

TURN EVERY AGENT INTO AN EXPERT THROUGH FULL-SPECTRUM COACHING

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ResponseDesignCorporation 

CREATING THE UNCOMMON CALL CENTER



Turn Every Agent into an Expert through Full-Spectrum Coaching

Abstract

Your coaches can make every front-line agent an expert. Learn the techniques of full-spectrum coaching so that all (not just some) of your agents “get it.”

Studies show that top performers can be as much as 125 percent more productive than average performers. Many managers accept these performance gaps and believe that some people will never make the grade—“some agents will never understand.”

It doesn't have to be that way. Coaches should be trained to look at processes and procedures through the eyes of the inexperienced agent so that they leave no gaps in their communication—leaving no one behind. Good news for the customer!

This article describes each step in the coaching process and shows how to ensure every link in the process is strong. If a single step is left out, the process itself is less than effective. If you have a coaching process already in place, stand your process up against the outline in this article to determine how comprehensive it is.



Turn Every Agent into an Expert through Full-Spectrum Coaching

Kathryn E. Jackson Ph.D

Have you ever thought about the difference between your top performers and your average performers? Do you know how much more efficient and effective the top performers are? Consider an article in the Journal of Applied Psychology that examined productivity differences between the top 1 percent of all performers and average performers in the same organizations. (John E. Hunter, et. al., "Individual Differences in Output Variability as a Function of Job Complexity," Volume 75, 1990) For complex jobs, top-level performers were 125 percent more productive than average performers. The gap between top level performers and those in the bottom 1 percent was even more striking. For medium-complexity jobs, top-level performers were 1,200 percent more productive than bottom-level performers. For high-complexity jobs, the gap was so profound it was unmeasurable.

Don't Accept the Gap

Most people accept the gap. They don't question the bell curve when it comes to performance. They think it's inevitable for some agents to be superstars, most to be average performers and well, there's that bottom 20 or so percentage that might never get it (see diagram, upper illustration).

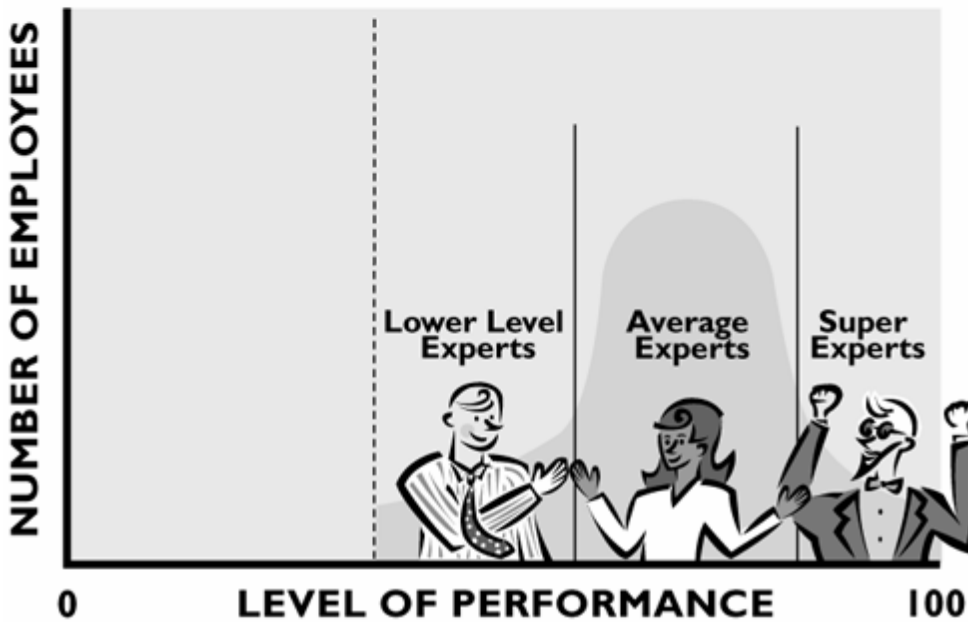
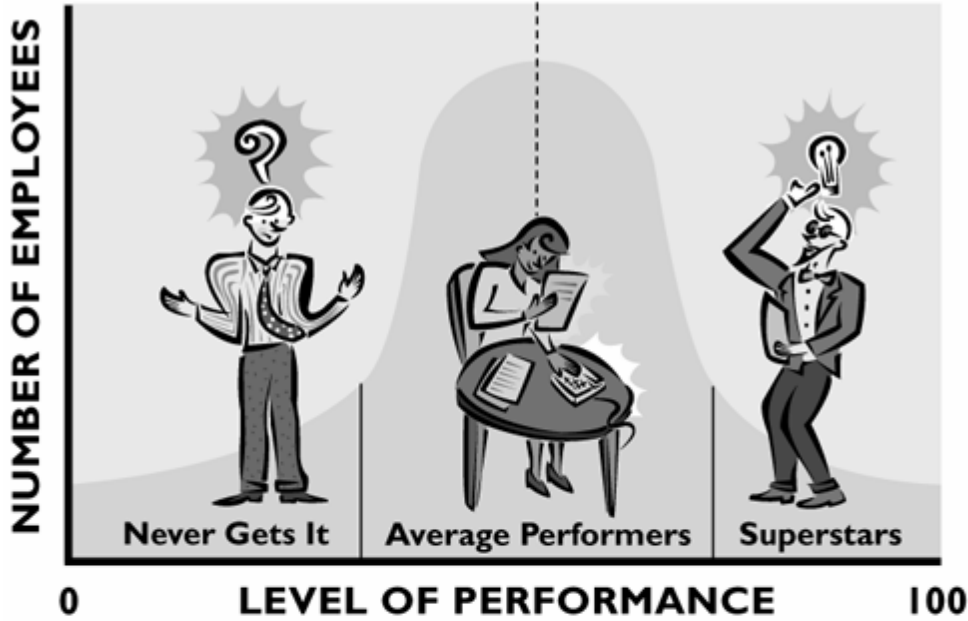
I've never been willing to accept this scenario. I think we can do better. I think if we do our job right, we can close the gap and shift the bell curve so it applies only to experts. Some people will be super experts, most will be average experts and a small percentage will be lower level experts—but they will be experts nonetheless (see diagram, lower illustration).

What It Means to Do Our Job Right

To do our job right, we must address the factors contributing to the gap. Certainly, there are many reasons for the gap, including inadequate recruiting, hiring, orientation, initial training, personal motivation, reward, and recognition, and inadequate ongoing training and support.

Even though each factor has to be addressed, I believe one of our greatest needs is ongoing training and support. We simply are not doing everything we can to develop customer contact experts.

CLOSING THE GAP





To do our job right, we must develop these experts by:

- setting clear expectations;
- providing consistent, timely, accurate performance feedback; and
- developing expert skill through:
 - educating,
 - modeling,
 - practicing,
 - applying, and
 - inventing.

This process is called full-spectrum coaching, and it's this full-spectrum I find sorely lacking in many contact centers.

Full-spectrum Coaching

Let's look at each aspect of this comprehensive coaching plan.

Educating

Educating means the coach teaches the foundation knowledge required to master the skill. The agent reads, listens to tapes, fills out worksheets, and reviews the information with the coach once the lessons are complete. This is commonly referred to as the "book work" phase of coaching.

Modeling

Modeling means the coach demonstrates the skill required to be an expert. The coach demonstrates expert call handling through role playing (with the coach playing the role of the agent), taking "live" calls, and playing audiotapes of expert performance. Contact center managers often ask if a contact center coach should be able to do the job of the front-line agent. My answer is, "Yes"! You have to be able to do a skill in order to model it. This doesn't mean coaches are as efficient as are agents who take calls every minute of the day, but they can certainly demonstrate a quality interaction.

Practicing

Practicing means the agent performs the skill in a simulated environment. This gives the coach the ability to control what "hits" the agent and allows the agent time to develop consistent habits and messages without worrying about the negative impact of a potential mistake. Practicing includes role-plays (with the agent playing the role of the agent), computer simulations, and producing simulated expert tapes (in which agents write and audiotape expert scripts).

Recently I asked several contact center managers, "How prepared are your agents to handle the job immediately following initial training?" The answers ranged from "barely" to "more than 60 percent." Many managers said there was no way to prepare them adequately. Agents simply have to get on the phone and experience what it is like. I believe there are consequences to this approach.

One of the consequences is that you risk losing customers due to their interaction with inexperienced agents. We should design simulated training that covers everything an agent could encounter once on the phone. We can't afford to leave anything to chance. Just as airlines use flight simulators we, as contact center experts, need to train in contact center simulators.



Applying

The application phase takes place in the “real” environment of the contact center. It consists of four stages. The coach controls the frequency of the first three stages. The agent controls the last.

- The first stage is the partnering stage. The coach sits with the agent in a highly interactive exchange. The coach decides who handles various parts of the call depending on the agent’s demonstrated skill and comfort level.
- The second stage is the support stage in which the coach is once again sitting with the agent. However, in this stage, the agent is in full control of the call and the coach takes control only if the agent signals her to do so.
- The third stage is a continuation of the support stage except that the coach is at a remote location. As in the second stage, the coach does not intervene unless there is a request from the agent.
- The final stage is the polish stage. The agent “goes solo” without coach intervention or continuous monitoring. The agent is asked to start taking control of his own learning process by recording the areas of the call in which he is comfortable and those in which he is not. The coach spends time with the agent after designated call handling sessions to “debrief” the experience.

Inventing

The invention phase is the last phase of skill development. The coach periodically observes the agent without intervening. In this phase, the agent creatively explores and resolves anomalies between what is supposed to happen and what appears to be happening. He learns how to vary his behavior according to the context of the call and the personalities of those involved. It is in this phase that the agent gains the highest level of skill mastery.

Caution

There are several cautions about these phases of intervention. First, you may not be able to utilize all of them in your contact center. For example, you may find it difficult to trade off responsibilities on the same call as described in the applying phase.

Second, the phases are not linear. You don’t complete the coaching cycle by going directly from educating to modeling to practicing to applying to inventing. You may find you are practicing a skill and need to return to modeling or educating. The coach determines the intervention that expedites the imbedding of the skill.

Amputated Coaching

After reading the description of full-spectrum coaching, you may already know where your coaching gaps are. If you don’t, there’s a good chance they are either between performance feedback and educating or between educating and modeling since these are the most commonly recognized gaps in the contact centers. We call these gaps Stage One and Stage Two Amputations.

Stage one amputation

Many contact centers produce reports and give agents feedback on their performance. However, it takes so long to produce the reports and manage the contact center on a daily basis that there’s not much time to do anything but show the agent his statistics and say, “Here ya’ go.” (Great job, good job, or try harder—depending on the



performance) That's what happens in the amputation between feedback and educating. Feedback is fine, but agents may not be getting the help they need to improve performance.

Stage two amputation

The amputation between educating and modeling is best described by the "find a lesson, copy a lesson, distribute a lesson" syndrome. These are the contact centers that give feedback and do a lot of educating but not much beyond that. The agents are doing tons of bookwork but are not getting the chance to translate all their knowledge into skill.

Knowledge doesn't become skill simply because it resides in my head for a certain period of time. I have to get it out of my head, see it modeled, have the opportunity to practice in a non-threatening environment, and then apply it to the "real world."

Repairing Amputations

Supervisors struggling with full-spectrum coaching skills contribute to both Stage One and Two Amputations. Generally, contact centers experience Stage One Amputations because there is no time to coach. Some contact centers are stuck at Stage Two because they don't understand full-spectrum coaching.

Administering First Aid

Your initial first aid is to define the skills required to accomplish the tasks of a coach. Remember, these tasks in full-spectrum coaching include communicating clear expectations, giving feedback, designing performance interventions, and implementing interventions. Response Design has defined a few of these full-spectrum skills as communicating, listening, observing, diagnosing, problem solving, educating, motivating, and partnering.

Next, figure out how to teach these skills so coaches aren't afraid of them. People sometimes create mental blocks about skills they think might be difficult. For example, some coaches are convinced they'll never learn how to "diagnose" the skill and knowledge needs of an agent. Other coaches see motivation as this nebulous, unattainable, time-consuming monster. To overcome these blocks, try distracting the coaches. Help them forget that they are mastering a "scary" skill.

Teaching Scary Skills

Following are a few examples of how to teach scary skills. These exercises have been tested in Response Design's seminars. They have proven to be extremely effective -- and fun!

Educating

Get all the ingredients and utensils together to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Keep everything in its container (bread in plastic bag, all the lids on, etc.). Have someone volunteer to instruct you how to make the sandwich. No one in the room can help the volunteer during the first session. The hardest part of this exercise is for you not to assume anything. When the volunteer says, "Take a piece of bread," don't assume you know how to open the plastic bag. At that point you can take the bag at both ends and pull vigorously until the bag pops open and the bread flies all over the room, or, you can say "I don't know how to do that." Keep going until the sandwich is made. Discuss with the group how it felt (to give the instructions and to observe someone giving instructions without being able to influence). Next round you can have the group assist the volunteer. Talk about

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when and how team instruction works. Talk about how many times we, as coaches, assume our people know how to do things because we think the skills are easy (and they're not!).

Observing

Ask the group members to pick a partner. Ask all to face their partners and observe them for thirty seconds. At the end of thirty seconds ask them, "How many people can tell me what you smelled during those thirty seconds?" Or "What noises did you hear during those 30 seconds?" This is a lesson in selective observation. Discuss with the coaches how this relates to what they observe about their agents. What "instructions" are keeping them from "seeing" or "hearing" important things about their agents?

Problem solving

Collect brainteasers. There are a ton of brainteasers you can buy commercially. Read a brainteaser to group members and have them try to solve it. Talk about whatever they want. Let the conversation go wherever they take it. Once the first teaser is solved, hand out a work sheet that walks the group through problem solving steps (without calling it that). Then read another brainteaser. Work through the questions on the work sheet. Talk about assumptions. Clarify words. Define what you know for sure and what are guesses. Write down what other information you would like to have and where you might be able to find it. After several brainteasers you'll find the group walking through problem solving with ease. Eureka -- problem solving made fun.

Educating

Use segments from movies that demonstrate excellence in teaching. Some of my favorite clips come from "Dead Poets Society" with Robin Williams. In the beginning of the film there is a marvelous scene where he captures the students' natural curiosity (the one where the phrase "Carpe Diem" was rejuvenated). Toward the middle of the film he demonstrates incredible insight, sensitivity, and ability to motivate (where he encourages the students to create poems). And, the final scene is my favorite. As he is leaving the school, the students demonstrate how much his life has changed theirs. There is no better way to inspire the teacher in all of us!

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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