AVID READERS MAKE BETTER LEADERS

Reading provides new perspectives and thinking vital for running a contact center.

BY KATHLEEN M. PETERSON, POWERHOUSE CONSULTING



I have grown up (personally and professionally) over the past 30-plus years working in the call/contact center business. I began in the early '80s when my husband David and I owned an "interconnect" telephone company. Interconnect companies sold premise-based telecommunications systems to businesses and hooked them up to the Bell System operating companies. This was prior to the divesture of the Bell System in 1984. We sold and installed some of the earliest ACD (automatic call distribution) systems as they came to market.

A Bit of History

These ACD systems were part of the early telecom digital revolution. Prior to the '80s and the introduction of digital technologies, companies used phones with flashing lamps and processed calls via intercom or overhead pages. "Pick up line 1" was the transfer method. Digital technology introduced many new features to businesses, including extensions, transfers, speed dial, voicemail and a slew of features that nobody today really needs or uses (e.g., call park and pickup groups).

Of all the whiz-bang offerings, ACD was the big winner. Its new features and functionality made it the big seller. This was the first time centralizing and overseeing inbound demand from customers or prospects became a real possibility market-wide. Financial institutions were the first big adopters. This telecom digital technology wave corresponded with many (deregulation) changes in banking and finance that created a need for improvements in customer care. The ACD provided the opportunity to centralize customer service for organizations that were growing and to service populations beyond the local area, reducing the need for consumers to conduct business in person.

Mail-order companies were also on board very quickly as they recognized the value of taking orders over the phone to provide quick responses and opportunities for add-on sales.

The funny thing is that in the first decade-plus, companies were really excited! They wanted to learn more, to do it all right. I spent nearly 10 years teaching ICMI's (International Customer Management Institute) "Essential Skills and Knowledge" public seminars, and we had very senior business leaders in attendance. They wanted to know what was needed to run a solid operation, to learn all they could about how to staff and how to produce the best results. They were EXCITED, and they were READING! ICMI's *Service Level Newsletter* was the first of its kind and had a wide variety of subscribers.

Those days were full of professional curiosity and tremendous interest in how to build a successful call/contact center. There were newsletters, and leaders read, researched and discussed various options and opportunities.

Among the many reasons we had so much success early on was our ability to read. We read mountains of manuals on all this newfangled digital technology and were able to

optimize the investments of early adopters. In all, there was a strong industry "buzz," which I fear had been waning well before the pandemic began.

Fast Forward to Today

What has happened to the call/contact center industry buzz? Maybe at least some of the buzz can be recharged simply by reading more.

DISCLAIMER: Pipeline *readers have self-identified as being interested in bringing back the buzz!! Linkedin groups show that there is a buzz growing again. We must kick that buzz meter back up and get folks thinking not only about HOW, but about WHY and WHAT call/contact centers are to become as we approach the next 20 years.*

I have thought for a very long time that "avid readers make better leaders." When clients ask me to interview job candidates for leadership positions in the contact center, I always ask interviewees what they read to keep up with industry trends. I cannot tell you how often there is a blank stare, as if the candidate is surprised that there is an "industry" that publishes all manner of material to stimulate thinking!

I firmly believe that reading is a key differentiator among professionals in any field. Michael Hyatt has identified "five ways reading can uniquely develop and empower leaders" based on his work and on the research of others.

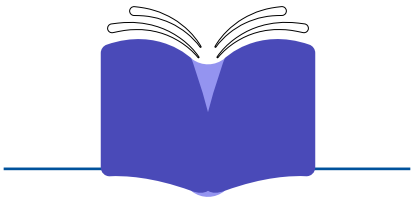
READING MAKES US BETTER THINKERS

According to Hyatt, reading is "the most efficient way to acquire information." Leaders deal with mountains of information and must filter that information to stay on track. Reading "actually upgrades our analytical tools, especially our judgment and problem-solving abilities," which are abundant in any contact center.

READING IMPROVES OUR PEOPLE SKILLS

Readers are not a bunch of nerds curled up in a window seat and set apart from others. They are curious and happily invest time in this healthy and enjoyable distraction. Stories—be they fiction, biographies or business journals—allow us to view situations through the eyes of others. We gain perspective on other ways to see things. Hyatt writes that "one CEO said that the insights about human nature in fiction and poetry has made all the difference in understanding and relating to her people."

Reading also improves emotional intelligence, a critical success factor in leading people and change... two very familiar realities in the contact center industry.

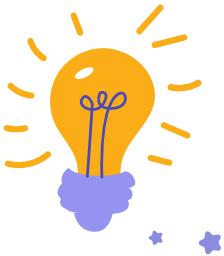


> "A readership crisis is really a leadership crisis."
>
> —MICHAEL HYATT

READING HELPS US MASTER COMMUNICATION

"When we read, especially widely and deeply, we pick up language proficiency that transfers across the board, including speaking and writing."

Contact center leaders are often responsible for communicating change and tending to multiple personalities. Rapport-building skills are critical to being successful. I am sometimes alarmed at the lack of awareness some leaders display when it comes to the ability to improve their communication. Reading is one way to dabble in alternatives, to challenge your own beliefs, and to make room for fresh and new ideas. I believe that readers tend to be better listeners, which mightily improves the ability to influence and persuade.



READING HELPS US RELAX

Contact center leaders are often challenged by highly stressful environments; relaxation is a path toward renewal and is of the utmost importance.

One study compared reading to other stress relievers like "walking, listening to music, or drinking a cup of tea. Reading was found to be the most effective, lowering heart rates and relieving tension in as few as six minutes."

READING KEEPS US YOUNG

Anne E. Cunningham has researched that reading is shown to keep us mentally sharp as we age: "Exercising our brains with books and other material might even be able to prevent dementia in later years."

In my opinion, reading is one of the key factors in generating interest and debate within the contact center industry. I would really like to see our industry come alive again and see a more genuine debate of ideas. What I see now are more arguments about who is right.

The industry appears flooded with leaders who think they already know all there is to know, of course, without the benefit of reading! Some folks with lots of letters after their names think that their accounting education prepared them to lead contact centers. These are not the enthusiastic executives of the '90s; they are short-term thinkers doing a stint on their way to a higher leadership level.

Today's Realities

Over the past years, there has been quite a change in the call/contact center business. The changes had already begun prior to the pandemic. Conference attendance is an indicator; senior leadership was rarely in attendance. The program and speakers became the same over and over. Topics focused largely on operational infrastructure with little if any strategic tracks or content. This left senior leaders out.

Many of the senior leaders I have encountered over the years believe they have been gifted with an inherent knowledge of how to run a contact center. As many of you know,

this is a gross misrepresentation of skill. All leaders must be willing to challenge their beliefs. Some operations seem to be led by descendants of Attila the Hun. They simply demand performance measured in the least effective manner where speed trumps quality and chaos is the only consistent element. When someone tells me that they have "20 years" of experience in contact center management, in reality, they may simply have worked in the same center for 20 years doing the same things. They are not reading, learning or growing... just repeating the same tired approach to delivering on metric objectives.



The most successful contact center leaders I have met have changed their minds many times over the years as new information and approaches to solving or avoiding problems are absorbed. This is often accomplished via reading, debating options with other professionals, participating in learning events (e.g., Contact Center Nation, CCNG, and the Northeast Contact Center Forum in New England), and joining contact center industry gatherings. Reading and ongoing learning bring new ideas and opportunities to challenge existing beliefs. This is the only true way to grow.

Make Time to Read

Each and every one of us *Pipeline* readers should share *Pipeline* with our colleagues and constituents to promote the value of reading and the thinking it inspires. As in the past, contact centers should organize a reading library or distribute an online reading list and award "points" to those who read and report on a topic of interest. Consider the value of reading and debating "best practices" with your colleagues!

Reading has very few, if any, downsides. It is powerful enough to soothe, inform, inspire, challenge, delight and provide decision-making frameworks on every human level imaginable. Make time to read, and you won't be disappointed!



Kathleen M. Peterson is the Chief Vision Officer of PowerHouse Consulting, a call center and telecommunications consulting firm. (www.powerhouse1.com)
@PowerHouse603