

Grand Central Station

Working Undistracted in a Chaotic Environment



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A Contact Center Case History from Cohen Brown Management Group

The client’s demands were firm. “Bring me bottom-line results only: Show me how your program improves my bottom line. I’m not going to be impressed if you come back and say you helped people enjoy their jobs more or take their lunch on time. Contact center work is high-pressure and unpredictable. Sometimes people have to miss lunch or stay late. That’s not going to change.”

The client was Foxtel, Australia’s largest subscription cable company. The pilot program in question was Cohen Brown Management Group’s unique *Structured Time & Workflow Management*, or STWM.

The pilot went forward, and in just two weeks, the client’s demands were being met:

- record high sales of targeted products
- record high quality of calls
- shrinkage stabilized at a healthy level
- average revenue per unit more than tripled



When I first walked into Foxtel's contact center, I said to myself, "Welcome to Grand Central Station! How can anybody work with so many distractions? The only thing missing were the trains."

Those powerful results are not unusual for STWM, but according to Cohen Brown's project leader, Johanna Lubahn, this engagement was special because of the backstory. To get the backstory, we asked an external writer to interview her.

Interviewer: You expected this engagement to be challenging – why?

JL: Because of the physical environment. When I first walked into Foxtel's contact center, I said to myself, "Welcome to Grand Central Station! How can anybody work with so many distractions? The only thing missing were the trains."

Int: But aren't all contact centers noisy and chaotic?

JL: Yes, but this was unusual, and it's essential to the story, so let me sketch the picture. You walk into a five story glass building entirely open in the middle – like an Embassy Suites hotel. The ground floor lobby is in constant, active use – ping pong games going, gatherings of employees, speakers holding microphones for special events. All hard surfaces – stone, glass, metal, bouncing the noise around. Even from the fifth floor you can easily hear the chatter and laughter.



The stairs come up the center from the lobby to the fifth floor, and there are elevators at each end that open directly into the open-floor-plan work areas.

And I mean wide open. From the north end of the

building you can see all the way to the south outdoors. From the east end, all the way through to the west. And those views are constantly in motion. With three staggered shifts of 2,000 people, there are constant comings and goings, people popping out of elevators, walking and talking past desks of people who are on the phone with customers.

And of course there are whiteboards all around, with people regularly updating them, even holding meetings around them. And if that's not enough, the workers are surrounded by TV monitors with all kinds of loud entertainment. This is a cable company, after all, so they want

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employees to see the fare their customers are getting, so it's all up there on monitors. And employees are allowed to choose what they want to watch, so they are up and down, changing channels.

Look, I'm not criticizing Foxtel – it's an intentionally designed modern building. Some people really thrive on this kind of pulsing, energetic atmosphere, and Foxtel employees tend to be young, a bit edgy – lots of spiky hair in unusual colors, piercings, ink – not your basic executives-in-waiting. So in some ways this environment worked for them.

But in a crucial way, it created so much distraction and so many interruptions that hours of each person's day were simply wasted instead of used well. When people really needed to concentrate on the task at hand, and the environment wouldn't let them, that's when you'd see people hunched over their desks, trying to block out sights, wearing headphones and studiously trying to avoid eye contact. But that's hard to do when so many sights and sounds are fighting for your attention.

Int: What did you learn from your Team Leader survey before the project?

JL: We had to applaud the Team Leaders' survey answers: **They were desperate to do better coaching.** They knew *how* to do it – we had already rolled out Cohen Brown's *Sports Coaching* program, and these Team Leaders ate it up and quickly became great coaches. But their chaotic environment made it impossible to deliver good coaching sessions. That's one of the things that they wanted help with.



The Team Leaders sit at the ends of the building, next to the elevators, so they are in a constant stream of traffic – and constantly interrupted.

One summed it up this way: "I lose employees with good potential simply because I cannot get in good coaching sessions

with them. If I get interrupted two or three times in half an hour – and that's conservative – that rep leaves not having learned much. Her performance doesn't improve, so my numbers don't, and the next thing you know, she's gone, and I'm training a new one. Such a waste, when I know exactly what could have kept her!"

We taught them how to Time Lock and then to how to Focal Lock, two skills that will serve them well at work and in every aspect of their lives, really.

STWM changed their culture, not just their individual behaviors.

Int: No private conference rooms for coaching purposes?

JL: Foxtel does have conference rooms, but not enough for private coaching sessions. They are at a premium. If you go a minute over your allotted time, people are pounding on the door. There is just an overall dearth of quiet space, so the Team Leaders were conducting coaching sessions at their desks in noisy, high-traffic settings. I don't care how much you thrive on chaos, it is not conducive to a concentrated learning session!

Int: As I listen to you, I question how STWM could have much impact, unless you also persuaded the company to make significant changes to the environment?

JL: Well, I admit to having some misgivings myself. We have implemented STWM in traditional office settings with great results, but I did wonder if our solutions could have the same powerful impact in contact centers where people don't control their workload or time, which is the core of STWM. When you walk the hall of a corporate office you can tell who the contact center people are – the harried looking ones in a race against time, their busy-ness a badge of honor. They are slaves to unpredictable workloads. So, yes, I won't say I was exactly a skeptic, but I will say I was most curious to see how STWM would unfold in such an inhospitable atmosphere.

Int: Then how did you bring about the behavioral change?

JL: I like to say we created a "virtual private room" for the Team Leaders by teaching them two great skills that will serve them well for the rest of their lives, professional and personal. First, we taught them how to Time Lock. Then we taught them how to Focal Lock.

And we taught them how to do it as a cohesive group following synchronized plans arrived at in concert, not just individual by individual, so that they could support one another in sustaining their new and improved behaviors. STWM changed their culture, not just their individual behaviors.

Int: Tell me about Time Locking – and why you call it "a skill"?

JL: Time Locking is basically carving out a specific period of time for a specific purpose, during which others recognize that you are not to be interrupted except in a true emergency. That's your period to use for whatever task most demands your uninterrupted attention. Each of our Team Leaders was accorded two hours a day – so roughly 25% of their



time – to Time Lock on their priorities – and most of them chose to use those two hours for coaching sessions.



The aspect of Time Locking that is a skill is that of negotiating with your boss and colleagues for it – selling why you need the time to work uninterrupted and how you will use it. So, as in sales, you might encounter objections, and you need to know how to handle them. You need to be able to articulate how your desire to work uninterrupted is not only good for you but is also good for your boss and for your colleagues who will need to cover for you. There has to be mutual value. It involves communication skills that many people in leadership positions may never have learned.

Int: How would people know when another Team Leader was Time Locking?

JL: They coordinated schedules and times when each Team Leader could Time Lock so that a colleague would be available to answer questions. Most of the Team Leaders chose an hour in the first part of their shift and an hour in the last part.

We also created a sign that stood up above their desks that could be seen from all sides and from a distance. It simply read “Time Locking,” on a bright red background, but it signaled to all that that person was off limits until the sign came down. So that person didn’t have to hunch or duck or avoid eye contact. He or she could work freely on whatever purpose the Time Lock was designed for without fear of interruption. You know, the expectation that you could be interrupted at any time is its own kind of distraction, so Time Locking ruled that out.

Int: And the other skill you mentioned – Focal Locking – why was that necessary?

JL: Because of what Edward G. Brown, our co-founder, aptly labeled Mental Leakage. Look, concentration is not a skill that is taught in school, and most people have a lot of trouble with it. Even in peaceful circumstances, our minds wander. We have trouble staying focused on the task at hand. You can imagine the Mental Leakage that can occur in a noisy, distracting atmosphere. People would struggle to maximize the

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value of their precious Time Locking period, simply because they were not accustomed to concentrating hard on any one thing for a sustained period of time.



So we worked with the Team Leaders on special techniques for keeping their minds on the task at hand. If they were Time Locking so that they could efficiently complete their daily reports, we taught them techniques for snapping back to attention and resisting the temptation to take up something else. If they were using the Time Lock for coaching, we taught them techniques for staying focused on the person being coached and the skills being practiced.

Int: How long did it take before those new skills showed any bottom-line performance results?

After just two weeks, sales of the targeted product were the highest they had ever attained. Same with their quality measures.

Their average revenue per unit went from \$20,000 to \$65,000!

JL: That is what was so gratifying. Because these are major behavioral changes, and yet the results showed up immediately. Seriously, in the first two weeks, here are the performance improvements that they documented – remember, just two weeks:

- In terms of sales, they had asked us to measure sales of an important product they had offered for some time. In the first two weeks, sales of this product were the highest they had ever attained!
- We were also looking at qualitative measures, and their quality scores were the highest ever since they started using a new set of quality conversation protocols – measuring such things as how well they conducted their customer needs assessments, or how comprehensively they wrapped up their calls. They targeted a 75% increase and actually achieved 85%!
- As for cross-sales, they use a proxy metric of average revenue per unit or ARPU. The STWM impact was nothing short of spectacular; ARPU rose from 75 points to 250 points. In terms of actual value, ARPU went from \$20,000 to \$65,000.
- We also tracked their sales of upgrade options, which improved from 78% to 88% of calls with additional hardware upgrades.
- And finally, their shrinkage, meaning time off the phone for lunch, vacation, sick time, vacation time, stabilized at a healthy 10%, up from 8%, across all teams. So while this wasn't in the client's



targeted metrics, we know that a healthy shrinkage rate reduces burnout and turnover – both of which hit the bottom line hard.

Int: Those seem to be impressive results, but was the client impressed?

JL: Absolutely. They had us implement STWM across the full management team of their two largest centers.

Below are some written testimonials that came in from the Team Leaders, but first I want to relate another conversation. Sometimes we get so caught up in making a corporate impact that we forget that we are also impacting the lives of people one person at a time in the most profound and personal ways.

One new Team Leader came to me in private, and he couldn't hold back his tears when he said, "I have to tell you – I'm a new father, and before we did this pilot, I was afraid every day that I would lose my job. I had no idea how to concentrate or organize my time – I didn't even know that was my problem. I just felt like a failure because I couldn't get things done or help my team improve." I teared up, too! Now he is one of their most successful Team Leaders. STWM changed his life. I know STWM is such a prosaic name, but it can deliver such exciting results!

What the clients said about STWM

Team Leader #1: *"Yes, I want the Time Locking back and so does my team! We appreciated having uninterrupted coaching throughout the trial. It was beneficial for all as we could set up coaching and discuss any action without being interrupted. I found also that with the 2–4 Time Lock I was able to arrange meetings without affecting the rest of my peers. I also found that I could work on projects and listen to my teams calls uninterrupted. I even took calls myself within one of these Time Locks. My first coaching session after the trial ended was interrupted three times and not much was achieved."*

Team Leader #2: *"I found Time Locking extremely beneficial as I personally have time management issues, and by locking dedicated time I found my coaching sessions improved with no interruptions as did my results. I was also able to listen to more calls and get a better insight into what my reps are actually doing. One of the key indicators which can't be measured was a decrease in personal stress and an increase in my personal productivity."*





Team Leader #3: *“The greatest benefits of Time Locks are about our people: Uninterrupted coaching, which enables better focus; opportunities for development and recognition through our floorwalker program, structure and uniformity in what we do, which*

frees up time so we are more available outside of Time Locks and better equipped to take on ad hoc tasks.”

Team Leader #4: *“Time Locking was especially beneficial for my team’s coaching. We are a new team, so sometimes it’s difficult trying to juggle coaching and helping others, and easy to get sidetracked. What we found is that by having the Time Lock sign up, we were able to run through coaching without interruption and really focus on how to improve. This can be seen through our ARPU, which has increased over 300 points.”*



Johanna Lubahn works with contact centers in over 20 different countries. Given the unique nature of the contact center industry, focus has been on developing a process that is scalable with size and adaptable to each interaction. The Cohen Brown methodology has been used with call centers from 5 seats to 4500 seats, with on-shore, off-shore and multi-site operations. As Cohen Brown’s Managing Director for Call Center services, she can be reached at Johanna_Lubahn@cbmg.com, +1 (517) 349-4066.

Cohen Brown Management Group, Inc.
11835 West Olympic Blvd.
Suite 920
Los Angeles, CA 90064
www.cohenbrown.com
(310) 966-1001
Fax (310) 966-4700

