Module 1 – The Role of the Contact Center

1.1 The Dynamic Contact Center

Key Points

- **A contact center is "a coordinated system of people, processes, technologies and strategies that provides access to information, resources and expertise, through appropriate channels of communication, enabling interactions that create value for the customer and organization."**

- **Contact centers are focused on aligning and matching organizational resources with customer demands through any channel of communication.**

- **Contact center management is "the art of having the right number of properly skilled people and supporting resources in place at the right time to handle an accurately forecasted workload, at service level and with quality."**

- **Contact center management is a profession that requires specialized training and qualifications.**

Explanation

Many people have the view that answering the phones and responding to emails is entry-level work. Since most of us do this every day, the attitude is, "The phones ring. The emails arrive. You answer them. How hard can it be?" The truth is that contact centers are complex, dynamic environments necessary to the accomplishment of the organization's mission. They must be well managed and adequately supported to carry out their role in the fiscal and cultural health of the organization.

International Customer Management Institute (ICMI) defines a contact center (a.k.a. call center, interaction center) as:

> *A coordinated system of people, processes, technologies and strategies that provides access to information, resources and expertise, through appropriate channels of communication, enabling interactions that create value for the customer and organization.*

Contact centers are driven by a customer's decision to interact with an organization. They exist in a demand-chasing environment. At virtually any moment in time, there are either more contacts to be handled than there are resources to handle them, or there are more resources than there are contacts to be handled. Demand must be "chased" with the supply of contact center resources. Contact centers are focused on aligning and matching organizational resources with customer demands through any channel of communication.

Contact Center Management

Due to the complexities of this demand-chasing environment, contact center management takes knowledge, commitment and investment. Bringing together the people, processes, technologies and strategies needed to consistently handle customer requests is a complex, multi-faceted task. ICMI defines contact center management as:

> *The art of having the right number of properly skilled people and supporting resources in place at the right time to handle an accurately forecasted workload, at service level and with quality.*

This definition can be boiled down to two major objectives: 1) Get the right resources in the right places at the right times; and 2) do the right things. Or more succinctly, provide service level with quality.

Contact Center Profession

A profession is a vocation that requires training and specific qualifications. That certainly describes the role of a contact center leader! Effective contact center leaders possess the following skills:

- **Leadership and management**: A contact center leader establishes the strategic direction of the center and ensures that operational results achieve the organization's goals.

- **Communication**: A contact center leader must be able to communicate with multiple groups of people within the organization in a manner that both gathers and disseminates information. This requires strong written, oral and interpersonal communication skills.

- **Project management**: A contact center leader ensures that initiatives are accomplished and commitments are met in a timely, consistent manner.

- **Quantitative analysis**: A contact center leader analyzes data from multiple sources and determines action plans based on the analysis.

- **Process improvement**: A contact center leader designs and improves processes to ensure consistent, quality handling of customer requests.

- **Performance assessments**: A contact center leader assesses the performance of the center, agent groups and individuals to determine if organizational goals are being accomplished.

- **Technical knowledge**: A contact center leader understands the fundamental principles at work in contact centers and how to deploy the people, processes, technology and strategy to operate successfully within that environment.

1.2   Customer Expectations and Organizational Value

Key Points

- **When interacting with a contact center, typical customer expectations include:**
  - o **Be accessible**
  - o **Treat me courteously**
  - o **Be responsive to what I need and want**
  - o **Do what I ask promptly**
  - o **Provide well-trained and informed employees**
  - o **Tell me what to expect**
  - o **Meet your commitments, keep your promises**
  - o **Do it right the first time**
  - o **Be socially responsible and ethical**
  - o **Follow up**

- **Contact centers provide three levels of value to the organization:**
  - o **Level 1: Efficiency**
  - o **Level 2: Customer satisfaction and loyalty**
  - o **Level 3: Strategic value**

Explanation

Before customers pick up the phone or write the first word of an email, they hold a set of expectations about that interaction. Surprisingly, what constitutes customer expectations has remained stable over time. ICMI developed a list of ten customer expectations based on customer feedback and surveys over 20 years ago. These customer expectations remain the same today. What has changed, however, is how customers define each of these expectations.

Customer Expectations

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- Meet your commitments, keep your promises
- Do it right the first time
- Be socially responsible and ethical
- Follow up

Customer expectations evolve because customers' experiences change. The service customers have received from your center in the past influences the level of service they will expect during their next contact. Even the service customers receive from other centers will impact their perception of good or poor service from your center. Contact center managers need to not only understand what customers expect from the organization, but also identify when expectations are shifting and know how to reposition the contact center to respond to those changes.

Organizational Value

For the most part, today's contact centers are recognized for the strategic value they possess. ICMI has categorized this organizational value into three levels.

Level 1: Efficiency

Level 2: Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty

Level 3: Strategic Value

Contact center leaders can use these levels to focus their efforts on improving the value of their centers. Operating more efficiently contributes to the financial strength of an organization, satisfying customers creates brand loyalty and increased profitability, and providing customer intelligence to other business units establishes the center as a powerful tool for the future growth of the organization.

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Three Levels of Value

Customer contact centers have the potential to create value on three distinct levels:

LEVEL 1: EFFICIENCY. Because contact centers pool information, people and technology resources, they are a highly efficient means of delivering service. Appropriate forecasts, accurate staffing and schedules, and effective real-time management complement and further the center's inherent efficiencies. And these disciplines retain their importance, even as an ever-expanding array of contact channels become part of the mix.

LEVEL 2: CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND LOYALTY. In recent years, research has begun to reveal the powerful connection between high levels of satisfaction and profitability. And given today's powerful social communities and the opportunity for customers to share experiences, every interaction must be viewed as an event that can have an impact, positive or negative, on the organization's brand reputation.

LEVEL 3: STRATEGIC VALUE. The contact center is the customer's moment of truth, shaping how they perceive and will interact with the organization in the future. But there's far more to it — in the course of handling interactions and capturing customer input, the contact center can become a powerful source of intelligence (based on customer data and insight), helping business units across the board improve products, services and processes.

Every day, more organizations are transitioning their centers from a rote focus on efficiency to better harnessing their strategic potential. Having a greater business impact requires objectives and measures that support organizationwide contributions. It is essential to take inventory of job roles, technologies, processes and organizational design, and align them to deliver maximum value on all three levels.

Excerpt from *Call Center Management on Fast Forward* Third Edition by Brad Cleveland, ICMI, 2012.

Key Points

- **Whether customer contacts are initiated by the customer or the contact center affects how they are operated.**

- **Inbound contact centers handle contacts initiated by the customer.**

- **Outbound contact centers handle contacts initiated by the center.**

- **Blended (inbound/outbound) contact centers handle both inbound and outbound contacts.**

- **The impact of whether a center's contacts are inbound and/or outbound is greatest in the following operational areas:**
  - **Strategic planning**
  - **Performance measures**
  - **Forecasting and staffing**
  - **Real-time management**
  - **Technology**
  - **Regulations**

Explanation

Contact centers can be found in virtually every vertical industry – from healthcare to finance to education. What types of customer requests are being handled has little impact on how the various centers operate. However, whether the center handles inbound contacts only, outbound contacts only or a combination of both change how they operate in many respects.

Inbound contact centers handle contacts initiated by the customer. In general, their strategic purpose is to respond to customer requests when the customer chooses and using what contact channel the customer prefers. These requests are typically sales, service or technical support related. Inbound only centers may handle some outbound contacts, but the center is still classified as inbound only if those outbound contacts constitute work directly related to individual inbound contacts. For example,

if a roadside assistance contact center must call the customer back to confirm that a tow truck will assist them shortly, this center would still be considered an inbound center.

Outbound contact centers handle contacts initiated by the contact center. Generally, their strategic purpose is to proactively engage the customer to achieve a sales, service or technical support goal. Organizations may have previously asked customers what time of day they would rather to be contacted or which contact channel they prefer, but the contact center ultimately chooses when to make the contact and which contact channel to use.

Blended (inbound/outbound) contact centers handle both inbound contacts and outbound contacts that are not directly related to individual inbound contacts. Blended centers may have separate agent groups to handle inbound work and outbound work or they may have combined agent groups that handle both inbound and outbound work as the inbound workload allows. The term blended center can be confusing because it is sometimes also applied to centers that handle a variety of contact channels (i.e., phone, email, social interactions). For the purposes of certification, a blended center refers to a center that handles both inbound and outbound contacts.

The impact of whether contacts are initiated by the customer (inbound) or initiated by the center (outbound) is greatest in the following operational areas:

- **Strategic planning**: Inbound and outbound only centers share a common limit of strategic scope. They typically were created to serve one purpose or one customer base. Blended centers have greater strategic scope of activities. They serve both an inbound strategy and an outbound strategy. One of these strategies must be designated as the primary strategy and the other as secondary. The fact that there are two strategies creates a higher level of complexity than inbound only or outbound only.

- **Performance measures**: Due to the separate operational dynamics of handling an inbound workload versus initiating contact with customers through outbound contacts, the performance metrics required to measure the effectiveness of the center differ greatly.

- **Forecasting and staffing**: Centers handling inbound contacts must forecast (i.e., predict) how many contacts will be received at what time of day and staff accordingly, typically down to the half-hour. Centers handling an outbound workload can decide how many contacts to make at what time of day based on a variety of factors, such as time of day effectiveness, staff availability and the strategic importance of the campaign.

- **Real-time management**: Managing the queue in real time is more complex in a blended center than in an inbound only or outbound only center. Appropriate thresholds must be set for real-time analysts to know when to change dialer pacing or when to move agents between queues so that the analysts do not react too quickly or wait too long to respond.

- **Technology**: Outbound only centers require the addition of dialer technology that can dial the number of telephone numbers that are required in order to achieve the desired right party contact (RPC) rate. It should also be noted that blended centers typically have a higher reliance on technology than inbound only or outbound only centers as they need to balance the inbound calls with outbound dialing.

- **Regulations**: Inbound and outbound contacts are regulated differently depending on their impact on the customer. Most regulations on inbound contacts are concerned with customer wait time and access to live agents. Regulations on outbound contacts most often refer to which customers the center can contact and how much silence a customer can hear before being connected. Blended centers have the responsibility of following both kinds of regulations.