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BPA Quality Monitoring White Paper

“Agent Coaching – Why and How to Make it Effective”

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I am a runner, I love to run. Recently, I set one of my best times as a 40 year old for a 3 mile run, averaging about 7.5 minutes per mile. I felt great about this result. The very next day, my 9 year old daughter runs into my office, with a grin ear to ear and proceeds to inform me that she set the school record for the mile, running it in just shy of 6 minutes flat. All of a sudden, I wasn't that great anymore, and I didn't realize it until someone told me. Aside from being much older, I had no idea why I couldn't beat a 9 year old. I needed a coach to get me there.

Your call center agent is much the same. They carry on their daily activities to the best of their knowledge or ability, each with their own mind about how well they are doing. Whether this meets the expectations set by the overall company isn't known, that is until someone tells them. Sure, you can send the agents reports, numbers, scores, and customer satisfaction numbers all day...just like my comparison to my daughters running time. This only gives them half of the picture...it tells them the result of what they are doing. While they may perform well While they may perform well or poorly, they simply do not know the reasons why. Someone must be their coach.

This paper will explore coaching as an integral part of a successful quality program. We will discuss the pitfalls and key performance measures required to make any coaching venture successful.

Coaching – to coach or not to coach?

The extent and practice of call center agent coaching is a long standing contention point amongst call center managers and supervisors. Those who stand firmly in the corner of “no coaching” believe that coaching activities are counterproductive when compared to the cost of such activities. In some cases, these individuals are absolutely correct...but the reason that it's counterproductive is not the fact that it is conducted, rather how the coaching is integrated into the improvement of the entire system. Dr. Gary S. Goodman, the best-selling author of 12 books and more than a thousand articles related to call center activity outlines the pitfalls of coaching activities as such:

1. Coaching is conducted one way...the supervisor talks and does not engage the agent in the conversation.
2. The agent doesn't own or understand the performance metrics they are responsible for. They should be able to score their own calls accurately.
3. Criteria is not objective.
4. Discrimination or favoritism that evades review and correction.
5. Recording and monitoring are done secretly. Reps should know that they are being observed and that they will be held accountable.



Dr. Goodman also suggests: “Why don’t call centers enhance their coaching techniques? Every one I’ve encountered that remains stuck in the muck claims “We don’t have time to do a more thorough job!”

The same folks then prepare to waste their efforts on yet another generation of phone workers that will turn-over in short order. They miss the point that a stitch in time saves nine.

Pay full attention to the people you have on board now, be fair and thorough in your evaluations, measuring the right things the right way, and you’ll go a long way toward remedying the turnover and underlying motivational problems that plague calls centers and the people who work in them.”

In short, Dr. Goodman’s assertion is that if you simply coach for the sake of coaching, you are absolutely throwing away your time and money. The advice given to the agents on how to improve their performance is just as important as how that advice is given to them.

Effective Coaching Requirements

Now that we’ve established that just “doing the coaching” isn’t enough, lets discuss what is needed to make coaching effective. Ideally, you want your overall quality program and coaching to result in improvements in your call center activities, i.e., lower handle time, better first call resolution, higher customer satisfaction, higher levels of sales, etc. According to Lee Anne Wimberly, Demand Generation Specialist from focus.com, the following questions must be asked about your coaching environment:

- Are my supervisors prepared to coach?
- How targeted and actionable is coaching?
- Is coaching consistent across supervisors?
- How often do supervisors coach?
- Do agents have a mechanism to take ownership for performance improvement?

Additionally, coaching has to become a part of the larger picture...it must be focused on improvement of the entire system as well as the individual agent. Lee Anne adds that the following Key Measurements must exist for a fully robust coaching environment:

- Compliance to coaching processes
- Performance changes directly linked to coaching
- Time spent in coaching Problem coaching vs. enhancement coaching
- Proficient agent attrition.

So what does this mean? This means that in order for coaching to be successful at the individual level, the coaching must play a part of the larger Quality program and integrate well with that system.

Improve the System AND the Agent

Coaching is an integral part of agent performance...after all; somehow the agents must learn what they are doing right and wrong. As we’ve discussed effective coaching is integrated as a part of the larger picture; Coaching to the System as well as to the individual agent. According to Impact Learning Systems, poor team performance can be attributed to one of the following:

1. The agents don’t have the knowledge or skills required to perform the job.
2. The agents can perform the job, but choose not to.
3. The supervisors don’t have the skills required to motivate and inspire their team to top performance and they don’t have the authority to take corrective action.
4. The supervisors do have the skills and authority but don’t use them.



This begins by looking at the supervisors as coaches. The ideal coaching situation has specific “Coach the Coach,” training or evaluation in place. If a supervisor’s team is not performing, the performance of the whole team must be analyzed, specifically in regard to the effectiveness of the supervisor themselves. In this environment, the supervisor is held as responsible for the performance of the agent as the agent themselves are. To accomplish proficiency in this method, this might include a master coach or training specialist who is responsible for the development of the supervisor and their coaching skills.

The article in this reference goes on to exemplify the effect of well trained coaches. In those cases, the teams of supervisors who received this type of “coach the coach” coaching scored 37.5% higher on overall monitoring scores than the control group. One call center implemented a similar program throughout their call center and moved their accuracy scores from 25th place among all plans to 12th.

Now that it’s established that how the coaches are trained to coach is key, let’s take a look at the elements that are required to monitor the system as well as the agent in terms of performance variables. Your specific variables may differ, based on your industry, but according to Niels Kjellerup of callcenters.com here are some examples of the skills that are needed to be coached and trained:

- How to control a conversation, so it doesn’t drag on needlessly.
- How to identify the Needs of the caller.
- How to handle angry callers
- How to project the intention ‘to help’ the caller
- How to be honest with the caller
- How to pay attention to every caller and not let your mind wander
- How to be outcome focused without being pushy or dominating.

This isn’t comprehensive, but it gives the general overview of the types of things your organization should systematically feed back in your coaching. In short, the ideal coaching environment focuses on the agent’s performance relative the performance of the entire system of providing excellent customer service to your customers.

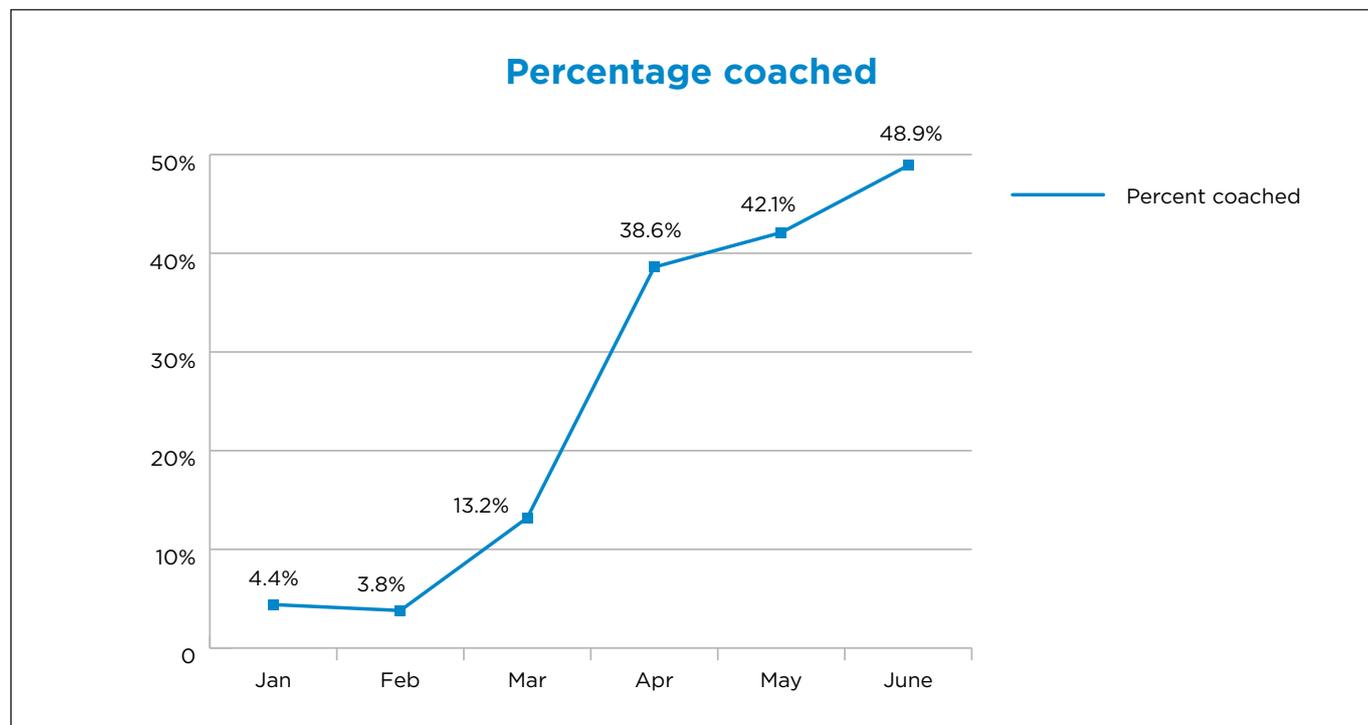
Coaching in practice with BPA – results of effective coaching

Part of the BPA Program allows our customers to track and capture all coaching activity within the same online tools and databases in which the Quality Monitoring is conducted. This allows supervisors and managers to conveniently manage the Quality Program and coaching conducted through the use of audits performed by BPA Analysts. Unilaterally, customers who utilize this function see incremental improvements in their overall performance and quality scores through the use of active coaching and our online coaching tools, when contrasted to companies that do no coaching at all.

Overleaf is an example of a well known cable company relating coaching activity to overall quality scoring. This particular customer had every supervisor attend a coaching development meeting prior to the release and use of the monitoring criteria. The supervisors played an integral role in the development of this criteria, and in the end, the measurements were clear, concise and targeted at not only improving the agent, but improving the process of handling the customer as well.



The first chart demonstrates the % of monitored calls actually coached and delivered to individual agents. In the beginning of the program, very little coaching was conducted, with a steady increase in the activity over the following months:



The next chart demonstrates the overall and site quality score performance for the same time period. Note that the two trends are virtually identical. As the coaching activity increased, quality scores also showed similar improvements.





The assertion here is that there is a direct relation with our customer's coaching activity and their ability to perform. This assertion is absolutely true, not only because coaching activity is occurring, but also because this particular customer is extremely progressive in their coaching activities, aligning their coaching philosophies with the previously mentioned effective coaching suggestions. They use clear, concise measures and conduct their coaching activity in a very proactive and positive manner. If this customer only conducted coaching, and did so in a counterproductive manner, these results may have not manifested itself to this degree. These positive results can be attributed not only to the fact that coaching was conducted, but in the manner in which it was conducted as well.

Summary of coaching

In the end, I went to the local gym and hired a trainer. She pointed out a few things I was doing incorrectly with my running form, as well as provided me with specific advice and training on how to work through the cardiovascular plateau I had hit. While I'm still a bit behind my daughter's best time, I'm creeping closer, and that skinny little kid better watch out behind her!

In the same fashion I was able to improve my performance, your call center agents and the entire delivery of customer service in your organization can benefit from a well structured and integrated coaching environment. Had my trainer simply told me that I was old, slow and needed to run faster, she would have only stated the obvious and would have given me nothing useful to improve upon. Her specific goals, advice and changes to my behaviors allowed me to improve. The same applies to your agent; clear concise coaching, based on objective criteria and targeted at performance variables that effect the entire system of customer service excellence will produce results that will greatly outweigh the investment in time and money.

A large white silhouette of a unicorn head, facing right, set against a blue background with various icons like a lightbulb, speech bubble, and bar chart.

About BPA

With over 20 years experience, over 100 different clients, and millions of observations made worldwide, BPA International has the experience, knowledge and ingenuity to help you achieve the highest possible Call Center Quality Customer Experience. BPA is the most experienced and qualified provider of Contact Center Quality Services worldwide.

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