

# Emotionally Connected Customer Experience

Autumn 2025



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## CCMA Leadership Forum Series

The Leadership Series is the documented output from the CCMA's series of Leadership Forum roundtables. These take place at the House of Lords and provide an exclusive opportunity for senior contact centre leaders to explore the key factors driving change in their industry - and to consider how to continue innovating and adding value for the benefit of the customer, colleagues, and the business.

## Leadership Forum Attendees

Vicki Martin, Director of Customer Experience, Alliance Healthcare

Vicki Hart-Mclaren, Senior Manager, Guest Support, Contact Centre Operations, Carnival UK

Kerri Butchers, Senior Operations Leader, DVLA

Rob Cooper, Head of Operations, Fairfax & Favor

Prashant Parekh, Customer Change Director, Huntingdonshire District Council

Ian Harrison, Head of Customer Engagement, LeShuttle

Sabina Onwuka, Head of Customer Services, London Borough of Barking & Dagenham

Peter Lonsdale, People Services Consultant, McDonald's UK & Ireland

David Condron, Head of Public Contact & Service Delivery, Metropolitan Police

Graham Swanton, Director of Customer and Insight, Moat Housing

Lisa Lewis, Chief of Staff, NHS Professionals

Ingrid Brackley, Head of Customer Service Operations, NHS Property Services

Phil Heron, Operations Director, Optimum Medical

Catherine Oehlers, VP Customer Experience

Freda Owusu, Director of Customer Contact Centre, Sovereign Network Group

Lucie Child, Head of Customer, Transport for Greater Manchester



## The Fundamentals of Emotional Connection

As organisations increasingly deploy AI and automation to handle routine customer queries, the nature of human interaction in contact centres is fundamentally changing. Rather than diminishing the importance of emotional



connection, this technological evolution is amplifying it. The conversations that remain with human advisors are becoming more complex, more sensitive, and more emotionally demanding - requiring enhanced empathy, judgement and resilience from frontline teams.

This Leadership Forum explored how organisations across diverse sectors are navigating this transformation. From pharmaceutical supply chains to housing providers, from public services to luxury audio brands, leaders shared their experiences of maintaining and strengthening emotional connection in an era of rapid digital change. The discussion revealed both universal challenges and sector-specific nuances, while highlighting that success depends less on the technology itself and more on the culture, measurement frameworks and organisational commitment that surround it:

**Emotion is inherent in service delivery.** Whether handling life-saving pharmaceutical orders, managing housing repairs or supporting holiday bookings, every customer interaction carries emotional weight that organisations must acknowledge and manage effectively.

**Quality matters more than speed.** Leaders state that measuring the right outcomes - resolution, empathy, customer satisfaction - often drives more positive customer

experiences than focusing solely on efficiency metrics such as Average Handle Time (AHT).

**Channel preference is personal and contextual.** Assumptions about which channels customers prefer for emotional interactions don't always prove correct. Digital solutions can sometimes provide the privacy and convenience customers need, even in sensitive scenarios.

**AI amplifies the importance of human connection.** As automation handles routine queries, frontline advisors increasingly manage complex, emotionally demanding interactions, requiring enhanced training, support and empowerment.

**Emotional connection requires organisational commitment.** From board level to frontline, leaders strongly believe that embedding emotional intelligence in culture, processes and technology decisions is a key determinant for whether organisations truly serve their customers' needs.

## Understanding the Emotional Landscape

The nature of emotional connection varies dramatically across sectors and customer contexts. For some organisations, emotion is intrinsic to every interaction. As Vicki Martin at Cencora Alliance Healthcare observed about the healthcare industry: "The products we supply are inherently emotive. They help people stay healthy, tackle illnesses, and manage long-term health conditions. Whether as a preventative measure or a cure, every product we deliver aims to support positive health outcomes, creating a deeply personal and meaningful connection."



Similarly, in the housing sector, the emotional stakes are high. "Our residents have no choice about their housing provider, therefore it's all emotive contact," explained Freda Owusu from Sovereign Network Group. Graham Swanton from Moat Housing agreed: "People's homes are emotive. And increasingly, in housing, you're often expected to step in to fill the role of other services that aren't there anymore."

For public sector organisations, the emotional complexity can be even more pronounced. The Metropolitan Police's David Condron described handling "anything from terrorist calls to fireworks complaints" on a day-by-day basis.

However, while the emotion may be more 'baked in' to customer interactions in certain sectors, that doesn't mean it isn't present in others. As Catherine Oehlers emphasised, "Everything is emotive. It's not just about product, it's about a customer's circumstances. Once you understand the customer journey, you understand that any purchase or transaction can potentially come with a significant emotional weight."

The Leadership Forum highlighted a crucial reality: customers are often contacting organisations due to an emotional state being triggered. By the time they engage, they can be frustrated, concerned, excited, nervous, or dealing with circumstances that require heightened empathy and understanding.

## Human Connections in an Automated World

A recurring theme throughout the Leadership Forum was the paradoxical relationship between automation and emotional connection. Rather than replacing human interaction, AI is often intensifying the emotional demands placed on frontline advisors by removing simpler queries from the contact mix.

Several organisations have successfully deployed AI to handle routine interactions. Rob Cooper from Fairfax & Favor shared that his organisation had "automated 30% of customer contact with AI for product help, returns and standard questions". Ian Harrison from LeShuttle described how improvements to their web chat service, powered by AI, had "halved the number of web chats being handled."

However, this automation success creates new challenges. As routine queries disappear, advisors face increasingly complex scenarios, requiring higher levels of emotional intelligence and resilience. As AI takes low-hanging fruit away, the frontline are dealing with more complex issues, leaders noted. The impact on colleagues can be significant.

Kerri Butchers from DVLA emphasised the importance of supporting colleagues through this transition: "Advisors are left with complex queries. We're providing as much support





as we can to our staff, including emotional intelligence and resilience training.”

The broad consensus from leaders was that successful AI implementation depended on thoughtful boundaries. Phil Heron from Optimum Medical described making a conscious decision that there are some customer journeys that just wouldn’t be automated.

“We’re automating back office and simple transactional conversations, but creating our own training academy to ensure we’re the best for the service we deliver and keep the human in it,” Heron stated.

Peter Lonsdale from McDonald’s reinforced this point, warning against artificial divisions in the customer experience: “We mustn’t silo AI and human contact. There has to be open and obvious opportunities to speak to a human being at any point that the customer so desires. How the business would like the journey to be is secondary to what the customer needs or wants.”

### Challenging Assumptions About Channel Preference

The conventional wisdom suggests customers prefer speaking to humans during emotional moments. However, several leaders questioned this line of thinking. As Graham

Swanton from Moat Housing observed: “The assumption is that people always want to pick up a phone in emotive scenarios, but that’s not always true. Medical problems are a good example – people are often too embarrassed to turn to voice and would prefer digital or AI.”

Ian from LeShuttle highlighted how effective digital experiences are reshaping expectations: “The NHS app is a great example, because it has brought simplicity. When the experience works that well, it’s life-changing. If you can get the blend right of simple functional stuff through an app while also offering the personal touch, it’s superb.”

However, demographic considerations remain critical. Organisations serve multigenerational customer bases with varying comfort levels across different channels. The challenge lies in providing genuine choice rather than forcing customers down predetermined paths based on organisational preference or assumption.

Alliance Healthcare’s Vicki cautioned: “We have to be inclusive, remember our demographics and ensure we’re not forcing customers down paths we’ve chosen for them.”

### Data, Storytelling and the Voice of the Customer

Leaders described holding vast amounts of customer data, yet acknowledged significant opportunities to leverage this information more effectively for delivering emotionally connected experiences.

Vicki Hart-Mclaren from Carnival explained how recent technology investment transformed their capability: “We’ve done a big tech shift in the last 18 months. All the bells and whistles, analytics and so on. It’s given us reams of data and we now understand where people are and aren’t happy.”

Speech analytics emerged as a particularly valuable tool for understanding emotional nuance. However, data alone doesn’t drive change – storytelling and senior leadership engagement do. Carnival’s Vicki highlighted a novel approach to both: “Senior teams get a lot of numbers and data daily, so we choose a guest call where someone was frustrated and share it with them. We’ll then use a video of the advisor alongside it dealing with the query, and bring the advisor experience to life as well as the voice of the guest.”



Prashant Parekh from Huntingdonshire District Council recommended a direct approach: “Encourage senior leaders to get on the phone and experience a customer interaction directly to gain sufficient insight into why process changes may or may not work.”

Ian stressed organisational accountability: “Go back out to the rest of the organisation and show colleagues what customers are saying about different facets of the business. Everything people do affects the customer - everyone works in customer experience, even if they’re not customer-facing.”

### Measuring What Matters

Traditional contact centre metrics increasingly fail to capture the quality of emotionally connected experiences. Several leaders described deliberately moving away from efficiency-focused measures towards outcome-based evaluation.

Sabina Onwuka from London Borough of Barking & Dagenham explained a fundamental cultural shift: “Quality of call has to be right. We have to measure the right things. We’ve taken AHT out of the equation for advisors because it changes the culture. Advisors can have time to resolve a query. We focus on outcomes and resolution.”

This shift recognises that emotional connection cannot be rushed. Lisa Lewis from NHS Professionals observed that customers increasingly notice when advisors follow rigid

scripts: “When contact centre advisors follow scripts and box-tick, it’s much more evident to customers and less tolerated.”

David from the Metropolitan Police described how removing process-driven constraints improved satisfaction: “Moving away from processes and taking away robotic tick-boxes can shift customer satisfaction - suddenly you’re offering them conversation rather than a process.”

The forum acknowledged that balancing operational metrics with experience quality remains challenging, but the consensus emerged that leading with quality drives better long-term outcomes than optimising purely for efficiency.

### Culture and Compliance

Emotional connection flourishes or fails based on organisational culture. Leaders emphasised that frontline empowerment, training investment and senior leadership commitment determine whether emotional intelligence becomes embedded throughout operations.

Peter highlighted the foundation required: “We all agree that training, from a frontline advisor perspective is crucial. However, that training will be ineffective if we don’t ensure that we are creating the right environment for, and expectations of, our own people. So it’s equally important for us to have leaders in the team setting the right culture



and leading processes and systems which are designed to enable the kind of service we want to deliver.”

Sabina described the cultural transformation at London Borough of Barking & Dagenham: “We’ve changed the culture of our service in the last four years. You have to bring your people into the headspace that there will always be change, but that there are ways to embrace it.”

Training emerged as a critical enabler, particularly as advisor roles become more complex. Ingrid Brackley from NHS Property Services explained: “Now we’re doing empathy training and restructuring our priorities in contact, looking less at transactional interactions and more at customer care.”

For regulated sectors, innovation in customer experience must navigate complex governance frameworks and reputational considerations that can slow or prevent change.

Graham described the challenges facing housing providers: “Housing providers work in a heavily regulated environment. Regulation impacts the strategic direction decisions made by boards. Some providers will be fearful, ‘Do we want to be first to change something and potentially be publicised if it goes wrong’? Governance and the reputational impact of change can be huge hurdles for some.”

This regulatory caution can create resistance to beneficial innovation, particularly around AI. Leaders stressed the importance of thoughtful implementation that prioritises transparency and maintains human oversight. Sabina emphasised: “We have to remember we’re human when

we’re coding AI or building AI, so that the emotion is baked into the AI. It’s about who is feeding the tool with the information that’s going to best serve customers.”

### Maintaining Human Connection

Despite digital transformation and automation advances, voice contact remains crucial for emotionally connected experiences – and may become even more valuable as routine queries migrate to other channels.

Ian shared a historical perspective: “I took my first call 30 years ago and we were talking about the death of the contact centre then. It’s not going away.”

The forum discussed how voice offers unique capabilities for handling emotional complexity. Voice can enable real-time empathy, allow advisors to read tone and adjust responses accordingly, and provides the immediate reassurance many customers need during difficult moments. Furthermore, voice interactions generate invaluable insights that organisations risk losing as they become more digital.

The challenge lies not in choosing between voice and digital, but in creating blended experiences where customers can move fluidly between channels based on their needs.

Ultimately, increasing automation will place even greater demands on human advisors, requiring continued investment in training, support and wellbeing. The Leadership Forum reinforced the sentiment that genuine emotional connection remains fundamentally human – something that thoughtful implementation of technology can support and amplify, but never fully replicate.



## Building Emotionally Connected Experiences

What advice do contact centre leaders give to their peers looking to deliver emotionally connected customer experiences?

“Be clear about the questions you’re trying to answer. Don’t waste time needlessly chasing the next big thing. Focus on understanding your customers’ diverse needs and guide them in ways that align with their preferences, not just the paths you’ve chosen for them.”

**Vicki Martin, Director of Customer Experience, Alliance Healthcare**

“Make sure you bring your Voice of the Guest or Customer programme to life with great storytelling. And ensure you provide your customers ‘brilliant basics’. The ‘surprise and delight’ is becoming less and less important, in comparison.”

**Vicki Hart-Mclaren, Senior Manager, Guest Support, Contact Centre Operations, Carnival UK**

“Transparency is key in everything you do. If there’s a significant change you want to make to anything then you have to be honest and ensure the involvement of your staff and colleagues. Give them a chance to be involved and to help shape what you’re doing.”

**Kerri Butchers, Senior Operations Leader, DVLA**

“Plan for the worst case rather than the best case. Don’t be afraid to ask challenging questions, don’t be afraid to plan systems for difficult and worst case scenarios. Especially if you’re talking about the involvement of AI.”

**Rob Cooper, Head of Operations, Fairfax & Favor**

“Analyse your most difficult and complex complaints. It helps you gain sufficient insight into why process changes may or may not work.”

**Prashant Parekh, Customer Change Director, Huntingdonshire District Council**

“Go back out to the rest of the organisation and show colleagues what customers are saying about different facets of the business. Everything people do affects the customer – everyone works in customer experience, even if they’re not customer-facing.”

**Ian Harrison, Head of Customer Engagement, LeShuttle**

“What’s your data telling you? If your corporate plan is to be a data-led organisation, are you listening to what the data’s telling you? Start with the humans and then layer on the tech. All these elements have to align. Bring IT skills into the contact centre.”

**Sabina Onwuka, Head of Customer Services, London Borough of Barking & Dagenham**

“We mustn’t silo AI and human contact. There has to be open and obvious opportunities to speak to a human being at any point that the customer so desires. How the business would like the journey to be is secondary to what the customer needs or wants.”

**Peter Lonsdale, People Services Consultant, McDonald’s UK & Ireland**

“People are looking for ROI and savings across the board. Focus on helping other parts of the business improve their service, then that will help you and the wider organisation. Sponsors have to be from customer experience or service.”

**David Condron, Head of Public Contact & Service Delivery, Metropolitan Police**

“We’re all representing organisations that needs the customer and is serving a purpose for the customer. Segment to understand what customers want and then provide options to ensure different customers who want different things at different times are all served accordingly.”

**Graham Swanton, Director of Customer and Insight, Moat Housing**

“Don’t follow your competitor, follow your customer. Consider the basics and think about subtle service.”

**Lisa Lewis, Chief of Staff, NHS Professionals**

“Take what people are saying about you and tell a story to get investment.”

**Ingrid Brackley, Head of Customer Service Operations, NHS Property Services**

“Think about how you highlight your purpose and the impact you have on customers. Any decision you make – can you look back and show exactly why it’s going to improve the experience of the customer? What difference will the changes you make actually make to customers?”

**Phil Heron, Operations Director, Optimum Medical**

“Take your time and get CX right. Customer insights, forums and routes to inform what you are doing. Talk to fellow professionals to ensure you get decisions right.”

**Freda Owusu, Director of Customer Contact Centre, Sovereign Network Group**

“Immerse yourself in your customer’s life and experiences. Seeing life through their lens reveals the real obstacles and where you can remove these pain points for them.”

**Lucie Child, Head of Customer, Transport for Greater Manchester**

## About the CCMA

For more than 30 years, the CCMA has been dedicated to supporting contact centre leaders. We push ourselves to do more for our thriving membership base, which is the largest community of industry professionals in the UK.

The CCMA was founded with the goal of sharing best practice and networking to improve skills and knowledge in order to progress contact centre operations – and we live by that to this day.

We give those who work in contact centres the chance to discuss ideas and share experiences through member-only Special Interest Groups and online and in-person events. Member organisations are invited to become Accredited through the Contact Centre Standards Framework and get independent guidance on where they can improve. There is the opportunity to compare operations against industry standards and 25+ KPIs, via our annual CCMA Benchmark.

Our training arm, CCMA Academy gives contact centre professionals at all levels a structured learning opportunity to support both personal and professional development for the benefit of their operations. We also celebrate the progress our industry is making through the UK National Contact Centres Awards. Those that win go on to share their stories through channels such as the UK National Contact Centre Conference, Best Practice Visits and CareerTalk, while also providing input into our Special Interest Groups and other events.

[www.ccma.org.uk](http://www.ccma.org.uk)

## About Ventrice

Ventrice is a customer experience specialist combining human empathy with AI-driven solutions and digital transformation expertise. Partnering with ambitious, experience-focused brands, Ventrice delivers multilingual, omnichannel CX, intelligent automation, and strategic consultancy. By aligning emotion with innovation, Ventrice transforms every customer interaction into a meaningful brand experience - driving loyalty, accelerating satisfaction, and unlocking long-term growth through smarter, more connected service.

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