ADVOCATUS DIABOLI AND THE METRIC MIRAGE

Do your metrics misrepresent the reality of your center's performance?

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Devil's advocate, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms,* it means: "One who argues against a cause or position either for the sake of argument or to help determine its validity." The term comes from the Roman Catholic Church where the Latin *advocatus diaboli* signifies an official who was appointed to present arguments against a proposed canonization or beatification. It was transferred to wider use in the mid-1700s.

Clearly the role of devil's advocate plays an important part for Catholics when deciding on sainthood. (I suppose that's a good time to strive for accuracy!) However, we all recognize the term as associated with someone who is little more than a pain in the butt. These folks often gleefully point out the shortcomings of others. They critique the ideas of others for sport and are the ultimate Monday morning business quarterbacks. Anything from a failed product launch to the recent new-hire is subjected to this type of annoying "insight" from people who do little beyond the sideline commentary or (even worse) for "the sake of argument."

In spite of all that, I am about to play *advocatus diaboli* from the perspective of helping to determine the validity of a certain "condition" that I have been coming across a bit too much lately.

This devil's advocate wants to encourage a discussion on the condition I call "metrics mirage." This happens, typically in less "mature" contact centers, when metrics misrepresent the reality as it relates to performance and experience.

Contact center leaders must challenge themselves continually to validate that the direction they are taking aligns with the strategic objectives, vision and values of their organization and brand. They must remain fluent in describing contact center performance in such a way as to make sure that you never fall victim to the "metrics mirage."

Know the Difference Between ANSWERED and HANDLED Calls

Most contact centers today are equipped with multimedia channel access; however, voice contacts continue to dominate. This confounds many business leaders, especially *untrained* executives who have *untrained* contact center leaders reporting to them. To this day, there are executives who have a hard time comprehending just what is so difficult about "answering the phone." This is particularly prevalent in industries where contact centers have emerged by default rather than by design. (Health care comes to mind.) There are cases in which contact center origins lie, not in a well-planned organizational design, but in an IT/Telecom acquisition of an ACD (automated call distribution) system.

The business then goes about deploying this technology around existing business practices without the benefit of understanding the organizational requirements to make contact center technology effective. They have been "sold and told" that this system will take care of their "phone answering" problems because they will now know how many calls arrived and how many were actually ANSWERED. *But what do they really know?*

After all, isn't "calls answered" the easiest thing to find on an ACD report? (I take that back; oftentimes, nothing is easy to find in ACD reports!) Let's assume that one knows how to find the report on the number of inbound calls that arrived and the number of those calls that were ANSWERED. For some, this is enough information to report up the chain of command that all is well. Even with this minimal insight, leaders in environments such as those described here are often evaluated by the number of calls that were ANSWERED.

What's wrong with that you say? Think about it from a consumer's perspective. Has there ever been a time when you have had your call ANSWERED, yet not HANDLED? How did you feel? Did you run to the company's Facebook page and declare how wonderful it was to be ANSWERED quickly? I doubt it. To the uninitiated, the daily reports look as if the consumer's needs *were met* because they show that the calls were ANSWERED.

Are We Meeting Caller Needs?

Generally speaking, what prevents a call from being HANDLED once it has been ANSWERED is a failure in design and in understanding caller needs. Designs that fail often include the ones where the leadership mandate is NO MENU… we want all our calls ANSWERED immediately by a human. Well, good for you; but sadly, many of these calls are actually NOT HANDLED.

Some, when attempting to meet the "no menu" directive, create what amounts to a front-end customer service "switchboard"; the call, once ANSWERED, is *then* transferred. This is where you darn well may wait on hold! The only thing this model does is "reposition" the delay. This repositioning, however, allows reports to be delivered that indicate, "Yes indeed, we ANSWERED those calls straightaway." This type of design does not meet the objectives of the caller, which is to have their call HANDLED. Answering a call quickly with a resource that cannot assist the caller will

certainly not send anyone to the Internet with rave reviews. If the job is customer service, the caller expects to be answered by a customer service representative who can handle the call; not an operator who then transfers the call.

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Voicemail and answering services also don't count as calls being handled—and yes, many contact centers today continue to "overflow" calls to voicemail; resulting in another workload—messages. Most of us recognize that, in a contact center environment, taking messages is a futile activity. This is especially true when you consider the fact that if you haven't got the staff to answer the calls, it is highly unlikely that you will have anyone to call them back. But alas, the reports might look better. The metric mirage glows!

Let's face it, in these situations no one appears to ever ask questions such as:

▸ How many calls went to voicemail?
▸ How many messages have to be returned?
▸ How long did it take to call the customer back?
▸ How many attempts did it take to reach them?
▸ How many had actually called back before they received a callback?
▸ How many called back and left another message... relaunching the entire loop?!

These questions and more go unanswered because the reports look good, expectations have been met, and no one is asking the other questions... until complaints about "access" begin to hit the senior leadership who wonder what is going on and to which only a difficult truth will tell the whole story. (Keep in mind that this scenario can play out in situations other than voicemail—the callback from the queue feature will not assist an organization who is already understaffed!).

The metric mirage is just that—a thin veil disguising a difficult truth—temporarily. *Advocatus diaboli* urges you to use only the metrics that support the conditions you know to be true. If uncertainty exists, study the disciplines of call center and workforce management. It isn't hard, but it does take time and the desire to learn.

The bottom line is that the caller's ONLY objective is to get their query HANDLED! This should be the primary objective of those responsible for the call. This means that contact center agents need to be trained and proficient in the areas required to effectively handle the call and meet the caller's need. Workforce management disciplines must be in place to accurately forecast and schedule staff. Performance indicators must be dialed into the right metrics. Budgets must be established to support objectives. Technology must be designed for optimization and meeting customer needs and preferences. And, in my experience, menus and reasonable delays are an accepted path to HANDLED calls.

Thank you for letting me play *advocatus diaboli.* And please... *carpe diem!* ◉

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