The Communication Culture is the Right Culture for Customer Support
THE COMMUNICATION CULTURE IS THE RIGHT CULTURE FOR CUSTOMER SUPPORT

The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.

–C. G. Jung

Leaders in the contact center industry often find their organizations stuck in a rut of stagnant metrics. Despite the infusion of new technology, friendly competitions, and fun committees, customer-facing metrics fail to inch upward. Although many factors might contribute to the stagnation, one productive line of questions focuses upon the impact of an organization’s communication culture on customer-facing metrics. For example, what are the key beliefs that shape core assumptions about communication? How do values influence decision-making about customer conversations? What are the communication practices that infuse the organization with talent, creativity and innovation? Before exploring questions like these, however, a few brief definitions might be helpful to understand the main differences between beliefs, values, and practices. Beliefs are at the core of any organization’s culture, consisting of internalized statements about ourselves and our surroundings, such as “people like to talk” or “hard work is a key source of life satisfaction.” Emerging from the belief core are values or internalized guidelines for how to behave within the organization. Within thriving organizations, values align with beliefs. Practices are recurrent patterns of behavior, such as rituals, ceremonies, and routines. Again, within the effective organization practices materialize from the beliefs and values of the organization. Examples of practices are screening interviews, coaching sessions, standardized greetings, or even dress-down Fridays. Taken as a whole, beliefs, values, and practices constitute the building blocks of organizational culture.

BELIEFS
Beliefs have the capacity to serve as a compass, providing clear direction when confronted with important decisions, policy dilemmas, and the like. For example, if leaders share the belief, “consistency is the key to customer communication,” scripted greetings and closings would likely appear on the agent scorecard because prescribed communication behaviors would maximize the consistency of what a customer hears at the beginning and ending of every call. At the core of the communication culture are four core beliefs about work: (1) creativity is the key to communication excellence, (2) agents serve as communication professionals, (3) business is personal, and (4) dialogue results in value creation for customers and agents.

Creativity is the Key to Communication Excellence
What makes agent-customer conversations great? Although resolving the issue on the first contact and minimizing the effort of the customer are very important outcomes, both result in only acceptable conversations, not great ones. Turns out the answer to the “great” question is simple with profound implications. The simple answer is that great conversations are creative and non-linear, punctuated by moments of unpredictability. Personalization fuels creativity, allowing, even encouraging, the uniqueness of both customer and agent to enliven the conversation. Personalization also creates the clear perception that this conversation could only take place between one unique agent and one unique customer, rooted in one unique situation.
Great conversations are also interspersed with sparks of spontaneity; those vivid moments when the unrehearsed conversation creates a tangible connection between agent and customer. Although unpredictable and varied, these sparks of spontaneity have the potential to transform a routine and monotonous conversation into a creative and energizing experience. The implication of conversational creativity, however, might seem overwhelming on the surface—how can you monitor and coach something that is unique and spontaneous? How do you foster creativity without producing utter chaos? The way to harness the creative power of agents is to turn attention to the objectives of communication (reducing customer effort, framing the situation, building rapport, etc.) rather than focusing on a limiting set of prescribed communication behaviors (apologies, empathy statements, standard greetings, etc.). Communication objectives provide the necessary boundaries, structure, and expectations when talking with customers while, at the same time, giving agents the license to choose the most effective behaviors that emerge from the unique needs of the moment.

Agents are Communication Professionals
A skeptic might read the above heading and dismiss the title “communication professional” as just an ineffective semantic gesture designed to make agents feel better about their job, but lacking consequence (e.g., “an agent, by any other name, is an agent”). The opposite, however, is true. The organizational identity of agents frames the core responsibilities of their job. Indeed, who you are in the organization determines what you are responsible for doing, day in and day out. To illustrate this point, let’s explore three different organizational identities for a contact center agent and map the corresponding responsibilities that emerge from each identity: (1) product specialist, (2) company representative, and (3) communication professionals. When agents are viewed as product specialists, their core responsibility is to obtain knowledge and solve problems in a task-focused manner. Which is to say, the purpose of screening, training, and coaching is to produce an agent who can navigate tasks effectively and efficiently. Foundational to the view of agent-as-product-specialist is the restrictive conception of communication as the exchange of information. Consequently, the job of an agent is to gather task information from the customer, apply their training to access information systems relevant to the issue, and relay information to the customer that resolves the issue. From a sales perspective, the agent collects key information about the caller’s wants and needs, filters the information into a sales model (e.g., assumptive sales, consultative sales) and works to convert the caller into a customer. When viewed as a representative, an agent serves as spokesperson for the organization, requiring the frontline employee to put on the “company face” for the customer. Foundational to the representative identity is communication as performance, during which a representative is charged with conforming to a uniform “company voice.” In other words, an agent’s unique voice need not be cultivated. Instead, representatives are taught the best way to sound, given appropriate phrases and sentences, and coached on how to appear empathetic. When answering the phone, for example, the agent should sound happy and upbeat (e.g., a “smiling voice”), use prescribed phrases, such as “It’s a wonderful day at Company X; my name is Y; how may I assist you today?” When agents are viewed as communication professionals, however, their responsibility is to develop and apply their complex understanding of communication, resulting in highly competent and personalized conversations. Foundational to this organizational identity is the belief that communication is the process of connecting with others. Because of the unique-ness of each agent and each customer, however, the process of connecting requires a blend of both talent and education. More specifically, agents must learn how to adapt their verbal and nonverbal messages to address customer issues in nuanced ways that demonstrate an acute understanding of unique situation of the customer. Connecting with customers also requires the recognition of, and adaptation to, the unique social needs of each customer.

Business is Personal
“Don’t take it personally, it’s just business.” The communication culture summarily rejects this widely heard statement and adopts a very different belief, “when business is conducted between people, it’s always personal.” When business is viewed as fundamentally relational, practices are guided by the same set of social principles that guide our conversations with friends and family members. Viewed as much more than economic engine, business is reframed as a complex network of relationships.
The implication of this belief is that the communication culture does not require agents to check their identities at the door before starting work. No longer are agents encouraged to view customers as contracts, accounts, or end-users. Instead, agents are encouraged to view customers are fellow human beings who are in genuine need of assistance. The communication culture is built upon the profound conviction in “good business” in which work provides a profound sense of fulfillment.

As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (p. 3) wrote:

*Our jobs determine to a large extent what our lives are like. Is what you do for a living making you ill? Does it keep you from becoming a more fully realized person? Do you feel ashamed of what you have to do at work? All the often, the answer to such questions is yes. Yet is does not have to be like that. Work can be one of the most joyful, most fulfilling aspects of life.*

**Dialogue results in value creation for customers and agents.**

Leaders in the contact center industry may believe that successful business strategies mandate that the conversational needs of agents are frivolous when compared to the needs of the customer. On the surface, this belief seems to make sense—losing a customer is much more important than the social needs of an agent. An exclusive emphasis on customer needs, however, is not only unnecessary but it is also counterproductive because one of the reliable predictors of customer satisfaction is agent satisfaction.

Within the culture of communication, however, both customer and agent needs are met. Customers derive value from conversations because their needs are resolved in a professional, personable, and spontaneous manner. The agent receives personal satisfaction because they are encouraged to develop and use their own unique style when assisting customers. Accordingly, agents receive the satisfaction of helping people who have genuine needs by applying their own unique set of communication talents and expertise. To explore this point further, let’s turn our attention to the key values that producing lasting satisfaction for contact center employees in the communication culture.

**VALUES**

The culture of communication is also founded upon three values: (1) intrinsic motivation, (2) continuous development, and (3) autonomy. Each of these values align with the core beliefs of the communication culture and produce a highly rewarding work experience for agents. Intrinsic motivation occurs when work fulfills the primary work needs of an employee. Continuous development is built upon the philosophy of lifelong learning and can function as the antidote to the toxic boredom that often results from performing repetitive tasks. The key to development is knowing how to walk the fine line of communication complexity. Although autonomy has multiple meanings and connotations, within the communication culture autonomy has a specific meaning: agents are trusted to apply their education and talents to choose the best conversational route for each customer. Agents, however, are still given clear goals, such as resolving the issue, satisfying the customer, building loyalty, etc. The result of these beliefs and values is a conversation that is professional, personalized, and spontaneous.

**PRACTICES**

Up to this point, the discussion has focused on the internalized attributes of the communication culture. Emerging from those internalized beliefs and values are specific practices that transform ideas into great conversations. For example, the crucial role of screening within the communication culture is to identify communication attributes that are highly resistant to training. Continuous development is fueled by education rather than training because education empowers the agent through knowledge and objectives to make well-informed decisions. The goal of coaching within the communication culture is steady progression toward communication mastery. Coaches, therefore, operate with the belief that learning must take place developmentally and systematically, focusing on the most appropriate communication objective for that agent at that stage of communication development. Lastly, all practices align and reinforce the beliefs and values that constitute the communication culture. In essence, the communication culture is built upon deeply held beliefs and values that guide choice-making, which produce an integrated and meaningful set of organizational practices.

**CONCLUSION**

The communication culture provides an innovative vision of contact centers. The culture is built upon the firm foundation of creativity, professionalism, personalization, and value creation. Supporting these core beliefs are three central values, intrinsic motivation, continuous development, and autonomy. Beliefs and values, in turn, manifest in groundbreaking ways of screening, educating, and developing agents. Within the successful organization, practices are integrated in purposeful ways that unleash the untapped potential of the contact center. Although call center technologies have become more sophisticated and widespread, they only assist with linear processes (i.e., left brain thinking). Great calls, however, also require lateral thinking to infuse the conversation with creativity and moments of spontaneity (right brain thinking). Through the culture of communication, agents engage in “whole brain” conversations that produce meaningful connections with customers, highly satisfying work, and strong customer loyalty to the brand.