



Authentic Coaching: Getting the Best from Customer Service Providers

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In customer service, your only competitive advantage may be your people. And the most formidable task faced by customer service managers may be to help their workers make the most of their potential. Research shows that most managers are incompetent when it comes to organizing, leading, and supporting the people they supervise. This article shows how managers can be more effective through coaching.

The greatest single challenge that managers have today is engaging their workforce to produce high levels of human work performance. Particularly in customer serving functions, managers have been unable to generate and deploy their workers' unique human qualities into the work of serving customers.

Savvy executives already know that only by successfully meeting this challenge can their companies achieve sustainable competitive advantage in customer service. Customer service managers are realizing only gradually that their most formidable task is not controlling their assigned workers. Their greatest challenge is engaging their workers in ways that yield continual learning, competence, flexibility, innovation, discretionary effort, added value, and worker satisfaction—which together generate high-quality work and high productivity.

In addressing this challenge, more and more companies are experimenting with alternatives to the traditional role of manager. Much of this effort is focusing on new ways of organizing, leading, and supporting workers. Rightly so, because most managers are incompetent in this area. Research conducted by Lominger Limited, Inc., ranked the competency “understanding people” in the top 10 of the 67 competencies linked by research to successful performance. This same research showed that North American managers are rated poorest—67th out of the same 67 competencies—in this crucial capability.

Companies taking the initiative to improve the performance of managers are generally following one or more of three basic strategies:

- Emphasizing the coaching aspects of the managers' roles
- Renaming and redefining the role of managers to make them more like coaches
- Dividing the current management role and shifting the human side of the job to designated coaches

It's too early to draw any conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of any of these approaches, though our experience with all three provides insight on their common element of coaching. Recently we have honed this experience into a new role-concept that can help managers meet today's customer service challenge. We think authentic coaching may well be the answer to the problems faced by customer service managers.

For perspective, we should remember that traditional management methods were first adopted by businesses beginning in the late eighteenth century. Copied from the successful organization of the Prussian army a century before, these methods particularly suited the transition that people were having to make from independent farming and trades to the very large factories that were employing more and more of the population.

As you might imagine, emphasis then was placed on keeping track of people and on controlling their work to best suit the uncompromising machinery. This approach was in accordance with the dominant organizing principle of the industrial age: if workers would only do exactly what the machines required, the machines themselves would ensure a quality performance. This concept of management has served enterprise well.

Today the mix of issues that define work quality are considerably different from the issues in the late 1700s. There is substantially more emphasis on having workers perform in ways that are uniquely human and not machinelike—particularly in areas of customer service. For high-quality customer service today, workers must project empathy, concern, understanding, appreciation, knowledge, perspective, and spirit. And they must instinctively integrate and genuinely express these behaviors effectively just when and as the situation dictates. Consider too the fact that not one of these behaviors can be produced by machine ... not even by computers. They also cannot be produced effectively by people who are treated like machines.

Service by the Numbers

Most customer service functions are managed like production lines. Gratuitous talk about service quality aside, these operations are operated with machine efficiency so as to incur the least possible expense. The negative impacts of this approach are frequently overshadowed by positive business trends. As a result, managers grow accustomed to operating problems like marginal performance, absenteeism, excessive turnover, and others. In industries for which the customer service function is a sales channel, slightly more consideration is given to the effectiveness of the service process.

Industry is so accustomed to the production-line approach to service that management is virtually unaware of its costly impact—on workers, on management, on customers, and on the business. The financial impact of this approach, in our estimation, is worker productivity at 30-70 percent below potential, and unproductive turnover and hiring and training costs 100-500 percent above the necessary. This estimate holds for customer service in virtually every line of business. However, these figures do not include the financial impact attributable to customers who are left ambivalent or displeased with the machinelike service they've received.

Our culture has become so indoctrinated in this approach to service that managers often struggle with the fact that there is a problem, and struggle even more to develop an alternative. In many areas of life, each of us is reduced to a mechanistic image, whether by a number (e.g., Social Security, wait list, table, address, account, etc.) or industry jargon (e.g., customer, be-back, complaint, double cheeseburger, line-on-hold, etc.). Influenced by this mechanistic reduction, we don't think twice before treating someone else the very same way. Managers treat their employees this way; employees treat their customers this way. And the problem isn't that this treatment is unpleasant or inhumane, although this may be true. The problem for industry is the millions (or billions) in excess service costs,

unnecessary and costly customer ambivalence and dissatisfaction, and needless worker turnover costs.

If a customer service manager cannot grasp this reasoning, we may suggest a role reversal—for the manager to work as a customer service representative. Most managers can't stand it for more than a couple of hours. They typically get frustrated with restrictions against taking action and insulted by the rules and other measures by which their performance is evaluated. It's not the work that gets to them; it's the treatment ..., being treated like a machine. When asked what impact this treatment has on their attitude toward serving customers, they finally feel the frustration and resignation felt by many customer service providers. It's a fact that performance is directly impacted by how people are treated; machinelike treatment, however well intended, will generally result in the worst of human behavior.

Think about what we tell our customer service providers:

- Customers talk to *you*, not to a *company*.
- Customers think of themselves as *people*, not as just *customers*.
- It's not enough to *service* customers; you have to *care* about them.

We ask our customer service providers to make the company human and to treat customers as people. But how can they do so if we don't treat them as people?

Though customer service providers are admittedly a business tool used to provide certain kinds of customer service, treating them as not much more than a tool diminishes the real potential inherent in their human nature. We can see this same human nature at work in children. It takes recognizing and appreciating them for their uniqueness to develop their self-esteem, ignite their spirit, and fuel their discretionary effort. We also feel it as adults.

Single out a time or two in which someone recognized and acknowledged you as an individual and treated you like somebody special. How did that make you feel? How did that affect your attitude, your feeling toward that person, how you treated him or her, how you felt about yourself, and what you did in response? It lit a spark, didn't it? That's the spark you want to light in your customer service providers if you want them to really put themselves into their work for you.

A Better Way to Manage

The term *authentic coaching* describes an approach to working with direct reports—a management concept that promises big potential for managers of customer service providers. During the past 20 years, we've studied the manager's role in most industries, researched the vast human and social sciences, and worked with clients experimenting with numerous alternative approaches to management's traditional controlling methods. More and more often today, we see the authentic coaching approach adopted for the human side of managing. We have seen it provide better results in more situations and in more industries than all other supervisory approaches combined.

Coaching is a term everyone is familiar with from school and sports in particular, and maybe less familiar in the contexts of singing, dancing, acting, painting, work trades, and numerous other human pursuits. Of course, the meaning is similar—helping people prepare to do their very best. Yet the methods and effort vary widely according to the students, goals. In a management context, the emphasis of coaching is placed on providing individualized support to achieve high performance and productivity.

Authentic is also a familiar term to most of us, though at times we may have to look hard to find anything that is authentic in today's culture. Western society has become so focused on achieving end results that it has sacrificed concern for the means by which the end is achieved. As a result, it seems as if the behavior of most people, as they attempt to attain their objective, is frequently contrived and

artificial. This contrived behavior creates a problem, however, because it distances people from their true values and beliefs, qualities that are, after all, the root of their human nature and the source of those attributes that create high performance in customer service.

If we combine these two words—*authentic coaching*—and their meaning, we describe a manager who is focused both on providing appropriate support to his or her workers, and on doing so in ways that accept their human nature and allow them to more genuinely express themselves. What? And give up tight-fisted control? Give up the privilege of treating people any legal way you want to just because they report to you? Our best answer to these frequent first responses of resistance is ... let's compare the results you get now with the results you will get with authentic coaching.

Customer service managers who fully adopt the authentic coaching approach to managing routinely improve the performance of their operations by 20, 60, or even 200 percent and more, and in every important measure. And they consistently outperform their peer-group managers who are unwilling to try it. In fact, we have seen authentic coaching work in enough customer service settings now that we rarely hesitate to recommend it as an obvious solution to many of the typical performance problems. It's the closest thing to a universal management approach that befits today's workers and the challenges faced by managers in today's customer service function. It presents managers with the ultimate question: Which is more important, to have your way with workers or to have their best performance?

The Human Side of Managing

Authentic coaching is not hard to like. For people who are managing a large number of customer service providers, one of the strong appeals of authentic coaching is that it's grounded in natural human behavior. Customer service providers and managers both win, because they're able to be more genuine without pretense or role playing. Authentic coaching also guides managers to experience and act toward their employees as real individual people.

For many managers, authentic coaching is a refreshing change. It guides them to act out of their real selves, not to abandon personal values and style to adopt some false persona as managers. For others, though, being authentic can be uncomfortable at first. They're not accustomed to behaving genuinely. Like many people, they are well practiced at adapting to situations by adopting behaviors that they think will be approved. So to accept and genuinely express themselves carries with it many apprehensions. Fortunately, these long-avoided fears will diminish as the managers witness the acceptance and successful impact of their more natural behavior.

For workers, a strong appeal of authentic coaching is its emphasis on integrity, honesty, and sincerity. People increasingly tire of never getting honest answers to their questions ... if they get any answers at all ... and of having to contrive different artificial behaviors for every situation. Authentic coaching guides a manager to accept others as they are and to work with each as a real person—not treat him or her as a machine (number, desk, territory, etc.).

Authentic coaching, as an alternative to traditional, control-based management, is grounded in a set of guiding principles. These are ten of the guiding principles explained in *Authentic Coaching: Real Guidance for the Human Side of Performance*. These principles are easy to understand, remember, and apply. More important, perhaps, these principles are based on science, validated in research, and proven through experience. They are not myths, feel-good beliefs, or conjecture.

- 1. Human nature provides all of the technology necessary for leading people to do their best.**
Authentic coaches know that nature has “wired” people to act in ways that support their own safety and self-satisfaction. So when they coach in ways that respect these natural behaviors, the objectives are achieved and often surpassed with minimal support. When workers are in situations

aligned with their human nature, they can be fast learners and powerful achievers. Typically, company-imposed barriers and constraints get in the way of high-performance work, often simply because they ignore natural human behavior.

- 2. Workers respond and adapt to the whole system that defines their roles and responsibilities.** Authentic coaches think in terms of the whole system—the many interacting elements of enterprise, organization, and work design that potentially impact workers—in order to provide effective support for higher performance. The causes that undermine performance are generally not obvious or direct, such as an old policy, workers in another department, the wrong resources, weaknesses in the organization structure, lack of feedback, and so on. Nor are the solutions obvious or direct. When dealing with complex human behavior in an inherently complex work system, authentic coaches know to avoid snap decisions and jumping to the first solution considered—the managerial behaviors that allow many workplace problems to persist year after year.
- 3. People are different, not broken; they do not need fixing.** Authentic coaches respect human nature and accept that people are OK just the way they are. Some people will be open to learning in the coach's ways and meeting the coach's standards, yet many won't. Coaches know to focus on selecting people whose human nature is consistent with the real challenges inherent in the work to be performed. People can be trained on equipment and procedures, but training will not change their natural behavior. Authentic coaches carefully define what is acceptable and let workers decide whether this is something they want to do. Certainly people can learn and change; however, adults will do so only if they strongly feel a need.
- 4. Caring is essential to coaching. Authentic coaches care about the people they coach, and coach only people they care about.** If put in a situation to supervise anyone they don't care about, authentic coaches find reasons to care about that person. They are honest with themselves. Only through caring can they hope to connect with people and influence them. This is particularly true when seeking cooperation and change. Most often, authentic coaches can develop a caring spirit for people just by knowing more about them: their kids, childhood, joys, challenges, and dreams are all pathways to caring.
- 5. Attitude defines working relationships and determines the influence achieved.** Authentic coaches know that their attitude largely determines the success of their coaching. The coach's attitude toward workers sets the boundaries for the workers' attitude toward him or her. If the coach wants to receive respect, trust, and support, then he or she must first approach workers with respect, trust, and support. Likewise, if workers sense disrespect, mistrust, and weak support, then the source is probably the coach's attitude toward the workers. This truth of human nature is the basis of the Golden Rule that has been passed from generation to generation for centuries—Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It works.
- 6. Vulnerabilities create the opportunity for influence and relationships.** Authentic coaches know that relationships are rooted in compensating vulnerabilities. This fact is equally true in both personal and professional relationships because it's inherent in human nature. If people appear perfect or act as if they think they're perfect, and they do not expose their natural opportunities for growth, then they will not be in a position to form genuinely supportive relationships. Those who relate to the perfect persona will soon be disillusioned, and all others will be unable to feel the human vulnerability that is necessary for a relationship to form. Managers who appear perfect to their workers seem inhuman and unapproachable, so these managers will be unable to coach them effectively. Authentic coaches make the effort to seem very human to their workers.
- 7. Honest and considerate communication is more likely to get an honest and considerate response.** Authentic coaching requires that you say what you mean to workers. All too often

workers are left in the dark and simply don't know what they need to know in order to do their work. Authentic coaching demands straightforward talk, although with consideration for the esteem of the worker. (Honesty is no excuse for disrespect.) If coaches are not honest with their workers, then it's virtually assured that their workers will not be honest with them. Because managers characteristically have been less than open and honest with workers, distrust and cynicism dominate the typical workplace. Authentic coaching can begin to reverse this pattern.

- 8. For improved performance, trust clear expectations, accurate feedback, and aligned support.** Authentic coaching is grounded in a clear understanding of human behavior, which is not the mystery it once was. Today, human work-performance technology—humaneering—is nearly as advanced as engineering, pharmacology, and other major technologies. As a result, we know that the essential ingredients for high levels of human performance include, at a minimum, (a) clear objectives for acceptable performance, (b) methods for workers to measure their own performance and thus receive instant feedback, and (c) support needed for performance-improvement objectives. Since these essential elements are often missing, authentic coaching often begins the performance-improvement process by putting these elements in place.
- 9. Replace most training with self-directed learning.** Authentic coaching requires the effective application of all sorts of technology, including instructional technology. Training was first introduced into the workplace by Frederick Taylor to standardize workers to their assigned machinery. This approach is considerably different from the challenge of preparing customer service providers to produce high-performance work. At best, training teaches workers how to use equipment, the current best practices, and essential policies they must follow—the basics. For achieving higher levels of human work performance, however, authentic coaching stresses self-directed learning. It's also important to provide workers with effective tools for learning and skill development, targeting the competencies important for their brand of customer service.
- 10. Know what you don't know about human nature and identify knowledgeable support.** Authentic coaches use authoritative information when determining workforce needs, and they don't play psychologist. Coaches keep in mind that everyone is different; and that what works for one person will likely not work for others. For example, it's generally true that whatever would work best for the coach if in the same role is not what will work best for most of his or her workers. Authentic coaches use the available professional tools (e.g., validated surveys, instruments, etc.) to detect individual and organizational needs and diagnose performance problems. And though coaches can expect workers to know when something is not working, they don't make the mistake of expecting the workers to (a) accurately recognize all of the contributing causes, (b) create an alternative that will work permanently, and (c) convince the people in charge to try something different. Coaches need to know their limits—to know what they don't know—and engage objective professionals to work with their workers for permanent solutions to problems.

Switching to Authentic Coaching

These guiding principles do work if applied in earnest. The greater challenge, we find, is for managers who are making the switch to authentic coaching to persist in this effort in the face of doubting workers. Unfortunately, years of a machinelike working environment have engendered skepticism and cynicism regarding management. It will take time for some people to give up this impression. However, the current high turnover prevalent in poorly managed customer service functions can accelerate this process by more quickly bringing in new workers, who can begin with an impression of management as cooperative.

The hard part of authentic coaching, if there is one, is dropping the control-oriented behavior to which many managers have grown accustomed. Before the switch is made, it can be helpful for managers to consider their current style of managing people and how they learned it. Very few ever learn their style from a truly effective manager. And they don't teach management in school. So most

managers are left to trust their instincts, which in the case of managing people are most often very misleading.

In the hundreds of customer service operations that we examine professionally, we've most often found in popular use the approach we named the "lazy-parent" style of managing. Our professional work further indicates that this style is a significant cause of endless workforce problems that waste the potential for extraordinary customer service and employee satisfaction. Furthermore, the lazy-parent style not only fails to improve and maximize workforce performance and productivity, but it actually creates problems. When this all-too-popular management style is used, it seems the only possible winner is the manager who adopts the style. The win for the manager is hollow, however, because of the additional problems he or she encounters and the relatively poor business performance that results.

When dealing with the lazy-parent manager, employees are naturally motivated to do the minimum that is tolerated. This paternalistic management approach just seems to bring out the childhood rebellion inside all people, and it wreaks havoc in the workplace.

But, you ask, if this approach is so devastating to business, why is it so common? This is an important question. Our research indicates that the prevalence of this style is substantially due to insufficient, ineffective, or inappropriate training for new managers—or no training at all. As a result, many new managers resort to the dominant image they have for the exercising of authority—their parents, and in particular the one who was more controlling. The result is a fascistic behavior that emphasizes control, guarded communication, artificial motivation, and other dysfunctional behavior that virtually destroy the human spirit and the will to achieve. And in a largely unconscious exchange for this treatment, the workers respond about as well as children do—with minimal compliance, active rule-testing, minimal tolerance, passive aggressiveness, and so on.

The Results Speak for Themselves

Positive results with authentic coaching are not always immediate or dramatic. For workers who haven't received much respect or consideration throughout their lives, trusting and responding to this new treatment may take time. But don't be surprised when those workers who are full of life but have learned to park their human nature at the door start to enjoy serving and delighting customers.

Eventually, the results are generally profound. Managers who adopt the more natural authentic coaching approach to management—after employees sense that the change is genuine—realize improvements in work performance and productivity that they cannot explain to other managers, except by attributing them to their change in approach. Problems that seemed unsolvable can cease to be issues, particularly as managers make policy changes consistent with this approach. Turnover, absenteeism, poor attitude, marginal performance quality, slack follow-through, slumping sales promotion, and low productivity—problems generally accepted or attributed to inferior employees—are attributable to the lazy-parent managerial style.

We have briefly discussed an alternative approach to management that treats your people and you as the real people you are. It's based on mutual respect and appreciation and on an honest and sincere dialogue. And, perhaps most important, it will bring out the best performance your people can provide. In most cases, managers do not know just how good customer service performance can get until they try the authentic coaching approach. It makes all the difference.

This article is based on the professional work of Jim Pepitone and his application of humaneering technology for management development. For further information, please contact him at jimpepitone@pepitone.com.