

High Tech – High Touch: A Case Study in World Class Customer Service in a Call Center*

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the case study of one organization as it embarked upon the journey of building a world-class customer care center. It provides an examination of management's original intentions and the unintended consequences that resulted. A description of the transition process will be presented, as well as an overview of the clash of cultures that resulted in the hiring of an outside consulting firm. The intervention is described, as well as the organization's reaction and assimilation of the data collected. The action plans that were implemented are presented along with the impact of those plans on the organization, including the results of an eighteen month follow up audit.

INTRODUCTION

In 1998 a large southern utility determined the need to focus on its customer service function and decided to consolidate the operation into one site (from numerous ones), upgrade the use of technology to monitor and enhance quality, redesign jobs to create greater focus and more segmentation of effort and eliminate levels of supervision while expanding spans of control. Management also committed to a vision, 'Easy to Reach, Easy to do Business With, Great Place to Work.' The following is a case study of the planned change, results, and the process of coming to terms with the unintended consequences of this significant shift in organizational culture. It is the study of one organization's learning the reality of implementing planned change within a customer service environment while continuing to provide great service.

BACKGROUND

From 1998 until early 2000 this company embarked upon significant cultural change within the organization. Once the decision was made to consolidate and merge numerous centers into one centralized location, management set the vision and began the journey to benchmark "best in class" call centers in order to draw the newest, best ideas together and create a center with excellent quality and exceptional productivity within a physical environment that would support employee professionalism.

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The center consolidation and a series of technical and work related changes were implemented that were intended to bring to life the vision of “Easy To Reach, Easy To Do Business With, Great Place To Work”. Overall, there was significant success. The development of narrower job spans through segmentation of work along with the use of enhanced quality monitoring technology contributed to improved average handling time (AHT) and improved customer service metrics. The merged customer service centers reduced costs and supported improved productivity.

There were a number of assumptions underlying management’s actions during the planning process. First and foremost, was a belief in the use of advanced technology to improve speed of communication, monitoring of actual employee performance and measurement of conformance. Second was the belief that consolidation of centers into one large, highly automated, beautiful, modern facility would be appreciated and accepted by employees because it would make their work easier and more pleasant. Third, productivity could be improved through not only the use of technology but also the narrowing of job responsibilities into focused segmentation. Lastly, costs could be lowered through reducing numbers of supervisory positions, and that those remaining in these roles could supervise greater numbers of people because the technology would allow them to supervise differently, especially with the application of more quantitative metrics. What was missing in all of this change was a lack of appreciation for the human side of the equation. The best of intentions ran squarely into the wants, needs, perceptions and desires of the people who were expected to appreciate and applaud the changes the most, those who provide direct customer service.

TRANSITION STEPS

In an attempt to minimize the impact on employees and to contain attrition, management of the center began implementation of the planned multiple changes two years prior to the most visible of the changes, the physical move into the new facility. Segmentation of work, reduction of supervisory levels, and many of the technology enhancements were implemented over the first two years of the transition, in hopes that employees would become accustomed to these changes prior to the relocation. Management also offered employees relocation packages if they moved their families and homes into the community where the new center was located. In addition, employee involvement teams were utilized to get employee input for choosing the interior design, such as colors for walls, carpets, and cubes. Employees were also invited to select new work areas and to visit the site prior to its completion. While many management decisions were made with an eye towards building a work culture where people would feel valued, some of the critical change elements were implemented without a true understanding of the people who worked in the center and how they would experience this totally new technical, social, and physical work environment.

CULTURE

When the different centers were smaller and separate from one another, people found job satisfaction and work support from “knowing” one another, the informal rules or norms of their specific center, their intimate relationships with various levels of management, and the ability to service the customer irregardless the presenting problem. The centers each had a different work culture, the implication of which was not totally understood or appreciated until after people were merged together. One example of an unexpected reaction to the implementation of more technology was the employee belief that management no longer trusted people, due to the perceived new reliance on monitoring of time off the phone. People also reacted to receiving e-mails for policy changes and information updates as disrespectful and an example of a growing distancing of management from the individual employee. These reactions added to the challenge of bringing together multiple sites, and put the spot light on a quiet, growing problem, that of the mixing and merging of three generations of workers, along with a creation of a large customer care center within which was working a significant diversity of people (cultures, backgrounds, ethnic origins and ages).

All of these issues, feelings, experiences came together in the spring of 2000 when a contentious situation between a supervisor and employee blew up and was communicated to everyone within the center through the use of technology. With one simple hit of the ‘send to all’ button, a difficult private situation was communicated center wide, without regard to whether or not others even knew the two parties involved. This misuse of technology resulted in polarizing people and created great divisions, causing the CEO to visit and “hear your concerns” and to publicly suggest that center management had better get its act together.

It was at this point that the organization sought out the services of Competitive Human Resources Strategies (CHRS) LLC, a consulting firm with a reputation for working effectively with Customer Service organizations, providing pragmatic, doable solutions to thorny problems.

THE INTERVENTION

CHRS consultants utilized the traditional action research model consisting of four distinct steps. This model is grounded in fifty years of behavioral science research and consulting and consists of the process of defining the presenting problem and data collection (facts, opinions, visual observation, quantitative and qualitative perspectives), diagnosis or data analysis (identifying “gaps” between “what is” and “what ought to be” as supported by the data), collaborative feedback, planning and action (understanding the data and planning and carrying out steps that one hopes will improve things), and follow up evaluation (data

collection and auditing to determine progress and identification of new gaps). Over six weeks in May and June, 2000 three consultants from CHRS collected data utilizing the following methodologies: qualitative data collected through focus groups with 165 out of 500 employees participating, a 32 item quantitative questionnaire distributed to these same employees prior to soliciting their responses to the focus groups questions. 20 one on one interviews (initiated at the request of the individual employee) 29 one on one interviews with management members, a Management Practices Survey resulting in 360 degree feedback reports for all management and supervisory personnel, on site observation of work areas, cafeteria, etc, with casual conversations with employees, a review of relevant company documentation, including human resource policies and work procedures, and two follow up statistical studies, an attrition study and a retention study, to determine future hiring profiles.

EMERGING ISSUES THROUGH THE DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

While reviewing the data, the same themes kept emerging. There was a collision course of management's vision for the creation of a state of the art, "best in class" technical environment that would support objectivity of measurement, improved productivity and better quality monitoring while honoring people's desire for personal unique attention and a work environment that felt like family and home. Basically employees were asking for a more human lens to be applied to their experience of work while at the same time management was just beginning to fully utilize technology to take the human element out of monitoring and measurement of individual performance. Other primary issues emerged including (1) a need for management to improve relationships and interactions with and between people through more visibility and one on one communication. (2) The erosion of trust due to the increased size of the organization and the various changes implemented during the transition process as well as a perceived lack of consistency regarding treatment of employees. (3) Unrealistic expectations of new hires, specifically generation X and their very different wants and needs versus the more experienced or more senior employees. The more senior employees had a difficult time understanding the newcomers' impatience with the traditional promotional timeframes. Also sited in the data, was a perceived clash between the Corporation's stated value system, versus the one experienced at the Center. Secondary issues that emerged included (1) the restructuring of the organization created spans of control which were too large, given the relative inexperience of many new supervisors. (2) The new work design and the impact of narrower job responsibilities at the same time the organization increased employee hiring criteria. (3) Untried supervision, many of who were perceived to lack the ability to hold a confidence and to treat people consistently across the center and area to area. (4) Communication that was perceived to have become more impersonal and automated. People felt disconnected from one another and their supervisor. (5) The career expectations of newer employees and the need for an articulated

career path which would be seen as fair and available to all, regardless of gender, age, or cultural, ethnic background.

REACTIONS TO THE DATA AND ASSIMILIATION PROCESS

All the quantitative measurement suggested that the Customer Care Center and the change efforts were successful. The vision of “Easy to Reach, Easy to do Business With” was attained. However, the accomplishment of creating a “Great Place to Work” was much more elusive. In fact, reaction of management to the intervention data was personal and immediate. The first reaction was denial, followed by a sense of public humiliation and a desire, after all the work, all the effort, to simply walk away, to quit. Management believed they had bent over backwards to provide a work environment that would create a culture where people would feel valued. The employee reactions were disturbing because they showed a lack of appreciation for the accomplishments of the preceding three years. It was also the observation of the consultants, that from a purely objective view the Center was a good place to work. The consultants were impressed with management, their expressed caring for the people, the excellent physical environment, the focus on applying technology to long frustrating problems and the fair pay, fair policies and fair practices built into the management of the organization. Yet, management needed to really listen and hear the data, the voices of employees. They needed to first accept and value the experience of the employees as their reality and to then embrace that change must begin with them personally, before their efforts could result in the desired outcomes. There was more work to do. Simply getting people into the building, restructuring the work, applying technical solutions, and enhancing monitoring would not and could not create the results they were seeking. Management began to accept the unique perceptions of employees and reintroduce more personal attention and more one on one interaction into their management style. They also came to the realization that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to management would no longer work in this highly diverse organization. Supervision was much more defensive and reactionary in their experience. They seemed shell shocked from the data. Those who had been in supervision for a longer period of time, acknowledged the need to change their approach, while those who were new and who had been working so hard to meet management’s expectations were confused and upset. Employees were surprised by the candor of the feedback and the ability of the consultants to capture their experience.

CASCADING COMMUNICATION AND INVOLVEMENT PROCESS

The process for feedback of the data analysis and developing the action plan included almost everyone at the Center. This took a significant amount of time and management commitment. The consultants met with management for four days to help them fully understand and absorb the data, as well as to determine where to focus their attention. A decision was reached to ask all supervision to attend a daylong meeting to review the data and to contribute to the action plan. Upon completion of this meeting, a decision was

made to have the consultants work with all employees in intact work groups. The supervisors would be involved in those meetings, taking ownership for the ideas already under consideration by management and to solicit additional ideas for improvement. Management also wanted to ensure that the consultants had it 'right'. A short questionnaire was administered to every employee who attended a meeting, asking 'to what degree were the issues identified correctly', and how much did employees agree with some of the trial ideas for improvement. Employees were also asked to identify what was missed, and which employees felt could enhance the ideas already under discussion. The feedback process was designed to support greater ownership for the data itself, the diagnosis, and the ideas for improvement.

ACTION PLANNING

The actions planned and implemented as a result of the data feedback were tailored to meet the human needs of employees while staying true to the goals of integrating technology solutions to the management of the center. A great deal of time and attention was spent reintroducing personalized communication into the daily interactions between employees and supervision. Quantitative goals were reestablished to provide time for additional one on one personal meetings between employees and supervision, as well as monthly team meetings. Business literacy was expanded and greater effort was devoted to ensure the use of e-mail was appropriate to the issue being communicated. Quality monitoring was adjusted to provide more individualized feedback and the people responsible for monitoring were once again asked to take direct calls themselves. Calibration meetings were established to ensure consistency of feedback. To meet the expectation of new hires, career opportunities were expanded and more enhanced, objective criteria was developed. Greater opportunities were created for employee involvement with decision-making, and clearer boundaries established. Opportunities for more direct interactions with senior level center management were created with monthly focus group meetings. Leadership effectiveness was enhanced with the establishment of development plans for each supervisor based upon the 360-degree feedback provided during the assessment phase of the intervention. Training has been provided and consistency enhanced with the establishment of supervisory calibration meetings to ensure each supervisor is working within the same parameters of understanding for policy implementation. Perhaps the most visible action was the introduction of a center-wide Diversity Council and diversity training to help supervision and management understand the unique needs and wants of the highly diverse workforce at the Center.

IMPACT OF THE INTERVENTION

Today, there are many good things to share about life at this customer care center. Communication has improved up and down the organization. Management is listening and responding, although some supervisors still struggle with this role requirement. There is greater consistency of application of people policies, more career opportunities, and important changes to the organizational structure that support management providing more attention to the people and in meeting their needs and wants. Relationships have improved significantly with the Quality Monitoring Process and Function, and the old antagonism between the Quality Monitoring Group and the people serving the customer has disappeared. There is now an open door policy, and more importantly, greater trust between management and employees. People feel acknowledged, recognized and respected for their unique contributions to the organization.

There are still many challenges before center management. As a group, management needs to focus once again on the business issues, this time, in such a way that people feel part of the process and not a target of it. Customer expectations keep rising, as do the costs associated with serving them, thus continually increasing pressure on management. Intergenerational gaps continue to be a challenge, the largest one experienced under the diversity umbrella at this center. As a group, supervision must learn to maintain consistency, while granting more individual ability to make decisions while employees themselves must learn to accept responsibility for their choices.

Management of the center has learned the value and need for consistency, and the use of calibration meetings to create this consistency, especially during times of significant organizational change. Also learned is the need to communicate, clearly and repetitively in order to personally ensure that the message being sent by management is the same one received by employees. Another critical lesson is once again the importance of front line supervision. They are an essential aspect of communicating the organization's desire to focus on people. They need to be visible, consistent, and feel supported and capable of working with people. They need the skills of facilitation, influence and coaching. Reliance on objective feedback is not enough.

EIGHTEEN MONTH FOLLOW UP

In February of the following year the consulting team returned to the customer care center to evaluate the initial intervention and to assess the organization's progress. After conducting focus groups, administering a 17-item employee survey, and reassessing supervisory performance utilizing a 360-degree feedback tool, all results indicated progress.

Most noted improvements were in the areas of communication, relationships with supervisors, policy consistency, overall trust, employee involvement and management and organizational focus on change initiatives. Issues that continued to be problematic were matching employee expectations for career progress with actual opportunities available, managing change and transition, and the need to support supervisory skill and ability in the area of understanding personal influence upon employees.

The 17-item quantitative survey showed progress or constancy in all but one dimension. Employees saw a decrease in cooperative working relationships with fellow employees. Overall findings from the 360-degree feedback survey indicated improvement for most supervisors. This improvement was supported by the addition of a manager the role of which was primarily dedicated to working with supervisors, coaching and ensuring managerial consistency of policy.

PROGRESS TO DATE

In the three plus years since this work originated much has changed at the customer care center. New management and restructuring allowed for a strengthening of the leadership team. Greater attention was focused on communication, helping to 'nip in the bud' any rumors or concerns. Perhaps most significantly, in an effort to honor and acknowledge the diversity of the work force and to enhance the 'high touch' needs of the work force, the physical environment was transformed to allow for personal expression and celebration of traditions and geographic locations.

A constant challenge for management of the customer care center is the ongoing tension between the quality monitoring group and the representatives. The gap between what the organization's quality monitoring group expects and what the phone representatives deliver continues to create significant tension. This is despite active intervention by management.

Another major shift has been the movement back to 'universal representatives' after attempts to utilize segmentation of callers and calls. While going back to universal representatives has increased training time it has also improved service and improved the morale of those representatives who were uncomfortable being unable to service all needs of the callers.

Turnover has decreased and there is greater stability in the work force (it is difficult to determine if this is due to economic conditions, improved management of the center, or

better selection and hiring processes - see article on selection). This has supported the work of the center and has contributed to the group continuing to win awards for their service. The Corporation won the J.D. Powers #1 in Customer Service in the following year.