

## **Stress or Pressure?**

“Call handlers are asked to produce both quality and quantity, to combine strength and stamina with emotional labour to deliver one hundred and eighty seconds of ‘bubbly personality’ one hundred and twenty times a day”.

There can be no doubt that the call handlers role is a challenging one and their continued motivation is key to reducing stress, maintaining performance and lowering absenteeism and turnover. It is not enough just to avoid de-motivating call handlers (although it is certainly a good start).

It is important that managers and team leaders within the Call Centre are trained to recognise symptoms of stress and also clearly understand the difference between work pressure and stress.

Pressure is stimulating, it motivates people, but stress is bad for both the health and well - being of the employee and the employer. Stress can be brought about by a number of common situations- the volume of work, the type of calls they are handling (debt collection for example), or because they are handling a call from an irate customer. No two people will respond to a difficult situation in the same way, and what one person considers a mild inconvenience is a major catastrophe for another.

The symptoms of stress are many and varied. Behaviourally, people can have difficulty concentrating, lose their sense of humour, and become more aggressive or more withdrawn. They may show signs of excessive smoking or drinking, frequent indigestion, flu and colds, headaches, other aches and pains. And physiologically, stress can be a risk factor in illnesses including heart disease and some mental health conditions.

It is important that everyone understands the organisations objectives as well as those for the Call Centre, we know that focusing on productivity alone will quickly result in quality issues and it is important to ensure that both quantitative and qualitative measures form part of the Call Centres key performance indicators. We need to always be aware that individual as well as organisational goals and targets must be balanced between these two, often conflicting, demands.

The consequences of overemphasising productivity include:

- Increased stress
- Poor morale
- Rushing through calls in order to improve productivity
- Call handlers don't listen to the customer properly, so mistakes get made
- Poor working relationships between supervisors, managers and staff.
- Increased absence
- Negative impact on customer satisfaction

A recent MORI survey carried out for the Marketing and Communication Agency found that 40% of the UK employees interviewed had no faith in their organisations' leadership, strategy or vision. The survey also reported that restructuring or mergers had directly affected 41% of managers and 29% of non-managers in the previous twelve months, so organisational goals were probably changing faster than they could be e-mailed to all employees.

Management consultants Towers Perrin concludes, somewhat obviously, that employee understanding of corporate strategy and their role in it will lead on to all the other things on the management wish list, like better customer service, product development, creativity and innovation.

Everybody seems to know this and talks about it endlessly, but internal communications remain an issue within Call Centres. To be effective, the communication programme must always reinforce the organisations values and should also be:

Descriptive – statements tend to be informative rather than evaluative.

Solution oriented – there is a focus on problem solving rather than on what cannot be done.

Open and honest – even if criticism is expressed, there are rarely hidden messages; the aim is to help and improve.

Caring – there is an emphasis on empathy and understanding.

Forgiving – the inevitability of error or misjudgement (within reason!) is recognised and action is taken to learn from the experience rather than repeat it.

Feedback – everyone sees this as a positive and essential part of maintaining good working relationships and high levels of performance.

An open, supportive environment is more likely to give call handlers a feeling of worth and importance. If suggestions are welcomed and acted upon, mistakes used as an opportunity to learn and crises are dealt with in an even handed way then our call handlers are more likely to be open in their communication. They will feel trusted, secure and confident in their jobs and in the organisation as a whole.

Effective team working, flexibility and a sense of involvement all contribute to - and benefit from – an open and supportive climate. A good team spirit contributes to the overall atmosphere of the Call Centre.

Team leaders play a critical role in the Call Centre as the majority of communication is channelled through them. We must train them to manage by praise and not punishment; because stress is often caused by the way people are treated. As well as having a structured team leader training and development programme; coaching and honest feedback are crucial to maintaining effective two - way communications across the Call Centre.

Each team will usually have a weekly or monthly team briefing away from their workstations. These are often used to update call handlers on any

developments/changes and to give an opportunity for the team to talk discuss areas of concern or interest.

If there are calls in the queue, then a team brief or a coaching session often runs the risk of being cancelled as, of course, taking call handlers away from their workstations will have a detrimental effect on service levels.

Although this is understandable occasionally, any medium and long-term occurrences that impact on communications will hit morale hard. Call handlers spend all day facing a screen and speaking into a telephone where their opportunity to interact is only with their caller. Opportunities for social relations with their work colleagues are therefore very highly valued.

The difficulties of communicating across different shifts in the twenty - four hour, seven day a week Call Centre should not be underestimated. If we are to communicate effectively, some innovative enablers must support the communication strategy:

- Communication whiteboards - a simple but effective method of communicating which can be used to say ‘ thank you, we had a great day’s work yesterday’ or to say ‘there’s a problem with the system today, please bear with us it will be fixed by lunchtime.’
- Buzz Sessions – These sessions usually take just five or ten minutes at the start of the shift, and are used to communicate day - to - day issues. They are also an opportunity to meet and greet the team and start off in a positive mood.
- Newsletters - Can be a mix of formal and informal news: who’s who, an interview with a senior manager, births and birthdays as well as products, sales or marketing updates.
- Meet the boss sessions - An open forum for some call handlers to talk to “the boss” in a more informal setting and ask any questions.
- Employee opinion survey - Opportunities to benchmark morale and respond to issues and concerns.
- Intranets - A very useful tool for making information available quickly and easily at the workstation - but help people to manage new technology - don’t overload them with emails or leave them in front of screens for too long.

It is important that an established reward and recognition programme is in place and that everyone understands it.

Because Call Centres need team players and steady performers as much as they need high performers any reward system should afford the opportunity for everyone to take part. There is often an assumption that recognition and rewards equates to money and budget but this is not the case.

It is important though that rewards focus on behaviour and not simply performance results. Recognition can be a certificate, a name on a 'wall of honour', helium balloons on the desk or even t-shirts. The key factor is that the individual call handler or even the whole team are publicly recognised by their manager and by their peers; this is a very powerful motivator indeed.

One of the best morale boosters is to receive a letter of praise from a customer. These should be displayed in the Call Centre as they will not only motivate those involved but will also reinforce the organisations commitment to maintaining high standards of quality customer service.

And finally, create and maintain a culture where people want to have fun. People spend more of their life at work than anywhere else-make it fun.

#### About the author

Ann-Marie Stagg is Chair of the Call Centre Management Association in the UK. She has managed a variety of call centres for large organisations including the Automobile Association, Vertex Data Science, North West Water and Littlewoods Bet Direct. Ann-Marie has recently taken up the role of Call Centre Director for Scottish Power. The CCMA award of 1998 Call Centre Manager of the Year was their recognition of Ann-Marie's people skills and saw her representing the UK at the Global Call Centre Managers awards in Denver. She is on the editorial board of a number of call centre industry publications and speaks at call centre conferences in the UK and abroad. Contact her at the CCMA website or email [amstagg@ukonline.co.uk](mailto:amstagg@ukonline.co.uk)

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#### Research drawn from:

Call Centre Management Review,  
Maryland, USA [www.incoming.com](http://www.incoming.com)

Cary Cooper, BUPA Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health

University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (Umist)

HSE [www.healthandsafety.co.uk](http://www.healthandsafety.co.uk)

The Effects of New Ways of Working on Employee Stress Levels research report

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