



# 7 Habits of Highly Effective Contact Center Leaders

# Table of Contents

Key Habits to Cultivate to Become an Exceptional Leader .....	3
1. Be an active, empathetic listener .....	4
2. Empower your teams to solve problems .....	5
3. Share valuable data .....	5
4. Always be learning .....	6
5. Develop strong boundaries .....	7
6. Take action .....	8
7. Be human and approachable .....	8
Applying Effective Habits .....	8
About Serenova .....	8

# Key Habits to Cultivate to Become an Exceptional Leader

Great leadership is one of the best sources of competitive advantage an organization can foster. The most effective leaders don't subscribe to an autocratic mentality where they hold all the answers. On the contrary, they believe every team member has a contribution to make and deserves to be heard.

Considering that the average contact center turnover rate is 30% to 40%<sup>1</sup>, developing your leadership skills can pay big dividends for both your team and your career. A 2016 survey found the key contributors to high agent turnover were non-challenging work, lack of recognition, no career growth or development, and an inflexible working environment.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, many of these issues can be addressed long before agents decide to leave if contact center leaders cultivate the seven habits outlined in this e-book.

Similar to Stephen R. Covey's seminal book, "7 Habits of Highly Effective People," which focuses on powerful lessons in personal change, the seven habits in this e-book focus specifically on behaviors that can help you become a more effective contact center leader.

To offer a real-life perspective on how these seven traits can contribute to effective leadership, Jen Jackson, Vice President of Customer Success at Serenova, shares her practical recommendations. Jen has led multiple contact centers in her career, and her real-life examples illustrate how you can use these seven habits to foster trust and build effective relationships in (and out of) your contact center.

<sup>1</sup> "What You Need to Know About Contact Center Turnover Rate," Sharpen, June 18, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> "Agent Turnover Still No. 1 Challenge for Contact Centers," Contact Center Pipeline, May 2017.



## HABIT

# 1

# Be an active, empathetic listener.

Being a successful contact center leader is predicated on the relationships you build. And key to building a strong foundation with others is listening. That means not just waiting until someone stops speaking to make your point, but *active listening*. Active listening is an important skill to cultivate, especially since only 23% of employees say their managers respond constructively when they share work problems.<sup>3</sup>

Graham D. Bodie, associate professor of communication studies at Louisiana State University, explains that active listening involves:

- **Minimizing distractions, such as finding a quiet place to talk or turning off the ringer on your cell phone.**
- **Making eye contact.**
- **Verbally reflecting the other person's feelings, as appropriate.**
- **Asking questions to show you're interested in what the other person is saying.**
- **Using subtle, but encouraging, cues such as saying "right," "mmm hmmm," or nodding your head to let the other person know you are listening.**<sup>4</sup>

Active listening involves giving the other person your undivided attention. But it can't be faked. People will immediately sense if your intentions aren't genuine. An immediate red flag is replying with some form of "Life's not fair" or "You'll get over it."

Successful active listening also involves displaying empathy, showing people they are being heard and, therefore, appreciated. It can also boost engagement, morale, retention and productivity. Unfortunately, there's often a gap between leaders' and employees' assessments of the empathy level: 60% of CEOs believe their organizations are empathetic, but only 24% of employees agree.<sup>5</sup>

## The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Contact Center Leaders

- » 1. **Be an active, empathetic listener.**
- » 2. **Empower your teams to solve problems.**
- » 3. **Share valuable data.**
- » 4. **Always be learning.**
- » 5. **Develop strong boundaries.**
- » 6. **Take action.**
- » 7. **Be human and approachable.**

Cultivating empathy, though, is critical. *Businessolver* found that one out of three people would switch companies for increased empathy, 40% would work longer hours and 56% would stay if they felt valued.<sup>6</sup> The key to leaving a person with a feeling of empathy is to train your listening skills. And active, engaged listening involves showing understanding and interest in what the other person is saying.

“What are two of the most common warning phrases that indicate someone isn't listening?”

Replying with some form of “Life's not fair” or “You'll get over it.”

— “Two Phrases That Indicate Your Boss Is Not Listening to You,” Forbes, May 27, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> “Two Phrases That Indicate Your Boss Is Not Listening to You,” Forbes, May 27, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> “Improve Leadership Skills Through Active Listening,” Jody Michael Associates.

<sup>5/6</sup> “Rewards Multiply with Workplace Empathy,” The Washington Post.



## HABIT 2

# Empower your teams to solve problems.

Every leader must deal with crises and problems. It's certainly a big part of every contact center leader's responsibilities. One of your most valuable strengths is the perspective you bring to issues your team struggles to solve. By having a wider view, with context based on your experience and your position in the organization, you can offer valuable perspectives and guide your team to solutions they help develop.

"Observation is critical," says Jen, "because when you're interacting with your contact center employees, you'll hear and see things in a different context than they will. It's not that your team doesn't have the intelligence to see these issues, but the reality is that they might be so immersed they don't see other ways to approach the issue with the proper insight. It's really about being open to what's going on around you and supporting people on issues for which they might not see solutions."

### Enabling Decision-Making in Younger Agents

This is also a bit of a challenge as you try to empower employees and not stifle decision-making. But it's especially important for younger generations such as Millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996), who make up almost 70% of the contact center agent workforce.<sup>7</sup>

Seventy-six percent of Millennials report they are more satisfied within a creative, inclusive work culture, while only 28% felt the companies they worked for were making full use of their skills.<sup>8</sup> The key is to help your employees understand that while you can provide valuable perspectives when needed, you also value their ability to make decisions independently, and you'll support them when they do.

## HABIT 3

# Share valuable data.

Every day, your team gathers invaluable information on customer preferences, expectations, satisfaction and loyalty.<sup>9</sup> Too often, though, contact centers don't realize this gold mine of customer information could be very helpful to other areas of their organization.

Jen recalls that when other teams were discussing their upcoming initiatives in product strategy meetings, she'd consider what data she could gather to help them make well-informed decisions. "I'd ask myself, 'What valuable customer insights can I share that will assist them? Or are there ways I can poll our customers to gather helpful information?'"

Sometimes high-stakes decisions need to be made quickly and without the necessary customer information. Sharing, or volunteering to gather, important customer data helps ensure your peers understand your customers and assists your peers in making thoughtful decisions on products, services, policies and processes. It also goes a long way in raising your department's profile and establishing it as a valuable go-to resource.

<sup>7</sup> "Growing Millennial Workforce? Time to Implement an Omnichannel Contact Center Platform," Smart Customer Service.

<sup>8</sup> "4 Ways to Guide Your Employees Toward Empowered Decisions," Entrepreneur.

<sup>9</sup> "Enhancing Your Call Center's Relationship with—and Value to—the Rest of the Organization," ICMI.

## HABIT 4

# Always be learning.

It's tough for executives to be successful if they're not committed to learning. The more you expose yourself to new content and different perspectives, the more you grow personally and professionally.

When Warren Buffet was asked how to get smarter, he gave a straightforward answer: "Read 500 pages every day. That's how knowledge works."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Inc.com contributor, Simon Sinek, says: "The best leaders don't consider themselves experts—they consider themselves students."<sup>11</sup>

"Even though the book didn't directly relate to a contact center, it had a great deal of useful information that was applicable to my department and our challenges. It made such an impact on me that I asked my management team to read it too. I then challenged them to look at our contact center and identify changes we could make," she recalls.

This is an excellent example of how going outside your area of expertise to learn something new can be very worthwhile—including in ways you might not expect.

“*The best leaders don't consider themselves experts—they consider themselves students.*”

— Simon Sinek, Inc.com

In addition to using traditional channels for acquiring knowledge, such as books, podcasts or TED talks, it's important to realize that you might learn the most by delving into an area outside the contact center, such as software development techniques, financial analysis or target marketing.

Jen shares that she once led a contact center where a new leader had recently come onboard to run the development organization. He required everyone on his team to read "The Phoenix Project," a popular book about DevOps techniques. Since Jen worked closely with that team, she also decided to read the book and came away with important insights such as questioning existing processes and considering if there were better ways to solve issues.



<sup>10</sup> "7 Habits That All Great Leaders Have," Inc.com

<sup>11</sup> "This is the one skill that all great leaders have," Ladders, Aug. 2017.

## HABIT 5

# Develop strong boundaries.

Many leaders work so hard that they fail to disconnect to recharge. It's important to have firm boundaries for how and when you disconnect from work and day-to-day responsibilities. Jen explains, "Nearly all successful leaders have routines that include purposeful downtime. It's essential to take time to pause in the middle of the chaos of running a contact center."

As Ladders.com notes, "Contrary to stereotypes, the best leaders aren't always busy. They know that having the maximum impact means leaving time for deep concentration and uninterrupted pondering (and yes, even adequate rest)."<sup>12</sup>

One of the hardest aspects of this habit is giving yourself permission to do it. Our culture loves the hard-driving, motivated executive, but subscribing to that lifestyle is also a recipe for burnout. It's important to recognize that regular disconnection can help make you a better leader.

Think about what parts of your job are most stressful. Maybe it's constantly being tied to technology? In that case, setting aside one weekend a month that is completely technology-free might be the answer. Or perhaps you no longer take work home in the evenings. This might seem like an inconsequential habit, but everyone needs to re-charge and the more demanding your career, the more you need to do it to be successful.

### Know When To Say No

Another way leaders can establish firm boundaries is by clearly defining their contact center's responsibilities and knowing when to say no to outside requests.

Jen shares a perfect example: "I was in a new leadership position at an organization that had been heaping lots of responsibilities on the contact center such as using the agents to answer other departments' phones when they were at lunch. Three days after I joined, I met with the other teams and said we weren't doing that anymore. Any messages that came in during lunch could go to voicemail."

This is an example of clearly defining what your organization is and isn't responsible for and sticking to it to best meet your contact center's and the organization's overall priorities and goals.



<sup>12</sup>"This is the one skill that all great leaders have," Ladders, Aug. 2017.



## HABIT 6

# Take action.

As a leader, you probably have many great ideas for new services, improvements and initiatives. It's also important, though, to not only focus on strategy but also action.

Experienced leaders usually understand that their ideas are only as valuable as the actionable steps needed to bring them to life. Newer leaders, however, might not realize that it's a valuable skill to take a concept and translate it into an actionable plan.

The point isn't to necessarily have a well-thought-out plan for every idea you want to discuss at the next management meeting, but you do need some idea of the steps required to realize your vision. "It's important to understand you don't need to have all the answers, but when you go to your management team, you can't go to the table without some sort of plan or an outline of action. As a leader, your organization expects you to engage in strategic, action-oriented thinking," explains Jen.

## HABIT 7

# Be human and approachable.

However, don't focus on execution to the exclusion of being human and approachable. The people you work with have lives, and you need to remember that there will be times when they need your support—whether that's listening or giving helpful advice. "You don't want to be so focused on driving positive business outcomes that you forget you're working with people," says Jen. "And remember to work with an eye toward supporting everyone on your team."

Being approachable is about being human. If you observe that one of your employees seems detached, for instance, engage with him or her in a supportive way to show you care.

"I never want to be in a position where I'm so busy that I don't respond positively to someone who wants to talk," says Jen. "I will always say, 'Yes, I'm available for you.' It doesn't matter what my obligations are, I want people to know they can come to me at any time and talk."

““ *Most people do not listen with the intent to understand. Most people listen with the intent to reply.*

— Stephen Covey

## Applying Effective Habits

Being a contact center leader is a highly demanding job that requires excellent communication skills, integrity and the ability to foster a positive work environment where employees trust and respect your decision-making. It's also critical to build relationships with your employees and the leaders of other departments in your organization. By adopting these seven behaviors, you'll set yourself on the path to becoming a truly outstanding and effective contact center leader.

For additional resources on cloud contact center solutions and optimizing customer experience, visit the [resources center on the Serenova website](#).

### About Serenova

Serenova simplifies every aspect of the customer experience to make life easier for contact center executives, their customers and employees. The world's most passionate, customer-focused brands achieve better interactions, deeper insights and more meaningful outcomes with Serenova's contact center solutions. To see the power of Serenova for yourself, [request a demo](#).







Serenova.com

**Global HQ**

7300 Ranch Road 2222  
Building III, Suite 200  
Austin, TX 78730

**Reading, UK**

1650 Arlington Business Park  
Theale, Reading RG7 4SA  
United Kingdom

**Fredericton, Canada**

25 Waggoners Lane  
Fredericton, New Brunswick  
E3B-2L2 Canada