

*A Learning Paths Whitepaper*



# **Improving Call Center Performance**

## Creating Consistency, Transparency and Speed

The ultimate goal of any call center is to deliver a consistent customer experience on each call, every day, by all employees. There should be a high degree of transparency to the customer. It shouldn't matter who the customer talks with or where the call center is located. Of course, every call center has its unique performance or results goals that must be met. However, these goals need to be accomplished within the framework of consistency and transparency.

For example, you call an 800 number to book a hotel reservation. It shouldn't matter who handles the call. You should be able to get a good hotel and a great price as quickly as possible. The next time you call the experience should be identical, and the time after that, and the time after that.

In addition, if this center had a performance goal of booking 50 hotel reservations per day per agent. The goal isn't that some agents book 75 reservations and others book 25 reservations to average out to 50 per day. Instead it means that everyone in the center is close to that performance goal. That similarity in results is an indicator of consistency.

Creating consistency and transparency can be a significant challenge for a number of reasons. They include:

- “ It requires consistent processes and systems. If there isn't one documented way of doing things, it means there will be dozens or even hundreds of different ways. It also means that new employees will be learning from trial and error rather than the proven experience of others. In addition, as call centers expand, open up additional locations or pick-up and move, there is usually a lot of pressure to be up and running at light speed. Without consistent and documented processes and systems, these changes lead to a great deal of chaos and turmoil in the short run.
- “ Most call centers have a high level of attrition. It's not unusual in larger call centers to have 40 to 80% attrition. This means that there is a constant flow of new employees into the center who need to quickly get to the level of the current workforce. In ramping up new employees, there is a critical need for speed.
- “ Changes in the business lead to changes on the front line. Without a smooth way to introduce and integrate new policies, procedures, strategies and product, it leads to inconsistent application and adoption by employees and work groups.

## The Learning Paths Solution

Learning Paths is a proven methodology for getting all call center employees on the same page as fast as possible. We define a Learning Path as the sequence of training, practice and experience that leads to a desired level of proficiency. We then measure a Learning Path in terms of Time to Proficiency.



*“Do Your Customers Have the Same High Quality Experience No Matter Who Answers the Phone?”*

*“Does High Turnover Make Impossible to Get Everyone Trained?”*



For example, employees in a call center might be taking orders from an 800 number tied to an infomercial. A Learning Path would structure the best way to learn how to take calls and process orders. This would include time in the classroom, self-study, structured practice with a coach and learning time taking live calls. The Learning Path would identify the number of hours spent practicing or the number of calls required to reach proficiency. In this case, proficiency might be measured by number of calls handled, number of orders taken and a customer satisfaction score.

Initially, we would map out the current Learning Path and measure the current time to proficiency. Then, through a process of adding, deleting, combining, rearranging and resequencing the path, we would look for ways to shorten the path by at least 30% on the first attempt at improving it. In our example, you might find the following opportunities for improvement:

- “ Current training includes parts of the computer system that aren’t used for these calls. Action: **Delete It.**
- “ There are a number of unique situations that aren’t included in the training. These exceptions usually get handled by supervisors. Action: **Add it.**
- “ Some classroom training could be replaced by a simple job aid. Action: **Create it.**
- “ Practice with a coach is done differently with each work group. There is no set process. Action: **Structure It.**

### Accelerating the Path

Over the longer term, a Learning Path is improved by applying a range of accelerated learning techniques and building upon the best practices of top performers. Here are just a few examples of how to make a Learning Path better and faster.

- “ **Teach Multi-Tasking**  
Call centers are multi-tasking environments. Usually, you need to be able to use the computer, phone, reference materials and a call process all at once. You need to be able to do these tasks while demonstrating strong interpersonal and communication skills. When each of these elements is taught separately, it takes a significant amount of time to use them at the same time.  
You will often see that so called **technical skills** and **soft skills** are taught separately and then sometimes combined in some type of practice activity. However, the challenge isn’t to know about a product and to know how to sell, it’s to be able to sell the product. Therefore the accelerated training method is to build the training around the call and not all its pieces and parts.
- “ **Close the Classroom Gap**  
When there is a lot of classroom training, there is usually a large gap between what’s happening in the classroom and what happens



*“How Much Do You Invest Before Agents Take Their First Call?”*

*“Can You Save Money by Speeding Up the Learning Process?”*



on-the-job. This happens for a number of reasons. First, classroom trainers spend so much time training that they lose touch with what's happening on the floor. Second, front line managers are often out of touch with what happens in the classroom and often contradict or change what's being taught. Third, there is often a lot of difference between front line managers in how they evaluate and direct employees. In other words, who you work for determines the actual training you receive.

In accelerating a path, a key action is to move training out of the classroom and onto the floor, and to have trainers and managers work together along a structured path. Often in a call center managers monitor and evaluate performance and then give feedback. Their role really needs to be changed so that they are coaches and teachers with the goal of improving performance and not just rewarding and punishing it. To make this change, you would naturally change the Learning Path for managers.

#### “ **Fix the Process** ”

All too often, training is required to make up for broken systems and processes. It's not uncommon to find an extra week of classroom training to teach a computer system that is ill-suited for its application. In other words, there are too many screens, screens that are confusing and data that doesn't transfer to the right place.

It's also not uncommon to find compensation and incentive programs, procedures, marketing strategies and more that drive strange and unwanted behaviors. Employees will ask a series of questions in order to get a high score on an evaluation rather than tuning into what the customer is saying. By using the Learning Path approach, what's broken becomes quickly apparent and any changes quickly transfer into a new Learning Path with all its measures. In other words, the discipline and rigor of a Learning Path drive constant improvement. Keeping the unnecessary, irrelevant and counter-productive training out of the path quickly shortens it.

#### “ **Accelerate Wanted Attrition** ”

It might seem strange to want attrition. However, one of the challenges in a call center is to quickly find out who is ill-suited for the job. You don't want to have someone go through three or four weeks of training, at your expense, and then quit in week five. In a customer service call center, you will often find that new employees become disillusioned when they realize that instead of taking calls from a lot of happy, friendly calls, everyone is calling with problems. Many of these callers are frustrated, angry and truly upset.

This in reality is something that new employees need to experience on day one or even pre-hire so that they can opt out before it costs you a lot of money. In call centers, there are



*“Do Your Supervisors Help or Undermine the Training Process?”*



functions that some people really like to do while others won't do them under any circumstance. For example, in a collections call center, some people quit when they realize that they are going to be calling people at home and asking them for money. Others like the challenge and feel that they are doing a service for their company and the debtor.

## Back to the Bottom Line

In a call center, installing and improving Learning Paths quickly reduces Time to Proficiency. It also means that you have a definite check on whether or not employees actually reach proficiency. It is a more rigorous process of measurement that will enable you to tie training results to the bottom line.

On the most basic level, consider what it means to the bottom line if an employee begins handling calls on day 15 rather than day 40. There is, of course, an additional 25 days of output. There is also a need for fewer employees because more employees are contributing to the overall output. It also means fewer errors and customer complaints which reduces both costs and lost customers. Learning Paths are a natural fit for call centers because they tend to add more structure and rigor to what already exists. This additional structure and rigor also makes it much easier to expand, move or change what the call center does.

## About LPI

Learning Paths International is a performance improvement consulting firm with partners in the U.S., Canada, U.K. and Europe. In addition to the Learning Path Methodology, LPI also offers a wide range of consulting and learning development services including: strategic planning, change management and leadership development

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*“How Long Does It Really Take for Your Agents to Reach Proficiency?”*

