The 3 Step Strategy for Customer Contact Victory in the WFH Age

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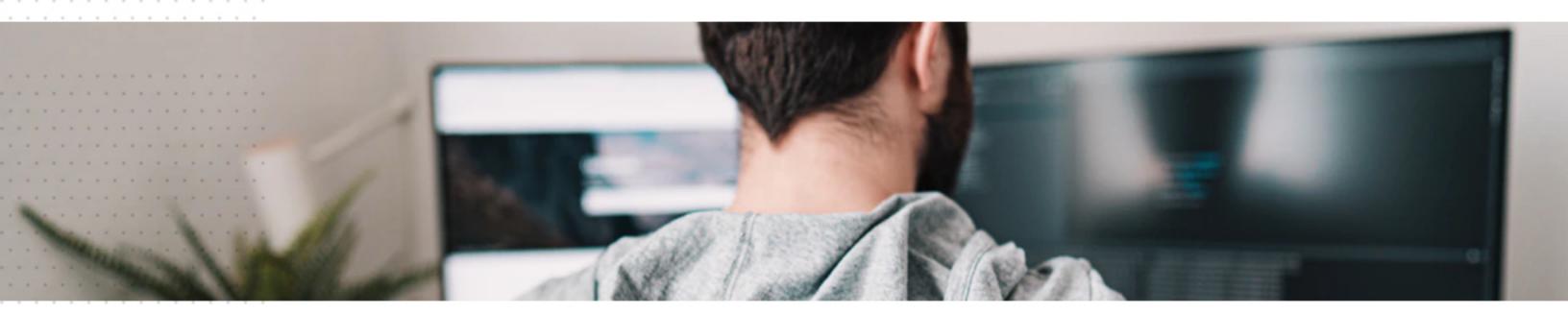*Greg Salvato, CEO TouchPoint One*

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Words aren't remotely enough to convey the extreme level of gratitude we owe to the nurses, doctors, respiratory therapists, and other medical workers entrenched in the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. Committed to the oaths they've taken as medical professionals to care for the sick, and often lacking adequate testing, PPE, and other vital equipment, these genuine heroes put their lives on the line every day to save others.

In a less hazardous, though still vital, theatre of the coronavirus war, contact centers have also stepped up to maintain continuity in customer support for healthcare, communications, transportation, public services, and other critical industries. Within a matter of days, tens of thousands of customer contact agents, supervisors, and additional support and management staff transitioned entire operations from traditional office facilities to massive Work from Home (WFH) programs. This achievement is unprecedented in scope and speed and has revealed much about the potential for humans to accomplish seemingly impossible feats when the cost of failure is unimaginable.

While the success of these efforts is undeniable, the WFH paradigm has amplified the pre-existing challenges faced by supervisors in a traditional office setting to nurture, develop, and motivate employees. Realizing optimal agent performance in any customer contact environment is reliant on informed, equipped, trained, and meaningfully engaged frontline leaders. Lacking these capabilities in a WFH arrangement is, at best, a setup for stress, uncertainty, and confusion and, at worst, a path to outright failure. To address these challenges and win in the WFH age, make the following three initiatives a priority for your organization now.

1. Transform Performance Management.

Most contact centers are managed based on a defined set of performance metrics and targets. Some common Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) include quality, net promoter score, customer satisfaction, attendance, attrition, average handle time, sales conversion rate, calls per hour, service levels, bill-to-pay ratios, and countless others. The KPIs selected vary depending on business type, department or program, functional role, and other factors, and together, comprise a complete scorecard of specific performance objectives.

Performance can apply to operational, behavioral, financial, emotional, customer, or other attributes that impact the business. However, at a minimum, supervisors and their colleagues should be aware of the following:

1. the metrics that constitute success for their program/department and how that fits into the success of the enterprise overall

2. accurate and complete knowledge of how their team and individual agents are performing to the defined goals

3. actionable insights and guidance derived from performance data about how to help their agents and teams become more productiv

In most organizations, pieces and parts of the performance picture exist in isolated systems and data silos. Supervisors and other members of the workforce, therefore, lack the complete view of performance needed to analyze and improve behaviors and results. It's not difficult to understand the level of frustration and disadvantage a supervisor (or any employee) would experience without a timely, accurate, and complete basis for gauging and guiding performance. Without such awareness, it's not logical to expect effective leadership or success in a traditional, let alone Work from Home program.

If you haven't yet fully committed to the digital transformation of your performance analytics and management system, there should be no higher priority as immediate gains in people, data, processes, and technology will accumulate the moment you do. Like a live conductor's score, the system is the dynamic interface by which all stakeholders understand their respective roles, how the components fit together, and the effectiveness of the individual parts. Moreover, the system serves as the knowing framework to harmoniously align, assist, and engage your entire workforce and vendor-partner network.

2. Systemize Coaching & Agent Support.

For supervisors, cultivating productive relationships with contact center agents is a significant challenge. WFH compounds the problem by eliminating the advantages possible by physical proximity. Team success is dependent on the supervisor's ability to establish and maintain credibility, trust, and influence through mutually respectful and beneficial relationships with agents.

Yet contact center team leaders are rarely equipped with adequate, if any, tools to develop constructive relationships with agents, peers, and senior leaders. They don't possess a system to document coaching interactions or establish targets for coaching frequency. They lack structured, collaborative accountability to a standard of coaching quality. They're missing a meaningful analysis of the impact of the support they provide. Ask any supervisor how many times

they coached Sally or Marco last month, and they'll most likely have no idea. Ask a manager to share with you the metrics by which they can identify their strongest or weakest team leader, custom-tailor an individualized skills development program, or effectively mentor - and they can't. They simply haven't been provided the systems or guidance to do so.

Software vendors are actively developing solutions to address the need for comprehensive coaching tools geared for supervisors and their managers. There are viable strategies, too, for organizations with the financial means and risk appetite to build and maintain proprietary coaching and agent support systems in-house. Whether built or bought, providing a systemized way for supervisors to develop productive support, coaching routines, and skills, fills a critical capability gap for contact centers. Adding a closed-loop coaching & agent support system to your customer contact operations will provide your frontline managers with an empowering level of structure and autonomy to develop and lead. The positive impact realized at the team level will ripple across your WFH environment and throughout the organization.

3. Implement Continuous Training.

Among the handful of positive outcomes resulting from the COVID-19 crisis is a sobering reminder of organizational fragility and the incredible power of communities to rapidly and naturally galvanize to overcome enormous obstacles. People crave purpose, desire to be of individual and collective value, and want to advance in skill and ability. The pandemic has activated these innate drives around the globe and across every conceivable demographic in an incredible shared effort to win this great war.

Crises aren't a prerequisite to arousing the human will to thrive, and employers should use every means possible to exploit intrinsic motivation to enhance the lives of their employees and, as a result, their businesses. To do so requires intelligence, caring, and commitment to a strategy of continuous training.

In a recent TouchPoint One survey, thirty-one percent of supervisors named training as the #1 thing they wish their employer would provide more of, second only to higher wages and financial incentives. To excel, supervisors must possess not only business domain expertise, but management, critical thinking, and leadership skills. A 2005 study from the Stanford Research Institute International and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation found that 75 percent of long-term job success depends on soft skills and only 25 percent on technical knowledge. In 2017, research from Michigan's Ross School of Business found that soft skills training boosted productivity and employee retention 12 percent and delivered a 250 percent return on investment based on higher productivity and employee retention.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the lives of each one of your employees. The fear, sacrifice, and anger the situation is causing are real. Supervisors trained with people skills and equipped with the tools and autonomy

to leverage them can ensure success in the WFH era and whatever hybrid variation our customer contact operations transition to in the crisis aftermath.

Let's Finish What We Started.

Work from Home momentum was building before coronavirus – the pandemic's impact simply accelerated the transition to lightspeed and reset the point of strategic equilibrium. The body of research indicating the direct link between influential frontline leaders and higher levels of workforce engagement, retention, and business success is vast. Despite the evidence, contact centers have been slow to act on the connection and advance from the legacy approaches, outdated processes, and unqualified technologies that hold talent back. This flawed strategic position didn't deliver success pre-coronavirus – and assures complete failure for WFH and beyond.

The massive overnight conversion to Work from Home is an achievement unparalleled in the contact center industry and which anyone involved should be proud. It has enabled businesses across critical verticals to continue to operate, serve communities, and establish a needed baseline of normalcy and certainty. But the work isn't finished as the conversion lays bare serious deficiencies for supervisor support that are undermining performance, damaging morale, and jeopardizing WFH success. The competitive environment won't long tolerate complacency, so swiftly and intelligently execute this 3 step strategy and triumph among the customer contact elite of the WFH age.

About the Author

Greg Salvato is the CEO if TouchPoint One, the leading provider of performance optimization solutions for contact centers. The Company's Acuity product is a full-featured employee engagement and performance management platform that enables improved decision making, talent development, and process execution at every operational level. TouchPoint One customer contact solutions deliver the compelling benefits of gamification, balanced scorecards, employee dashboards, and advanced performance management through innovative design and complete, functional alignment with business processes and strategies. http://www.touchpointone.com