

AFTER THE PANDEMIC: HOW TO BRING BACK THE CONTACT CENTER

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An executive's first-hand account of leading through the COVID-19 crisis.

BY TOBY PARRISH, TELEVERDE



The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption across nearly every line of business, and contact centers are no exception. In times like these, the most pressing matters are keeping your workforce moving forward and your workplace culture healthy.

As Chief Operating Officer of Televerde, I lead hundreds of contact center employees across 10 global engagement centers (seven of which happen to be within the walls of women's prisons). As call centers and social distancing don't exactly go hand-in-hand, this crisis serves as both a learning experience and a testament to our innate ability to adapt to change.

As a 25-year-old company, we've been through crises before. We know what it's like

to be in survival mode. Most importantly, we know what it takes to not just survive but to thrive. Here's how we are addressing this crisis head-on.

This Is Not a Drill

We pride ourselves on being a mission-driven, people-first company, so naturally our priority will always be the health and safety of our workforce. We're also a technology company so before the first "stay-at-home" orders were implemented in the U.S., we moved our corporate workforce to remote work.

Our incarcerated colleagues know they are the heart and soul of our company. [They are our "why."](#) Failure isn't an option for us because of the hundreds of women who rely on Televerde for sales training, education and

jobs both during and after incarceration. We take this seriously, and we're committed to being around for a long time to help as many women as we can.

These women also make up 70% of our workforce, which brings with it unique challenges. In times of crises, we rely on the strong partnerships we've created with the Department of Corrections in the states in which we operate. It takes a great deal of trust and courage to rely on others to ensure that your colleagues are safe, but this is what you do in any good partnership. You trust, and you focus on the things you can control. Over-communicating and weekly engagement with our executive leadership team were high priorities for us.

Anticipating the Glucose Crash

When we made the decision to move our corporate workforce remote, we drew information from both our own collective experiences and best practices surrounding teleworking and discovered that the two most important factors to succeed virtually are routine and communication.

Here's what we experienced: The first week of virtual office working was analog to a kid on a sugar high. Everyone was thrilled to be safe and thriving at home. But after the first week, reality set in. No more casual lunch outings, coffee breaks around the corner, or after-work happy hours. Our leadership team knew this was coming and we were ready for the reality.

With our routines and lives turned upside down and knowing this glucose crash would inevitably occur, we created a semblance of structure with daily check-ins, 1:1s throughout the day, and regular team meetings to end our days and reflect on any new developments or lessons learned.

Knowing full well the importance of living our culture, we were willing to do whatever it took to maintain workplace stability and camaraderie. We shared our favorite movies, photos of our home offices and swapped favorite music playlists. Above all, we empha-

sized maintaining communication and cohesion among teams. While we were still relentlessly focused on our customers and our mission, we are a people-first company and we made sure to make time for doing things that brought levity to our circumstances and encouraged positivity.

Culture is the biggest challenge companies face when moving to remote work. Do everything you can to promote a positive culture, but more importantly, to LIVE your culture at all times.

The Importance of Preparedness

As soon as news of the impending pandemic began to surface, we started contingency planning.

We asked ourselves: **What if?** What if half of our contact centers must shut down immediately? What if one of our employees gets infected? What if our clients need to pause their campaigns or need to scale up quickly to address a surge in demand?

We contemplated, asked questions, and mapped a plan to address every possible situation and outcome, so when the time came, we had a strategy in place to deal with whatever circumstance we were facing. Achieving this level of preparation for every situation meant clarity and conciseness when we had to make tough, quick decisions and adjustments.

Make no mistake: This crisis was by no means easy for us to overcome, but being meticulously over-prepared made everything just a little more bearable.

Training & Development

As part of our contingency plan, we assessed the skill sets of every employee in the company. We prioritized our strategic accounts and those that were coming to an end. We looked at all aspects of closure, the revenue impacts and considered which agents had been cross-trained.

Paychecks notwithstanding, [training is the most valuable thing you can offer your employees](#). Like many things in life—when it comes to your employees, you get out what you put in. The investment you put into your employees' professional development will go a long way toward improving performance, morale and culture.

Strengthening your employee base will reinforce your company in more ways than one—through increased sales, retention and customer satisfaction. And the stronger the employees, the stronger (and more resilient) the company.

Listening to and Addressing Concerns

In our frequent all-hands meetings (and whenever the need arose outside of those), we discussed all questions and concerns, striving to maintain transparency and trust among our workforce.

The need to maintain trust and transparency also applies to our client base. Interactions with clients came early and often. They wanted to find out what prospects were saying, what messages were resonating and what was going on in the market. If nothing else, we were able to provide valuable feedback to our customers when they needed it most.

Our agents on the frontlines benefited from putting our clients' solutions in different perspectives where they addressed current market challenges.

For example, one of our clients is a well-known cybersecurity company that provides enterprises with remote access and VPN solutions. Understandably, demand for their solution surged during this crisis, and we were able to help them handle the volume of inquiries from current and net new customers.

We were able to scale to meet the demand quickly and position their solution as a way to solve current market challenges. Our partnership exceeded their annual goal in just one quarter.

The moral of the story is that we were able to adapt and pivot when we needed to because of our strong leadership and positive culture, with special thanks to our agents' perseverance and never-give-up grit. And most importantly, we always make sure to give our team the recognition they deserve.

The 5 Whys

One of the most crucial components of a positive culture is being able to give and receive feedback. [We pride ourselves on being a "Why?" company](#). When we ask anything of our employees, we explain the why behind the ask. This fosters a culture of trust,

collaboration and understanding.

Knowing the "why" eliminates fear, rumors and gossip, and promotes transparency and trust.

Why a Positive Culture Will Bring Back Your Contact Center

If you've been paying close attention, you'll notice that there is a common theme woven into every element of our crisis contingency plan: culture. The bottom line is this: If your company culture is healthy and strong, you're going to be able to adapt and pivot.

Culture is the key to success in any business operation. Without our commitment to culture, we wouldn't have made it this far. We recognize that things like family, recognition and camaraderie tie everyone together. And we place these things first.

Our culture allowed us to survive this crisis—and our culture is going to be what brings us back.

Lessons Learned from Overcoming Challenges

The only thing guaranteed in business—as in life—is that we will have to overcome challenges. Some are worse than others, but the best thing we can do is to use these challenges to learn from our mistakes and find ways to adapt and pivot.

The effects of the coronavirus will fundamentally change how we do business around the globe. If we take anything away from this time, let it be this: Invest in people and allow them to impact your company and culture positively. I always think of Richard Branson's wise words: "Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of the clients." Take care of your people and nourish your culture. Do both really well and your company and workforce will emerge from any crisis even stronger. •



Toby Parrish is Chief Operating Officer for [Televerde](#), an integrated sales and marketing technology organization based in Phoenix, Arizona. Toby has a proven record of building high-growth global companies spanning a 25-year career and has won U.S. awards for 50 Fastest Growing Companies and Inc. Magazine's Top 10.

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