

Call Center Coaching

Part II



This article originally appeared in
The Call Center Exchange
© 2000 Clifford G. Hurst
Reprinted with permission from the author

This essay is Part II in a two-part series on effective coaching in the call center.

In Part I of this series, I argued that coaching ought to be the #1 job priority of your front line leaders. I then emphasized the difference between two types of call observations—those used for quality assurance purposes and those used for coaching purposes.

In this essay I will suppose that you agree with the priorities and the distinctions made in Part I and that you are committed to having your frontline leaders regularly conduct side-by-side coaching sessions with their agents.

Well, then, how do they go about it? That's what I'll cover here.

Putting Good Ideas to Practice

What follows are a handful of practical, field-tested tips for making coaching sessions effective. Pass these ideas along to your frontline leaders and they'll be ready to roll up their sleeves, plug in next to an agent, and start coaching.

Some Tips

- To be effective, a coaching session needs to be fairly long... and must be without interruptions or other distractions. An hour is a good length of time for most call centers. If each call is especially long, as in many tech support centers, then you'll need an hour-and-a-half.

- Your agent's productivity statistics will be a little lower than usual for the duration of the coaching session. That's because you are going to want to have the agent go into wrap-up for a few minutes after each call while you talk about it and, perhaps role-play some alternative ways to handle a similar call in the future. Be sure that your workforce management people know this and schedule agents accordingly.
- Avoid the temptation to interrupt your agent by providing feedback during the call. Doing so only gets agents flustered. They're going to be nervous enough with you beside them anyway. Allow the call to unfold just as it would have if you weren't listening in. Only if the call is escalated should you get involved during the call.
- A great way to demonstrate a better way of doing something is for you to handle a few calls yourself while your agent listens to you. If you take a call, handle it yourself from start to finish. You'll gain a lot of respect from your agents when you demonstrate your willingness to do their job from time-to-time. The more visible you are about this, the better. You can be certain that all eyes from forty feet around will be watching you. Besides, you need to stay sharp on your own phone skills and this is one good way to do it.



- If you're in a sales environment and are going to handle some calls on an agent's behalf, be sure that the agent still gets credit for any sales that you make during this session. If you can't live with this advice, then ask yourself if you wouldn't be happier as a sales agent than as a supervisor....
- For a coaching session, put away your call observation/monitoring forms. They have no place in a coaching session, except perhaps as a way of helping you decide where to focus your attention. Do not score a coached call. Coaching should be a qualitative experience; not a quantitative one. See Part I of this series for a stronger argument of this. It's important.
- In a coaching session, do not try and evaluate the whole call. No agent can pay attention to more than one aspect of the call at a time. Decide at the start of the coaching session what aspect of the call you are going to focus on. And keep your feedback limited to that. How do you know where to start? There are three ways:



- Review previous QA scores to identify areas for improvement
 - Ask the agent. Most agents know where they should improve; they just don't know how to do it.
 - Listen to a few calls without comment and then decide.
- If side-by-side coaching is new for your people, some of them are going to be visibly nervous about it. You might be, too. That's okay. Start with a few agents who are eager for your help. As others look on and see how quickly those you've coached improve, they'll soon be asking for you to sit with them.
- Remember to work with your best agents, not just the worst ones. Your stars need your personal attention, too. (Besides, you can learn a lot from them.)
- You may feel reluctant to work with your stars because you feel that, when you were an agent, you weren't as good as they are

now. Does that mean you are unqualified to be a coach? Absolutely not. You need not have been a great agent to be a great coach. Here's why: a silent observer to a telephone conversation has a bit of psychological distance from the conversation itself. That distance gives you the ability to really listen to what is going on and to objectively evaluate both sides of the conversation. Neither of the two parties involved in the conversation, on the other hand, can be objective. They are engaged. Your objectivity gives you insight that will help you give constructive feedback even to your very best agents.

- Always be asking yourself, what am I learning from this call that I can pass along to other agents? Your job is to spread best practices. Spread them like a cough during flu season. Remember to give credit to the source of any good ideas you get. Keep the spotlight on your people; you are merely the conduit. Keep the pronoun "I" out of your vocabulary as much as you can during a coaching session.
- As you observe coaching calls, keep your ear tuned to the customer. A wise person once said, "The quality of your communication is the response you get." And isn't a certain kind of customer response the purpose of each phone call? Always keep asking yourself, "How is this customer responding? Is this the desired response? What is it about what the agent said or the way she said it that triggered this response? If the customer's response was favorable, can we duplicate what triggered it? If the customer's response was not favorable, how can we avoid duplicating what triggered it?"
- Notice that the last two questions above are future-oriented. Coaching is all about future performance. Avoid using phrases like "you should have..." and "you could have..." or "you did/didn't..." Those are evaluative phrases, not developmental ones. Replace them with: "next time what you can do is..." or "next time, why don't you...?" or "try it this way..."





Three Magic Questions

Socrates taught philosophy by asking questions. His questions challenged his pupils to think for themselves. Hence, they learned more thoroughly. And more importantly, they didn't argue with the source of the knowledge. You can be like Socrates. Rather than giving feedback on each call, learn to ask questions to draw out of your agents their own analysis about ways to improve.

Here are what I've come to call the *Three Magic Questions* you can use when coaching.

1. How do you feel that call went?
2. What did you do particularly well on that call?
3. What can you do differently (re: the area of focus) next time?



Here's why the three questions are so effective.

Question One is merely a way to take the psychological pulse of the agent. If your agent is already feeling pretty beat up by the customer, you will take a different approach to coaching than you will with an agent who is really upbeat and positive about the call just observed.

Question Two is a good self-discipline for both you and the agent. You see, it's easy to fall into the trap of seeing the job of observing calls as being one of fault-finding. In fact, a lot of the monitoring forms I've seen in use could be better called fault-finding forms. That's one reason they have no role during a coaching session. But the job of a coach is not to find fault. It is to make better. A law of learning says "that which gets reinforced gets repeated." And what do we want agents to repeat on future calls? The things they did well on the last one. So, your job is to look for the good in each call and reinforce that.

You'll accomplish this if, after each call you tell your agent what you observed about the things she did well. But you'll accomplish even more if you ask the agent to think about it herself. Get the agent to tell you what she thinks she did well and the acknowledge and reinforce that. This builds in the agent an increased ability for self-analysis. And it reverses what may otherwise be a self-defeating mental cycle. You see, a natural human tendency,

especially when a call did not have a favorable outcome, is for the agent to play over and over in his mind everything that went wrong. Left unchecked, this habit will serve to reinforce exactly the opposite of what you want to reinforce!

Question Three focuses on continuous self-improvement. It further refines your and your agents' analytical skills. And sets the stage for getting better and better and better. Continuous improvement also becomes a wonderful antidote to boredom on the job. Instead of doing the same thing over and over, your agents will strive to do something a little bit better on each call.

Here's the best part about the power of *Question Three*. About eighty percent of the time, your agents will tell you that they can improve on the next call the very same thing that you were going to tell them anyway. But you know what? When they tell it to you, they don't argue with the source. There is no defensiveness built up by this kind of coaching. And even in the twenty percent of the time that the agent misidentifies the areas most in need of improvement, by the time you've gone through these three questions, the agent is much more open to feedback than he would have been before.

One Caution

One word of caution about using the Three Magic Questions. I once recommended use of these during a workshop for call center managers. About three weeks later I got a phone call from a supervisor who said to me,

"I tried your methods and they didn't work."

I asked, "Why not?"

She replied, "My agents thought that I was being manipulative."

"Did you tell them what you were doing and why you were doing it?"

"Well, no."

"Then why don't you do that now?"

She did, and her people were fine with the practice. You see, there is no hidden agenda here.

Do you know what manipulation is? Manipulation is trying to get other people to do what you want them



to do without them knowing that you're trying to do it. That's when this technique might be seen as manipulative. To avoid this possibility, meet with all of your agents and tell them....

"I've just learned of a new method of coaching. It involves me asking you three magic questions after each call. The questions are... and here's why I am asking each one....."

Try it. I think you'll really like the response you get. Let me know how it works.

About the author



Cliff Hurst is president of Career Impact, Inc. located in Wells, Maine.

Career Impact provides training and consulting services to call centers.

Cliff is also author of :

A Career for the 21st Century: A Handbook for Call Center Agents, The Five Principles of Business Leadership, and the Business Success Series of CD-ROM training programs.

Cliff's workshop on *Coaching the Call Center Coaches* has been widely acclaimed by executives, managers, supervisors, coaches, team leaders, and trainers from Newfoundland to Florida. This series of articles discuss just a small part of all that we cover in those workshops.

You can learn more about Career Impact's products and services by visiting our web site:

www.careerimpact.net

Or by calling toll-free:

1-800-813-8105

A Surfer's Story

Years ago, I landed my first management position as a lieutenant of United States Marines. I had the good fortune to be stationed for two years in Hawaii—on the north shore of the island of Oahu. The north shore of Oahu is world famous for its surfing waves. Its big waves!

Well, I had never been on a surf board before, but being at that stage in my life more physically fit than mentally sound, I resolved that I, Cliff Hurst, would become a surfer. You can probably guess where this story is going. You see, Oahu is a great spot to *be* a surfer, but it's not such a good place to learn to *become* one.

Fortunately, I had a buddy who was an avid surfer and he promised to teach me. Weekend after weekend for many months we'd hit the waves. Or, rather, the waves hit me. I never did get the hang of it. I merely managed to swallow more sea water and eat more lava rock than I care to remember.

A typical outing would go like this: for about an hour I would flounder around in the surf, half drowning myself, until, at the point of exhaustion I would collapse on the beach. All the while, my buddy would paddle out and ride in; paddle out and ride in... over and over again.

Eventually, I would interrupt, "Aren't you bored yet? All you do is the same thing over and over again... you paddle out and ride in; paddle out and ride in...over and over again."

One day this accomplished surfer looked at me quizzically, and replied, "Cliff, you don't get it, do you? You just don't know what surfing's all about... Out there," he said grandly as he gestured to the line of breakers coming ashore, "every wave is different."

"Every wave is different." Some twenty-five years later, I finally figured out what my buddy meant. It's a lot like working in a call center. Today when I meet a rep who says she's bored taking the same old kinds of calls over and over again, I think to myself, "You don't get it, do you?" You see, no two calls are ever alike. Your outstanding reps know this, and they are the ones who rise to the unique challenges of every call every time. It's all those others who need your coaching to help them see their job in this light.