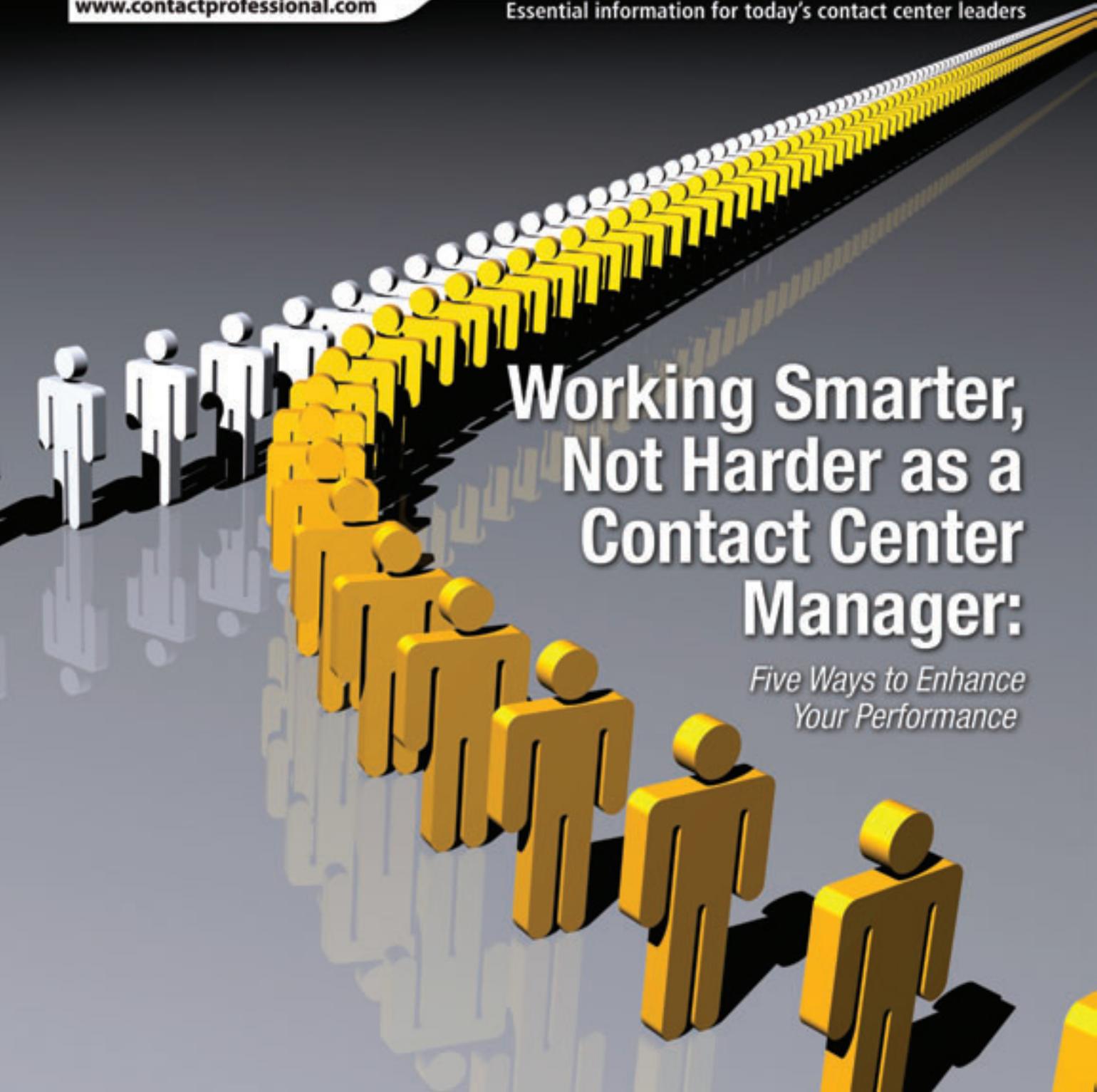


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Working Smarter, Not Harder as a Contact Center Manager:

*Five Ways to Enhance
Your Performance*



Working Smarter, Not Harder as a Contact Center Manager:

BY
DINA VANCE

Five Ways to Enhance Your Performance

If you're a typical contact center manager, this day probably sounds all too familiar. As you walk through the door, you find people lined up at your office wanting to talk to you about statistics and an escalated upset customer situation. Then, you're invited to a meeting set to take place in half an hour. When you finally make it to your desk, your voice mail light is flashing and you have 50 e-mails in your in-box, half of which need to be responded to by lunch. You still need to run reports for your executive team. It's not even 8:30 a.m.

With all these demands, how do you ensure you're successful at the end of the day?

The reality is that most managers face similar challenges. As a manager, you can choose to either react or be proactive. What distinguishes the good contact center managers from the great is how they choose to respond to those pressures.

What Makes a Manager Successful?

How do you gauge success as a contact center leader? Some feel they are doing well if their metrics are in line. However, others hold the bar higher. They want their employees to be satisfied, exemplified by reduced turnover rates. What's more, on top of good customer satisfaction scores, they want their customers to be happy with their overall experience. They also want their executives to see the value in their call center through a profitable return on investment. That's a tall order.

Becoming a better contact center manager is a matter of working smarter and not necessarily harder, while concentrating your limited time on the areas that really matter. Here are five ways to do so.

Focus on the Big Picture

While you start your day knowing what's supposed to take place, it's easy to get bogged down and distracted by the daily fires and time wasters – a reactive approach. To counteract this situation, be proactive by stepping back and taking a larger view of your day, your week and the job at hand. And to find the time to do that, it's important to be more deliberate in how you schedule your day.

Most people could say exactly the same thing. Instead, it's more productive to schedule several periods during the day to check e-mail. At the same time, a successful manager will schedule other priorities such as discussing strategy, being present on the contact center floor and coaching employees.

Gary Bailey, senior vice president, Specialty Call Centers at Key Bank, said, "It's what I call being a leader versus being a manager. To me, leaders are those who spend 75 percent of their time out on the floor. Leaders are visible and available. Ideally, they shouldn't spend more than 25 percent of their time re-

turning voice mails and emails, scheduling and in meetings. If they come up short, they are spending too much time at their desk or in meetings.”

Just Do It

One of the challenges every leader faces is how to make effective decisions. The first step is to figure out which decisions require employee input to garner crucial support. But equally important, successful managers also need to know when to stop gathering feedback, make a decision and move forward.

In short, sometimes you need to “just do it.”

Anne Nickerson, Ulysses master coach and senior consultant, pointed out that one of the key components to successful decision making is to understand the dynamics of the team. If the team is new and members are figuring out where they fit into the structure, it will be difficult to gain consensus by soliciting their opinions. However, members of more established, high-performing teams expect some level of input into decisions. If a leader makes high-level decisions without their buy-in, they are likely to get frustrated.

Gary Bailey of Key Bank concurred, “When you’re a manager, it’s hard to use a cookie-cutter approach to make decisions. If you’re forcefully employing your will, you risk demotivating people. Or if you’re a soft manager who tries to find the easiest way around issues by sugarcoating things, you will lose respect. It’s about finding the middle ground.

“Ultimately, it’s about balancing accountability and strong leadership with the fact that they know you understand them. This way, when you have to deliver a difficult message, your team will respect it because they know they can trust you.”

Make Coaching a Priority by Modeling It

Frequently, managers will say that they don’t have time to do coaching or get feedback from one-on-one sessions because they are constantly in meetings, on phone calls or responding to email. However, if you believe that coaching and feedback are vital ways to improve job performance, then there is only one way to make it a priority – model it to your team.

Through coaching, you can dramatically improve agent performance and create an overall better customer experience. But to firmly entrench coaching in your contact center’s culture, you need to show your managers and supervisors how it works. This way, they can coach their agents.

Anne Nickerson said, “Modeling coaching is so critical. A leader’s role is to mentor, educate and develop their employees. Know their learning style.”

Gary Bailey described it by saying, “It’s not effective to simply tell someone how to do something better. Instead, to make coaching effective, you need to show your team. As a call center leader, you can take some phone calls and ‘walk the walk.’ You can show them what success looks like and what you expect from them. Then in turn, they can go out and model the things you’ve shown them.”

Strike the Right Balance Between Working “Up” and “Down”

At contact centers, two scenarios often surface. Some managers will keep their nose to the ground, busy taking care of daily operations. While this can be comfortable for some personality styles, they risk being overlooked by senior leadership. Other managers spend their time trying to attract upper management’s attention. They spend their time attending meetings, working on any and all initiatives that come from above. While they may receive accolades from upper management, they risk having their departments languish from lack of attention.

As a manager, the challenge is to strike a balance between working in the trenches while being visible to upper management. While you try to work “up and out” for new opportunities, you still have to work “down and in” to do a good job at your current position.

The trap that many fall into is that they get so busy thinking about their next career move, they spend all their time networking and on office politics. Or the reverse happens.

However, there is a solution. Anne Nickerson said that if you do a great job managing inward – within your team and specific department, the results will show themselves, capturing the attention of upper management.

“If you give credit to the people in your organization that did it for you or with you, rather than saying ‘I did this myself,’ you also gain credibility with upper management,” Nickerson said. “Because people want to work for leaders like this, word about your management style and skills will spread within your organization.”

Gary Bailey takes it a step further by stating that managers need to let senior leaders know what’s going on in their area, a term he calls “no anonymous giving.”

“When you’re in meetings with upper management, you need to talk about what makes you successful. Leaders in call centers like to talk about strategies and future state, but it’s important to balance those strategic items with discussion of ‘this is the culture I’m developing’ and ‘these are the things I’m doing to make my employees successful.’ ”

Focus on the Customer

After being internally focused on metrics, profits and operations, it’s easy for contact centers to forget that their sole reason for existence is to serve the customer and extend the company’s brand and image. One way to keep customer service at the forefront is to ask questions such as:

“Are we easy to do business with?”

“Are we customer focused?”

Another way to keep the customer experience front and center is through coaching. By concentrating your coaching on a specific behavior to ensure the greatest impact, you can improve how your agents deliver service. This will enhance the customer’s experience – and their overall perception of your organization.

This focus pays off in other ways. Because a contact center is at the frontline of the customer, you are in a position to report trends you see developing to executives outside of your group, such as those in sales and marketing. Doing so will increase your visibility outside the contact center walls.

Which goes to show, it takes the whole package – ability to concentrate on the big picture, leadership skills, coaching, communication and customer focus – to becoming a better contact center manager. CP

About the author: Dina Vance (dvance@ulysseslearning.com; 704.943.5800), Senior Vice President of Ulysses Learning, is a widely respected thought leader on developing and leading contact center staff and a pioneer in improving performance of contact centers. Ms. Vance was responsible for the ground-level start up of two contact centers before managing the call center division for an international consulting and training organization. She has worked with Fortune 100 companies to optimize their call center performance through focus on results, people and process. She has served on the executive and advisory board of the Call Center Industry Advisory Council (CIAC), American Bankers Association (ABA), and *Contact Professional* magazine.

The Ulysses Learning Story...

A Greek shipping magnate who was passionate about training, education and technology wanted to invest in and advance the future of corporate learning. So in 1995 he formed a new company – Ulysses Learning – and, in the spirit of the epic Greek poem, our own “odyssey” began.

The first stop on the journey was to select the best, most experienced senior executives to navigate our course and charge them with a unique mission to search industry wide to:

1. identify the areas of business that could benefit most from developing human performance through technology-enabled training and related services;
2. uncover the toughest barriers to improvement; and
3. assemble a world-class team of experts to develop the best combination of training solutions to achieve and sustain demonstrable performance results.

Thanks to Ulysses’ blue-chip team - top business professionals, thought leaders, and consultants; performance improvement and training experts; cognitive scientists; and industrial/organizational psychologists – we have accomplished this mission.

Our research identified contact centers as an opportune place to begin developing frontline judgment and customer interaction skills. These two critical elements, when developed effectively, improve service, sales and coaching performance and achieve higher levels of revenue and customer loyalty results.

To that end, we developed the **CallMentor®** Learning and Performance Improvement System - simulation-based e-Learning intelligently blended with facilitation, coaching and performance improvement consulting.

Today, **CallMentor** is the contact center industry’s most recognized training solution, winning 11 consecutive Product of the Year Awards, among other industry distinctions and honors.

Ulysses has grown to be an international learning and performance improvement company serving industry leaders committed to improving their sales, service and customer loyalty at all points of customer contact. And, as our “Ulysses” name implies, we continue our journey with our clients to seek and develop the best possible combination of performance improvement methods and processes that produce measurable results and sustain the test of time.



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