

The leader of the pack

Recruiting effective team leaders is vital for the success of a call centre. But, asks **Alex Coxon**, how can managers assess who is suitable for leadership?



Standing out from the crowd: skills development is key to turning front line staff into leaders

developing an employee from agent to team leader is one of those perennial tasks call centres often undertake without a second thought. In many cases, managers will pinpoint the individual who is most adept on the phone: the one who always manages to up-sell or who engages

particularly well with customers. But putting an agent in the spotlight like this, without actually determining whether the move is right for them, can be incredibly destructive.

"A massive proportion of the attrition we face in call centres comes down to relationships," explains Anne Marie Forsyth,

chief executive of the Customer Contact Association (CCA). "The relationship agents have with their front line manager, or team leader, is perhaps most crucial of all.

"Colleagues might begin by being pleased for a peer who's been given a promotion, but will soon need to be convinced that the

A "FAB" NEW WAY FOR KEEPING TEAM LEADER SKILLS SHARP:

When M&S Money decided it needed to drive down business costs, increase productivity and reduce employee turnover — at the same time as continuing to provide exceptional customer service — the only solution was to develop a new kind of team leadership.

Working with business psychologists Kaisen Consulting, the financial services company designed a programme that would teach team leaders how to shape employee

behaviour. Entitled the FAB (Feelings, Attitudes and Behaviours) programme, it was decided that the course should be split into eight training days over three-months.

In each session, a focus is placed on realistic role-playing and feedback. In the advanced coaching module, for example, one team leader will take the role of a coach to two other participants. After each session, that individual would receive in-depth personal feedback, not only from the tutor, but also from the other delegates. While this

might not sound a million miles away from other team leader coaching programmes, what has made the FAB training different is the way in which participants are appraised in the aftermath.

Similar programmes conclude once the classroom sessions are over. However, FAB continues for another year — first evaluating the extent to which each manager has transferred their new skills into the workplace after three months — and then putting every graduate through an MOT a



individual is more than a friend who's done well. A leader needs to be able to teach them skills they wouldn't otherwise have. They need to be able to manage, mentor, communicate and be proactive. They can't simply be a pal."

So, just how should senior managers

year later designed to revisit and refresh their skills and ensuring what they've learnt hasn't been lost.

The results to date have been impressive. Two hundred staff have undergone the programme and CSR turnover has halved. Productivity and team revenues have also almost doubled. In fact, the scheme has been so well received that the firm plans to include senior managers in an executive version later this year.

best assess who has the potential for team leadership? According to Nick Drake-Knight, director at consultancy Performance in People, there are two key characteristics that senior managers should look for within their staff base.

The first, he says, is an ability to remain calm under pressure. "Culture starts at the top. If a team leader is seen panicking, this will have a snowball effect. Therefore managers should analyse how a prospective team leader copes under pressure.

"To get an accurate gauge, analysis should be done on the job rather than in an artificial testing situation where the results might be very different to real life," he adds. "The key is to watch and analyse over a period of time."

Recording an individual's performance over time is what Drake- ▶

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► Knight advocates when measuring the second facet, too. Ascertaining an individual's supportiveness — the degree to which they are charitable with others — is a really important gauge of potential leadership, he says. Therefore, managers should look for evidence of team projects where the agent in question hasn't necessarily been involved themselves, but has still gone out of their way to help others they work with.

Of course, having such abilities is all well and good should the individual in the spotlight be looking for advancement. But, remember that not everyone in the contact centre will actually want the responsibilities that come with team leadership.

Natalie Calvert, managing director at the contact centre consultancy Calcom, reckons that before any one individual is earmarked for promotion, they should first be given the opportunity to say whether or not it's a path they want to take.

"It's useful to run an assessment centre for anyone who is interested in becoming a team leader — even if such opportunities aren't currently available," she says. "Doing this allows team members to raise their hands and say they want to advance their careers. It also gives managers a measure of an individual's capabilities ahead of any analysis they might make based on that individual's day-to-day working lives."

Ultimately, Calvert's opinions echo those of

Drake-Knight: "You can recruit for operational skills, but in reality you should employ for attitude," she insists. "If you have the right attitude around you, you can produce the right culture, which in turn will allow you to train the right skills."

So, you've established which agents are interested in becoming team leaders, and which among them have the right attitude for the role. You might even have gone so far as to appoint one or two individuals. But what comes next? What skills should you be giving your new team leaders in order to help them do their job effectively?

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Naturally, soft management skills are important. New team leaders will need to discover what works best for them, almost certainly developing such skills as much on the job as they do in the training room.

Take Jodie Crinson, team manager at the outsourcer 2Touch, as an example. When Crinson was promoted to her current role, her employer enrolled her on an Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) course focused on communication skills. Undertaking the course with other front line managers from elsewhere in the business

enabled her to learn from other people's experiences, while the classroom-based training helped hone areas where few people had expertise.

By applying these skills in her working life, Crinson subsequently felt the real benefit. "Practising what I'd learnt was the key for me," she says. "I don't think you really learn until you're put in the deep end. Now I've covered the whole range of tasks needed for my job — everything from holding meetings to conducting disciplinarys — I feel a lot more confident as a team manager."

However, it's not only soft skills that senior managers need to impart onto their staff. According to Calvert, what is perhaps more important still is an understanding of the mechanisms of the business.

"I continue to be stunned by the lack of operational management expertise given in today's call centres," she adds. "Yes, there are plenty of training programmes focused on how people should hold meetings, how they can be a good supervisor and so on. But these are very much geared towards soft skills.

"Ultimately, new team leaders also need to learn about the function of their business. They need to know how to recruit and induct people — what works and what doesn't. They need to know about safety, about how to manage change. They need to understand the different elements of customer relationship management and the commercialities of managing people — in other words, how to

value people, as well as how to manage them on a day-to-day basis."

Perhaps only when call centres start both valuing and managing people will they truly begin to reap the rewards of internal promotion. After all, good agents won't necessarily want to stop climbing the career ladder simply because they've become a team leader. As these individuals ascend to senior roles, wouldn't it be preferable that they know as much about running a call centre as they do about communicating with their staff? Now, that's a sign of a good leader. ■