Is Continuous Improvement in Call Centers a Help or Hindrance?

All of us in call centers, contact centers, or operations centers, know that it's all about the numbers: the right number of seats to handle customer demand, the right number of agents to handle tasks, and the right number of tasks managed within a measured timeframe.

The Big Picture

But what if our collective focus on gaining maximum efficiency or quality, getting from 85% perfection to 100%, is beginning to follow the law of diminishing returns? Where the amount of effort being channeled into small incremental improvements, on a process that is already quite good, is getting in the way of the big picture. The big picture being the creation of entirely new ways of doing things.

We can look to the early adopters of continuous improvement methods, such as Six Sigma, Kaizen, and Lean, for insight. Although companies like Motorola and GE prospered for many years under the mantra of continuous improvement, they have more recently struggled to be innovation leaders and have lost market share to newcomers.

Parallel Paths

Does this mean that discipline, measurement, and process improvement is actually bad for the current-day contact center? Absolutely not, as long as process improvements aren't being achieved at the expense of creative thinking. Take Toyota as an example. It has continued to perfect its existing line of automobiles, but it also introduced something radically different, the Prius. It nurtured continuous improvement and innovation on parallel paths.

The point is that in the call center environment, it is essential to do both. As a workforce solutions partner to hundreds of contact centers across the nation, our continuous improvement efforts focus on: staff planning, recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and flexing workforces, up or down, depending upon fluctuating demand.

In this role, the ability to demonstrate measurable improvements in key performance areas is a prerequisite of doing business. Being an innovative problem solver and developing entirely new ways of doing things is what keeps our clients in business with us year after year.

RemX
The Workforce Experts

Seven Steps to Ensuring Continuous Improvement, Along with Innovation

Developed over thirty years of business operations experience, here are the seven essential steps RemX follow to ensure both process improvement, as well as innovation.

1. **Measure and Analyze Current Processes**
   Measurement is the basis for objectivity and serves as a compass for identifying strong and weak performance areas. Analysis allows you to understand the important nuances and variable factors in a process. Both are essential to prioritizing where efforts should be focused to affect the greatest gains in performance improvement.

2. **Identify Opportunities and Challenges**
   This is the step that some organizations miss. Once you've analyzed existing processes, put it all aside and dedicate time to think outside the box. What are the challenges to come that a process or solution does not yet exist to address? If we were starting our function from scratch today, how would we operate differently? How might these ideas address existing challenges identified in step one, or future challenges?

   To ensure the most innovative thinking, RemX conducts a "fresh-eye" assessment for all existing clients that leverages a team of seasoned contact center experts who are not familiar with the operation under review. Team members also represent various areas of expertise, such as compliance, customer satisfaction, technology, training, etc., to include fresh and distinct points of view.

3. **Plan Solutions**
   Whether it's improving an existing process or challenge, or creating a new opportunity or advantage, the most important part of planning a solution is to engage stakeholders. Seeking input from stakeholders or, better yet, giving them ownership in the design and success of the solution, is critical. This collaborative process will make your solution better and will also create essential buy-in and support. It's also important in this phase to identify measurements for success. What is the expected outcome of the solution or process? How can it be accurately and reliably quantified?

4. **Execute Improvement Action Items**
   Consider implementing a new solution in a pilot environment so that you can discover and work out the bugs before rolling it out everywhere. Be sure to communicate not just the "what," but also the "why" behind these actions. Leverage the stakeholders who had a part in the solution design as champions for change, and promote success stories from your pilot for enhanced credibility.

5. **Quantify Results**
   Track and monitor the measurements of success previously identified. This could mean enlisting the support of your technology, finance, or quality assurance teams to capture a metric not previously tracked. Verify the meaningfulness of new or improved metrics by conducting qualitative research. Interview staff members, customers, or other stakeholders to ensure there aren't other important outcomes or repercussions you may be missing.

6. **Implement Standard Operating Procedure**
   Armed with stakeholder ambassadors, pilot experiences and refinements, and validated improvements in both tangible and intangible results – it's time to implement the new or improved process as standard operating procedure. Effective communication, training, vehicles for continuous feedback, and alignment of individual and team incentives with program goals are all ways to encourage wide-scale adaptation.

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The Two Sides of Success

Methodical continuous improvement efforts and free-thinking innovation both have an important role to play in contact centers and operations centers. The goal is to create programs that foster both, and just as importantly to establish a culture, a leadership team, and business partnerships that support these efforts. By making idea generation a valued organizational attribute, you can realize the benefits of important process improvements as well as breakthrough reinventions.

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CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT & INNOVATION

- Measure & Analyze Current Process
- Identify Opportunities & Challenges
- Plan Solution
- Execute Improvement Actions
- Quantify Results
- Implement SOPs
- Do It Again