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ENGAGE

5 WAYS TO CHANGE A TOXIC CALL CENTER ENVIRONMENT

Learn why some call centers can feel downright destructive, and how your business can replace that toxicity with positivity — and success.

INTRODUCTION

No matter who you talk to, everyone agrees: a toxic call center is hurtful to customers, employees, and your bottom line. When customers call in, they're hoping to connect with an actively engaged team that's ready, willing, and capable of providing the service they expect. When employees clock in, they're hoping to be a part of that dream team — plus a positive working environment that helps them serve customers to their best ability.

The reality is that not every call center is set up for success — and some struggle to escape a toxic call center environment. If your call center is one of the good ones, high five! If you believe yours is just okay and could be better, we'll help you get there. This eBook explores toxic call center environments: what they look like, why they happen, and how to change them for the better.

AN INSIDE LOOK: WHAT MAKES A CALL CENTER TOXIC?

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Compared to their peers, call center workers scored significantly higher on tests designed to measure stress.[1] Call center agents cite their biggest workplace stressors as the following:[2]

1.	Nature of the job	Being tied to the phone all day and catering to customers is demanding work. Working in a call center is inherently stressful for this reason, which is why it's so important to eliminate any extra stressors that are adding to the strain.
2.	Quality/quantity conflict	Selling is a numbers game, but still, call centers want agents to deliver the highest quality customer service possible. The pressure for quantity vs. the aspiration for quality can put stress on agents as they strive to prioritize — and succeed.
3.	Intensity	Call center work is intense. To be successful, agents need to maximize talk time, stay productive, and be on the ball — all while switching from customer to customer.
4.	Targets	Call centers run on performance targets, which can be an added level of stress for even the most hardworking agents.
5.	Mental health	The repetitive, demanding daily work required of call center employees can be a strain on mental health.

TOXIC CALL CENTER ENVIRONMENT: ALL RISK, NO REWARD

When call center strategies and management styles lead to a toxic environment, everybody suffers — workers, customers, and of course, your business. Some results of a toxic environment can include:

Poor, inconsistent customer service

Low morale

Increased health issues / absenteeism

High employee turnover

Missed sales opportunities

RECOGNIZING A TOXIC CALL CENTER

The term 'toxic call center' didn't always exist — it was officially coined by Niels Kjellerup, the editor and senior partner at Resource International, in April 1999. The term is modeled after Dr. Jeffrey Pfeffer's 'toxic company' phrase. Dr. Pfeffer, the Thomas. D. Dee professor of organizational behavior at the Stanford Graduate School of Business and author of *The Human Equation: Building Profits by Putting People First*, asserts that companies that treat their people right get enormous dividends, including high levels of productivity and low rates of turnover. In contrast, businesses that don't treat employees right will get the reverse — and are considered toxic companies.[4]

Kjellerup went on to publish a case study of 126 call centers where he worked. In the study, he identified three main features of toxic call centers that ultimately lead to call center failure:

1. **Lack of people management know-how**

2. **Unrealistic benchmarks**

3. **Putting technology ahead of the process and adding value for customers**

RECOGNIZING A TOXIC CALL CENTER:
RED FLAGS & OPPORTUNITIES

RED FLAG:

Lack of people management know-how

People are people — and busy call center or not, management needs to treat them as such. Unfortunately, many contact centers put employee wants and needs on the back burner — offering few opportunities for constructive exchange and collaboration among staff and even fewer opportunities for professional growth or training to improve relationship and communication skills.

Reference terms like 'agent' can dehumanize staff, and combined with a lack of strategic vision for the call center — or any time for fun — can mean a factory-like atmosphere that leaves employees feeling like cogs in a machine instead of problem-solving, valued staff members capable of adding worth to the customer experience.

OPPORTUNITY

If a work environment is challenging and staff feel valued for their contributions, they're much more likely to stay productive and regularly come up with meaningful solutions to problems.

RED FLAG:

Unrealistic benchmarks

In any business, benchmarks are necessary. Management needs to be able to assess progress, monitor goals, and push teams to success. However, in contact centers, management often identifies the highest volume of calls in the shortest possible time as the most important benchmark of success. This measure adds to the factory-like, often merciless culture and takes away from staff enthusiasm, team energy, collaboration, and even effective problem solving for clients.

OPPORTUNITY

If a contact center has a strategic vision and mission that inspires employees to grow and fulfill their potential alongside the company every day, management can avoid toxic call center pains such as agent burnout and rapid turnover.

RED FLAG:

Putting technology ahead of the process and adding value for customers

Technology is a crucial part of running a successful contact center, now more than ever. It can enhance productivity, help boost sales, add value for customers, and more. Even with all of these benefits as possibilities, though, call center management needs to select and implement technology carefully.

Technology should be a help, not a hindrance to contact center agents' opportunities for growth or overall job satisfaction. It shouldn't be a tool used to mask low morale or productivity, or a crutch for management to fall back on when employee burnout becomes hard to ignore. Contact center software such as native-cloud technology with built in workforce management and workforce optimization features can help contact center admins and managers gain insight into staff productivity and help with scheduling staff during their requested times.

Understanding and utilizing technology should work alongside employee well-being — including the opportunity to interact with colleagues and take the time needed to serve customers for first-call resolution and the best possible outcomes.

OPPORTUNITY

Invest in the right technology as a means to making your contact center less toxic and more manageable for employees. Leverage its possibilities to make employees' day-to-day easier by giving them access to documentation and subject matter experts within the organization, for example; reduce stress by providing supervisor feedback and assistance on live calls, and make time for other things, like colleague collaboration or office-wide socialization.

TURNING TOXICITY AROUND

5 ways to change a toxic call center environment

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Whether you've spotted red flags at your call center, or simply want to get ahead of creating a positive, productive work environment, we're here to help. Here are our top five tips for going from toxic call center to a winning working environment.

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PUT PEOPLE FIRST

Whether it's contact center staff or customers, successful call centers keep tabs on the humans involved in their operations. After all, people need certain things to inspire them to achieve their best — or to feel satisfied that their problem has been met with a meaningful solution. Check in with employees, monitor customer happiness, and as management, take the time to put yourself in their shoes. Make sure your staff's people skills are just as much of a prioriity as their technical skills.

Action items:

Use technology to help employees be more efficient in their jobs — but keep solutions simple and people-centered.

Avoid a heavy stress environment — add in creativity, fun, incentives, and energy when possible.

Have an open door policy and ongoing two-way conversation with your employees — listen closely to what's working for them, and address what's not.

What makes employees happy?

According to a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, these are the top 10 factors employees say impact their happiness at work:[5]

1. Job security
2. Benefits
3. Compensation
4. Opportunities to use skills and abilities
5. Feeling safe in the work environment
6. The employee's relationship with his or her immediate supervisor
7. Management recognition of employee job performance
8. Communication between employees and senior management
9. The work itself
10. Autonomy and independence in their job

CREATE A CONTACT CENTER VISION
AND BENCHMARKS TO MATCH

Without vision, how can employees know what they are working toward — or why they should give it their all? A vision not only tells employees what they're contributing to each day, but also inspires them to do more. Is it inspiring to process 30 calls in as few minutes as possible, without necessarily leading any of those calls to a useful solution? No. Vague and lofty goals such as, meeting maximum call density, is not a good vision.

Most people want to feel like they're doing something useful every day, something that is a positive contribution to the world. Solving a problem is something that can make employees feel great about their efforts — especially if they do so in a way that also inspires customers to express appreciation. Create a vision that motivates your staff and includes them as an indispensable part of your overall contact center effort.

Action items: Acknowledge and reward your employees in personal ways — both when they make significant achievements and when they show commitment to success or dedication to collaborate with other staff.

CREATE ISLANDS OF 'DISRUPTIVE' FUN

No matter how much of a positive environment you create for your staff, at the end of the day, contact center work is still just that... work. It's demanding, monotonous, and can lead to staff burnout if management isn't careful. To keep team members energized, engaged with their work, and engaged with one another, be sure to sprinkle in some fun. Whether it's friendly sales team competitions, an office-wide outing, bagel Fridays, or something else entirely... fun is actually imperative in the office to keep morale, and productivity, up.

Action items: Assemble an internal team that can help you think up activities or give insight as to what might truly be inspiring to your employees.

How about this?
Have you ever thought about interjecting more fun into the work day in a way that's both a break for your team members and a benefit to your business goals? Lunch and learns are a great idea for promoting continued learning while still giving your team time to unwind, socialize, and hopefully eat something tasty. Invite one employee or a whole team to host, and then it turns into a chance for them to be highlighted, too!

"Employees who are not engaged represent a risk. These workers can tilt either way — good or bad. Many employees want a reason to be inspired. They are the 'show me' group that needs an extra push to perform their best. Imagine the effect on performance when leaders and managers push these employees in the right direction."[6]

— STATE OF THE GLOBAL WORKFORCE REPORT BY GALLUP

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ENCOURAGE AND RECOGNIZE CREATIVITY

Creativity is your businesses' greatest anecdote to problems. Encouraging, recognizing, and generating more of it in your call center is critical to success. No matter how dry or technical the issue, creativity is possible, and depends on periods of focused hard work intermittent with stimulating interactions and experiences, plus time to pull back for reflection and daydreaming. Unrelenting production results in doing the same thing over and over again, with little room for an alternate perspective or thoughtful improvement to processes. Give people the space and time to flex their creativity, and watch how a slight change in process or resolution turns into the next big thing.

35% of workers are only given time to be creative at work a few times per year.[7]

☑ **Action items:**

Make creativity a part of your contact center's overall plan and strategy.

Celebrate creativity when you see it! If someone offers up a creative solution to a problem, recognize it in a team meeting, announcement, or office newsletter.

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LET EVERY PERSON ON STAFF KNOW THAT
THEIR JOB IS TO MAKE SOMEONE'S DAY TODAY

Working in a call center can be a thankless job — but it shouldn't be. Agents should never feel like cogs in a wheel, when in reality, without them, the wheel wouldn't move at all. No matter the job, big or small, everybody wants to feel important, seen, and like they're a part of something greater — namely overall company success. Foster a working environment that is more of a supportive community and less of a collection of phones and cubicles. Encourage high fives, put 'thank yous' in practice, and make sure it's known that it's okay for colleagues to converse, or even share a laugh together.

Action items:

Lead by example, encouraging management to give out praise, take time for water-cooler chats, and have a sense of humor.

Develop a formal, but fun, way for colleagues to hand out kudos to one another to acknowledge a job well done — and have a reward for those who earn a certain amount.

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Interested in learning more about using best practices and technology to turn your call center into a high-functioning voice of the company? Schedule a demo today to learn about RingCentral's Collaborative Contact Center and see how to take your call center from toxic or at risk to thriving.

REQUEST A DEMO

VISIT RINGCENTRAL.COM

SOURCES: 1. USA TODAY, How to handle the stress of working in a contact center - 2. ResearchGate.net, Mental Health and Stress among Call Center Employee - 3. Stress.org, Workplace Stress - 4. Call Centre Manager forum, The Toxic Call Centre - 5. the balancecareers, Keys to Employee Satisfaction - 6. Gallup State of the Global Workplace - 7. Psychology Today, 10 Statistics You Need to Know About Creativity at Work