

Leadership in the Contact Center: Expectations, Complexities and Resources

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces a foundational definition of leadership in the contact center industry, compares and contrasts Theory X and Y styles, and introduces a recommended guiding metaphor for leaders. By defining leadership in the context of the contact center, and by providing a comparison of guiding leadership metaphors, the reader acquires a gateway to understanding the effects of positive and destructive leadership styles. The impact of leadership styles on contact center operations may be the difference between short and long term viability.

THE SLIPPERY CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP

The concept of leadership is nothing less than a global obsession. A simple search on the Internet bears this out. Amazon has over 300,000 books under the subject heading of “management and leadership.” In the academic arena, more than 28,000 articles appear in Business Source Premier¹ under the subject heading, *Leadership*. Perhaps one reason for the obsession is the (faulty) view that effective leadership can and should solve all problems (i.e., leadership is a panacea). Indeed, people are quick to announce, “Poor leadership!” in the face of any setback. Customer satisfaction is down? We must have a problem with leadership. Out of napkins in the break room? Bad leadership. To recognize when leadership truly is inhibiting the untapped potential of an organization, it is necessary to understand the slippery concept of leadership, to define it with balanced perspective on the purposes and realistic expectations of leadership.

In the years between 1900 and 1990, leadership scholars identified more than 200 definitions of leadership. Given the tidal wave of leadership texts over the past two decades, this number has more than doubled since that time.¹ Picking a “correct” definition of leadership out of the hundreds, however, is a fool’s errand. Although most of us are convinced that we know what leadership is, James Burns, professor and presidential biographer, declared, “Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on Earth.”¹



A fair and practical way of defining leadership is to find the common characteristics that most modern definitions attach to the word. Those common characteristics are: (1) strategic communication; (i.e., delivering messages designed to influence, persuade, or gain compliance), (2) coordination of efforts; and (3) attention setting and reaching goals. These three common markers combine to offer a workable definition: *leadership is the process of using strategic communication to coordinate individuals and groups toward organizational goals.*¹

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES OF THE CONTACT CENTER INDUSTRY

Early in the study of human communication, a mechanical model of explaining communication was adopted. This model accounted for a simple and linear definition of communication: a message is encoded at the source, sent via a channel, and decoded by a receiver. This explanation of communication is a fair account of how sound is transmitted from one person to another; however, it falls far short of accounting for the many nuances of human communication.

Human communication is complex. It is symbolic, nonlinear, and always accompanied by psychological implications.

Symbolic

When people communicate, we invariably use *ambiguous* referents (symbols) to express our meanings. The complexity of this fact is that every person's experiences lead them to attach their own meanings to symbols. All of us have our own sets of word associations, sensory experiences, and emotional perceptions.¹ For example, when given the phrase, "cell phone," one person's thoughts, images, and emotions brought forth by the verbal symbol "cell phone" (e.g., convenient and smart device that I like because it keeps me organized and entertained) may be quite different from another person's (e.g., complicated technology that gives unpredictable responses and is a frustrating but necessary burden). Although both audiences link the symbol to the same class of objects, the two activate very different thoughts, images, and emotions. *Human communication is textured and colored by the sensory and emotional perceptions of the symbols we use.* Because of the quick pace of symbolic exchange, human communication summons a rapid-fire series of thoughts, images, and emotions.

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Nonlinear

Everyone has experienced a friendly conversation punctuated by the awkward silence, followed by the thought, "How did we get on this topic?" Often, none of the participants of the conversation can readily answer this question. Human communication is nonlinear, just as the neural networks in our brains are nonlinear.¹ As an example of this point, take the phrase, "customer support." A number of associated words and sensory information are activated by this symbol, and related emotional pathways are triggered. At this point, the human brain has options. It can follow the path of associated words (when you said customer support, that made me think about...), or we can tap into sensory information ("Hey, I just saw the new contact center built by company X"), or we can follow our emotional responses ("those places are so frustrating, which reminds me of something frustrating that happened to me yesterday..."). After we choose our conversational path, the brain of our interaction partner activates a different series of pathways based upon his/her associated thoughts, images, and emotions. He or she chooses verbal symbols, which then trigger other pathways, and so on.

The freestyle process of interpreting communication is "how we got on this topic." Human communication produces complex, nonlinear communication patterns that look more like a labyrinth

than a street map.¹

The progression of activating nonlinear neural networks, determining another's meaning, and encoding messages involves conscious and unconscious processes. Ergo, the complexities of human communication include psychological elements.

Psychologically Significant

One of the most challenging characteristics of contact center work is the strenuous *emotional labor* required of agents. Emotional labor is where "individuals attempt to regulate inappropriate, felt and/or expressed emotions, which conflict with either internalized norms, or with job requirements."¹ For example, an agent is not permitted to acknowledge a customer's negative

emotion (e.g., "There is no need to be angry, sir."). Instead, agents are required to engage in *surface acting*,¹ which necessitates the performance of vocal behaviors that convey organizationally prescribed emotions (e.g., sounding happy, energetic and optimistic). Because contact center customers often are rude,¹ the frequent practice of surface acting often results in depersonalization of work and emotional exhaustion.¹

Although there are other unique challenges to the contact center industry, the two mentioned above (i.e., complexity of communication & strenuous emotional labor) create daunting leadership challenges. For example, leaders in the



contact center are tasked with finding people who can navigate the complexities of communication skillfully. Those plagued by high attrition must find ways to minimize emotional exhaustion and prevent burnout. The way leaders in the contact center industry meet these challenges has traditionally been guided by the invisible metaphors used to understand customer interaction. One dominant metaphor of the contact center industry is manufacturing.

MANUFACTURING COMMUNICATION

The mass-production approach to manufacturing communication is typical in contact centers where the objectives of customer interaction are consistency, adherence to interaction scripts, and efficiency (reducing AHT and increasing quality metrics). The manufacturing metaphor is manifest in organizations that institutionalize *top-down talk*, which is “talk designed to a large extent not by the people actually doing the talking, but by managers or consultants intent on controlling and standardizing institutional interactions.”¹ For example, contact center managers might develop detailed communication templates or write an interaction script for customer interaction.

Although the objective of the manufacturing approach is understandable (producing consistent and high quality interaction), the unfortunate consequence is surface acting by agents, which depersonalizes work, taxes agents’ emotions and ultimately results in attrition. Even if attrition were not an issue, the performance skills required to read a script

in a manner that produces the illusion of spontaneous and sincere speech far surpasses the skill set of most people.¹ Likewise, the quality of the customer experience falls far short of expectations. In short, the process of manufacturing communication produces interaction that is both insincere to customers and unnatural to agents.

Agent as Communication Machine

The manufacturing metaphor casts the agent as a communication machine designed and calibrated to produce consistent, predictable, and reliable interaction. By its very nature, *mechanical communication* does not allow for agent creativity or spontaneity because the machine (agent) is already calibrated (i.e., trained) for maximum efficiency.

Although the machine metaphor may work well “for routine and repetitive aspects of a business...the metaphor simply underestimates the human element in business—the quirky, intuitive, emotional human beings who consistently fail to act as one would expect—fail to act, that is, like machines.”¹ Furthermore, the manufacturing approach leads to three problematic results:

1. Focusing on things rather than people
2. Devaluing experimentation and creating a climate in which mistakes are abhorred
3. Denigrating the importance of values¹

Additionally, the *manufacturing* approach views agents as interchangeable and replaceable. You can take out a machine and replace it with a new one with only

minor complications. In other words, screening, hiring, and training are uncomplicated processes: find people with a good work ethic, use training to mechanize their interaction, and then put agents on the floor to produce communication.

Theory X Management

The manufacturing metaphor produces customer interaction that is depersonalized, inauthentic, and emotionally taxing. In other words, the manufacturing approach makes an agent's work unpleasant and offers very little rewards. When work is unpleasant, managers are often forced to make decisions and policies based upon Theory X assumptions of work (see Table 1).¹

When Theory X assumptions of work are adopted, the role of supervisor turns into that of a mechanic tasked with keeping the machines running at optimal efficiency. Supervisors are responsible for agents being in their chairs on time. Agents must be available on the phone as much

as possible and cannot take extended breaks. Petty issues that distract agents from answering phones (i.e., a system malfunction) must be dealt with immediately. Scheduling must be organized in a way that meets expected demands for production while maximizing efficiency.

Because work is tedious and not rewarding, the supervisor must carefully monitor the agents; otherwise, they will malfunction or shutdown. In the world of machines, an excellent day for a supervisor occurs when all of the machines run at optimal efficiency with only minor malfunctions.

The previous paragraphs illustrate how the mass-production manufacturing metaphor can lead to policies and practices in the contact center industry. Although the manufacturing metaphor dominates the contact center industry, a new, intelligence-based paradigm has emerged. At its root is the metaphor of "crafting communication."

TABLE 1: THEORY X ASSUMPTIONS FOR THE CONTACT CENTER INDUSTRY

- Interaction with customers is tedious, laborious and not rewarding.
- Agents are not self-correcting or motivated.
- Agents lack the capacity for creativity in addressing customer needs. Forced creativity creates more problems than it solves.
- Agents are motivated by extrinsic factors, such as pay and incentives.
- Because agents are not motivated internally, interaction must be closely controlled and often coerced to achieve organizational metrics.

THE IDEAL DIALOGUE COMPANY'S GUIDING METAPHOR: CRAFTING COMMUNICATION

A newly coined metaphor for customer interaction treats communication as a craft requiring highly skilled laborers who design a distinctive product with the unique needs of the customer in mind. The crafting metaphor works best when three conditions are present: (1) high product complexity, (2) value in uniqueness, (3) equifinality.

High Product Complexity

As highlighted in the previous discussion on the symbolic and nonlinear nature of communication, communication is highly complex process. *Because individuals appear to communicate with relative ease, however, some people mistakenly view communication as a simple process.* The reason that communication often appears effortless, is because we have been practicing our communication skills for many hours every day over a period of decades. As one communication scholar described the amount that we listen and speak, “we listen [the equivalent of] a book a day and speak [the equivalent of] a book a week.”¹ If communication were a simple process, a toddler would have the same communication proficiency as an adult, and we could all speak many different languages with only minimal effort. The perceived ease of communication is explained, by extensive practice and experience rather than simplicity.

Value in Uniqueness

The value of uniqueness during customer interaction emerges from the benefits of adapting to each situation skillfully. Value is added when interaction is: (1) fashioned to meet the individual communication needs of customers, (2) modified to address the unique situation, and (3) built using careful symbol selection and shaped by vocal behavior that increases customer engagement. From the agent's perspective, value is added when one is recognized for and encouraged to demonstrate his or her unique set of communication talents, such as communicating empathy, using humor appropriately, storytelling, etc. When agents are allowed to use the talents they bring to the job, the chance of agent-customer engagement increases significantly.

Equifinality

The term *equifinality* comes from systems theory and, in this case, refers to interaction systems in which the same end state can be reached in multiple ways¹ (i.e., many roads lead to the same destination). If our targeted objective (i.e., end state) is a satisfied and loyal customer, then equifinality is present if there are multiple ways to reach this objective. Because customers have different wants, communication expectations, and experiences with the product, there are many different potential interactions that can lead to customer satisfaction. The converse also holds true; there isn't a single interaction script that will produce satisfied customers regardless of need, background, or personality.

Agent as Craftsperson

When communication is viewed as a craft, agents are responsible for applying their talents to meet the needs of each interaction. The result of each interaction is engagement and, in turn, the customer's feeling of satisfaction that his or her need has been met competently and within a pleasant experience. Because of the complex nature of communication, *crafting* places agent selection and training at the core of all activities.

Because any true craft requires highly skilled labor, the process of selecting agents becomes critical. The key to screening and selection is to utilize a valid and reliable system for identifying communication talent.¹

Although a discussion of the factors that comprise communication talent exceeds the scope of this paper, the primary objective of screening and hiring should be finding individuals who possess a quality of highly developed communication skills that is difficult for adults to achieve in a

short period of time. For example, many aspects of the human voice are the product of habit, such as vocal quality, fundamental frequency, and prosodic disposition (patterns of rhythm and sound). Because these vocal attributes are highly resistant to change,¹ they should be evaluated through an initial filter during screening of potential agents.

Theory Y Management

When agents are viewed as highly skilled communicators who bring value to interaction, the core assumptions about the nature of work are transformed (see Table 2).¹ A critical part of the transformation of work is fulfilled by the supervisor.

When Theory Y assumptions are accepted, the role of the contact center supervisor becomes that of the mentor. Supervisors and agents are bound by a common objective: *tapping the unique talents of agents to craft customer interaction in ways that maximize the likelihood of customer engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty*. To that end, supervisors serve as

TABLE 2: THEORY Y ASSUMPTIONS FOR THE CONTACT CENTER INDUSTRY

- Interaction with customers is challenging and rewarding.
- Agents are self-monitoring and self-correcting and want to grow professionally.
- Agents are creative and can discover innovative ways to address customer needs.
- Agents are motivated to make a positive difference by engaging with customers.
- Interaction can be spontaneous, creative, and engaging and, at the same time, comply with organizational boundaries and professional expectations.

guides for agents as they navigate the complex patterns of communication produced by customers with differing needs, backgrounds, personalities, product issues, and vocabularies. Knowing that customer engagement can be achieved in many different ways (see Equifinality), supervisors assist agents in discovering their own model of customer engagement.

When leaders encourage agents to use their communication talents to solve problems and meet the needs of customers, the work becomes *intrinsically valuable* as people are naturally motivated by the drive to affect positive change.¹ In addition, supervisors honor the agent's vital contribution to the organization and community by basing their own success on the successes of those they lead.¹

Framing customer interaction as a craft, however, does not negate the unique challenges of the contact center. Without a doubt, irate customers will still populate the queue and customer interaction will still have some degree of repetition and monotony. Nevertheless, leadership practices and policies that reward agents for their using their talents, creativity, and highly developed communication skills will go a long way to compensate for the emotional labor, burnout, and attrition that afflicts the contact center industry.

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