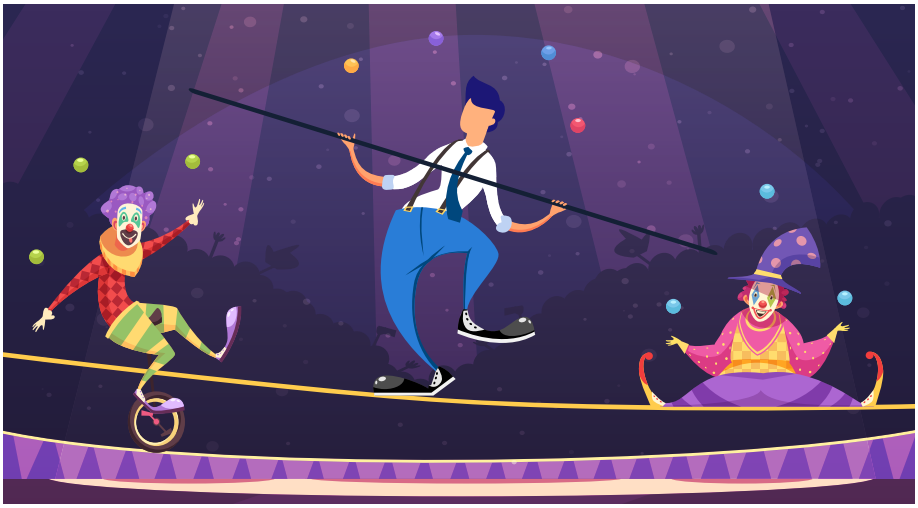
CONTACT CENTERS TODAY... A MANAGEMENT BALANCING ACT

Three conditions leaders take on that contribute to a circus-like atmosphere.

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The idiom "balancing act" is defined by dictionary.com as "a circus act in which a performer displays his or her balancing ability." From where I sit, this definition suits many a contact center.

I wonder how many managers feel that they have had to walk a tightrope to balance quality vs. quantity or the trapeze of metrics vs. momentum... never mind the three-ring circus of meddling vs. managing! And when it comes to juggling, contact center leaders that aren't putting out fires are often juggling the many demands placed upon them.

Of course, there are other definitions for the idiom "balancing act," for example: "a situation requiring careful balancing of opposing groups, views or activities" (www.dictionary.com). This definition, while not quite as much fun, certainly identifies what many contact center leaders face daily.

I would like to call out three conditions that are part of the balancing act leaders take on when juggling "opposing groups, views or activities." These contribute to a contact center circus atmosphere, minus the fun!

The Three-Ring Circus of Meddling Management

Meddling is when leadership interferes—when the "boss" wants to tamper with every aspect of what you are doing. This is often to the point of distraction and potential destruction of staff motivation and morale.

Some call this micromanagement. I prefer the term meddling. After all, these behaviors don't really merit the moniker of management. There is a difference between governance and interference; all leaders do better when they possess the insight to monitor their own behavior and make adjustments accordingly. Perhaps you have difficulty balancing your beliefs with an alternative approach. Perhaps you believe that you know a better and more thorough way to do something. Well, take a moment to ask yourself if, in fact, you are actually confusing a belief that your way is better with the fact that it is simply more familiar. In doing so, you dismiss the proposed alternative. If conflicts are frequent and decisions consistently shift from the domain expert to the meddling leader, chaos will be in the center ring.

Meddling is menacing to those professionals confident in their skills. When an organization solicits high-caliber talent it had best be prepared to allow that talent to work independently. When a senior leader interferes with activities and tasks that are below their rank and skill, be advised that there are significant risks. Loss of talent, motivation and morale are the most likely and most damaging. Ego, fear and incompetence are contributing factors when a leader (or a group of leaders) doesn't allow the contact center management team to do its job.

The best contact center executive leaders I know are confident in themselves... a key ingredient in being confident in others. Check your leadership approach for signs of meddling; this can be difficult because often meddling is well-intentioned. Balance must be achieved in guidance vs. interference. Simply, guide is to "ask" while interfere is to "tell."

Trapeze of Metrics and Momentum

Contact centers are hotbeds of metrics. Balancing the use of metrics and the building of high performance momentum is truly a challenge. Production metrics take center stage when the leader/manager has a lack of experience or sophistication. The use of metrics impacts the kind of momentum that is building in any center. The vendor community is an important factor, as well. Vendors have created literally hundreds of reports to track individual performance. Leadership is set up to believe that the data in the reports must

be the most important of all things to study.

The focus on metrics often leads to the creation of "targets" such as specific talk time, work time, or number of calls handled. Personally I find it increasingly hard to believe that these metrics still occupy the minds of contact center leaders. It is as if they prove anything other than evidence of production, a contribution to the absolute wrong type of momentum!

Leaders must learn to balance the use of metrics. Don't get me wrong… call volume and handle time are all necessary for the proper running of the contact center. However, leaders must make sure they are analyzing metrics at levels other than the agent. Analysis begins with the inputs and not the outputs.

When evaluating talk time, it must be understood that its output is so much more than simply the agent's interaction skills; it is also a reflection of process and technology. When networks lag or slow down, when agents must perform keyboard twister to complete transactions, when the desktop has multiple applications open with various timeouts and password resets, and when agents are forced to use their own Post-it note knowledge base, TALK TIME IS IMPACTED! The agent has NO CONTROL over many of these conditions. Yet there are managers out there that have difficulty balancing the evaluation of these metrics against all of the contributing factors.

There are organizations that demonize after-call work, believing that agents use it to "hide out." The lack of trust inherent in this belief distances leadership from the front line because there is no balance around people and process. Many times, analytics are not analytics at all. They are simply taking a look at the metrics and assigning a good or bad value to agent performance. It is unfair, unsophisticated and ultimately unsuccessful.

There are better ways to look at metrics. A colleague that runs a marketing contact center in healthcare had a team of agents work on handle time as a project. She set the team up to look at all the inputs to handle time and make recommendations for improvement. The findings were compelling! The team documented issues with timely notification of campaigns and product launches; agents were challenged due to lack of advance information and associated training. Post-call processing time was long due to the complexity of the CRM configuration. The handling of technical support calls for promo codes and website issues had landed in the contact center by default rather than by design and agents struggled mightily. These findings in many ways support the fact that metrics provide much more than insights to individual production. When properly analyzed, metrics provide insights into process issues and deliver infinitely more momentum to improvement than pinning performance solely on individual agents.



> "Step with care and great tact, and remember that Life's a Great Balancing Act."
>
> —DR. SEUSS

As for number of calls handled, this metric originated in the dark ages of Operator Services, a "catch-and-toss" environment that has no place in today's complex business environments. When you begin troubling yourself with how many calls any individual handled, think about the kind of momentum your use of this metric will yield. Never mind how incredibly easy the momentum is to manipulate. The simple act of hanging up on a few calls, pretending not to hear the caller, deliberately shortening calls to meet the metric… these methods are used by agents in environments where the number of calls handled has become a competition among the front line. And the loser is the customer!

Of course, we need to understand the productivity of all in the contact center. But it is the method that determines the type of momentum we build and the type of balance we apply. Metrics must be balanced. Proper analysis and measurements must be used wisely when it comes to building momentum for genuine efficiencies that yield genuine production. We recommend a model called Contribution to Capacity to address production (see "'Contribution to Capacity'… A Transformational Term," bit.ly/C2Cmodel). I coined the term in the late 1990s to make a conceptual shift away from adherence—one that frees frontline management for more valuable activities and makes agents responsible and accountable for their "contribution."

Walking the Tightrope of Quality vs. Quantity

I've been in the contact center industry since ACDs were introduced to the marketplace in the early 1980s. Yes I'm that old, or maybe I just started really young! Either way, this dilemma of quality vs. quantity has been around for decades. This *balancing act* is part and parcel of the issues mentioned above with a noteworthy difference… the *quality program*, to be exact. The quality of the quality program is where this balancing act begins. The quality program and other measures must be complementary and drive toward the same objectives. Far too many organizations invest significant amounts of money in recording systems and then shortchange quality program design and development.

In my experience, there is one of two opposing forces behind most quality programs. It is either *discovery and development* or *investigation and prosecution*. Discovery and development programs are grounded in coaching and training. Extensive time and effort are put into the development of coaches and the training of agents against clearly defined objectives. The program has documented guidelines, a stated program purpose, defined frequency of observations, and a specified feedback response time. The use of recordings and observation data is clear and scoring methodology is defined via a set of measurable behaviors. The *Definitions Document* defines each behavioral element, calibration sessions address both scoring and coaching standards, and disclaimers are provided where necessary. The balancing act here is that launching a proper program takes time and planning. I



I am stunned when I find contact center leaders that want to rush a quality program. It doesn't even sound right!

The investigation and prosecution model typically doesn't invest time in the "playbook." A form is created that is often nothing more than a compliance audit with a set of "did/didn't" questions to answer. You can detect this plan as a consumer when some poor soul on the other end of the phone overuses your name, says "thank you" one too many times, and engages in obviously scripted queries and responses. It is incredibly sad to me when I encounter this. Sometimes I'll ask, "Do they make you say that?" I usually receive an uncomfortable sigh. Sometimes I've taken to talking directly to the recording by saying, "This message is for you who are listening to this call. Please stop making your agents use scripts. They have brains."

Another indicator of the prosecution model is when you agree to participate in a post-call survey and the question is something like, "Would you hire this agent?" I become incredibly irritated by this since often the agent is the messenger of policies that make the customer unhappy. The customer happily replies, "NO!" The very act of putting the question on the survey implies that the frontline agent has sole responsibility for the customer's outcome. We all know that nothing is further from the truth. In my opinion, that question is prosecution-based.

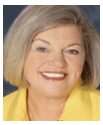
I once observed a call in an insurance company in which the agent was informing a customer that his claim had been denied. The customer was unhappy to say the least. Yet at the end of the call the agent asked, "Is there anything else I can help you with today?" This did nothing more than reignite the caller's rage. When I asked the agent why he asked that question under those circumstances, his answer was, "5 points." That, my friends, is NOT a quality program. This approach usually matches up with the production-like metrics discussed above.

Quality programs should not feel like walking a tightrope for either the contact center agent or the coach. Please invest properly to achieve balance and long-term gains.

Quality Breeds Quantity

In closing, I believe that, ultimately, quality in all areas of contact center management breeds quantity. Considering that today's contact centers handle increasingly complex issues, doing things right will always prove more productive than doing things over.

Take the time to find balance, particularly in these times. Keep in mind that employees need encouragement, development and empathy to actually deliver high quality, productivity and a great experience.



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