



How Do You Teach “The Power of One?”

By Vicki Herrell

As workforce management professionals, we all know the difference that just one agent can make in our net staffing. Unfortunately, the agents don't necessarily understand that concept. They may be thinking, “What difference can it make that I come back late from lunch? There are 50 other agents out there on the floor.” Sometimes it falls to the workforce management team to teach them just what a difference they make.

While we all know the benefits to the call center when agents adhere to schedule – improved service level, better customer service, and cost savings for the company – sometimes these benefits are not enough to motivate agents.

So what can we do to teach “The Power of One” to our agent population? Well, there are lots of different ways, and in this article, we'll explore several options. One way to get the information to the agent is through an interactive, fun activity. Here are some examples:

Tennis Ball Activity

Pull together a group of agents and ask them to line up in two groups facing one another. One side represents the customers and the others serve as call handlers. Give each of the “customers” a tennis ball, which represents a phone call. Then ask the customers to begin throwing the ball back and forth to the person across from them, the “agent.” This is very comfortable as long as there is a one-to-one ratio of customers to call handlers. Now send one call handler on break but leave all the customers. Send another call handler on an “unscheduled break” and leave all the customers. Keep throwing the balls back and forth to the remaining call handlers. The participants can easily see the impact of losing one agent, and then they really feel the impact of losing additional agents. This is also an excellent illustration to employ when talking about average handle time (how long the call handler holds the ball before pitching it back), schedule adherence, queue times, and service level/ASA.

Bucket Activity

You might want to do this one outside! Have one volunteer slowly pour water into a bucket (one from KFC works well). The water represents incoming calls/orders. After the bucket is full, start to poke holes into the bucket. Let the first holes represent someone leaving for a break or lunch according to their schedule. Agents can come up to plug these holes to stop the water flow. But then poke some holes to represent agents out of adherence – late to work or from a break, for example –

and do not plug those holes. As the water drains down, so goes the service level! The draining water can also represent lost orders or lost customers who have waited too long in queue.

Perfection Game Activity

Perfection is the battery-operated game where you set a timer and attempt to place differently-shaped pieces into their respective slots before the timer runs out, which causes the spring-loaded board to pop up suddenly and scatter the pieces. For the illustration to the agents, have three people placing the shapes simultaneously, and they will finish at a leisurely pace before the timer expires. Then remove an agent from the mix because they were signed off unexpectedly and not adhering to their schedule. Then reset the timer for the exact amount of time it took for three people to finish the job. Without fail, the two remaining people work frantically but are never able to complete the task before the timer expires and the pieces pop up. Then explain that the shapes represent calls, and the time it takes to place these shapes into their slots represents handle time. Also explain that when you had the right number of people in place to handle the task, everyone was able to work at a comfortable pace and get the job done. With the unexpected absence of just one agent, the remaining agents were forced to work much harder and still couldn't get the job done.

One Powerful Person

Another company has developed a curriculum for their new hires and existing agents called "One Powerful Person." Average adherence of the class attendees is analyzed prior to and after classes to determine the effectiveness of the training. During the training, they do an interactive exercise similar to the tennis ball activity where four individuals are "Agents" serving customers. Line them up a few feet apart, standing or at a table. Have five or six individuals act as "Customers" calling into the center. Line these individuals up arms length away across from the agents. Have a box of "Calls" in between the customers and agents, easily reached by the "Customers." These "calls" can be a box of small balls, cushy items, or anything easily handled in one hand (nothing sharp!). Instruct Agents that they will be receiving Calls from Customers and they will handle the Call from five-seven seconds each, then return the call to the box. Instruct Customers to "hand" a call to a random available agent, counting their delay time if there is no agent available.

Start the call exchange and go about two minutes. Stop and review delay times with customers. Ask Agents how they feel. Remove one agent from the line. Begin call exchange again. After two minutes, remove another agent and continue exchange. Have customers count delay time. Stop after one minute and review delay times with customers. How different did Agents feel after someone was "missing?"

In all these activities, debrief with the group by reviewing differences in delay time based on various agent situations. What was the effect on service? What was the impact on agents? Ask "What difference did one person make in this exercise?"

In addition to activities, workforce management teams have used other methods to make "The Power of One" more easily understood. One car rental company "re-branded" the whole notion of schedule adherence to help each individual realize his/her importance to the process. So instead of calling it schedule adherence, it became known as the Customer Accessibility Ratio (or C.A.R. for short). Using a one-page tri-fold flyer and a series of presentations, the workforce management staff explained that the whole idea behind adherence is being accessible to customers — being there when customers call. This made the objective a positive

one – being accessible to customers – rather than the somewhat negative “Big Brother” watch for schedule non-adherence.

One automobile financial company also tried to get rid of the “Big Brother” label that can be attached to the group that tracks agent adherence. Taking a proactive approach, they talked about it with the agents by asking them, “What is a big brother? What does a big brother do to you that you hate? They got answers such as, “They pick on you.” “They constantly challenge you.” “They are always watching everything you do so they can tell on you.”

Then the workforce management team asked, “What does a big brother do that’s good?” The answer usually is, “They protect you.” That’s the answer you’re looking for. Then they bring up the question, “Is challenging you a bad thing?” And they finally get across that agent adherence tracking might make the agent feel like he/she is being picked on, but in reality, it’s challenging the agent to go from good to excellent performance. It also can be communicated that the schedule adherence monitoring process helps protect and reward the agent that is doing what is right by doing what they’re scheduled to be doing.

Penny Reynolds of The Call Center School has written a book called “The Power of One” that is designed specifically for frontline staff. At the beginning of the book, she outlines its purpose by writing, “Each individual on the frontline in a call center has the power to do two things – make a tremendous difference in a customer’s experience with your organization and contribute significantly to the effective operation of the center. The purpose of this book is to help you understand your important role in both of these functions and to provide tips to maximize your success. The first half of the book focuses on making the most of each customer interaction and the second half outlines the contribution you make in the three measures of call center success – service, efficiency, and cost.”

In the section titled, “Staffing for Speed,” she gives the reader specific information about what a difference one person makes in the call center.

You’ve got an errand you’d like to run next Monday morning on your way into work, so you ask your team manager or supervisor about coming in late that morning. She says no because Monday will be a heavy calling time and you’ll be needed on the phones that morning to ensure service levels are met.

You may be frustrated by this, thinking, There are fifty other people here! What possible difference could I make? I think my supervisor is just being inflexible.

While it’s clear that if you’re one of only five people, then your contribution is a significant percentage of the call handling team. But what about when you’re in a center or call handling group ten times that big? Would your absence be noticeable?

The actual difference that one person can make in terms of the service (speed of answer) to customers can indeed be affected substantially by just one person. There’s a bigger impact in a small center, but even in larger centers or call handling groups, the impact of one person can be significant.

Let’s take the example of a center that expects to receive 750 calls between 9-10am and each call takes 240 seconds to handle. Your call center’s goal is to answer those calls with an average speed of answer (ASA) of under 20 seconds. The table below shows what happens with varying numbers of staff on the phones, along with

the resulting ASA and service level.

Workload Hours	Staff	Average Delay (ASA)	Service Level (in 20 seconds)
50	55	18 sec	75%
50	54	28 sec	66%
50	53	46 sec	55%
50	52	84 sec	40%
50	51	201 sec	22%

As you can see, when plenty of people are in place to deliver a very good level of service, then the impact of one person isn't so much. With 55 staff in place, the delay would be 18 seconds and subtracting a person would worsen that to 28 seconds. On the other hand, if only 52 agents are available and delays are already long at 84 seconds, losing one more person can make a tremendous difference in each caller's expected wait time. The difference between 52 and 51 staff is a jump from 84 seconds to 201 seconds of delay time! In this case, when one person is missing, the impact is almost an additional 2 minutes of wait time per call – a wait that would be very noticeable to the caller.

See what a big difference just one person can make? Delivering good service to callers depends upon every single person being available when scheduled.

The book then goes on to explain the concept of agent occupancy, and also the impact on the call center's bottom line from non-adherence. Many centers are purchasing this book for each of their agents, and using them as a great starting point for the conversation surrounding agent adherence. The books are \$5.95 each with volume discounts available. You can order them online at www.thecallcenterschool.com.

There are many ways to teach "The Power of One" to your agents. Try some of these ideas and see what works for you!