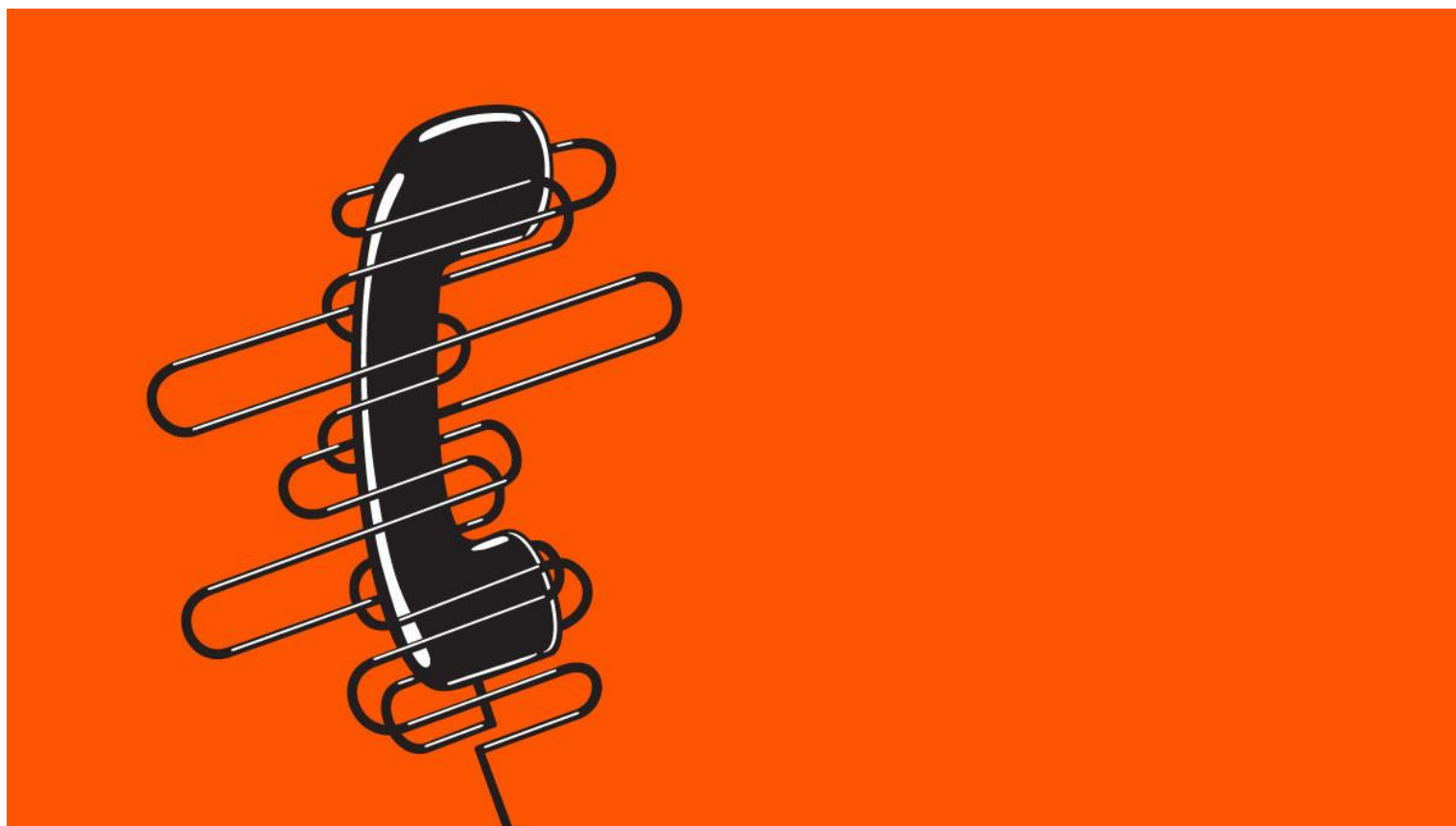


CUSTOMER SERVICE

Customer Service Reps Work Best When They Work Together, But Only 12% of Companies Let Them

by Lara Ponomareff, Lauren Pragoff, and Matthew Dixon

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Walk into any customer-service department and you're likely to encounter a scene that looks more

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personalities shine through,” the organization does all it can to actively prohibit such behavior, seeking instead to eliminate variance from one service interaction to the next. Calls are recorded and reps are ultimately evaluated on their ability to hit a prescribed set of quality checklist items—for instance, whether they used the customer’s name to build rapport, thanked the customer for being loyal, used an approved greeting and sign-off and, above all, whether they said anything factually incorrect about policies, products or services that could land the company in hot water.

In short, where other departments reward creativity and experimentation, what’s prized in customer service are consistency, error reduction and adherence to the rules.

Our research, however, shows that this type of management approach doesn’t just lead to lower-quality service interactions, but it’s more likely to *increase* errors than to reduce them.

In a global, online survey of more than 7,500 service reps from across 38 different companies, we found that service organizations fall into one of three distinct work environments or “climates”:

1. **Adherence climates**, in which reps rely primarily on company policies and procedures when making decisions.
2. **Individual-judgment climates**, wherein reps rely on their own personal experience and judgment to make decisions.
3. **Network-judgment climates**, in which reps rely more on advice and guidance from colleagues to inform their own decisions.

Perhaps not surprisingly, adherence climates tend to dominate in customer service. In our study, roughly three-quarters of companies can be characterized as representing one dominant type of climate. In those organizations, fully 52% of reps reported working in an adherence climate compared to 35% who work in an individual judgment climate and only 12% who find themselves in a network judgment climate.

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perform 50% better than the average contact center. The same true when it comes to making mistakes. Network judgment climates actually *reduce* the risk of rep error by 25% when compared to either individual judgment climates or adherence climates.

It turns out that the best way to improve performance and minimize risk *isn't* to tightly manage reps, but instead to liberate them to engage with one another and share both best practices and lessons learned in handling customer service requests.

Why do reps in network judgment climates perform better? We think it has to do with the shifting nature of service requests. In the days before self-service, tightly managing the service center might have made sense given the simple and predictable mix of issues that reps had to deal with—for instance, checking balances, changing addresses, or tracking packages. But, now that these easy issues are resolved in self-service channels, the average issue that makes it through to a live rep is more complex and far less predictable. In this environment, it's hard to provide reps with a script or checklist for every possible situation. Instead, with new and unique customer issues coming in every minute, it makes more sense to empower reps to leverage their peers' wisdom, experience, and lessons learned.

Whereas in the typical contact center, you would find reps working individually to resolve customer issues, in a network-judgment organization you would see reps leaning across their cube walls, huddled around a whiteboard or using tools like instant messaging to share advice and collaborate on solutions to complex issues.

Transforming an organization's climate to one of network judgment takes time and commitment, but can be done. Our research points to two key steps to get this right:

1. **Invest in collaboration tools and reward collaborative behaviors:** Companies should signal the expectations of peer learning and sharing through incentives and metrics (rewarding reps for collaborating with others and sharing advice) and bring reps closer together — both physically (by
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2. **Enlist reps to identify the underlying barriers to collaboration:** Managers are sometimes surprised that collaboration doesn't happen automatically after knocking down cube walls or investing in collaboration tools for reps. Often, there remain underlying barriers to collaboration that companies only surface once they engage reps in listening tours and focus groups. One of the biggest culprits stymying collaboration? Legacy productivity metrics like Average Handle Time (AHT), which [we've written about](#) previously. Said one manager from a large retailer, "We couldn't figure out why our reps weren't collaborating despite strong signals from management that we *wanted* them to. Once we got them together for a team brainstorming session, we realized that our obsession with AHT as a performance metric was sending the opposite message to reps: that we care more about handling calls quickly than allowing reps the time they need to tap a colleague on the shoulder and ask for advice."

A network judgment climate sets reps up to be true problem solvers and owners of a low-effort service experience. It means they have an outlet to share their ideas with their peers and their concerns with their supervisors. They get to stand up, take control, and share what they know.

And it has one other important benefit: reps *far* prefer it. Reps who work in a network-judgment organization demonstrate 54% higher discretionary effort and a 17% higher intent-to-stay than reps who work in the average contact center. With reps who stick around longer and are more engaged in their work, the richness of their collaboration and, therefore, the collective wisdom of the service department only improves. Network judgment is a trifecta win for the organizations who can implement it—better for reps, better for the company and, ultimately, better for the customer.



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D Berchemmann a year ago

"Reps who work in a network-judgment organization demonstrate 54% higher discretionary effort and a 17% higher intent-to-stay than reps who work in the average contact center." Nothing further need be said--the return here is significant.

I can clearly see your point as it relates to my contact center clients. They speak of personality, friendliness, tone and manner, etc., but grade almost exclusively on sterile QA guidelines (that can change at the drop of a hat depending on the metric du jour...). Mirrors adorn many cubicles, but CALLS are recorded, not agent behaviors. Most bonus plans are substantially--if not all--focused on individual metrics. In a BPO environment, clients exacerbate the problem; they speak of collaboration, "helping the customer," first-call resolution, etc., but use career call-center

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