touchpoint one

Why Your Customer Contact Operations May Be Failing and What You Can Do to Fix It

Greg Salvato, CEO, TouchPoint One

Contact Center Executive Report

November 2019

Why Your Customer Contact Operations May Be Failing and What You Can Do to Fix It

— TouchPoint One Survey Reveals the Truth About the State of Frontline Leadership and How to Address Morale, Execution, and Performance —

Achieving lasting success in the contact center hinges on the effectiveness of frontline leaders. Few would argue that any other resource possesses greater capacity to influence everything that matters most in the customer contact organization. De facto "frontline CEOs", they are best positioned to develop and motivate agents, deliver critical insights about customers and competition, and understand what's working or failing in training, systems, processes, and personnel.

But supervisors are often disadvantaged, if not entirely doomed, from the start; these ambitious, aspiring leaders, themselves typically former CSR superstars, are promoted to a position for which they are frequently ill-suited and unqualified. No training or guidance is necessary; after all, they know better than anyone what's required to succeed. They've seen it all as top agents, right? Of course not. Setting aside the fact that they may not have been good candidates for the position in the first place, supervisors report that they are simply not provided with the information, tools, training, and other forms of support necessary to do their jobs.

There is a vast body of research exposing the direct link between strong frontline leaders and higher levels of workforce engagement, retention, and business success. But despite the evidence and the voices of determined team leaders around the globe, contact centers have been slow to acknowledge this connection and that the legacy approaches, outdated processes, and unqualified technologies currently in use won't deliver success in today's highly competitive, rapidly evolving, labor-constrained digital age.

> *...supervisors report that they are not provided with the information, tools, training, and other forms of support necessary to do their jobs effectively.*

The purpose of this report is to share insights, analysis and interpretation of feedback gathered via a recent survey conducted by TouchPoint One in which supervisors were asked for their perspectives about the quality and adequacy of support they were provided by their employers while senior managers were asked similar questions regarding the support they provided or wished to provide their supervisors. The report is intended to stimulate serious thought and action by contact center executives interested in better understanding and fulfilling the needs of their frontline leaders, their most vital human capital asset, and improving their organization's stature, influence, and value to its customers, employees, and stakeholders.

Discovery Summary and Highlights

One of the primary objectives of our project was to understand how supervisor and senior manager perspectives about aspects of the frontline management support received or provided differed. Our process began with inquiry via a short survey.

We asked supervisors and team leaders the following three questions:

1. **What is the most useful thing provided to you by your employer to help you succeed?**

2. **What is the one thing you wish your employer would provide you to help you succeed?**

3. **On a scale of 1-10, to what extent are you provided by your employer with what you need to succeed?**

And of senior managers we asked three similar questions:

1. **What is the most useful thing that you or your organization provides specifically to supervisors to help them succeed?**

2. **What is the one thing you'd like or plan to provide specifically to your supervisors to help them succeed?**

3. **On a scale of 1-10, to what extent are you providing supervisors what they need to succeed?**

As you might expect, the feedback received from the survey was incredibly enlightening and offered valuable take-aways. For example, despite the growing perception that non-monetary and intrinsic incentives surpass financial rewards as effective and preferred motivators, 36 percent of supervisor respondents cited higher wages and financial incentives as the one thing they wished their employer would provide to help them succeed. Only 5 percent of respondents stated that existing compensation and related programs were adequate.

This feedback from supervisors closely aligns with findings from Addison Group's 2019 Workplace Satisfaction Survey in which almost half (47 percent) of the job seekers reported that they were unsatisfied with salary/compensation. Thirty-four percent of respondents said this was the job benefit that mattered more than any other.

↑**36%** Thirty-six percent of supervisors cited increased compensation and financial incentives as most instrumental to enabling their success.

Increased pay and incentives, perhaps not surprisingly, was mentioned by just 6 percent of senior managers in response to the question — What is the one thing you'd like or plan to provide specifically to your supervisors to help them succeed? No senior manager mentioned compensation as a "most useful thing that you or your organization provides specifically to supervisors to help them succeed."

Incongruity between senior and frontline management regarding the level or basis for compensation shouldn't be neglected or addressed with any less creativity applied to solve other critical business challenges. Being aware that an issue exists and demonstrating a commitment to developing a compensation plan that rewards supervisors according to performance will improve outcomes for all stakeholders and engender trust and accountability.

Resources most valued by both classes of management was also revealed in the survey and despite some disconnects, there was broad agreement about areas that needed attention. Responses generally aligned to the following categories of which we'll examine in more detail throughout the report.

- **training and skills development**

- **real-time performance intelligence**

- **management guidance and agent support systems**

- **recognition, reward, and incentives**

Designing effective solutions is dependent on context and understanding. To understand something well requires a continuous cycle of inquiry, observation, and interpretation which can ultimately lead to informed, imaginative strategies with high potential to drive advantageous change. Surveys, as used in this example, are one effective method of gathering such information, but polls, suggestion boxes (virtual and physical), peer-level round-tables, and other forums provide opportunities for employees to share, contribute, and learn – and undertake change with collective intelligence and purpose.

Training and Skills Development

The strongest point of alignment between senior management and frontline leaders revealed in our survey was a consistent appeal for more training. Structured, frequent, varied, and continuous were recurrent qualifiers used to articulate the ways each party sought or intended to enhance supervisor skills development.

> ❝ *"For the best return on your money, pour your purse into your head."*
> *— Benjamin Franklin*

Ben Franklin had it right – training can't be beat on investment returns, and developing critical skills in frontline leaders is paramount to ensuring they can be effective in their current roles and prepared for advancement as future opportunities arise. Twenty-two percent of senior managers in our survey named training as the most useful thing provided specifically to supervisors to help them succeed. Thirty-eight percent indicated training as the one thing they'd like or plan to provide specifically to their supervisors to help them succeed. Twenty-one percent of supervisors surveyed said that training was the most useful thing provided to them by their employer to help them succeed, but 31 percent identified it as the one thing they wish their employer would provide more of, second only to higher wages and financial incentives. Both senior and frontline managers view training as essential to developing the skills required to effectively support agents and consistently lead their teams to success. Moreover, frontline leaders voiced specific attributes of the training sought like; "hands-on", "regular", "workshops", "skill-building", "continual", etc. Survey responses from supervisors made clear connections between training and skills development and opportunities for achievement-based incentives and career advancement.

To excel, supervisors must possess a broad range of management skills. Business and operational acumen are a fundamental requirement, but leadership skills like communication, motivation, critical thinking, problem-solving, organizational, and others

touchpoint one

are what ensure success. Self-awareness, time and priority management, motivating others, conflict resolution, coaching, and good listening may sound simple, but they are distinct, dynamic skills that can only be developed with experience, training, and mentoring. Recognized contact center thought leader and Call Center Coach President, Jim Rembach, recommends a six-part framework to optimize frontline leader training that includes micro-learning, quick tips, questions & answers, boot camps, industry insights, and communities of practice. Training can be delivered offsite, onsite or online via third-party or internal programs and curriculum and is ideally integrated with the organization's in-house learning management system (LMS).

31%
Training

Thirty-one percent of supervisors identified training as the one thing they wish their employer would provide more of, second only to higher wages and financial incentives.

Don't take anything for granted, as it's very often little things that make or break agent engagement and performance. According to Brad Baumunk, President and COO of Robert C. Davis and Associates (RCDA), "An excellent customer experience comes down to having Quality Conversations and providing supervisors with enough time, and the right tools, to coach and develop their team members." This concept applies to the support interactions between supervisors and agents as much as with customers. For example, how often does a coaching session dive right into a weak metric rather than a recognition of something done well? A "how's the family?" or "how was your drive into work today?" icebreaker before discussing a recent customer survey can go a long way in building rapport and setting a positive tone for constructive support and instruction.

Whether you're a fan of the term or not, the importance of soft skills (Oxford English Dictionary defined as "personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people") in any organization, and most certainly densely-staffed contact centers, can't be understated. A 2005 study from the Stanford Research Institute International and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation found that 75percent 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.

↑12%
Productivity and employee retention

"Soft skills training boosted productivity and employee retention 12 percent and delivered a 250 percent return on investment."

— University of Michigan Ross School of Business

Moving the needle half this rate on attrition, productivity, and other contact center metrics equates to significant financial gains and enhanced customer experience for the organization. The impact of the soft-skills training provided at the supervisor level will naturally extend to agents, and so this should be a priority within an overall strategy to better equip your frontline leadership.

Expecting good performance from your contact center without a structured program for supervisor training doesn't make sense, but it's not an uncommon practice. Lacking continual education and guidance, existing supervisors will underperform, become disengaged, and eventually leave. Capable team leader candidates will quickly recognize a prospective employer's lack of

touchpoint one

commitment to their success as major gaps in training and support are discovered either during the recruitment process, or worse, after several weeks of costly onboarding and organizational ramp-up post-hire. It's likely that there are at least some significant deficiencies in your supervisor training program, and given the consensus of its value and importance, identifying and reconciling gaps should be an ongoing priority.

Real-time Performance Intelligence

Apart from a competitive wage and frequent, varied, and structured training, a common response provided by supervisors to "What is the most useful thing provided to you by your employer to help you to succeed?" was access to real-time performance intelligence. The organizations participating in this survey manage large global customer contact operations and had developed sophisticated data analytics capabilities on an advanced performance management platform. As a result, data management was comprehensive and nearly fully automated, able to deliver real-time, role-based performance dashboards to every employee.

The survey provided a strong confirmation of the value of this capability and in what ways it was integral to supervisor effectiveness and team performance. Thirty-four percent of senior managers indicated performance intelligence, reporting, and real-time stats as the most important thing provided by the organization to help supervisors succeed. Twenty-six percent of supervisors named it the most useful thing provided to them by their employer to help them succeed.

Most contact centers operate based on some form of metrics-based performance strategy. Though varied depending on industry and function, contact center performance is typically associated with a weighted set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), such as quality, customer experience metrics (NPS, CSAT, etc.), attendance, attrition, sales conversion rate, calls per hour, service levels, profit, and so on, that encompass the complete basis for which business success is measured and understood.

Ideally, these metrics are aggregated and dynamically calibrated to an evolving range of performance targets that are visible on-demand across departments and stakeholders in a manner appropriate to one's role or function and consistent with specific coaching and support methodologies and styles. Performance intelligence and transparency are core capabilities within advanced performance management systems and essential to all levels of employee success. Deloitte asserts that transparency is actually the enterprises most valuable currency, but that only 18 percent of respondents in their 2019 Global Human Capital Trends survey believed they have a transparent and open model. It's not difficult to appreciate the level of frustration and disadvantage a supervisor (or any employee) would experience without an accurate and complete basis for gauging and guiding individual or team performance. Without awareness, it's not logical to expect effective leadership or performance gains.

Performance measurement can be applied to any operational, behavioral, financial, emotional, customer, or other attribute that impacts the business, but at a minimum, supervisors and their colleagues should be aware and informed of:

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 productive**

Ensuring a shared awareness of the criteria that constitutes the contact center's success would seem obvious, but in practice, the contrary remains the common practice. 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 portrait of performance needed by to fully analyze and improve behaviors and results. If you haven't yet fully committed to the digital transformation of your performance management systems, immediate gains in people, data, processes and technology await you literally the moment you do. Without it, performance awareness and alignment are perhaps haphazard, and a likely root of significant stress, friction, and frustration within your organization.

34%
Performance intelligence

Thirty-four percent of senior managers identified performance intelligence as the most important thing provided by the organization to help supervisors succeed. Twenty-six percent of supervisors consider it the most useful thing provided to them by their employer to help them succeed.

Don't leave supervisors guessing, assuming, and wasting time with manual reporting processes and analytics routines that detract from coaching, training, team-building and other activities that add value to the business. Whether you build it yourself or procure it from a third-party, it's critical to have a single system for performance measurement, insight, and action that synthesizes the disparate systems data relevant to your KPIs and facilitates performance improvement.

Key Considerations:

How are your supervisors informed about how and to what degree performance expectations are being met? Is there latency in performance report delivery? Is reporting inclusive of not only operational KPIs, but also engagement, financial, attrition, sentiment and other metrics? Is reporting and performance management accessible on-demand, easy to navigate and to share? Are reporting systems consistent throughout workforce levels (including agents), to facilitate optimal organizational alignment and transparency? Can your supervisors frequently and appropriately reward, recognize, coach and otherwise support their agents based on data-driven insights? Include these and related questions as part of your frontline manager experience evaluation and strategy planning.

Management Guidance and Agent Support Systems

Alongside training, frontline leaders expressed a strong interest in our survey for greater senior management support and standardized systems and processes to manage their interactions and build productive relationships with agents and senior leadership. "Collaboration" and "structure" were principal terms used to articulate the tools they sought to enable coaching, support, feedback, recognition, and other forms of agent assistance and to coordinate their efforts with senior management.

touchpoint one

Twenty-eight percent of senior leaders identified coaching, support and related systems as investments they'd like or plan to provide specifically to their supervisors to help them succeed. Twenty-five percent of frontline leaders surveyed specified similar guidance and support systems as the one thing they wish their employer would provide them to help them succeed, indicating consistency between upper and frontline levels of management about the issue.

25% Twenty-five percent of frontline leaders surveyed said coaching, support and related systems were the one thing they wish their employer would provide them to help them succeed.

For supervisors, cultivating effective relationships with contact center agents is a significant challenge. Contact center teams are particularly dynamic due to high employee turnover, low-skill/low-wage, and demographic diversity. Agents are typically confined to small workspaces and subject to a variety of communications, logistics, and schedule restrictions due to security, regulatory, and other workplace policies. Despite the challenging environment, 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.

Contact center team leaders are, however, rarely equipped with adequate, if any, tools to develop constructive relationships with agents, peers, and senior leaders. They lack an ability to document coaching interactions or establish targets for coaching frequency. They lack structured accountability to a standard of coaching quality. They lack meaningful intelligence regarding the impact of the support they provide on the specific metrics and/or behaviors the support was intended to address. During your next site visit, 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 provide the metrics by which they can identify their strongest or weakest team leader, and they can't. They simply haven't been provided the guidance or systems to do so.

Supervisors are rarely equipped with adequate, if any, tools to develop constructive relationships with agents, peers, and senior leaders.

Contact Center Performance Management (CCPM) platforms provide an ideal foundation from which to integrate coaching and other collaborative support systems. They possess the intelligence that enables supervisors to not only pinpoint specific areas of strength or opportunity, but also act on the knowledge to develop agent skills and improve performance. Integrated coaching, recognition, and related support applications provide a flexible operational framework to guide supervisor support interactions with agents, reveal insights into how those interactions impact performance as well as best practices of top frontline leaders.

Software vendors are actively developing solutions to address the urgent need for comprehensive, data-aware, process-driven coaching tools geared for supervisors and their managers. There are viable strategies, too, for organizations with the financial means and fortitude to build and maintain proprietary software in-house. Whether built or bought, providing a systemized means for supervisors to develop productive support, coaching routines, and skills, based on feedback from our survey respondents, fills a critical capability gap. Implementing a similar system in your center will provide your frontline managers with an empowering level of structure and autonomy to develop and lead that they've not previously experienced. The positive impact realized at the team level will ripple across the entire organization.

Recognition, Reward and Incentives

People have an innate desire for acknowledgement and appreciation of their effort, commitment, value, and accomplishments, and our survey affirmed recognition's role as an essential form of reward that is critical to employee motivation, performance, and retention at all levels. Nineteen percent of senior managers mentioned various forms of recognition, appreciation and praise as the most important thing provided by the organization to help supervisors succeed. Twenty-four percent of supervisors surveyed listed recognition as the one thing they wish their employer would provide more of to help them succeed.

Employee recognition should be an integral component of any performance management culture, and contact centers are uniquely positioned to show appreciation to frontline leaders and other employees based on achievement, tenure, and numerous other aspects of operational, behavioral, or financial performance. Due to advances in digital workplace platforms, it's easier than ever to coordinate reward and recognition with performance metrics and related business goals ensuring they are substantive and meaningful.

24% Twenty-four percent of the supervisors in our survey identified a desire for more recognition than was currently provided, while only 16 percent of senior managers mentioned it as the top concern.

Recognition programs are nothing new and are used in some form by most organizations, and while 24 percent of the supervisors in our survey identified a desire for more recognition than was currently provided, only 16 percent of senior managers mentioned it as the top concern. This priority gap reminds us that as the workforce, organization, and business landscape evolves, to remain effective, recognition programs must be assessed and refreshed on a regular basis. SHRM's toolkit on Managing an Employee Recognition Program and expert advice from Deloitte and Roy Saunderson, Chief Learning Officer at Rideau Recognition Solutions are great resources to tap when updating an existing program or creating something new.

Don't limit the scope of your recognition, reward and incentive strategy – weave it into every appropriate aspect of the work experience possible. In performance reviews, team huddles, coaching sessions, and even corrective actions, recognition and positive temper is vital to constructive human development and motivation and far-reaching ROI.

Conclusion: Trust, Support, and Realizing Full Potential

As a member of the amazing team at TouchPoint One, I am inspired by the opportunity to leverage our collective energy, creativity, and commitment to develop solutions that help people realize their greatest potential. There are plenty of ways to make a living (even a financial fortune), but enabling the development, confidence, and competence of frontline leaders and agents at scale, understanding both the urgent need and the vast potential for benefit stretching far beyond the sphere of the local organization is, for me, a sort of high-grade motivational fuel.

The motivational stimuli of upper and frontline contact center management are evident throughout our survey responses. Senior managers showed consistent interest in leveraging their knowledge and experience to develop the skills of their frontline leaders

and expressed a steady desire to improve and expand the tools, programs, processes, and appreciation instrumental to enabling them to realize their full potential. Supervisor feedback illuminated how trust, empathy, clarity, stress, and collaboration fits into their concept of support, professional development, compensation, and culture. In chapter 5 of the "The Leadership Toolbox", author Vicki Brackett advises contact center leaders to "Admit that Your People May Know More than You Do", so institutionalizing inquiry, through even three-question increments, makes complete sense.

Contact centers are in an extraordinary position to help employees develop, thrive, and excel and in turn harness the resulting energy for the benefit of all the organization's stakeholders. In our survey, frontline managers repeatedly expressed the desire for not just increased wages, but the awareness, guidance, learning, camaraderie, and structure that facilitate the higher levels of performance that make greater earnings possible. With very few exceptions, attitudes about the workplace, trust in management, and potential for future success were constructive and positive. The perspectives and intentions of the members of frontline and senior management from whom we gathered feedback were, for the most part, in sync.

The average rating provided by supervisors to the question "On a scale of 1-10, to what extent are you provided by your employer with what you need to succeed?" was 7.3 – slightly higher than the average rating of 7.1 indicated by senior managers when asked "On a scale of 1-10, to what extent are you providing supervisors what they need to succeed?". Senior leadership was indeed slightly more critical of its performance than were the recipients of the support to whom they are responsible, indicating a healthy and encouraging sense of accountability of their need to do better.

Sustained inattention to the needs of supervisors gives rise to absenteeism, turnover, disengagement and other undesirable conditions that lead to failure for many customer contact organizations. If your contact center isn't achieving the level of prosperity that you know it's capable of, try diagnosing it from the perspective of your supervisors. Begin the journey with a simple survey like the one used for this report. Assemble representatives for all relevant stakeholder groups to evaluate the feedback, and create and implement a plan that corrects the deficiencies and capitalizes on strengths. Make the procedure a permanent component of your continuous improvement process. Your supervisors are the linchpins of your contact center's success, and they are depending on you for the support they need to deliver.

About TouchPoint One

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