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NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2010

## Emergence of the super agent

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# Coaching, leadership tsunami

Unleashing a tsunami of coaching and leadership can create profound changes in any sales or service organization. Here is a tale of two call centres and the positive impact that kind of move left in its wake

BY BRUCE SIMPSON

**T**his is a true story. It encompasses two case studies from very different worlds and tells their tale of implementing an eight month, coaching tsunami through the first two lines of management and how it transformed their centres.

The push required to create momentum for positive change requires consistency, discipline and leadership but the approach can help any sales and service team. The payback not only has a financial ROI, it changes the culture and the future capability of the organization to produce sustainable world class results.

The first example is a centre belonging to On-Line Support (OLS)

which is now among the fastest growing Canadian outsourcers at a time when many are shrinking or heading to far-away lands. OLS differentiates itself based on quality and high performance versus competing based on lowest-price.

Kevin Marchment leads half of the centre with 250 plus agents for a leading wireless carrier. He sums it up, as follows.

“If we have better customer satisfaction (CSat), first contact resolution (FCR) rates, sales and average handle time (AHT) than anyone else including our client’s internal centres AND we can do it for less cost, isn’t that the ultimate business case for outsourcing?”

The star of the second study



**Dan Stark, sales manager of corporate accounts for Microsoft, says the efficiency of the inside sales team improved 63 percent through a daily focus on coaching.**

requires no introduction. Microsoft is one of the most recognized brands in the world and the Canadian inside sales teams create, manage and influence revenues of more than \$500 million through their partner and direct sales reps. Microsoft, like many companies, has realized that the costs-of-sales to manage accounts and find new opportunities is best done with a disciplined inside sales team.

Dan Stark is sales manager of corporate accounts for Microsoft. He says: “We got a 63 percent improvement in efficiency of our team, through a daily focus on coaching, not just by reviewing a well prepared sales pipeline report once a month.”

**Escalating importance of leadership and true coaching**  
The Microsoft reps sell big deals

that average between \$75,000 - \$250,000. Some of the created opportunities they close themselves. Many they pass to sales specialists, either inside Microsoft or externally to a certified partner.

The inside reps have to be exceptional at engaging vice-president level decision-makers. Microsoft has built a system to grow this talent.

“In 2008 / 2009 cutbacks in IT spend and growing competition in the SMB marketplace required our inside sales teams to better understand our customer’s businesses and how Microsoft can best solve their problems,” says Stark. “We invested in performance coaching so we could help our reps know how to confidently develop the business case and secure budget as opposed to just focusing on projects that were already approved.”



**Kevin Marchment of On-Line Support says what the company asks agents to do is so much more complex than even five years ago.**

OLS’ reality was a collision course between the complexity of the work agents are being asked to do and the available GenY & GenX workforce.

“What we now ask agents to do between ‘hello and goodbye’ is so much more complex than even five years ago,” says Marchment. “In the past it could take a year to get a new hire to become fully competent. Yet like most of the industry 60 percent of agents leave the company within three to six months. If GenY and GenXers feel the work is hard and they aren’t supported, they quit and leave, or worse they quit and stay.”

Rick Gosk runs the other half of the OLS centre for a premiere financial services client. He has just a tinge of gray hair from having worked inside six different in-house and outsourced call centre organizations.

“Executives and clients demand so much from frontline agents; solve complex problems, strive for FCR, sell 12 different products, have high QA (quality assessment) scores, make sure the customer loves us (CSat),” he says. “Oh yes, don’t forget your AHT! Our management team acting in unison provides a consistent way of responding to changing business priorities and helping our agents change direction and their behaviours quickly.”

**World class sustainable results**  
For most training initiatives it is hard to attribute a hard ROI to them,



**Rick Gosk of On-Line Support says the management teams provides a consistent way of responding to changing business priorities and helping agents change direction and behaviours quickly.**

mostly because changing behaviour takes time. Such is not the case for installing a disciplined, consistent, all-hands approach to coaching. As you remake the capability of your frontline managers into coaches and leaders, it changes everything.

“We made more progress in one year than the previous five years combined,” says Gosk. “Sales improved by 45 percent, FCR increased by 13 percent and even with our client doing our QA evaluations, we went from 90 to 98 percent. And our performance is consistent every week.”

Microsoft’s Stark cites “not only a 63 percent improvement in efficiency, and overall sales results, but the quality of our pipeline has improved dramatically. As Microsoft’s ‘Lead Generating Machine’, the quality of leads we create and pass to specialists or our partners has improved because of our targeted coaching. Now we do less class-room training and more small-group or one-on-one coaching. As a result, you can feel the energy on the floor every day.”

Marchment points to the simple math and what accelerating agent competency has done for OLS.

“We’ve been able to accelerate the average time it takes for an agent to over-achieve our performance metrics from eight to 12 months to three to six months,” he says. “This reduced our attrition by 26 percent,

**"The quality of leads we create and pass to specialists or our partners has improved because of our targeted coaching.—Stark.**

not by running a contest, but by supporting agents properly through induction training, A-Bay and on the Floor. Our formal employee engagement scores went up by 11 percent and our absenteeism went down by more than 10 percent.

"The hidden story that only other operators can truly appreciate is that our voluntary overtime now adds hundreds of hours when our clients need us. We already have a stack of résumés' for hiring new agents ... before we start recruiting for a class!

"We've added millions of dollars in revenue and savings for OLS and what we've been able to do for our clients makes it win-win. We're currently running eight percent higher in C-Sat than our client's in-house centre, which makes our life less stressful and why they keep asking us to take more business."

#### 10 lessons learned

##### **DO Get Intimate with the business.**

"Our business has changed so much since our managers were themselves good agents, that they had very little value to add to experienced agents," says Marchment. "Every action plan was 'run a contest', or we'd scare / put someone on a PIP (Performance Improvement Plan).

"We are now specialists in accelerating performance; diagnosing specifically what behaviours need to change, and in which order. Our coaches are now so intimate and intelligent about their business."

##### **DON'T Assume Coaching will just Happen.**

"We started by having the SwitchGear coaching team help us 'create a clearing' to give frontline leaders the time they needed to coach," says Gosk. "They helped focus us on the best behaviours from 50 plus implementations of their proven methodology. They study how the best leaders inside world class operations actually run this new era of contact centres.

"It was a dramatic shift from our beliefs in how the business should

be run. Don't assume your frontline leaders know what to do, how to do it or for some managers that they even want to do it."

##### **DO Raise the bar on Accountability.**

"We have raised the bar for our managers, and the reps are aware of this," says Stark. "They have an expectation of the frequency and value of the coaching they receive.

"If they don't know how to do something, they know it is the manager's job to show them and support them. It is the manager's responsibility to bring value to their reps and they have to be able to role-play and demonstrate a skill themselves".

##### **DO Coach the Coach.**

"Who is coaching the coach?" asks Gosk. "We had previously done the one-off leadership training with no significant changes. Now our second line leaders are on the floor every day, reviewing today's coaching plans and triple-jacking to observe their TLs' coaching.

"We have measurements to help us answer two key questions: How do we know they are doing coaching, AND how do we know they are doing it well? Just like with agents, this is an everyday in-the-business approach, not a monthly meeting."

##### **DON'T Hide Results & Performance.**

Stark, who is focused on alignment and "mutual purpose," shares the importance of everyone being on the same page.

"Reps want to know what specifically is helping their teammates be successful and how they can learn from their peers," he says. "Daily discussion on results ensures we are on the same page and focused. This promotes a culture of learning, pride and performance inside our team."

##### **DO Install a Business Operating System (BOS):**

What you have your leaders focus on every day and week should not be left to chance. By

installing a BOS, it can either focus on results, performance and frontline knowledge-workers or on process, problems, emails and meetings.

"Installing an integrated system for how you run this new-age business must drive the right behaviours and performance," says Gosk. "Now more than ever being ruthless about what you ask your managers to focus on and how you evaluate them is the key to your ability to deliver consistent results."

**DON'T Forget your Allies.** Stark shares a best practice for any size company.

"When implementing a coaching initiative of this magnitude, be sure to educate your partners in HR, training, and marketing," he says. "Help them understand the positive impact of coaching to their role, to the reps, the team's performance and ultimately to your customers."

##### **DO Be Proactive versus Reactive.**

Gosk believes there is no substitute for everyday proactive coaching.

"We turned the model around," he says. "Instead of reacting to poor performance we proactively work to eliminate issues and errors before they happen. This not only forms a better foundation for the manager-agent relationship (the #1 cause of employees leaving a company), but also being disciplined and proactive is a lot less tiring and stressful!"

**DON'T Become a Dinosaur.** "The status quo had become comfortable for us," admits Marchment. "We were hitting target, but lacked consistency in our performance. We were like a toilet seat; up one week, down the next.

"Fast forward to a year later and the attitude across the whole team is that hitting target isn't our goal. We want to blow it out of the water.

"We do this by diagnosing, implementing one change at a time, follow-up, test, and learn. We take risks and do things every day that scare us. Isn't that the starting point for leadership by getting comfortable at being uncomfortable and that management doesn't have all the answers?"

**DO Get a Coach.** "We thought we were already good at coaching, but the science of driving change and improving human performance is now a strength of our team," says Stark. "Working with a specialist coach such as SwitchGear helped us accelerate our development.

"Top performers always have two to three specialist coaches. We've worked with SwitchGear on four engagements over 18 months to help us continually challenge ourselves to get better."

#### Summary

The benefits from improving processes and technology pale in comparison to maximizing the number one expense you are already spending money on. That is agent and management wages (plus 12-18 percent on top of this for vacation & benefits). With the complex work being done in sales and service organizations today the ability to consistently accelerate the skill and capability of frontline knowledge workers is the biggest game-changer of them all.

Innovative leaders of in-house and third-party organizations are raising the bar for themselves and each other by unleashing a tsunami of coaching and leadership. If your team is considering how to move from good to great, leveraging your leadership team properly can create the momentum required to make significant and sustainable change happen.

*Bruce Simpson is a partner at SwitchGear Consulting, Toronto, one of Canada's foremost consulting groups for contact centres specializing in accelerating revenue growth, lowering costs and taking employee and customer satisfaction to a higher level. He spent many years in sales management and call centre operations at Bell Canada. He later helped form North Direct Response, which morphed into the billion-dollar enterprise ClientLogic. He can be reached at bruce@switchgear.ca.*