

STOP FIGHTING FIRES - ASSESS YOUR MANAGEMENT STYLE

Product No. 10031

ResponseDesignCorporation 

CREATING THE UNCOMMON CALL CENTER



Stop Fighting Fires - Assess Your Management Style

Abstract

Overcome the tyranny of the urgent by implementing a management style that responds to short-term needs without losing sight of long-term goals. In a fast-paced customer contact center environment, managers must often take immediate action to curtail service level degradation. They craft a quick solution to the problem, and if the solution works, they simply make it standard operating procedure. Unfortunately, these “fire fighting rules” rarely make good long-term solutions. Rather than manage in a maze of rules, the window style of management focuses on achieving both short- and long-term objectives by driving ownership and decision making to the level of greatest impact.

This article explains the differences between the maze and window styles of management. It provides a tool to assess your current management style and a step-by-step plan for migrating to a wide-open-windows approach. Using this article as a guide, you can focus your energy on demolishing barriers to excellence instead of building more!



Stop Fighting Fires - Assess Your Management Style

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Contact center Director Log

Monday, October 18, 10:30 a.m.

Service level: 37% in 20 seconds. Average speed of answer: 387 seconds. I call an emergency meeting.

Monday, October 18, 11:00 a.m.

Emergency meeting notes: Agents are MIA (missing in action). They should be on the phones but the maze is holding them captive somewhere. Breaks are all messed up -- call volume has forced some agents to leave late which means they return late. Others go at their scheduled time and so too many agents are out all at once. Several agents have gotten up to process special requests -- irate customers who demand "being walked through" the system. Lisa, a supervisor, reports a problem with personal calls being made and received at the workstations.

The team outlines a plan: All supervisors walk the floor. The supervisors will check anyone with greater than 175 seconds of talk time or 30 seconds of after call work time. Are the agents experiencing problems and do they need any assistance? All agents leaving the area must first check with operations to get approval. The managers will handle all special requests. Supervisors will notify agents of breaks and should remain in their seats until notified. Lisa is to stay by the supervisor console to monitor activity. She is to notify other supervisors if someone signs off the system, if talk time or after call work time goes over acceptable limits, or if anyone does not adhere to their assigned schedule. She is also to monitor calls randomly. If she hears personal calls, she is to disconnect immediately and serve a written notice. Three notices equal a one-day suspension. The switchboard operator will take all personal messages for the agents and deliver them to Lisa who will distribute them appropriately (emergency messages immediately, all others posted on message board). Operations will set the readerboard thresholds so that the strobe light will start flashing at a lower queue level. Supervisors are to "remind" agents there are a lot of calls in queue and ask them to stay on the phones.

Tuesday, October 19, 3:00 p.m.

The plan helped the service level. The management team got back together to establish some rules based on yesterday's success:

- No personal calls at the work station
- Non-emergency calls are to be made during break time in the break area at the two phones provided by the company
- The switchboard operator will take all emergency messages and will distribute them to the supervisors
- Anyone leaving the work area must notify operations to get approval
- No special "walk through" is allowed without prior approval by a supervisor. Managers will handle them once approved.

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- One supervisor will constantly monitor agents' talk time and after call work time. They will notify other supervisors if someone's statistics go "out of bounds"
- Agents are to adhere strictly to break times, if they miss their start time they must still return at their scheduled time
- Schedule adherence will be monitored every 15 minutes
- The activation of the strobe light means agents are to hold all after call work until later. They are to go right on to the next call. Supervisors will enforce this.

Wednesday, October 20, 10:00 a.m.

Several agents report critical messages were not delivered (sick children, etc.). The team decides to dedicate a phone in the phone area for emergency calls. Supervisors will take messages and deliver them personally. Lisa reports personal phone calls are still occurring at the workstation. Human Resources has already suspended one employee. We increase monitoring. We draft a memo giving the emergency phone number to the agents as well as "reminding" them of the "no personal phone call" rule and consequences. Front-line morale seems to be suffering. This is probably due to the unusually high call volume.

Friday, October 22, 9:00 a.m.

Supervisors look distressed. They are taking messages all day at the "emergency" phone. Most calls are not emergencies. Agents are getting up to use the dedicated phone to make outbound calls. "It's just one quick call. At least I'm staying in the area and getting back to my station quickly to take more calls. The two phones in the break room are always busy and you'll suspend me if I make personal calls at my station. What other options do I have?" they ask.

Other agents are still complaining that their emergency phone messages are not being delivered. Supervisors say that, at times, no one is near the phone to answer it. Lisa reports personal calls are still occurring at the workstations. Supervisors suggest putting the phone in my office. They say I can make sure the messages get to the agents. Also, with the phone in my office the number of outbound calls should decrease. What agent would make an unnecessary call in front of me? Everyone seems on edge. It has to be the pressure of the call volume.

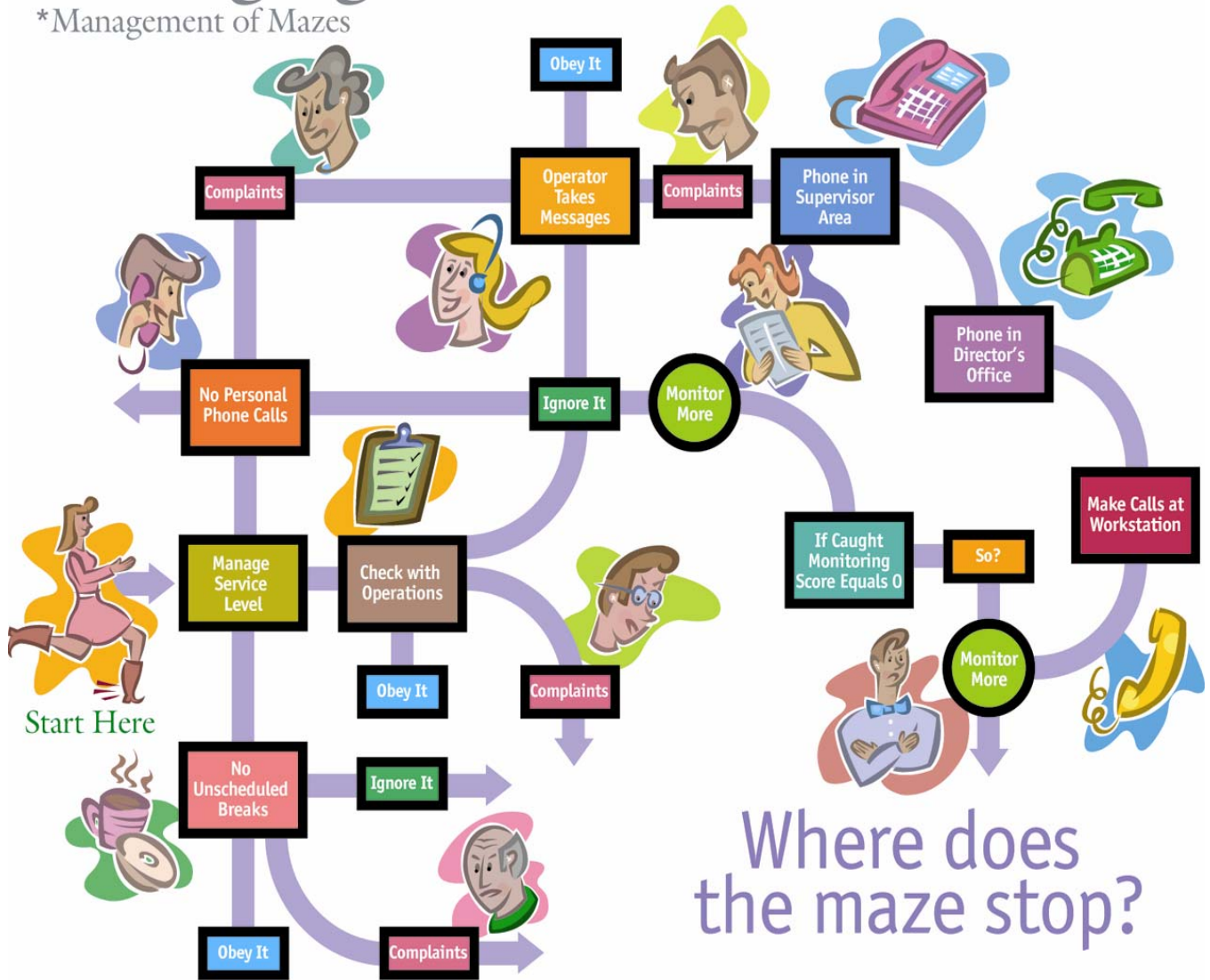
What's Wrong – MOM?

Look at the graphic representation of the scenario described above. This illustration is typical of a management style called "MOM." MOM stands for "management of mazes".



The "MOM" Approach to Managing

*Management of Mazes



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In the story above, MOM started when the Director recognized a problem (poor service level). As the team diagnosed the reasons contributing to the poor service level (personal phone calls, poor schedule adherence, talk time, after call work time, special requests), they implemented some quick solutions (or rules). The quick solutions seemed to work so well, the management team made them permanent. Then the real problems started. The employees who were impacted by the rules had four reactions to them. They:

1. ignored them,
2. went around them,
3. complained about them, and
4. a few may have even obeyed them

The first three reactions forced the management team to shift their focus from managing the service level to managing the rules and the “fizz” created by the rules.

Once a management team shifts its focus from the goal to the rule, the contact center is experiencing the full-blown effects of MOM.

If left unchecked, MOM can quickly turn into the contact center equivalent of Psycho’s “Mother of the Year -- Mrs. Bates” -- a truly terrifying experience.

Why MOM is Everywhere

Consider for a moment that you are in a burning building and everyone is looking to you for a safe escape. As a leader, what do you do? Undoubtedly, you take charge and make a decision. You don’t spend a lot of time discussing alternatives.

When you run a contact center you often feel as if you are standing in a burning building. Therefore, you become conditioned to take charge and make decisions. In a true fire, your decisions must be immediate or disaster strikes. You design solutions to take care of the immediate situation. After the fire is out, you find new approaches to prevent fires from happening in the first place.

In the above scenario, we see the Director responding to a fire. The first MOM error was having the management team take charge and make all the short-term decisions. Their decisions did reduce the roaring fire to burning embers. However, these “take charge and make decisions” decisions were “owned” by the management team. Their decisions ate valuable time as managers policed, enforced, modified and added to the rules.

When the fire was at the smoldering stage they made their fateful MOM mistake. Instead of pulling back and developing a long-term approach to service level they simply made their fire-fighting solutions standard operating procedure. Rarely do these “fire fighting rules” make good long-term solutions.

The MOM style of management does not work because:

- The front-line does not own the goal.
- The management team is deciding all the rules and limiting the front-line’s motivation to choose the desired behavior.
- MOM encourages “getting around” the rules because people don’t understand or own the big picture.
- There aren’t enough rules in the world to ensure desired behavior.
- The management team is consumed by “non value added” activities.
- The management team takes on the role and reputation of a police force.



- The front-line agents' perception of favoritism is reinforced when they see some people bending the rules (agents getting away with making phone calls from their workstation).
- The undesired behavior leads to few consequences until an employee demonstrates extreme behavior. Then the consequences are extreme (a zero on monitoring, suspension with two zeros, termination with).
- There is no reward or recognition for choosing the desired behavior.
- The focus is on the negative (no personal calls) rather than reinforcing desired behavior (maintaining service level).
- The management team and front-line see each other as an unreasonable adversary (both believe "the other side" does not understand their personal or professional needs).

WOW -- The Alternative to MOM

In every company there are multiple "windows." The front-line agents are the customer contact window. The customer evaluates the company's commitment to quality as they peer through this window.

The management team is the employee resource window. The front-line agent receives all the resources necessary to delight the customer through this window. The goal of every company is to have both windows wide open.

WOW stands for "wide open window." When both windows are wide open, the customer experiences quality. However, if the management team's window is only partially open, the front-line's needs and the customer's expectations are only partially met.

The WOW style of management opens the management window by driving ownership and decision making to the level of greatest impact. Those who support the front-line become demolition experts not architects of complex mazes. They demolish barriers to excellence instead of building more.

WOW -- What's This Look Like?

Let's rewrite the initial scenario in WOW terms.

Contact center Director Log

Monday, October 18, 10:30 a.m.

Service level: 37% in 20 seconds. Average speed of answer: 387 seconds. I call an emergency meeting.

Monday, October 18, 11:00 a.m.

The supervisors and Service Level Subteam (composed of 3 front-line agents) attend the emergency meeting. I review the critical conditions. The team suggests the following short-term steps:

- The supervisors assign each agent to a "tag team." Each team determines the order in which people will take breaks. An employee "tags" the next person in line when he returns from his break. Each person is responsible to keep his break within the 15-minute limit.
- We establish alert levels according to the number of calls waiting and the longest hold time. We define and notify the extra resources needed for each level of alert. We postpone all team meetings and coaching



sessions during alerts. Teams are responsible for rescheduling “lost” time. Operations will make call volume and staffing projections available.

- All lead agents are to get on the phones during the first alert.
- All supervisors are to be walking the floor during alerts. Agents raise “flags” when they need help. Any supervisor is to help any agent. If all supervisors are busy, agents call the Help Desk.
- The Director manages the Help Desk during alerts. Substitute personnel assist at the Help Desk during alerts (so lead agents can get on the phones). When unable to help the agent, they take a message to the Director who finds the help they need.
- Client Services handle all special requests.
- The readerboards and phones notify agents of alert levels.
- Agents decide when and where to make personal calls. We ask them to avoid all personal calls during alerts, if possible.
- We will give a special reward and recognition bonus if the contact center maintains the service level goal for 90% of the remaining half-hours for October 18.
- If the preceding measures don’t seem to be working by noon, the Director will reconvene the team for a quick 15-minute update.
- The sub-team agrees to meet October 19 for 1 hour to review the short-term impact and arrive at long-term solutions for maintaining service level.

The Defining Differences

Clearly, the first difference between WOW and MOM is where energy is focused. Notice in MOM the focus shifts from service level to personal calls. In WOW, the focus remains on the service level.

The second difference is participation. In MOM, the management team takes charge, makes decisions and communicates the rules to the troops. In WOW, the management team supports the front-line team as they define and implement the best solution.

The third difference between WOW and MOM is profitability. Response Design has used WOW in dozens of companies struggling with turnover, customer satisfaction, absenteeism, grievances, morale, productivity, and quality (to name a few operational hurdles) and has seen dramatic changes. WOW is more than “getting employees together to discuss problems and solutions.” WOW is a way of life. Involving each member of the customer contact team is not easy, but the rewards are well worth the effort.



What's Your Style?

Answer the following questions as they relate to your contact center.

Y N Does your management team complain that they feel like policemen?

Does your management team spend time talking about:

Y N how to keep the agents in their seats?
Y N dress code enforcement?
Y N high absenteeism?
Y N personal phone calls?
Y N high turnover?
Y N how to reduce the noise level?
Y N how to stop the chitchat with neighbors?
Y N how to stop agents from reading non-business material on the job?
Y N low morale?

Do managers and agents feel:

Y N stressed out?
Y N uninformed?
Y N unappreciated?
Y N misunderstood?

Do agents complain of:

Y N being treated like children?
Y N never having anyone around to answer questions?
Y N being "picked on" all the time?
Y N sporadic and inconsistent feedback?
Y N being "chained" to their desk?
Y N unreasonable expectations?

All of the above are symptoms of the MOM style of management. If you answered "yes" to five or more, read on.

Getting Started

We know there are hurdles in moving from MOM to WOW. Your people are already working 50 to 60 hours a week. Your operation is always on fire. You're in a double bind -- you can't afford the time it takes for WOW nor can you afford **not** to invest in it. Start slowly and be patient. Constantly balance the immediate with the long-term needs of your company. As you invest in WOW, your productivity will increase. You can reinvest these gains in continual WOW development.

To start:

- Establish a Steering Committee. This is a team of cross-functional managers who guide the employee sub-teams.



- Take one thing at a time.
- Determine your first goal (your greatest need) -- in the scenario above it was to maintain (and even improve) service level.
- Determine what is necessary to reach the goal. (Agents must be available to take the calls when customers call.)
- Determine who is responsible for making this happen. (The front-line agents are responsible for making sure this happens.)
- Review the goal with the Steering Committee to determine the business parameters of the situation, if any. (For example, budgetary constraints, contractual requirements, legal issues, operational constraints, etc..)
- Determine if there is time for a committee approach to the short-term solution. If not, put some measures in place but communicate with the team that these are only temporary. You will remove them once the subteam has had time to design a more permanent solution.
- Select a subteam of people to represent their peers (the Service Level Subteam).
- Educate the subteam on group skills, company and subteam specific information:
 - the purpose of the subteam
 - facilitation skills
 - consensus decision making
 - brainstorming
 - how to prioritize
 - how to balance the needs of the customer, employee and company
 - business parameters
 - subteam information -- in the above example, service level
 - running efficient meetings
- Give the subteam ownership for both the short- and long-term solutions. Have them design a way to meet the needs of the company (service level maintenance), the customer (easy access), and the employee (the opportunity to act responsibly).
- Have them determine the best way to communicate with their peers.
- Assist with group facilitation as necessary.
- Provide access to required information.
- Charge the subteam with designing a solution that:
 - contributes to the goal
 - recognizes people who choose to act responsibly
 - provides natural or logical consequences for people who choose not to act responsibly
 - is self-enforcing
 - educates all persons responsible for the goal
 - provides for continual improvement of the solution
- Implement the short-term recommendations.
- Review the sub-team's long-term recommendations with the Steering Committee to catch any missing elements.
- Implement the long-term solutions.
- Allow the subteam time to periodically review the solution for continual improvement opportunities.

From experience, sub-teams can design a long-term solution within four to six hours. If they don't, it's usually due to either lack of information or poor facilitation.

One caution, many companies start using WOW and due to company culture or sheer force of habit forget about it when the pressure is on. Using sub-teams for continual improvement is not something that should be started and stopped at the whim of management. If you don't think you can follow through, don't start. Intermittent WOW management causes much greater damage than consistent MOM management ever could.



Summary

Validation for the WOW versus MOM style of management is everywhere. However, the WOW style of management is rare due to the "tyranny of the urgent." This law maintains that the urgent will always crowd out the important. When the building is on fire, there are urgent needs. Everyone focuses on putting out the flames. However, if your building is continually on fire you might want to shift some of your focus to figuring out why and solving those important needs as well.

Kathryn Jackson, co-founder of Response Design Corporation (RDC) and call center expert helps professionals get more from their call center. Response Design is the how-to source for integrating the call center into the customer relationship. Its independent consultants use call center web seminars, contact center consulting, call center tutorials, call center benchmarking, world class customer service articles, and best-in-class customer service practices to ensure you get the most from your call center investment.

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