

“Passing the baton” refers to handing over a particular duty or responsibility to someone, as in a relay race. Years ago, I devised a leadership seminar and much of the program’s focus was on *communication*. We actually handed out relay race batons to illustrate the action of “handing off” information.

Business is about communication regardless of the channel; it is the No. 1 professional skill to master. I am always amazed by folks who balk at the suggestion that enhancing one’s communication skills is a lifetime pursuit. Just because you can talk does not mean you can communicate!

When it comes to contact center management, the ability to “engage” your team, the executive team, the front line and your crossfunctional partners is essentially the ability to communicate. The ability to “coach” your team is the ability to communicate. In addition, the ability to gain funding for the center is the ability to communicate. At each juncture, communication is the key. It is not, however, the same key!

The contact center world deals with a barrage of constant communication and information. This is why we often recommend that centers fund and staff a “Communication Gatekeeper”—the portal monitor for all communication in and out of the contact center.

In many organizations, a “free for all” communication style has emerged. Frontline agents receive blanket emails from a multitude of departments. Marketing may suggest asking a question during a call, such as, “Are you familiar with our blah, blah, blah?” Or they have the notion that the agent ought to be asking Net Promoter type questions (uncomfortable). Or IT may send out new steps for using X, Y or Z systems to all agents.

Whatever the reason, the approach of having anyone in the enterprise able to communicate these types of requests directly to the front line is an extremely dangerous process. It is one that emerges by default, NOT by design. No one in their right mind would actually define such a process... I hope.

The challenge is that agents often are not given time to peruse emails. In these scenarios, agents’ inboxes are “bloated” with messages; taking the time to decipher and deploy requests is an unreasonable expectation. Conversely, when information flows through the Gatekeeper, it can be vetted as to whether there is a training (or other type of) issue involved. Leadership can evaluate a request for agents to collect information within a call. They can determine how to train, how to capture responses, how to report, how to staff if call duration is a factor, etc. In addition, the Gatekeeper can reject and respond to requests when necessary.

When communications are systematically funneled through the Gatekeeper, intranets, newsletters and memos become the baton by which information is distributed in the contact center. Agents are afforded time to review and absorb the information sent to them. The Gatekeeper may also become the portal for a company’s “communication review process.” Some very gifted organizations have a process that sends all customer communication to the contact center for review *before* it is sent out. The purpose is to determine if the information is clearly written and understandable. This will reduce or eliminate customer contacts that might occur due to a confusing mass communication.

Recently, I received a communication from Ally Bank. The bank had bought out an auto loan and sent a letter so laden with “legalese” that it made no sense to me. I called... only to be greeted by the IVR with an option about the loan letter (an indication of the number of calls generated by the letter). Unbelievably, Ally used the exact same legalese on the recording! This forced calls to the agent in spite of the bank’s attempt to explain. Here is a bank that prides itself on being easy to do business with. A conversation with the contact center would most certainly have yielded a letter that reduced the amount of inbound traffic.



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Having a Communication Gatekeeper to manage “passing the baton” of information from the enterprise requires a solid plan and a careful design. But let’s also look at the more intimate “hand off” of information from quality coaches to the front line. *How well is that process designed?*

Contact centers spend an untold number of dollars managing quality programs and have varying levels of success. Quality coaching needs an occasional boost to make it interesting and adoptable. You can tell people all day long what you want them to do, but if the baton is not passed off properly, the race to excellence will not be won by your organization. If the quality program is failing or is at risk, it is often a sign of big trouble in the rank and file. *What can you do to turn this around? How can you paint the baton in a way that makes it more FUN?*

Three ideas pop up to my mind in regard to coaching.

1. CALIBRATE THE COACHING

Quality programs are famous for celebrating the brilliance of calibration exercises. This is great, but it is time to ratchet up this activity and add a lap to the relay. Pass the baton and calibrate the actual coaching! If there is agreement on scoring an element, discuss how to coach to the solution. Target the context for the coaching—strategic objectives, vision, mission, etc. For example, I recently called an Ecom brand when I could not apply a “promo” code to a set of towels. The agent informed me that the towels were not part of the promotion. Then, dead silence. *Wouldn’t it have been a good idea to see if any other towels WERE part of the promotion?* The agent lost a sale due to lack of engagement; lack of interest, creativity and curiosity; lack of brand ambassadorship; and lack of a rich context in the coaching department! Sadly, one might find the call rated highly against QA criteria. Coaching cannot be solely explicit; *did/didn’t* criteria yields flat responses. A customer experience context elevates the explicit to include the tacit influence of delivering a branded experience. The customer is on the line looking to BUY something; helping them accomplish this mission also helps the brand. Maybe there is a super-secret promo code that agents have when offering an appeasement to callers who bother to call! It is unbelievable that no sale at all was the outcome of my call. This incident shows that coaching must dig deeper than “answered customer’s questions,” etc. If you determine exactly what the coaching context is, all your efforts will be communicated using the same baton... so to speak.


2. THINK DISCOVERY

Quality coaching has to be about discovery and development and NOT about investigation and prosecution. The coaching program must be conducted consistently and carefully to provide timely feedback both positive and negative. When it is not, coaches tend to get caught up in investigation mode rather than discovery mode. This leads to negative feedback becoming the norm. Programs that only provide explicit corrective action miss many opportunities to groom great communicators in the tacit side of the relay.

3. SHAKE IT UP

Consider changing up your coaching approach. Monthly themes may be in order. How about “conversation coaching?” Remember that folks on the phone must engage in genuine, real and actual conversations; this is becoming rare in our society. The fine art of conversation is a perfect context for much of the criteria being evaluated. It is just a “new” baton, a new method to hand off actionable information in a different and creative way. *How about a month focused on “change coaching”?* Much of what emerges from a coaching session or QA evaluation

are changes the coach would like the agent to make. A dialogue around how to change a particular approach may just help the agent pick up that baton and run more gracefully in the change lane. *How about “contribution coaching”?* This paints the baton with the elements of engagement that actually trigger contribution... contribution to the capacity model—showing up; contribution to the customer experience—knowing and presenting products, services, and alternatives; and contribution to the team—helping others and yourself with personal development. Think about the options. It will make things more interesting and possibly add a little creativity. And heck, have some FUN.

When you have the duty of “passing the baton,” make sure your message is clear, consistent and steady. If it is also creative you will advance in the race... a race where communicators will always WIN! 

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