OPEN THE DOOR... TO POSSIBILITY!

Lead with passion and optimism when planning for the "new normal."

BY KATHLEEN M. PETERSON, POWERHOUSE CONSULTING



The idiom "Open the Door" is defined by Merriam-Webster as "to make something easier." Who isn't interested in making something easier? Think back on the past couple of years and the push toward improving the customer experience. This has put a lot of value on making things easy for consumers.

Which Door Will It Be?

As we return to our "new normal," contact center leaders will have to set the stage for what's next and allow a theme (of sorts) to be created, such as "Open the Door." As one would expect, there are many choices related to what doors to walk through. *Will it be the door of fear and powerlessness or the door of possibility and passion?* Leaders have a unique responsibility to influence the overall direction that their business unit will assume. This is true even when one is faced with the kinds of conditions many must confront today. Leading people includes understanding that it is not conditions that shape destiny... *it is choices*. This could very likely be the most important leadership message you will ever send.

Pessimism, fear and frustration do not yield a resourceful state of mind. It is quite the opposite. People often become "stuck" in what-ifs and in pointless worrying. They worry about something that has already happened that they can do nothing about. Or they worry about something that HAS NOT happened and, in fact, MAY NOT happen. This is a serious waste of valuable energy and leaves one exhausted and immobilized. Worry is driven by uncertainty. Closing the gap on uncertainty in any way possible helps your staff to look forward. Momentum is created by sharing timelines for returning to the office and identifying what to expect when all are cleared to return, including expectations for staff.

Business leaders can check up on how team members are feeling by simply asking, "How are you doing?" Asking the question and listening to the answer without providing solutions shows you really, really, really care. Choose to promote optimism!

Optimism Is the Better Choice

Optimism provides the framework for creative thinking, a sense of possibility, and an understanding that all conditions we face are *temporary*, not permanent. One of my favorite definitions of optimism is the "ability to overcome adversity." Many interpret optimism as an inappropriate response to challenging times, as if somehow an optimistic view is not "serious." Certainly, *blind optimism* is just that. But the ability to look to the future, to instill in those around you a sense that this too shall pass sends a very powerful message. It is the belief that what is gained from difficult times has more lasting value than what is learned in better times. A constant focus on identifying challenges and facing them head on creates a powerful force upon which people can draw from and contribute.

When you make a choice about setting the tone for what's next, understand that *action* is required to produce results. Many leaders face objectives that may seem impossible to achieve right now. But look at the "essence" of the objective. In most cases, the essence is around *quality* and *cost*. Today's leaders will be responsible for demonstrating the ability to balance quality and cost... this is not a new battle. What is needed now is to expand the conversation to demonstrate VALUE.

Are You Grounded in Possibility?

First and foremost, check your state of mind to assure that you are truly grounded in "what is possible." Then take a long and hard

look at your operation from the *not-so-obvious* angle. I am not suggesting that proper workforce management (WFM), technology and current quality programs are not worthy of evaluation. I assume that routine assessments around these areas are being conducted. But the "gateway to action" is what you do *creatively* with what you have found, what else you examine, and how you report your findings.

As an example, workforce management is both an art and a science. The numbers are reflective of how effective your planning is and how productive your staff has been. However, a solid WFM assessment will also alert you to *turnover and burnout* behaviors. Turnover is relatively easy to spot, but not necessarily easy to fix. Burnout behaviors often precede actual turnover. When there is a jump in tardiness, absences and error rates, *and* a reduction in overall productivity and quality, your operation is in a slump. As much effort as there is on individual reprimands or coaching, seeing the bigger picture alerts leaders to a more pervasive condition that MUST be identified and acknowledged.

The most common cause of turnover is management. When fear and pessimism get a grip on an environment, some managers (particularly less experienced frontline managers) think they can force performance to meet objectives. As far as I know, this simply does not work, especially with those staff that you would most like to keep. Nothing will drive good people away faster than a poor manager.

How Solid Are Your Management Practices?

Leaders must closely monitor frontline management to assure that traditional data is being used to identify more *global* issues. Many contact centers have been misled by their ACD reports. Over the past couple of decades, technology advancements in ACD reporting have resulted in literally hundreds of agent reports—perhaps suggesting that agents represent the best place to look for trouble spots and improvement. While it is important to monitor agent performance, there are many more global, pervasive, and process-driven issues that relate to management performance and actions. No amount of focus on individual agent performance will ever match the powerful impact of identifying challenges and improvements at a high level to improve the performance of all and to add real value to the contact center's operation. This is an important door to walk through, if you haven't already. Bring the entire management team along as well and instill a "big-picture" perspective.

> "Watch your thoughts, for they become words. Watch your words, for they become actions. Watch your actions, for they become habits. Watch your habits, for they become character. Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny."
>
> —UNKNOWN AUTHOR

For instance, when the customer data record is provided at the same time a call is delivered, the entire contact center enjoys the benefits of shortened handle time, error reduction, and a sense from callers that the organization is savvy and state-of-the art. When a handoff or escalation is eliminated, the caller is more likely to be handled within a single call; this avoids callbacks and multiple parties being involved in the customer experience. If a center is "chopped up" into small groups, providing cross-training opportunities reduces delays for callers, improves staff utilization, adds value to each agent advancing in skills, and creates an opportunity to develop a career path. This in turn decreases turnover and retains skills and talent. The result is a better experience for customers and employees and a reduction in error rates and hiring/training costs, thus adding value while improving quality and cost.

Process Considerations for the Future

Here are some thoughts to consider as we move forward. First, think *process*. An analysis of processes is the most effective method for improving efficiency and reducing costs not only in the contact center but also across multiple business units. The "low-hanging fruit" is in eliminating activities and tasks involving paper, human handoffs, transfers, approvals and escalations.

When streamlining processes, there is often the uncomfortable requirement of conducting an in-depth evaluation of contact center's technical infrastructure. Unfortunately, many companies have *cobbled together* decisions made in isolation by multiple departments or have approved "home-grown" applications that cannot interface with any 21st century tools. This results in the "elephant in the room" that everyone sees but that no one acknowledges. Fear takes over and forces workarounds, undocumented procedures, Band-Aids and other inefficient activities—rather than facing the reality that as long as the technical infrastructure is behind the times, the service operation will be hard pressed to gain genuine efficiencies.

Eliminating Cross-functional Dysfunction

Another factor in the process improvement challenge relates to *cross-functional relationships*. Few processes are confined within the walls of any contact center. There is generally a continuum that flows throughout the operation. Most of the demand within contact centers is generated elsewhere. For example, how's your relationship with marketing? Are marketing plans shared with you or are you left to be informed by a caller regarding a campaign or promotion? When handoffs are necessary, does the contact center have any visibility into what actually happened to the caller? The contact center is the destination sought by callers when other departments

fail to hold up their end of the bargain, so to speak.

If you want the center to handle only the front end, you'd best be available for those handoffs. Or conversely, the contact center can undertake a complete process analysis to discover ways to complete the transaction. Ideally, the cross-functional partners are willing to participate. But don't ignore the concerns. Some managers look at the contact center's "taking away work" from them as a threat, even if it is better for the consumer. This is cross-functional dysfunction! Address the need to fix the process from the perspective of a shared goal to put the consumer experience first.

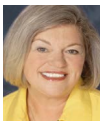
Building Optimistic Momentum

When planning for the "new normal," consider gathering your frontline management team for a couple of hours to gather information on what the team views as the current major challenges. Challenge team members to think "big picture." Consider engaging frontline agents as well; it's always interesting to see the operation from multiple perspectives and to identify trends across roles.

If you choose to conduct a session, consider calling it (for example) "Opening the Door to the Future." Make it fun and exciting by using metaphors and encouraging honest participation. Regardless of the name, do something to acknowledge what everyone has been through. Show gratitude for each person's return, and work hard to reduce uncertainty by building optimistic momentum. Frustration is often the result of conversations begun, but actions not taken, or action taken but not communicated to all. Open the door to communication.

Lead with passion and optimism. Search for improvements within your team and with cross-functional colleagues. Communicate with senior executives about challenges, improvements and impacts. Make yourself an expert resource to the executive that may not really understand the contact center's role, reinforce the value the center brings.

This is the time for contact center management to challenge everything! To look for opportunities to promote a big-picture vision, identify efficiency gains via cross-functional alignment and process improvement, use quality to deepen understanding of customers changing needs and preferences, while demonstrating value to the enterprise. Let us know how you do... open the door to possibility!



Kathleen M. Peterson is the Chief Vision Officer of PowerHouse Consulting, a call center and telecommunications consulting firm. (www.powerhouse1.com)

@PowerHouse603