

# Contact Centre Zone

## Why Grade Of Service Metrics Don't Work

A systems management guide By Stuart Corrigan

[www.callcentre-services.co.uk](http://www.callcentre-services.co.uk)

## Someone from a UK Financial Services Sector call centre asked us:

*How do you change a call centre that plans, and everything evolves around, GOS but which, when asked what their purpose is and how GOS measures this, admits it does not? When then asked what they are doing to change that, they say they don't need to.*

**Note:** GOS (grade of service) is a series of standard call centre metrics such as the percentage of calls answered within the time frame specified by the business, average call waiting times, abandon call rate etc

## Ron Skea, Vanguard Scotland consultant, answers:

**This is a typical problem in call centres and Argyris calls it the battle between 'espoused theory' and 'theory in action'.** Managers talk about being customer focused and work being designed to deliver world class customer service. However, the reality is a focus on volumes and activity, with internally set targets and service levels. The managers believe that a focus on GOS metrics improves customer service and they fail to see that it has the opposite effect. We also have to remember that call centre managers are themselves part of a wider organisational system and are being judged on these same metrics by their bosses so it shouldn't be surprising that they are focused on them.

**A systems approach, which argues that you don't design your system around GOS metrics, is therefore counter intuitive to managers.** This in turn means you won't change management thinking by rational/logical debate. Not least because managers try using GOS as a circular argument to lead you up a blind alley and then beat you up – *'so you think we should ignore call waiting times?'; 'so taking longer to answer calls is 'improving' customer service?'; 'if you don't think waiting times are important just ask a customer who's waited 5 minutes how they feel!'; 'if you don't measure it how can you improve it?'* etc.

**Of course waiting times matter to customers. No one disputes that and no one is arguing that a call centre should take longer to answer calls.** But, as you so correctly point out, *what matters* isn't the same as *purpose* (from the customer's perspective). The failing in the current system is thinking that by focusing on these measures that they are improving customer service. However, 'unacceptably high' call waiting times and similar metrics are just a symptom of problems, not the cause of them. By acting to reduce waiting times in the traditional way, managers are invariably actually driving waste, failure and poorer service into the system.

**But they won't come to believe that from logical/rational discussion in a meeting room.** They won't believe it from hearing how in my last contact centre by focusing on purpose rather than GOS we actually increased agent productivity by 30% and cut average waiting time to 8 seconds. They won't understand that removing waste and failure demand and dealing only with value calls takes less time, frees up resources and so reduces call waiting times.

**They need to see it for themselves. And the only way to start a change in thinking is to get them curious.** That's why Vanguard always start by doing a 'scoping' exercise with the senior leader – it's a mini CHECK that gives them the evidence of the impact of their current thinking on the system and also shows them what REALLY matters to customers. As a customer of course I want my call answered as quickly as possible. But much more importantly I want the person answering my call to be able to deal there and then with whatever it is I am phoning up about. Getting my call answered in less than 20 seconds by someone who cannot then do what I need done is NOT what matters to me. Getting a manager to listen (*only* listening – no intervening) to customers as they phone in is one step in helping them see that for themselves. Scoping includes other evidence gathering activities which build a picture for the manager of the real performance of the system as opposed to the one they understand from their GOS metrics.

**The aim is to give managers some understanding of the impact their underlying assumptions** are having on the system and then let them make an informed decision about whether to proceed with an intervention to improve the system.

**Of course there will still be some managers who rationalise away what they've seen (blame staff, blame customers, blame IT, blame anyone except me!) but at least then you know you're dealing with someone stuck in what Argyris calls single loop learning** i.e. destined to keep repeating the same mistakes until things get so bad that either they have to recognise that their current thinking is the problem, or, someone more senior decides that the manager needs replaced. Unfortunately customers, staff and the organisation have to continue suffering until this happens.