

LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS: RISING ABOVE COVID CHALLENGES

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Contact center leaders share their thoughts about recent challenges, lessons learned and success stories from the crisis.

BY SANGEETA BHATNAGAR, SB GLOBAL



More than six months ago, the world changed for everyone. In most places, people were sent home to work remotely. The contact center industry was expected to get their teams home while continuing to serve millions of customers.

So many leaders stepped up to the plate and served selflessly to make sure that their teams reached home safely. They went above and beyond to ensure their staff was physically safe AND the discussion of mental health support became more common.

Through this crisis, many stories have emerged. The human spirit is resilient. We now need to debrief to see what was done right and what could be done better. We need to focus on Rising Above as we continue to find our way through the new normal.

As a direct result, the Greater Toronto Area Contact Centre (GTACC) association's annual conference is now a North American virtual summit. It is a perfect time to reflect, acknowledge and learn by sharing with others.

I interviewed some of the speakers who will be sharing at GTACC's virtual summit to get their thoughts on some key issues that many industry leaders are faced with.

Challenges

WHAT WAS ONE OF YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS?

DAVID BRADSHAW, Vice President, Client Care, ATB Financial, says, "One of the biggest challenges posed by the pandemic was ensuring the continued engagement of team members. Like our customers, team members faced their own challenges including finding childcare, setting up a home workspace that ensured privacy, and risk tolerance."



In addition, **PENNY ST. ANTOINE**, Senior Vice President of Single-Family Operations at MCAP Service Corporation, states: "At the beginning of the COVID crisis, mortgage deferrals were offered to help Canadian homeowners deal with loss of income. Like all lenders, MCAP was inundated with thousands of requests for help as many homeowners had been laid off or lost their income."



"We were also faced with getting our 800-strong workforce working from home, onboarding a large new customer with over 18,000 loans, and transitioning to a new outsourcing provider."

"The first month of the crisis we received 35,000 requests to defer mortgage payments over and above our regular volumes."

ERIC SCIPIO DEL CAMPO, Vice President Canada Contact Centers, Scotiabank, adds,



"Working collaboratively with our teams to support uninterrupted service to our customers while placing the health and safety of our employees at the forefront has been paramount for us from the beginning."

"We took advantage of this challenge to reimagine and redefine the way we operate by mobilizing resources from across our organization and pivoting our training capabilities to bring support to our frontline sooner."

"In addition, in tandem to securing additional support, we fast-tracked an 18-month-long project and delivered it in 30 days to help reduce the density of our centers via secure remote-work arrangements for about

half of our team. These actions along with rigorous social distancing practices allowed us to maintain 24/7 service in our centers and balance the rapidly changing needs of our team.”

TONY PORCIELLO, Director, Retail Operations/Global Consumer Care, Spin Master,



spoke about onboarding new-hires. He says, “Onboarding from a work-from-home culture has been challenging yet unavoidable. We’ve had to

come up with solutions including scheduled training sessions, buddy systems, IT support processes, and various other ways so people know who, how, when and where to connect for support. One-on-one sessions are much more crucial in a work-from-home environment. And now that the city is entering into late stages of economic reopening, meet-up sessions are also something that we’re looking forward to in order to give people an idea of an office culture and face-to-face communication.”

Culture

The sudden requirement to enable the workforce to work remotely has had some impacts on the culture and workplace models that companies are moving toward.

WHAT DO YOU FORESEE THE NEW MODEL FOR THE WORKPLACE BEING?

Penny says, “We are increasingly comfortable in the new environment, and this will evolve over the next few years. The way we work, lead, train and our culture has changed significantly. While many are discovering a better life balance, others are finding they need the office environment in order to be effective and healthy. We believe a hybrid approach will develop that allows people the flexibility to either work at home, in an office or a little of both.”

HOW HAS YOUR WORKPLACE CULTURE CHANGED OR TRANSFORMED IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS?

Eric responds, “Over the last six months, our team in the contact centers at Scotiabank switched perspectives quite swiftly to embrace the new, evolving normal.

“While working remotely has been a

change for us all, we’ve noticed that our teams continue to remain accountable, supportive and proactive to deliver on what matters most to our customers. As our culture continues to evolve, it’s heartening to witness that, through all of this, we’ve continued to provide best-in-class advice to our customers and draw the best out of our people.”

Another element around **Leading through Crisis** is creating a “culture of safety”—considering both the physical and mental aspects.

DAVID TSANG, Director Customer Support, Wajax, adds, “It was actually not a difficult



task, as Wajax has an extremely strong belief when it comes to the safety of our employees. Each meeting, whether it is in person or online, employees are mandated to provide a safety share update. The update could be related to our regular personal experiences or workplace-related. With the importance of safety already ingrained in ourselves as Wajax employees, it was simply focusing more on the impact on employees’ well-being both physically and mentally due to COVID.

“For instance, some of the safety share updates in the past months that I had come across were referenced in detail toward physical and mental health through COVID. Employees shared their experiences and stressed the importance of self-care and the need to stay connected with loved ones while in isolation. Suggestions were provided around looking for ways to bring some joy into your day, unwind, blow-off some steam or have a laugh when you can. Reminders were provided regarding resources like the employee assistance program that employees can leverage, if needed. The high expectation of safety in Wajax has put employees in a proper state of mind even during difficult times like COVID.”

Tony adds, “When we went to a work-from-home model, we knew it was going to be crucial for people to stay connected to each other and to our office. Every week, we would set up a fun connection or what we call a team huddle. During this, we would have little Ice Breakers either at the beginning or at the back end of the meeting. Topics included talking about what your favorite food is, or

what was your favorite vacation, or what was your favorite toy growing up as a child.

“We would also include things like virtual background contests on Zoom and jokes of the week. We found that this was important to give people a little smile in their day and for them to feel some sense of normalcy and connection to their colleagues and management team. It also gives them something to look forward to and to prepare for as the next week’s challenge for the team huddle was unknown.”

IN YOUR WORKPLACE, WHAT ARE SOME SUCCESS STORIES THAT CAME OUT OF THIS CRISIS?

SHARON STINES, AVP, Customer Care, AIR MILES Rewards Program, shares: “One of the



key successes that comes to mind was the increased focus on connecting with each other—communication across all levels and departments. Since we no

longer were in the office, we made a concentrated effort to provide additional touchpoints for associates by leveraging a variety of tools: video messages, virtual meetings, new social channels, etc. Though I think the initial aim was mainly to keep associates informed and educated on what to expect, the result was an increase in transparency and trust. The messages were authentic, genuine and personal. In addition to the business updates, we shared what we felt, what we feared and what we hoped.

“It grew beyond just being about the business and included who we are as people. We celebrated and shared our vulnerabilities, our strengths and our joys; we laughed and cried together. This additional focus on connecting will remain even when we return to the office. It has become a critical part of our culture, a reflection of how we work and engage with each other.”

WHAT DID YOU DISCOVER ABOUT THE HUMAN SPIRIT?

David Bradshaw states, “We discovered our team members are very adaptable and resilient, partly because we have a clear strategy and purpose. We focus on team member engagement and customer experience. We put our customers at the heart of everything

we do. As a result of our team’s adaptability, our customer satisfaction scores remained stable throughout the challenges of the pandemic and we continued to receive excellent customer feedback.”

Sharon adds that “people are capable of so much more than they know. **Acceptance is key.** We are all capable of anything when we know we are not being judged on our mistakes, that there is someone waiting to catch us if we should fall, that someone believes in us, that we are part of a collective whole, and that we are not alone. **If we know these things, we are willing to try and that is everything.”**

Lessons Learned and Take-Aways

WHAT IS THE BEST LESSON YOU CAN SHARE ABOUT LEADING THROUGH CRISIS?

Sharon says, “Have a plan, someplace to start and a path forward. Take a step so people can envision progress and a way out.” She adds that the plan is worthless without:

- **Leveraging the power of Team.** Success is driven not by one but by the collective power of the team. In a crisis you need a variety of skill sets, expertise and experiences coupled with a willingness to experiment and try something new to succeed.
- **Giving people permission to fail.** Making sure they understand that perfection is not the goal, rather progress is. Creating an environment where they can pivot and try new approaches before they land on the right one.
- **Trust—it’s all about EI (emotional intelligence).** Lead with a people-first mindset—take care of them, show them you care, ensure their safety, trust them with the truth, and share your personal fears and failures (let them know they are not alone).
- **Enable and Empower.** Ensure they have the tools and authority required to make decisions—remove unnecessary approvals and steps.

David Tsang points out, “It’s easier said than done, but I have learned one must lead with extra care and calmness—and lead with a **strong sense of empathy through crisis.** Most employees not only have to deal with the crisis at work but there are battles at home for many potentially due to health, financial or emotional concerns.”

Tsang adds that, “**Leaders must stand**

tall and lead by example through difficult times. If leaders show any lack of confidence or resilience through crisis, how can we expect our teams to pull through? I have learned that, despite how challenging situations are when taking care of our employees and our customers through COVID, constant check-ins through live chat, calls or emails go a long way. These small gestures provide employees a sense of care.”

Eric adds, “As I look back at leading our extraordinary team over this period, I feel that the most substantial lesson has been the **opportunity to drive effective change.** During COVID-19, I witnessed our team improve the way they communicated, collaborated, executed and adapted with speed to solve our business challenges. Each day, and sometimes several times a day, we implemented a variety of change measures to deal with the unknown and support a testing mentality to drive better outcomes. Frequent open communication without reprisal from mistakes helped support the foundation of trust needed to work through the uncertainty with the team’s best foot forward.”

Penny notes, “The best lesson I would share is to **build a team you can trust before a crisis hits.** During times of crisis, there is no time to follow up with people, or for decisions to follow an authority matrix. One person cannot take it all on. Everyone needs to jump in on different tasks. It is divide and conquer at its finest.”

Tony says, “The number one take-away that we’ve learned during the COVID-19 pandemic is that it’s never a one-size-fits-all approach. Everybody learns at a different speed and capacity, and has different comfort levels in the way they interact with others—both from a safety perspective and a human engagement perspective. It’s important for us to cater to these different needs and to provide an environment where people feel comfortable, engaged and excited to deliver their best.

“This, I believe, will continue into the future way of doing business and is something all businesses should consider, whether it’s a hybrid model of work from home or in office, or creating an environment where people can time shift in order to meet their life and business needs. It’s also important to invest in mental health and interaction of your employees. Everybody is going through

a difficult time and we can’t give a one-size-fits-all approach and expect everyone to succeed. It will take time, effort and agility to react in the future.”

Thinking about some lessons learned, David Bradshaw says to “stay connected with your people. With team members working remotely, you miss out on those daily human interactions like walking by someone’s desk and having a chat or bumping into a colleague in common areas, like the cafeteria or lounge. That connection is vital so that team members feel supported and can be nimble when presented with both challenges and opportunities.”

Thank you to ALL the leaders who served selflessly to ensure that your teams’ and customers’ needs were taken care of during this crisis.

Many thanks to David Bradshaw, Sharon Stines, Penny St. Antoine, David Tsang, Eric Scipio del Campo and Tony Porciello for sharing their valuable insights! ●

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Hear more from these leaders along with many others at our annual conference! Join us VIRTUALLY on November 5th as we share many lessons learned around Leading through Crisis, Employee Engagement, CX/EX in the new normal, Diversity and Inclusion, along with leading-edge technology solutions.

For more information about the Greater Toronto Area Contact Centre (GTACC) association or this amazing CX/EX Summit, visit: www.gtacc.ca/gtacc-2020-conference. We have waived the traditional entrance fee, but instead are asking for a nominal donation to either of our two pillar charities. A non-transferable link will be sent to the email used for the donation.



Sangeeta Bhatnagar is Founder of the boutique Human Capital firm SB Global, which focuses on talent acquisition and training (live and virtually) for top-tiered Contact Center & CX professionals.

With an emphasis on Human Behavior, Sangeeta helps companies to attract, retain and develop top talent using behavior models, strategies and Emotional Intelligence principles. Sangeeta was selected as one of ICFE’s “Top 50 Customer Service Thought Leaders on Twitter.” She co-authored the Amazon #1 best-selling anthology “Called to Action,” and she is Chair of the Greater Toronto Area Contact Centre Association.

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