

First Things First: Don't Be a "World-Class" Junkie

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1999 is upon us. Somehow the resolutions we are making this year seem more significant than in previous years. The resolutions being made in Call Centers are worth examining.

In addition to fixing Y2K problems, many people are resolving to improve their overall service offerings to customers. Terms like "world class" and "best practices" are being tossed around more than ever. These terms seem to have meaning but lack definition.

The terms seem to define a desire to achieve what is best for those we serve - the customer, the employee and the shareholder. These desires are then translated into "best practices" as the road that will take us to our destination – "world class."

Metaphorically, best practices are the path that will lead Call Center professionals to the ultimate destination – a world-class operation. Unfortunately, in most Call Centers this is often the road less traveled. Managers must be able to define what the road to world-class really looks like. I would submit that "world class" is a moving target. Truly being world class means you will be committed to a process of constant improvement. In fact world class may come to define those organizations best able to manage change.

If this is true, then the path to world class is in fact to define and master best practices. But before any Call Center can be the best, it must develop a plan to first become *better*. I often visit Call Centers that say they are committed to achieving world-class status with no plan on how to reach this destination. There seems to be a belief that, if you want world-class status badly enough, you can produce the numbers to make you look like your center has achieved it.

Statistical results alone do not qualify your Call Center for world class status. In this small space, I will suggest what I feel are two "best practices" that, when fully adopted, will get you and your center headed toward the ultimate destination.

(1) *Strong Leadership* - Leadership is another term that's widely used yet poorly defined. Some believe that the manager is the inherent leader of a Call Center. But not all managers lead; some merely manage. A manager who is a leader makes sure not only that everybody understands the center's mission, but inspires them to perform in ways that fulfill that mission. In doing so, the Call Center leader clearly communicates what each person's role is in accomplishing the center's goals. Leaders link mission to performance; judge fairly; make exceptions wisely; are willing and able to deal with "problem" employees; set clear priorities and an example for others; and, most importantly, invest time in their people. Leaders are measured by actions, not words.

(2) *Forecasting Expertise* - When forecasting is neglected in the Call Center, everything else – service levels, customer satisfaction, employee morale, costs – suffers. While forecasting/scheduling is rarely an item on widely publicized benchmark reports, it is the single greatest contributor to significant Call Center success. A suggestion: make forecasting somebody's full-time job in the center. This duty is far too crucial to be merely somebody's "other" job. Nor should forecasting be a shared responsibility. Put in place a dedicated "workforce management

specialist" or "traffic coordinator." Be sure that this person develops a working relationship with every department in your organization that has an impact on call volume/duration and staff availability - marketing/advertising, operations, telecom, IS, senior management, HR, etc. The forecaster needs to be able to count on these departments to deliver information on a consistent basis. As one Call Center forecaster told me, "Forecasters know the past; but without help, they cannot predict the future."

Aim for a forecasting accuracy rate of plus or minus 5%. When volume and duration are reviewed, then the quality of the event must be evaluated. When volume is a steady stream of repeat calls, the fact that they have been accurately forecasted is of little comfort. Duration is also a function of process. If systems are slow or demand for help is high, the fact that we have it correct in the forecast will not be cause for celebration. We must consider all components of the call as opportunities for improvement. Once this level of attention is paid to forecasting accuracy and process improvements, many of your other problems will be minimized.

Become the Best on the Block

The millennium Call Center manager must be working these resolutions all year, every year. Check in routinely on your progress, make adjustments and celebrate each learning and leadership moment. And forget about terms like "world-class" - first focus on becoming the best Call Center on your block.