

PROFESSIONALISM: Agent Training Prerequisite #1



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Joyce Filupeit is a worldwide expert in leadership development and organizational performance. Her experience developing and delivering priority-based workplace training spans 25 years. She has earned an international reputation for improving agent training for call centers around the world.

Joyce's brand of organizational and leadership transformation has brought revitalization to such organizations as Honeywell, Motorola, SITEL, and the US Army TACOM. Some of her other notable accomplishments include preparing a large resort hotel property in Scottsdale, Arizona, to obtain their Five Diamond rating. She led the charge for a multi-site manufacturing company based in Detroit to improve internal communication, establish a corporate identity, and improve management effectiveness.

As executive coach, staff-training facilitator and curriculum designer, Joyce has designed workshops in call center leadership, communication improvement, performance management, project management, and culture transition.

“WHY ARE WE LOSING OUR TRAINEES?”

Recently a customer contact company asked me to observe their training and help them figure out what was wrong with it. All they knew was that their attrition during training was high and that employees didn't seem to be using the skills they were supposed to have learned. They were losing people, and their clients were unhappy.

When I first walked into the training room to start the process of evaluation, I flashed back to my second-grade class picture. In the photo, there we are – all docile seven-year olds in rows, hands folded in desks bolted to the ground. I thought back to the classroom rules that forbade us to leave our seats until recess or lunch. If you finished an assignment early, you just sat and waited for everyone else. If you were really lucky, your assigned seat was near a window and you could stare outside.

Otherwise, you put your head down and napped. It was in second grade that I realized that kindergarten was as good as it was going to get in the academic world.

There was a good reason for my transcendental return to grade school: the training classroom had the same feel as that rigid second-grade environment. The only substantive difference was that this class was filled with adults, not little kids.

The initial flush of excitement over a new job was extinguished in that classroom. The energy level was almost nonexistent. There were people sleeping; people slumped and staring into space. (The classroom had no windows). A monotone-voiced trainer was planted behind her desk and didn't move away from it.



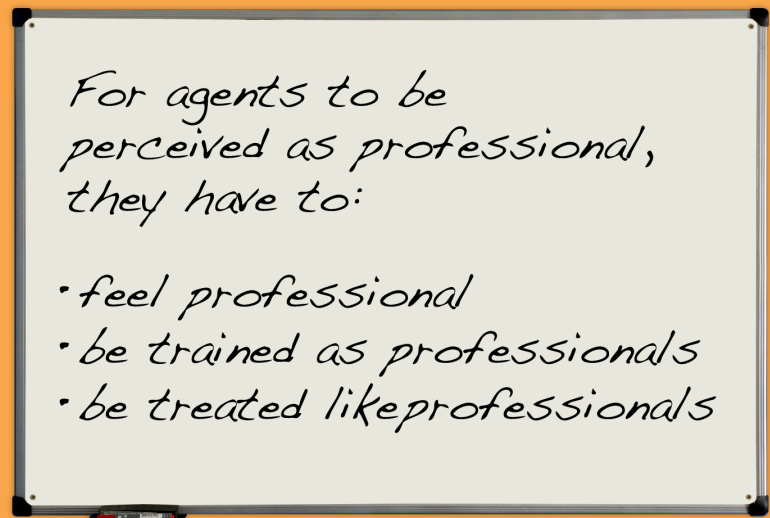
The room was dark, colorless, and cramped. Student desks were lined up in a row. The only visual aid in the room was a list of rules. It would be next to impossible for a participant in this class to feel like a professional. Beyond the uninspiring feel of the classroom, the curriculum needed help. The material was page after page of details to be memorized, just like the multiplication tables in second grade. No system of follow-up or refresher references was offered for employees to use after completing the class.

In addition, the coursework fell short of training an agent to handle human interaction professionally. Attention to customer service skills was minimal. Engagement was not discussed. Troubleshooting strategy was not explored.

After observing the class and reviewing the learning material, I was convinced that this company was lucky to have not lost even more people. It also struck me that the participants who would stay with the company long enough to become agents would be lacking a key quality of effective agents: professionalism.

PRODUCING PROFESSIONALS IN THE TRAINING ROOM

Handling human interactions professionally matters so much in our industry. Here's what I have learned in my years of working with agents: outstanding professionalism is **absolutely critical** to achieving customer engagement and satisfaction. A customer call is not just a phone call; to the customer, the agent is the voice of the brand! The agent, sometimes single-handedly, designs the impression of the company.



It's easy to take for granted that a new hire is qualified to act like a professional. Professionalism is a given, a prerequisite for the job. In reality, assuming that a well-dressed new hire understands how to apply professionalism in the call center world is hazardous. Professionalism is more a state of mind than a personality trait, and in reality, professionalism is a learned quality. It comes from being taught that you are important to the mission of the company.

For agents to be perceived as professional, they have to feel professional, be trained as professionals, and be treated like professionals.

Defining Professional

How do you define a professional? Here's what most people say:

- Takes initiative - is the first one to act or step towards a positive action
- Respectful to everyone - shows politeness or deference to every person regardless of situation
- Assertive - acts with purpose but is careful to avoid being aggressive or overbearing.
- Accurate, reliable, conscientious - takes the customer into mind before acting and develops a trusting relationship. Seeks out the "right" answer for the customer
- "Warm and cool" - shows an appropriate emotional closeness to the customer
- Self learning, self correcting -constantly improving and searching
- Trustworthy - demonstrates relationship-building skills and ensures that all of their actions and words are truthful

That's a lot to ask of anyone, especially in a training environment that resembles an old-fashioned second grade class.

Inevitably, this style of training turns out woefully underprepared, underperforming agents.

Psychological Ownership

Employees who do not see themselves as professionals have very little psychological ownership of their jobs. They lack the passion and drive to contribute to the success of the team. They feel like the company is "just another place to work" until something better comes along.

Additionally, employees who do not have psychological ownership are much more likely to be-

come heavily stressed when being asked to do work that brings the burden of emotional labor. The call center agent's job is fraught with emotional labor. Agents must remain polite, warm and engaged when the caller is not; they have to be clear and problem solve when the caller is not able to. They often are required to interact with people from a culture that is not their own.

In all cases, they must demonstrate all qualities of professionalism. Professionalism must stay constant, even when circumstances present unreasonable challenges, all day and every day.

Without psychological ownership, an agent under prolonged emotional stress tends to forget the overarching goals. Moreover, the stress shows up in their voices, their problem solving skills diminish, and the quality of the interaction suffers.

By its nature, the agent position comes with an enormous amount of emotional labor. We need to equip our agents with the professional attitudes and behaviors necessary for meeting that challenge.

Assessing Your Training

Is your training getting the job done? Does it demonstrate respect for the agent as a professional? When you evaluate your training program, ask yourself the questions below. The answers have a direct correlation to the quality of the agents your training will produce.

- Are the people in the class treated like adults or made to feel like second-graders posing for the class picture?
- Is the training engaging and interactive? Are there exercises and discussions about real situations, or just an endless series of PowerPoint presentations?

- Would you want to sit in on the class? Is the trainer excited to be there and clearly enjoying the work, or does the trainer seem bored and disinterested?
- Does the training focus on skills that will be used every day? Are there clear, well defined learning objectives linked to your call drivers, or is the material prefaced with “you’ll probably never need this, but...”?
- Does coursework instill useful, tested techniques for handling customer issues and problems? Or does the training hand out a tired list of tricks and techniques to defuse unhappy people? (Or worse, not talk about tactical customer service at all?)
- Does the environment foster a positive image of the company, the customers and the client? Does it show respect for the agent’s role? Or is the conversation centered on difficulties and challenges of dealing with “dumb” customers?



- Do the participants have an idea of how they sound on the phone? Do they receive an assessment that pinpoints in their voice perception the areas of strength and the areas for development? Or are they merely told to “sound nice and smile.”?
- Does the training address cross-cultural communication, or are agents expected to figure it out?
- Is reinforcement built into the skills training? Or is the material offered in the style of spaghetti on the wall—maybe it will stick if it’s thrown?

These checkpoints are the difference between a successful agent-training program and one that achieves more attrition than prepared agents. When your training sets the stage for success as a professional agent, you win. That’s because your customers and clients win, and most importantly the people who face the emotional labor, the ones who make it all happen, win.



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