

Three Steps for Attacking Adherence Problems

Ask a group of workforce management professionals about their biggest problem and a high percentage will tell you that it is schedule adherence. Enormous effort goes into forecasting workload, calculating staff requirements, and creating staff schedules. But all that hard work goes down the drain when the frontline staff don't stick to the schedule plan.

This lack of schedule adherence is frustrating and it's expensive. (See *Managing by the Numbers* article, page ____.) So what can be done about it?

This article will outline some of the reasons that agents may not be adhering to their planned schedules and explore some potential solutions to the problem. For all you workforce planners out there, it's time to step away from erlang and workload distributions and enter the world of psychology and behavior analytics.

Performance Management Approach

Figuring out why people behave a certain way is called behavior analytics and the application of this psychological science in the workplace is called performance management. A structured performance management model is made up of the following steps.

1. Define performance standards and objectives.
2. Measure existing performance.
3. Identify gaps in "what we want" versus "what we have."
4. Determine root cause(s) for the performance gap(s).
5. Apply a behavioral solution to address the underlying cause.

Let's take a look at this model as it applies to schedule adherence.

The first step is to define performance standards and communicate them to the staff. This involves defining the precise times that a person is expected to be on the phones, take breaks, go to lunch, work on other activities, and so on. This needs to be defined and then communicated clearly as the expectation. Don't assume that when you specify a start time of 7:30am that it's perfectly clear what that means. Some staff might take that to mean in the parking lot or in the front door at 7:30, clocked in at the time clock and in the break room getting coffee at 7:30, or even at their desk getting organized at 7:30. If you mean logged in at 7:30 ready to take a call, then be explicit.

Another part of this definition will involve the leeway that exists in meeting the exact numbers. What percent time out of adherence will be allowed at a maximum? Are there various levels of adherence that will earn them a better "grade" than others? And what are the rewards and/or consequences for meeting the goal or not meeting it? All this needs to be clearly defined for everyone in the center and communicated clearly and often.

Part of the communication about schedule adherence needs to be education about the numbers. Be sure the staff understand the relevance of adherence and why it's so important that each person be in their seat on time. Every member of the team should understand the "power of one" when it comes to call center staffing and know the impact they make on speed of service, occupancy, and bottom-line cost. (See Power of One article in _____ issue of On Target.)

The next step is to measure performance. Unlike some other qualitative measures of performance, schedule adherence lends itself to being measured quite easily. Note the login/logout times compared to schedule and note the deviations, both in terms of total minutes as well as a percentage of total hours scheduled. If the deviation meets your defined "grace period", then there's no performance gap. However, if the deviation from schedule is more than allowed, the next step is to identify the reason that person is not meeting the expectation.

Three Reasons for Non-Performance

There are three basic reasons why an employee doesn't do what is expected. These reasons are:

1. Don't Know
2. Can't
3. Won't

Let's take a look at these from a schedule adherence perspective.

First, the agent may not know what is expected in terms of schedule adherence. Have expectations of start/stop times, breaks, and off-phone time been communicated clearly? Does the agent know how much deviation is allowed and what the consequences will be for adhering or not adhering? Make sure each person understands the schedule "contract," grades of adherence, and consequences for following or not following the plan.

The other instance of "don't know" is when agents are fully aware of the expectation, but are not getting enough feedback about how they're adhering to the work plan. Make individual schedule adherence statistics available to them on a regular basis, preferably daily.

If the two "don't know" issues have been covered (they're aware of the expectation and have been receiving their adherence numbers on a regular basis), then the next possibility for cause of the problem is in the "can't" category. Perhaps they don't have the knowledge/skill to perform, or there is a barrier or obstacle preventing proper performance. While the "can't" reason can explain some other performance issues in the call center, it is generally not an underlying cause of adherence problems. Most agents are perfectly capable of following their work schedules. Occasionally there is a "barrier" to adherence (long calls forcing them to vary from scheduled stop times or severe

understaffing that make it difficult to actually break away from phones when planned). However, most schedule adherence issues do not fall into the “can’t” category.

This brings us to the final possibility – the “won’t” category. This is the reason for most adherence problems. Most employees with an adherence problem have willfully decided not to stick to the schedule. The reason for this behavior is most often the lack of a proper behavioral consequence.

If your call center has no real consequences associated with schedule adherence, then think about what happens to two agents seated side by side. Sarah is the picture of punctuality while her neighbor Alex is consistently late. With no formal system of consequences in place, Sarah will actually be getting negative consequences by being on time – she has to handle more calls and workload is heavier because someone is missing. On the other hand, Alex is getting positive consequences by his behavior – he may be getting another few minutes sleep in the morning or be spending extra time in the coffee area and he doesn’t have to take as many calls. Unless a regular, predictable system of consequences is in place, you may be rewarding the behaviors you want to disappear, while there’s nothing to support the actions you want to see.

Applying consequences is critical to shaping behavior. While some consequences occur naturally, others will need to be consciously applied. For example, agents may demonstrate some desirable behaviors such as telephone etiquette because they get an immediate consequence for doing so – a friendly, thankful reaction from a customer. However, other behaviors like schedule adherence don’t come with natural built-in positive consequences, so you will have to apply consequences to shape the behavior you want to see.

Both positive and negative consequences can be used to influence behavior. If you can catch someone demonstrating desirable behaviors, then you will want to immediately apply a positive consequence. Positive consequences work more effectively than negative consequences. People like positive reinforcement better, it produces a less stressful environment, and it also maximizes performance.

Negative consequences can also be used, but they are not as effective as positive consequences. Negative reinforcement will shape performance, but it generally produces behaviors that are just enough to get by. Discipline and punishment will generally stop a negative behavior, but in some cases only for a little while, and it will never encourage employees to give maximum effort like positive consequences can do.

Sometimes situations occur where even though positive consequences are given for desired behaviors and negative consequences are attached to the wrong behaviors, employees still do the wrong things. This is because there are other characteristics of consequences in addition to just the positive and negative aspects. In addition to the positive/negative aspects associated with a consequence there are also the aspects of how personal a consequence is, how immediate it is, and how certain it is. These other aspects of a consequence can sometimes outweigh the positive/negative aspects.

Let’s look at an example where positive aspects for adherence and negative aspects for non-adherence are in place, but still don’t yield the desired result. Examine both the

positive and negative effects associated with this lack of schedule adherence, along with the personal, immediacy, and certainty aspects of the consequences.

Lack of Schedule Adherence Consequences	Positive/Negative	Personal/General	Immediate/Future	Certain/Uncertain
Impact on service level	N	G	I	C
Impact on peer occupancy	N	G	I	C
Bad appraisal	N	P	F	U
Loss of bonus	N	P	F	U
10-minutes extra sleep	P	P	I	C
More time to socialize	P	P	I	C
Fewer calls to take	P	P	I	C

Even though there are many negative consequences associated with a lack of schedule adherence, the employee may continue to do it. Two of the negative consequences are of benefit to the overall call center and customers, but not felt as a personal effect. The bad appraisal and loss of bonus are also negative, but they are not immediate. Those things will likely happen sometime out in the future, and may be viewed as uncertain by the employee.

These negative consequences may be outweighed by the positive consequences. The benefits may include an extra ten minutes of “snooze” time in the morning, or an extra few minutes to socialize in the break room, not to mention fewer calls to take. All these consequences are personally felt by the employee, and they’re all immediate and certain. Even though they’re not as significant as the negative ones, the fact that they’re personal, immediate, and certain may sway the employee to continue his errant schedule behavior.

The key when developing a plan of consequences is to apply consequences that are positive to shape desired behavior. However, it’s not enough that the consequence is positive. It also has to be personal (something that means something to the employee), immediate, and certain for it to work as an influence on behavior.

With this in mind, think about ways to make the positive and negative consequences more immediate. A supervisor that is waiting at the agent’s workstation with a warning note when he comes back from break may send a stronger message than simply reporting adherence numbers at the end of the week along with a warning. Some call centers choose to project the real-time adherence screen up for all to see, so that other employees can apply some peer pressure on the spot for agents coming back late from break.

Conclusion

The job of the workforce planner isn’t over when the schedules are complete. Making the plan a success involves working with supervisors and frontline staff to ensure that everyone is where they’re supposed to be. Schedule adherence will be much higher when

the frontline staff have been educated on the relevance and importance of sticking to the plan and provided with regular feedback on how they're doing. Couple this with a system of appropriate rewards and consequences and you'll see schedule adherence steadily and surely improve.

About the Author....

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