



Protect Your Training Investment With Effective Coaching

Most call center managers think their supervisors are actively coaching and developing their representatives. More often than not, they're monitoring and evaluating rather than coaching. Make sure your supervisors are doing the kind of real world coaching that will protect your training investments.





A Cautionary Tale

Several years ago we worked with a large client in the telecommunications industry that was eager to change their well-established culture of service to a new culture of sales and service. To this end, they made several significant investments.

First, they changed their hiring criteria. And they implemented screening mechanisms to assure that new hires had sales aptitude in addition to verbal and keyboarding skills.

Then they changed their initial training curriculum. We designed and developed a customized sales training program specifically for this audience. And we worked with the client's internal training department to integrate this sales training throughout their initial training curriculum.

The results were a classic case of good news and bad news.

First, the good news. Our client's investments in hiring and training really paid off. When newly hired representatives completed their initial training, they were extremely successful at selling. In fact, their sales results surpassed by a wide margin the results of the incumbent representatives – many of whom had been with the organization for years.

Now, the bad news. After about six months on the job, the sales results of the new representatives had fallen to the point where they were consistent with the sales of the incumbent group.

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Disappointing? Absolutely. Surprising? Not really!

It turns out that our client's results were far from unusual. In fact, they were pretty typical.

Research shows that the positive impact of even the best training is relatively short-lived. Within six months – or less – the positive performance “spike” from training has crashed back to the same level as before the training took place.

What accounts for this distressingly short impact? There are several factors. Over time, representatives develop bad habits. In some environments, peer pressure is a factor. And some organizations never implement basic performance management components – like clear expectations and meaningful rewards and consequences – that are essential for sustaining improved performance.

But the principal reason for the short-term impact of training is the lack of consistent coaching and follow-up by first-line supervisors.

One recent study demonstrated that if managers failed to provide coaching support, trainees retained just 13% of their new skills after six months. And according to the International Personnel Management Association, “studies have shown that training alone increased productivity by 22.4 percent while training plus coaching increased productivity by 88 percent.”

Wait just a minute, you protest. That can't be the reason. Our supervisors do plenty of coaching.

Don't they?

That's an interesting question. And the answer depends on whom you ask.

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If you ask most call center managers whether their supervisors coach on a regular basis, you'll hear a resounding YES. But if you ask most representatives, you'll get a much different answer. "Our supervisors do a lot of monitoring and evaluating. But they don't do any coaching!"

Evaluation And Coaching

In our work with sales and service organizations, we find that it's common for managers at every level to confuse "coaching" with "monitoring and evaluating." Here's a summary of the key differences:

Evaluation	Coaching
The process of measuring results (and behaviors) against a standard.	The process of improving results by changing thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors.
Focus is on the past.	Focus is on the future.
Addresses every aspect of job performance.	Achieves "small wins" by working on one area at a time.
Highlights what the employee did wrong or did not do.	Highlights what the employee did well or improved.
One-way communication.	Two-way communication.
The employee may not agree with your assessment.	Buy-in is critical.



So take a good, hard look at your supervisors. Are they improving results by helping representatives change their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors? Are they focused on what to do next time rather than on what went wrong on the last call? Are they achieving “small wins” by focusing on specific areas for improvement rather than trying to fix everything at once? Are they highlighting what employees are doing well and where they are improving? And, most important, are they using effective two-way communication to gain each representative’s buy-in and commitment to change?

If you can truthfully answer yes to all of these questions, then congratulations! Your supervisors are coaching. If you can’t answer yes to these questions, then your team is monitoring and evaluating. And you are missing out on significant opportunities to develop your people and improve the rate of return on your investments in recruitment and training.

So how can you help your managers and supervisors make the transition from monitoring and evaluating to coaching?

Two Kinds Of Coaching

If you consider coaches in sports like basketball or football, they really do two kinds of coaching: coaching during practice and coaching during the game.

During practice they demonstrate key skills. They rehearse the fundamentals. And they provide continual feedback to help players hone their execution.

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During the game, they focus on winning. Their emphasis is on strategy and execution. And they provide insights about the other team so their players can make appropriate adjustments.

This analogy holds true in a sales or service organization, too.

Coaching During Practice

Coaching during “practice” happens when representatives are not talking with customers and performing actual work. When supervisors coach during practice, they deliver technical information and product knowledge. They demonstrate and model key interaction skills. And they let representatives practice and receive feedback.

There are three principal opportunities for coaching during practice:

Training. We’ve had particular success with helping our clients implement High Impact Training sessions (HITs!). These “training sessions in a box” are ready-to-go training interventions that supervisors can conduct in 15, 30, or 45 minute segments with small groups or single representatives.

One-on-one development. One-on-one sessions are the best way for supervisors to utilize the ESP approach to skill development: explain, show, practice. And, of course, they also need to provide appropriate feedback because only perfect practice makes perfect.



Team meetings. It's difficult to carve out meeting time in a contact center environment. But our clients have found that quick, pre-shift meetings are a great way to keep representatives focused on critical performance goals and interactive skills. The key is KISMIF – keep it simple, make it fun!

Coaching During The Game

Coaching during “the game” happens when a representative is talking with a customer and performing actual work. When supervisors coach during “the game,” they have two objectives.

First, they help the representative perform the work successfully. In other words, they are actively involved in helping the representative complete a successful call.

Second, they help the representative develop knowledge, skills, and abilities that he or she can use in the future.

There are three different ways to provide coaching during “the game.”

Demonstration call. The supervisor assumes the role of the representative and talks directly with the customer while the representative observes. And the supervisor models the specific behaviors or approach that he or she wants the representative to apply.



Joint call. The joint call is the most flexible on-line coaching technique, and it's also the most fun. With a joint call, the supervisor and the representative use a team approach. Both of them are on the line at the same time. And they take turns talking with the customer.

Coaching call. The coaching call is most appropriate when a supervisor is working with a skilled representative who needs relatively little direction or assistance. The representative is the only person who actually talks to the customer. The coach reinforces what the representative is doing well, points out any major opportunities he or she is missing, and helps the rep plan his or her presentation.

Regardless of which coaching technique your supervisors use, it's vital that they involve the representative in meaningful Plus/Delta feedback after the call. They can do this by asking three simple but effective questions:

- What went well on this call?
- What didn't go as well as you would have liked?
- What is one thing that you will do differently next time that will make the biggest difference in your performance?



Make The Commitment

Even with the time pressures that are a fact of life in most contact centers, your supervisors should make the time to coach on a regular basis. And regardless of whether they're coaching during practice or coaching during the game, they should take an active role in actually helping your representatives improve – rather than just telling them how well they scored.

When your supervisors make coaching a way of life, you'll be able to sustain the performance improvements that you worked hard to earn through recruitment and training. And you'll develop your contact center's most valuable asset – your people.

About The Elkind Group

The Elkind Group is dedicated to improving the performance of front-line sales and service teams. We help clients solve their most important performance problems, resulting in increased revenue, customer loyalty, and customer lifetime value.

The Elkind Group's approach integrates performance consulting, customized training, and executive coaching. We work with all levels of the organization to change mind sets, build skill sets, and create a culture committed to sustained performance improvement. For more information, visit www.elkindgroup.com.



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