

# THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

**Good intentions often lead to unintended consequences.**

BY Kathleen M. Peterson, PowerHouse Consulting

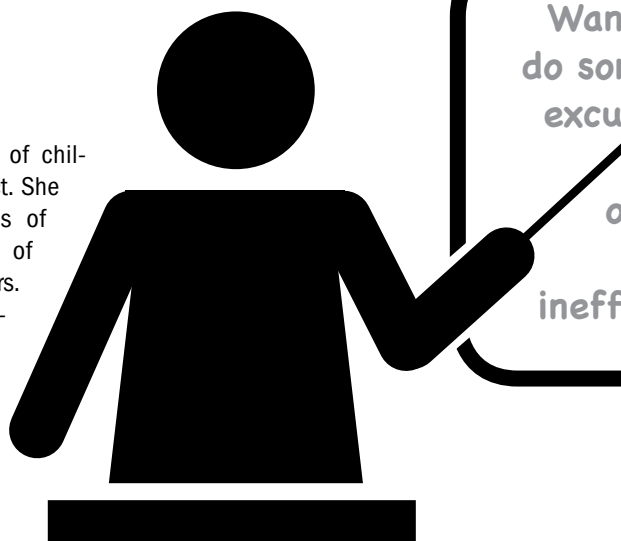
**M**y mother had a lot of children... 10 to be exact. She had multiple means of teaching this brood of children acceptable social behaviors. These included metaphors, analogies and idioms. I recall an idiom she offered me when I spent the birthday money my aunt sent but had not written a *thank-you* note. While I forget my exact litany of “excuses,” I do remember my mother’s rolled-eye response: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

She pointed out that wanting or intending to do something while making excuses about not doing it was a waste of time and energy, and that was inefficient and ineffective. Needless to say, I immediately sat down and wrote the note!

## Good Intentions Are Bad for Business

Recently, I have come upon some customer experience situations where this lesson is worthy of consideration. In the contact center business, we are guardians of the experience. Good intentions may fall on deaf ears when resolving customer issues because *good intentions alone are simply bad for business*, particularly the customer care business.

Think about the effects of “metrics manipulation.” It is done so routinely in some centers that it is no longer recognized as manipulation because the defense, if you will, is draped in good intentions. Consider the case



Wanting or intending to do something while making excuses about not doing it is a waste of time and energy, and that is inefficient and ineffective.

of a major financial services firm whose chairman wants a monthly report on service level. Let’s say the target is 85% of calls answered in 30 seconds. The contact center director and the operations staff keep a close eye on service level as the weeks of the month pass. If there is a risk of not “hitting” the objective, the operation goes into high gear for the last week by calling in “corporate reserves” (folks who have been promoted or moved to other departments) to return to the center to jack up the numbers. Whatever it takes to get the final monthly performance number to equal 85/30 is what is done. The fact that anyone would even disclose this to me is an indication of the thoroughness of the delusion of “good intentions”—in this case—giving the chairman what he wants.

I asked, “Do you think that is what he really wants? Does he believe when he sees the number achieved that there were three weeks of poor service topped off with one

week of stellar service averaging out to meet the objective?” I think not. The good intention that results in the manipulation of data (this is only one of hundreds of examples we could discuss) actually does more harm than good. The “good intention” actually ignores the true objective—the overall experience of the caller, not a manipulated metric. The road to hell comes when at some point the operations team must address the actual staffing issue and attempt to get funding. How then do you reconcile the fact that objectives have been consistently met? DAH... “We were lying.”

Business analytics may also suffer in environments driven by good intentions. The contact center is among the most information-rich environments in any business. As I always say, “Information is the currency of the contact center.” This is only true when information is gathered properly and utilized to improve process and overall performance. What sometimes happens is that the contact

center holds back actionable information because they “don’t want to throw them under the bus.” The “them” can be staff from within the department or any other department causing serious experience issues that the contact center knows about but fails to report on due to this good intention of “protection.” This road to hell leaves processes unresolved due to misplaced loyalties and puts the customer experience (and all that it involves) at risk.

### Good Intentions Masquerade as Brand Promises

Some brands make promises that, in reality, the best we can say about them is that they had “good intentions” (though some appear more like hallucinations). Brand is all about the promise, and most promises today extend beyond the actual product and include experience promises. Once promised, these need to be among the major drivers of operations.

“Hell isn’t merely paved with good intentions; it’s walled and roofed with them. Yes, and furnished, too.”

—ALDOUS HUXLEY  
*English Writer and Novelist*

Here’s an example. I recently needed to replace an old TV. We went to a major retailer that boasts a high-end branded environment—a “specialty store” within a store—to provide consumers (who want it) with “high-touch” service and a knowledgeable staff guiding the purchase of high-tech entertainment portals previously known as TV sets.

My husband and I opted for this “high-touch” service and on a Sunday afternoon made our way to this major retailer. We spent 40 minutes floating around the “specialty” shop where manufacturers’ reps for Sony and LG were on site supposedly to help the sales people help the customers... except there were no sales people. I actually called the main number of the store and asked to speak to the manager on duty. I asked exactly how one was supposed to actually purchase something. He was “pissy” in his response, but finally a sales person was dispatched to “take our order.” This was how it felt to make a purchase that day... an order taken, not a “high-touch” service given. Never again! In

fact, we just bought another new TV and hired an independent, small business operation to handle everything from securing to installing the device. The big-box brand promised a high-end experience and the suppliers sent staff to support them. But the store simply neglected the operational requirements—to staff in a way that actualizes these intentions. Losing customers along the way... now that is a road to hell!

### Good Intentions Make Poor Defenses

Finally, good intentions make poor defenses. It is so interesting to me the posture some folks assume when resolving customer issues. Far too often, the resolution process contains a defensive posture that really only serves to frustrate—in some cases infuriate—the customer.

I recently had a technical support person

for my insurance company hang up on me. I believe that this IS NEVER a reasonable option for a frontline agent. If the agent has lost control of the call—and yes, that is what happened regardless of the defense—that call must be transferred to a supervisor. Period! No frontline person should assume they have the authority to disconnect a caller they are having difficulty with. In this case, these actions should be cause for dismissal since clearly they are not suited to the job. On the other hand, if agents are hanging up on callers to meet a metric objective it is another form of “good intentions” gone bad.

Anyway... I called back, got a supervisor, registered my complaint, and a manager called me back. This manager said he had listened to the call and completely agreed that Chris should not have hung up on me. Then he blew the entire thing by adding how surprised he was since Chris was one of their best people. My immediate reaction was, “If he is one of your best people, you have BIG problems!” What possible defense is that?

One driven by good intentions! Needless to say, there was no good done here.

I had a situation in which a marketing firm doing some work for us assigned an incompetent to perform the tasks. She missed deadlines for deliverables and delivered an unacceptable work product. When the issue was raised, her first message to me was, “We pride ourselves on our excellent work and communications with clients.” Hey, guess what? That is a “good intention” that must be reserved for others because I did not enjoy anything like that! This just added fuel to the fire.

Individuals on the front line need to keep a DO NOT USE list of phrases that frustrate callers and fall into the “good intentions—poor defenses” category. These are phrases like I heard the other day when calling an airline. I made an inquiry and instead of confirming my question, the agent started down the wrong answer road. I interrupted to clear up my question and she responded, “You have to let me talk.” It was actually creepy... and irritating. Other phrases in that same category that just put people over the edge are, “I’m just trying to do my job” and “You have to calm down.” Almost any phrase that begins with the word YOU is going to inflame a conversation, not move it to resolution.

All these incidents have a “good intentions” defense associated with them. But trust me when I say that GOOD INTENTIONS MAKE POOR DEFENSES. And these examples are only for the business world. It would take many chapters to address the impact of good intentions as poor defenses in our personal lives... “I meant to,” “I was going to,” “I didn’t want to bother you.”

Try this next time when one of these situations occurs... just say you’re sorry. “I’m sorry that happened and here’s what I would like to do.” Giving a proper apology and taking responsibility is the best defense when resolving problems. Keep in mind that any apology that follows a “good intentions” defense will be met with skepticism and seen as too little too late! ●



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