

Contact Center Leadership

The Unicorn of Continuous Improvement

-- *Two steps forward, two steps back...*

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Continuous Improvement... the unicorn of any contact center.

Yeah, I know. Continuous Improvement is the wonder child of any measurement-driven organization. The Holy Grail. It's how we make incremental improvements over time, increasing our productivity, effectiveness and profitability. "It's what we do." So, hear me out before you go all "what's this unicorn crap?" on me.

First, let's define it. Continuous Improvement is best defined as:

*"An ongoing effort to improve products, services, or processes; **incremental improvement over time**. It is based upon a belief that continual improvement can be brought about by a **never-ending series of small changes**."*

Now, let's unpack that a bit...

An *ongoing effort* means that this isn't a finite project or ultimate destination; that some level of attention is *continuously* applied. *Improvement over time* means that, over an extended period of time, the delta between starting point and now is demonstrable improvement, that we are on a journey. Finally, a *never-ending series of small changes* means just that; it space implies that we continue to make the changes necessary—not necessarily do the same things over and over.

So that's Continuous Improvement, you say??

Yeah, well, that's not us. Not in most—if not *all*—contact centers.



It's not that we don't support, believe in and attempt to drive toward this mythical beast called Continuous Improvement. We do all of that.



We just don't consistently maintain it. And Continuous Improvement is absolutely grounded on maintaining a level of improvement and then building on it. It does not mean improving, deteriorating, then improving again (which we do all too well).

Not that anyone—in any industry—does Continuous Improvement perfectly. Every company, operation, organization, etc. has problems at one time or another with the Continuous Improvement process, and the subsequent results.

But in contact centers, it seems to be the carrot on a donkey's lead stick, or a dream that disappears when we wake up, unattainable by the mere mortal leaders, supervisors and Quality Analysts in hot pursuit.

Think about it: Continuous Improvement means you improve, regroup, improve some more. Rinse and repeat ad nauseam. In contact centers, we see a problem (usually some pesky, errant metric), identify some specific actions to correct (not necessarily improve), get better, level off, *then get worse again*. In the same metric. Abandoned calls seem to come back. Conformance bounces up and down. First-call resolution needs constant watching.

Average Handle Time (AHT) goes up... we focus intently. We follow up with agents. We do our supervisor calls and related coaching. We redouble our QA and feedback efforts, and... viola! *AHT improves*.

...and then, at some later date, it gets worse again. Not because we wanted it to, or even caused it to, really. But because we're managing to a specific metric, and that only works when we *focus specifically* on that metric.

Unfortunately, I know of no contact centers that manage to just one single metric, so... when we begin focusing on some other metric, like First-call resolution, After-call work, Occupancy, etc., we lose focus on the metric we initially improved (AHT in this example).

And surprise! Average Handle Time deteriorates.

Until we realize it, and catch it. Then, after getting worse, *it gets better again*. Because we refocused on it specifically. That's not Continuous Improvement, folks; that's—to use some Army vernacular—dying twice for the same hill.

Unless we understand that Continuous *Improvement* is a unicorn without Continuous *Involvement* by our agents, via a commitment only attainable through successful, meaningful **leadership**, we'll be paying twice (or three times, or four) for the same improvement.



That's not Continuous. It's simply *repetitive*.

And kinda dumb.

Don't fret—we'll give some “how-to” tips on that Continuous Involvement in a future article.

Until then...

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