



## Creating Leadership in Every Cubicle: Critical-Path Skills for Transforming Support Performance

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How do you fundamentally change the performance of a support team, in ways that make a real, measurable impact on customer satisfaction levels, productivity and turnover? The answer is to create a leader in every cubicle of your support operation, and watch what happens when you have a team of “owners” who are stakeholders in the support process.

If you scratch the surface of many leading organizations, you will often see practices designed to boost the sense of leadership on the front lines, which in turn drives their success and profitability. I have also seen this transformation happen personally as a support manager, and the results are nothing short of magical – both in terms of support performance, and the atmosphere everyone senses when they come in to work in the morning. But more important, there is a surprising amount of science behind how to make this happen, and putting this science to work will have a real impact on your service quality metrics, morale, turnover, and productivity.

Here are three key factors in making this happen:

### 1. Moving from smile training to skills training

If you Google the term “customer service training” nowadays, you will get close to a million hits, ranging from major training and development firms to every motivational speaker on the face of the earth. But here is a bold statement: over more than a quarter-century of experience, my personal experience is that:

- Customer service training often doesn’t change support metrics.
- The right customer *skills* training can dramatically change metrics.

Customer service training is frequently attitudinal, and in my

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experience “smile training” – focused on things like attitude, courtesy, or non-specific generalities about service – does not teach people the mechanics of how to handle critical support situations. Conversely, there are specific techniques, based on known principles of behavioral psychology, which will dramatically change the way that people react to you – and arm your team with specific, procedural skills for the specifics of what happens in your support center.

Looking at the best practices of other organizations, there is a direct correlation between their customer *skills* training approach and their level of success. These organizations don’t succeed because they have nicer people – instead, they succeed because they have specific, skills-based, scenario-driven methodologies in place for training their customer support agents. For example:

- **FedEx** uses interactive video training that is customized to specific FedEx scenarios.
- **Southwest Airlines** – whose service quality lies within the context of a larger culture – rotates call center agents through other airline operations to learn the culture before putting them on the phones.
- The **Philadelphia Phillies** employ Dale Carnegie training for their customer contact staff, customized to their unique operations.

When skills like these are trained – and more importantly, coached, as we’ll discuss in the next section – I have personally seen the same kinds of transformational results in my own work as organizations like these ones do on a larger scale. To put a skills-based approach into practice in your own organization:

- Customer skills training should be skills-based, scenario-based, and specific to your organization.
- Training outcomes should correlate with service metrics.
- Your customer skills orientation and in-service training should be an extension of a larger culture that supports customer satisfaction.

## 2. Moving from deficit-based coaching to strength-based coaching

Picture this: You are monitoring your agents’ calls. First, one agent tells the customer to “shut up and stop talking so much”. Later, another agent tells a customer that their question was stupid and should be directed elsewhere. What do you say to these agents?

If you are like most customer contact operations, you handle situations like these using a *deficit-based* coaching approach – you tell this person what they did wrong, and instruct them to change the behavior. By comparison, *strength-based* coaching is focused on

working in partnership with employees to help them grow, not tallying wins and losses.

Deficit-based coaching follows strong instincts in human nature. Many performance monitoring and measurement systems are deficit-based. They are simple, logical, and make sense. But in the long run, they don't work. *Deficit-based coaching almost always breeds resistance and lessens buy-in, while strength-based coaching almost always changes performance.*

Strength-based coaching leverages the fact that we all hate being criticized, but like gaining new skills and personal growth. For example, here is how I handled the two situations above, both of which actually happened in my own support center:

- In the first case, the agent and I talked about how frustrating it is to have people talk too much and interrupt you constantly – then we role-played a scenario where he talked too much and I shut him down politely and effectively, using a technique that he then learned and practiced. He ended up as one of our longest-serving team leaders.
- In the second case, I went to this agent with a smile on my face and said, “How would you like to learn how to tell someone their question is stupid without ever using the word ‘stupid’ in the sentence?” We practiced some new ways to respond to this situation, and this person eventually went on to become one of our highest-rated agents for customer satisfaction.

In general, strength-based coaching involves creating a mistake-free, criticism-free environment that moves from “You did X wrong” to “Here’s how to be great at this” – one that respects the human nature that leads us to do the wrong things at times, but also coaches people to the strengths that they all bring to your support operation. It works best when talented peers do the coaching, with managers playing a supportive and leadership role. And it represents part of a broader career development and personal growth process that will lift everyone’s skills and performance.

Creating an environment of strength-based coaching, integrated with our customer and job skills training, was critical to changing the culture and performance of our own support center. More important, tying this issue to our theme of front-line leadership, a strength-based coaching environment created a very noticeable and important change in the culture of our team: people soon openly shared their mistakes with managers and each other, and took personal responsibility for their own skills and that of the team.

Here are some guidelines for putting strength-based coaching into practice:

- I recommend using call monitoring for customer skills as coaching measure *only*, not a performance measure. Why? Because, in my experience, it otherwise creates an adversarial system that negates its value as a coaching tool.
- Focus on best practices and standards, not on catching mistakes.
- Move as much coaching to the team level and peer level as is practical. Employee buy-in is much greater when “the boss” isn’t judging their efforts, and this provides leadership roles for team members.
- Create a mix of individual and group coaching processes as part of an ongoing professional development process.

### **3. Creating a culture of leadership and responsibility at the cubicle level.**

Giving people the right skills and creating a supportive coaching environment are foundational to what I feel is the larger issue in create a self-motivated, high-performing support team: creating a sense of leadership and ownership among people at the cubicle level.

Here are a few simple questions that will help you assess the level of leadership in your own team:

- Do a significant percentage of your team have titles and responsibilities that give them importance *and* add value to the organization? Or are they an undifferentiated mass of “customer support representatives”?
- What areas of their job involve autonomy or decision-making authority?
- What input do they have in hiring decisions? Do they play a role in who “joins the club”?
- Do they have responsibility for outcomes, and share in the rewards of those outcomes?

Deeper issues such as these represent the essence of having leadership at the cubicle level, because higher levels of ownership and authority equate to higher performance – and vice versa. Leading organizations in all spheres of life put more responsibility and authority at the front line level, and this in turn is reflective of their own leadership style, as shown in the figure below.



Here are some principles for putting front-line leadership into practice:

- Seek creative ways to distribute leadership to your team. Look at integrating roles such as training, coaching, liaison work, strategic support, team leadership, subject matter expertise, etc. with customer contact responsibilities.
- Look at ways to give team members outcome responsibility as well as process responsibility
- Train and coach for leadership skills as well as agent skills.
- Make sure your performance criteria allow you to leverage each individual's skills matrix.
- Front-line leadership works – and only works - when long-term principles are more important than short-term decisions.

## Summary

Creating front-line leadership is an inexpensive, self-perpetuating and dramatically effective way to improve performance, which revolves around three key outcomes for your team:

- Customer skills mastery
- Partnership and buy-in for coaching
- Greater team and peer responsibility

Each of these steps involve simple procedural and cultural changes, which in turn can have a far-reaching impact on support quality, productivity, morale, turnover, and ultimately the overall success of your organization.

## About Rich Gallagher.....

*Rich Gallagher is a critically acclaimed business author and former help desk manager whose latest book is Great Customer Connections: Simple Psychological Techniques that Guarantee Exceptional Service (AMACOM Books).*

*Visit him on-line at <http://www.greatcustomerconnections.com/>.*

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