Bridging the Gap Between Executive and Call Center Management

How Operational Reviews Enable a Bottom-Up Chain of Information

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For years, executive management regarded the call center as nothing more than required overhead with costs that burden the bottom line. With the rise of customer relationship management (CRM), many executives recognized that the call center could be a strategic asset; a source of information that reflects the voice of the customer. In response, call centers have tried to transform themselves from independent entities solely charged with solving service issue into the so-called unified contact center responsible for all customer touch points, including sales and marketing. By doing so, call centers hoped to be elevated from purely an operational necessity to a strategic asset critical to improving overall business performance.

To support this transformation, many contact centers have turned to performance management. Performance management is a methodical process for helping an organization accomplish its goals by ensuring that day-to-day execution is consistent with an organization's strategy. Operational performance management provides line of sight from top-level organizational strategy down to line worker tactics by emphasizing the collective understanding of *what* the goals are and *how* they will be accomplished. As such, successful performance management provides much more than just dashboard metrics that measure activities. It depicts the cause and effect relationships between contact center performance and strategic goals, helping executive management understand the nature of this strategic asset.

Despite significant investments in time and technology – including performance management – why is it that many executive managers still regard the contact center as a cost center, with little tie to organizational strategy? To a large extent, the culprit lies in how contacts centers report on and review their performance. Organizations must consider fundamental changes to their weekly meetings that discuss performance and replace them with structured operational reviews.

What's Wrong with the Weekly Meeting?

Although most contact centers' managers probably don't realize it, their weekly status meetings may be increasing the divide between executive management and themselves. In fact, whenever someone associated with a call center discusses performance, they are potentially reinforcing the tactical – rather than strategic – nature of the call center. Most contact centers use "briefing books" based on Microsoft PowerPoint to document performance. The most common issues with creating these briefing books and conducting the weekly status meeting are as follows:

Four Obstacles to Reviewing Call Center Performance

1. Too much human intervention required
2. Performance data cannot be certified
3. Inconsistent information that is difficult to interpret
4. Historic information becomes outdated

1. Labor-intensive

To create briefing books, call center analysts run reports from operational systems, export the resulting information, merge it with data from other sources, and then add color commentary to explain the results, trends, and anomalies. In addition to the labor-intensive nature of these tasks, the likelihood of unintentional error is high. It is not uncommon for a call center analyst to spend hours preparing a briefing book, only to discover that it contains a critical error right before the meeting. Nothing creates more doubt in the minds of senior management than an organization that is uncertain about its own performance.

2. Lack of Certification

Because data is removed from operational systems and "manipulated" to make it easier to explain, there's no way to track what changes have been made to it. While the changes are usually benign, the possibility of an unintentional omission or outright gaming of the results means that meeting time is often spent arguing about the accuracy of the presentation rather than actually making decisions. Worse still, decisions might be based on faulty assumptions and therefore subject to change when the underlying errors are discovered. As a result, senior management often doesn't believe the numbers that they see reported from a call center and may even second-guess the decisions of the call center managers.

3. Inconsistencies

While it's possible to create a common look and feel for a briefing book, it is much more difficult to standardize the contents and interpretations. However, without this extra effort on standardization, stakeholders might interpret the same metric or activity in different ways. For example, depending on whether the metric *average delay of all callers* includes those customers that hang up during their hold time might make a different on whether the switch needs to be expanded and whether the organization is making progress towards its customer satisfaction objectives. Furthermore, it is common for the call center to interpret an objective such as customer satisfaction based on the frequency with which customers call back with the same problem while executive management may base it on the number of repeat buys or lifetime value.

4. Timeliness

By their very nature, briefing books are static and represent performance at some specific point in the past. Unless everyone within a call center picks the exact moment in time, another set of inconsistencies – and confusion – can arise. In addition, performance information is constantly changing. While it's interesting to know that *staff occupancy* was below target last week, it's critical to know whether it has improved since then so the call center can decide what adjustments have to be made for the coming week. Furthermore, executives outside the call center often want dig more deeply into the detail around a specific topic. A static briefing book doesn't provide the opportunity for additional commentary.

What's an Operational Review?

According to Ventana Research, operational reviews are "regularly scheduled meetings in which organizations evaluate their conformity with plans and resource allocations as well as its organizational structure, operating procedures, processes and controls." In other words, operational reviews are a process for management to understand current performance, identify areas that need improvement, and adjust plans going forward. Organizations typically conduct operational review meetings at various levels on a regularly scheduled basis.

At first blush, an operational review might seem a lot like a formal weekly status meeting. However, while the operational review process might include weekly meetings, the goal is not just to communicate status but also to support performance alignment; the coordination of every member of an organization ensures progress towards overall objectives. This coordination stems from the fact that the results from operational reviews at one level are typically aggregated for presentation at the next. For example, a call center with six physical locations would have individual performance reviews for each location that would then be aggregated into one overall view of performance. The call center director would then present this aggregated review to executive management.

Unlike strategy and planning that are cascaded down from above, operational reviews are aggregated from below. As a result, while objectives often seem mandated and meet with resistance, operational reviews typically have much higher rates of adoption and acceptance. Not surprisingly, individual contributors and managers alike are more likely to information that they themselves have supplied. In addition, this aggregation forces groups to create explicit links between their goals and actions, exposing the relationships between different levels in an organization.

A structured operational review process addresses the limitations in preparing for the weekly status meetings by relying on technology to automate the process of publishing timely, documented, and certified performance information. The static briefing book is replaced by a live, interactive system that allows users to discuss results and to dig more deeply into the root cause of issues, when appropriate. By publishing performance information *before* the meeting, the weekly status meeting is transformed from a chaotic summary of what happened since the last time everyone got together to a structured operational review focused on addressing uncovered issues and agreeing to incremental changes in plans. The process also helps contact centers go from seeming reactive to being proactive.

Adopting a structured operational review process provides benefits beyond streamlining the weekly review meeting. By switching from a tactical to a strategic focus, contacts centers explicitly tie their operations to overall objectives. This, in turn, helps executive management understand how the contact center can be a strategic asset in achieving their own goals. By doing so, the operational review process provides the backbone for the holy grail of performance management: providing line of sight from the top-level organizational strategy down to every call center worker.

Putting it All Together

While the call center is still viewed by many as required overhead, the unified contact center has the potential to be a revenue-generating, strategic asset. One key is to stop thinking of the call center as an independent entity whose mission is to provide excellent service to customers in a cost-effective manner. Instead, an organization must think of the contact center as a primary channel in achieving its overall customer-oriented objectives, regardless of whether those objectives involve increasing share of wallet, stemming customer churn, or becoming more of a trusted advisor.

To reinforce the integrated and strategic nature of the contact center, management must rethink how they report performance. Instead of relying on unstructured weekly status meetings that debate past results, call centers should switch to formalized operational reviews that focus attention on desired outcomes and impacts to other departments. In addition, instead of distributing labor-intensive briefing books potentially riddled with inconsistencies and errors, contact centers should adopt live systems that allow interactive discussions of goals, initiatives, and metrics.

Contact centers can ill afford to continue to be perceived as a tactical asset. By adopting a structure operational review process that ties its goals to overall objectives, the modern contact center can rightfully take its role as a strategic entity representing the voice of the customer.

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