

One of the key assumptions in call centre design and management is that people can be held accountable for their performance. Call centre workers are appraised on the amount of work they do - how many calls they take and how long they take on calls. In fact their performance is governed by many things that are beyond their control - the nature of calls, the availability of information, the behaviour of other parts of the organisation and so on. To hold the worker accountable in such circumstances causes stress.

Call centre workers believe as their managers do that they can be held accountable for performance. When, as will be inevitable, they risk becoming losers, people 'cheat' - they do anything they need to do to keep the boss happy. Peoples' ingenuity is engaged in surviving rather than improving performance; it is a tragic waste of human talent. The human costs of demoralisation are incalculable. The obvious costs are recruitment and training as these conditions encourage high turnover. But the real costs are higher - poor service and high costs are associated with customer dissatisfaction and staff dissatisfaction.

The Call Centre manager sees his or her job as setting and monitoring work standards, productivity and procedures. It is an uncritically inherited assumption of traditional management thinking that people are the primary cause of poor performance rather than the system in which they work. As a consequence, management becomes concerned with managing people's productivity. Paradoxically, managing productivity undermines productivity.

Based on their resource plans, managers set their service agents work standards and targets. It is a rational idea. In reality, however, the performance of any one individual will be subject to variation and the extent of that variation must be established before any action can be contemplated, otherwise managers can make the situation worse. Managers (and service agents) need to know whether variation in performance is attributable to agents or the system. Current approaches to people management in call centres ignore this important question.

Figure 1 shows a Call Centre service agent's work activity every day for twenty days.

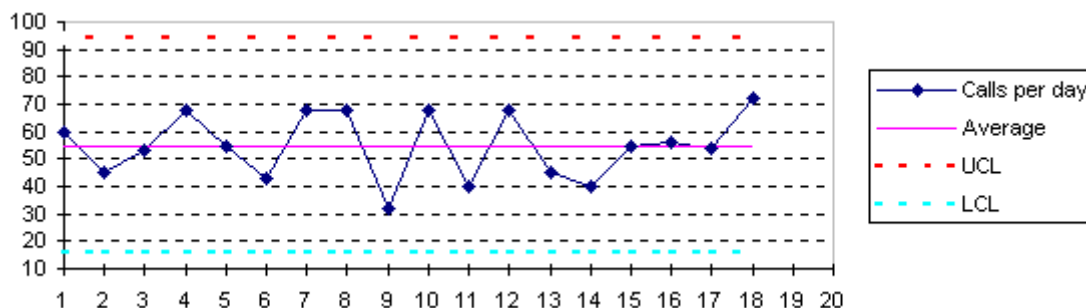


Figure 1: Call centre service agent's calls taken by day

If you accept the theory of variation - and I recommend you do, for it helps connect ends with means and thus can be used to guide improvement - the chart shows that we can expect the service agent to take as few as twenty and as many as ninety calls on any one day. The variation is caused by the service agent's system.

What does this mean? There is always variation, in anything that we do. In a call centre, variation will be caused by customers, products, procedures, availability of information, knowledge of the service agent and so on.

Customers - no two customers are the same
Products - no two products are the same
Procedures - can inhibit efficiency and service
Information - helps or hinders
Calls - 'value' work or 'failure' work

Figure2: Variation caused by the system - some examples

Most managers look at such a chart and express either disbelief or panic. Their attention is always drawn to the lower limit - they are terrified at the prospect of all service agents taking as few as twenty calls. However, one wouldn't expect a series of observations at the lower or, for that matter, the higher limit of the chart. The chart simply illustrates that the variation existing within the observations (numbers of calls per day) would lead one to expect values as high or as low as the limits. Most, however, would occur around the mean.

Ignoring this fundamental truth, managers set work standards and police peoples' performance. If the work standard is set at a high level, say seventy calls, service agents may only be able to achieve it by 'cheating'. And they do; they close a call before the customer is finished, and sometimes before the customer has started; they tell customers to call back; they re-route difficult calls, in short they do all they can to avoid missing work targets or standards. These are not bad people, they work in a bad system.

Behaving this way causes demoralisation. Most people in customer-contact jobs want to serve the customer. When their system won't let them and they have to 'cheat' to survive, they become unhappy.

The better way to think about managing people is to lead them in understanding and acting on the system. It harnesses service agents' ingenuity towards contributing, learning and improving, rather than engaging their ingenuity against the system. Systems thinkers appreciate that all performance is subject to variation. The first-level manager should address the question: what are the causes of variation? Those identified that are within the team's control can be actioned by the team. Those beyond the team's control should be actioned by the manager.

In transforming a call centre, management's focus changes from managing people - ensuring that people do as they 'should' - to managing the system - understanding and improving how well the work flows, end to end, to fulfil the customers' demands.

It is a revolutionary step away from the current pre-occupation with managing people. It is a step that managers are only prepared to take when they have first learned that their current performance is governed by the system and not the people. Once managers make this conceptual leap they stop wasting time doing 'one-to-ones'; the impact on productivity is enormous.

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