Procedure*Flow*

The Essential Guide to
Agent Empowerment

"7 in 10 Americans say they've spent more money to do business with a company that delivers great service.[1]"

Introduction

In today's world, outstanding customer service is the ultimate competitive advantage. We are living in the Age of the Customer, and companies across the globe are taking note. Consumers care more about service today than ever before, and as a result are shifting their spending habits.

Outstanding customer service begins with your front line customer facing employees. In fact, 68% of consumers say that a pleasant representative was key to their recent positive service experience [1]. Which is why a team of confident, knowledgeable, and empowered customer service agents are critical to a company's success.

This ebook will act as your guide to becoming a contact center that thrives on agent empowerment. By implementing the 7 changes outlined in this ebook, you'll see dramatic improvements across your whole cycle of data. Contact centers who focus on agent empowerment not only see improved agent confidence and performance, they also create a better overall customer experience.

Your agent empowerment journey starts here.

What is Agent Empowerment?

Providing the necessary resources and environment that enables contact center agents to perform to the best of their ability. This involves giving agents the responsibilities and autonomy to make key decisions when interacting with customers.

Goals of Agent Empowerment

Before diving head first into agent empowerment, you should consider why you'd like to implement it into your contact center. It's important to keep in mind that your contact center and business are unique, so your motivations and reasons for implementing it will likely vary.

Create a sense of ownership

When agents have the authority and autonomy to make key decisions themselves, they will feel a strong sense of ownership when interacting with customers.

Improve morale

Happier employees stay in their role longer, which can make a big difference for companies struggling with high attrition.

Enable continuous improvement

When an entire team is engaged, the door is wide open for improvement. Everyone who feels a sense of ownership, and has the ability to act on it can help improve operations across the entire center.

Increase motivation

When agents have the ability to make things right with customers, they'll be highly motivated to exceed their expectations. In doing this, they'll improve their individual metrics, and always be willing to go above and beyond for a customer.

Improve your whole cycle of data

In the world of contact centers, it's no secret that any statistic you can think of is measured and examined under a microscope by senior management. Metrics such as AHT, NPS, and CSAT are just a few of stats that agents need to worry about when interacting with customers, and are often under intense pressure to perform. Which is why many centers have stopped focusing on singular metrics, and have shifted their focus to improving their whole cycle of data. Empowered agents leads to better performance, and therefore better overall metrics.

7 Ways to Empower Your Agents

In this section, we'll answer the question everyone's been asking: how do I empower my agents? After working with contact centers across the globe, we've broken down the process into 7 main sections. These approaches have been proven not only to give your agents a sense of empowerment, but also make measurable improvements to contact centers' bottom lines. You'll learn one step at a time how to make small changes in your center that will have a big impact. Keep reading to learn the things you can start doing today to empower your team.

1 Easy Access to Current Information

We live in a fast paced world. Information is changing constantly. New products and pricing are introduced, new campaigns and promotions are continuously coming out, and on top of all this, company policies and processes change frequently. These changes affect every single call your agents receive from customers, and they'll need to be well informed to do their job well.

There are many different ways you can do this.

Eliminate the paper

If it's written in a notebook, or printed in a binder, it becomes outdated very quickly, and becomes very challenging to maintain and update. Relying on information that's been physically written or printed can be one of the easiest and fastest ways for agents to make critical errors during customer calls.

Communication with employees

Make sure no one is left in the dark. Make it a standard practice that every time important information is updated, some form of communication is sent out to your team. This will ensure that everyone is aware of important changes, and every customer interaction will be handled with the latest up to date information.

Make sure they know early on where to find information

Why wait until an agent is struggling to show them where to find resources such as knowledge base articles? Ingrain items like this in training that show where to find information that explains how to complete a task, handle a customer inquiry, or walks them through a specific challenging scenario.

Take advantage of the cloud

Most software for call centers is available on cloud. This means that your information can be updated for your team in a matter of seconds, no matter the location of your team.

Ensure that those responsible are making updating information a priority

Depending on your contact center, updating information like pricing sheets or knowledge base articles may be the responsibility of different groups of people. No matter what team is responsible, it must be ingrained in your company culture to maintain a current, updated version of information at all times that employees can access. If even one piece of information in an agent's system is out of date, it could impact hundreds of customer calls.

2 Technologies and Systems

In a contact center, technology can make the difference between agents easily handling customer inquiries, and agents feeling completely lost.

One of the most effective, and often overlooked ways to empower agents is to provide them with the technology that best suits their needs. It's your customer service agents who are interacting with this technology for 8+ hours a day, and the technology you provide them can either help or hurt their performance.

When working with confusing or outdated technology, agents can feel demotivated or overwhelmed. If your center already has modern technology that agents love, great! But if your center doesn't, it might be time to start looking for some new technology.

When evaluating different technology providers, always keep in mind the following:

Cost Vs. ROI/benefits

If you're like most contact centers, you're working with a tight technology budget. When evaluating different technology for your center, consider not just the initial cost of the technology, but maintenance costs, as well as the expected ROI and other business benefits.

Time and resources required to implement

Depending on the technology you're interested in, implementation could be quick and painless, or could take months and require many human resources.

Integrations with your existing systems

Many different technologies on the marketplace work with integration partners to help seamlessly introduce new technology into your contact center. Whether or not this technology integrates with your existing systems should be a major factor when shopping for new technology.

Simplicity/ease of use

Unless every agent you hire has a computer science degree, you'll want your technology to be simple and easy to use. This will help with quick implementation, and get agents comfortable with it faster.

Does it fit with your unique business needs

Every industry, business, and contact center has different needs. Keep in mind that certain technologies work in some industries better than others.

Ensuring your technology meets your quality standards is critical. But it's important to think about quantity as well! Nothing will overwhelm an agent more than when they have to use 10+ different systems to handle a single customer call. Keep quantity in mind when shopping for a solution, and put yourself in the agent's shoes.

3 Agents Need Authority

Your agents handle a wide variety of challenging customer scenarios. In many cases, they'll be dealing with angry and frustrated customers, which can be emotionally draining on employees. If agents know a customer is upset and know what needs to happen to resolve the issue, but don't have the authority to act on the situation at hand, it can be extremely demotivating, and create a feeling of helplessness.

Giving them the authority to make things right with the customer can be a game changer for your employees. When they're interacting with an upset customer and can actually offer them something for their dissatisfaction, they'll be in greater control of the situation and increase their feeling of empowerment. Making things right with the customer can mean a lot of different things depending on your business, and the customer issue. Broadly speaking, there are three main different types of authority you can give agents to put them in greater control of handling customer issues.

Offering discounts

If a customer issue is minor, a 20% discount off their next purchase could be enough to satisfy your customer. Giving agents the ability to offer small or major discounts will help reduce escalations to management, and enable agents to resolve customers issues faster.

Offering upgrades

Similarly to discounts, upgrades are a great way to make things right with a customer when they've experienced an issue. For example, a customer service agent in the hospitality industry may require the authority to upgrade a customer's hotel room.

Retention pricing

If your customer is facing a major issue, or is extremely upset, you may need to leverage retention pricing. This type of pricing is not available to the public, and will only be offered to customers for retention purposes. Giving agents the authority to offer retention pricing is especially important when a customer is very upset and has faced a major issue. These are the scenarios when resolving their issue as quickly as possible becomes mission critical, and can make the difference between a customer staying, or going to a competitor.

4 Training & Learning

Your training program will be the first thing a new agent sees when starting in your contact center. Making this a positive learning experience will be absolutely critical to agents' success and will set the tone for the rest of their time at your center.

When creating your training program, you'll need to find the right balance, ensuring it's not too short with significant learning gaps, and not too long with too much information. The content should be just enough to not overwhelm the agent, but include all the necessary information they'll need to do their job effectively.

Visual and engaging content

Most people prefer visual to non-visual content, and your employees will too! Luckily, with visuals you have many different options. Visuals could be images, videos, physical objects, games, infographics, virtual reality, etc.

Content for all different learning styles

Every employee is unique and will have different preferred ways of learning new information. Creating a training program that accommodates the different types of learning styles will ensure that every agent can learn in the way that best suits them, and is set up for success very early on.

Hands on training

If you want your employees to actually remember what they learned in training, it's imperative that there is at least one module of hands on training. This is essentially "Learning by Doing", which has been shown to increase learner retention by 70%[2]!

Introduce technologies and systems as early on as possible

Your center may have very modern technology that is simple and intuitive for new employees to use, or your center may be using technology that is 20+ years old and has a massive learning curve. Either way, the earlier you get employees familiar with this technology, the better. This will increase the comfort level and confidence of your agents when they take their first customer call.

They know where to go for support

Even with a "perfect" training program, one of your agents is bound to get stuck at some point. Let your agents know that this is normal, and ensure they know where they can go when they need additional support. This help may come from your internal knowledge base, or from a team lead or supervisor.

They know what they have the authority and responsibility to do

This is a major part of empowering your agents. It's a first step to give your agents authority, but a critical step is to have clear communication on what they can and cannot do with a customer. For example, if a customer is upset, maybe you will give your agents the authority to offer a customer 20% of their next purchase. If this authority is clearly articulated early on in the training process, it will help your agents feel empowered, and create a stronger sense of ownership.

5 Feedback

Contact center agents are your first line of defense. They're the ones interacting with your customers more than anyone else, and have a front row seat to see what customers care about most. Which is why it's very surprising to learn that in many contact centers agents will have little or no way to provide their feedback to upper management. Your agents (especially your tenured ones) have the power to make lasting and measurable improvements in your center, all you have to do is enable them.

Let your agents know they have a voice early on

Ideally, you should be letting your new hires know early on in training that they have the ability to give feedback, and that their feedback is highly valued. This will set the tone for the rest of their time at your center.

Have an easy, accessible tool to provide feedback

Don't make it difficult for agents to provide feedback. Give them a simple and quick way for them to give their input. This will encourage more employees to do so more frequently.

Encourage feedback in all areas of the business

Let agents know that you don't just want feedback on things like incentives and benefits. Encourage them to give input if they think there's a better way to handle a specific customer scenario, or a more efficient way to close a call.

Have a method or plan in place to easily implement that feedback

Feedback is great, but if your employees are continuously giving good feedback that isn't acted upon, it can be very disheartening, and actually discourage your agents from providing feedback in the future. Management needs to have some type of plan in place that continuously looks at the feedback being given to them, selects a few ideas they can implement, and then pushes those changes through the center, making them visible to everyone.

Celebrate any improvements made with agent feedback

If your agent has given feedback, and played a role in improving a call flow, or improving efficiency, that should be known and celebrated! This will make the agents feel like they're making a difference, and encourage them to continue to provide feedback.

6 Continued Support

Part of agent empowerment is giving your agents a sense of independence. But even the most knowledgeable, experienced, and talented agents will need support from time to time. We've seen four different approaches that will ensure agents feel supported across the board.

Provide different types of support for employees

Your support mechanism for employees will vary largely depending on what your employee needs help with. Maybe they're struggling with specific product knowledge, are unsure of how to use their technology, or perhaps they're just having a stressful day. Ensure that different types of support are available for employees that will be able to assist them no matter what they're struggling with.

Regular check-ins

Never underestimate the power of face to face conversations with your team. At a minimum, you should be checking in with your team on a monthly basis to learn what your employees are struggling with most, and where you can help provide support.

Show agents where to find support in a pinch

Sometimes when your agents need support, they don't have time to wait around for an answer to a question. When they're facing an issue and have the customer on hold, every second counts. Show employees where they can find support quickly when they're in a tight situation and need answers fast.

Enable agents to support each other

If you're short on resources like management's time or money, one of the easiest ways to improve agent support is to enable it to come from other agents! Most contact centers have at least a few senior agents that are really confident in their role. Leverage those employees as much as you can to help out new hires. Senior agents know exactly what it's like to be a new face in a contact center, and usually know all the tips and tricks to help make their first few months in the center easier.

7 Take Out the Time Wasters

In a contact center, every second counts. Just a few seconds of wasted time can add up when you have a team of hundreds, or thousands of agents answering dozens of calls every day. Taking out some of your agent's biggest time wasters will allow your agents to better assist your customers, and empower them to do their job to the best of their ability. Below we've included some of the most common time wasters we've seen in contact centers.

Manual tracking

All agents' key metrics they've evaluated on are tracked automatically, right? Wrong. In many centers, agents will have to track at least one of their metrics manually after each call. If the metric is not critical to evaluate performance, it shouldn't be tracked. If it is critical, your center needs to find a way to track it automatically, and give that time back to your agent to work on other things.

Fighting with tools that don't work

If your technology is slow, freezes frequently, or gives regular error messages, it's having a big impact on your agent's time (not to mention your center's metrics). Aside from agent frustration, this wastes several minutes of your agent's time every day, and it doesn't take long for those minutes to add up to hours, and then days.

Self created barriers or work avoidance

When agents are frustrated with the lack of functionality of their tools, the lack of support by team leads and supervisors, or overwhelmed with call volume, they will do whatever they can to survive. They'll avoid work at all costs simply because they're frustrated, overwhelmed, and just need a few minutes to breath and get away from the stress.

Culture Shift: How to Implement Big Changes in Your Contact Center

If you're going to empower agents in your contact center, you've likely got some big changes coming up. It's important to not get overwhelmed initially. Every contact center is capable of empowering agents. Truly, the hardest part is getting started.

Start with what's causing you the most pain

Take a moment to evaluate the state of your contact center. What areas are you struggling with most? Is it agent performance, inefficiency, or dissatisfied customers? No matter what your greatest challenge is, there is always an action that can be taken to improve.

Tackle one change at a time

Once you've identified your greatest business challenge, find the change that will have the most impact, and make a plan of attack. Your plan doesn't need to be 40 pages long. It should contain just enough detail to outline what you'd like to achieve, the steps you need to do in order to achieve it, and how you're going to measure success.

Measure results and analyze

After implementing your first change, take a look at your results. What was effective? What didn't work well? Maybe you have more work to do to implement this change, or maybe it was a huge success and you're ready to tackle the next item on your list.

Rinse and Repeat

Once you've gone through this process a few times, you'll start seeing dramatic results. You'll be able to seamlessly transition from one positive change to the next, improving your whole cycle of data, and empowering every single one of your agents.

Empower Your Agents Today

Looking to empower your agents? Not sure where to start? We can help.
ProcedureFlow enables agent empowerment every day. We help with everything from implementing the right technology, to improving your feedback process, to change management.

ProcedureFlow

Contact us to start empowering your agents today.

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About ProcedureFlow

ProcedureFlow is a reimagined contact center knowledge base. It makes the most complicated information easy and intuitive to create, maintain, and use, even in highly regulated and complicated industries. We provide every employee with the exact information they need to handle any contact scenario, making employees confident in their abilities very close to day one on the job. ProcedureFlow allows organizations to leverage the knowledge and expertise of their top performers, and put it into the hands of every employee, improving quality and consistency. This allows organizations to transform traditional classroom training to "learning by doing", creating a more motivating and engaging environment for employees.

For more information, visit procedureflow.com

Sources

1. American Express. American Express® Global Customer Service Barometer. 2017.

2. The Peak Performance Center. The Learning Pyramid. 2012.