



Accelerating Change Across 600 Employees

By Joe Laipple, Ph.D.

James is a director of a large call center of 600 people. He has six managers reporting to him. The center has about 30 supervisors who manage the agents, who spend the day answering about 50 customer calls each. James was new to this position about eight months ago. Just before James arrived, this center had just finished participating in a culture survey that measured employee engagement. The survey results were well below the company's average. The center had never met its monthly productivity numbers in its seven-year history. It had solid customer service numbers and quality numbers.

[They] didn't just approach employees when there were problems. The questions [they asked] were intended to have a positive impact...within the center.

– Joe Laipple

He was promoted to lead this center at the same time a new head of the center was appointed. Together they teamed up to improve the business results in a sustainable way. That would mean not only improving productivity, but also improving the culture and maintaining the solid customer service and quality numbers. This meant helping to hold all leaders and influencers accountable for driving results in a positive way. It also meant dealing with poor performers objectively, quickly, and persistently. James is a numbers guy who knows (and remembers) the specific numbers better than virtually anyone else in the center. But he also has a vision for the center that includes not only getting good results but doing so the right way.

James and his HR partner developed a plan using Coaching for Rapid Change® as one of their key tools to create positive change. They experienced incremental change over the course of the first few months. It was slow and steady. James believed it was a solid foundation that he and his team could maintain.



They made the kind of progress most teams make: some leaders were making the tools part of their day-to-day routines, some leaders were having some success with the tools, and some were barely complying with the minimum requirements. Pockets of success and more than a handful of good examples James could point to, but not wide-spread cascading and adoption.

And then something happened. **James and his team saw an acceleration in the change.** This acceleration led to improvements in the culture, four months exceeding their productivity measures, number two in customer service in the entire company, and number one in quality within their region. Usually when teams see an improvement in productivity it has a negative impact on the culture, the customer experience, and the quality of the work. This was not the case for James and his team.

Let's explore what happened to James, his managers, his HR partner, and the supervisors. What they did offers lessons for other groups who are seeing some success but who desire an acceleration of the change and who want to see this kind of change stick.

HOW THEY GOT STARTED

James and his team of leaders made commitments using the Coaching for Rapid Change process. Each leader (the director, the six managers, and the 30 supervisors) agreed to hold five 3-minute conversations each day. These conversations were focused on what was working to help provide positive reinforcement to the agents. The conversations could be held with any level and across

Sometimes if you want to see a change for the better, you have to take things into your own hands.

— Clint Eastwood

reporting relationships. The leaders would ask questions and show that they didn't just approach employees when things weren't working or when there were problems. The questions were intended to have a positive impact on the employees and to build positive relationships within the center.

They also agreed to share their best examples each week in the Rapid Change sessions. Each group of managers would meet with their team of supervisors, who shared what they were trying to accomplish, what happened during the conversation, and what they did to have a helpful interaction. They also gave each other feedback on what they liked and offered suggestions to improve their conversations and coaching. The primary goal of the sessions was to learn specific tips from each other that could be spread across teams and the center.

James and his team saw some incremental progress using these tools in the way described above. Leaders were approaching employees not just when there were problems but also when things were working. Leaders were starting to be viewed as helpful and as able to drive change in a positive way. But James was not satisfied with the rate of change. He was interested in accelerating the rate of change and in spreading the process and impact across more leaders and more employees.

WHAT THEY DID TO MAKE IT WORK

1. **30 minutes on the floor each day.** Managers and the director were struggling with the commitment to five 3-minute meetings per day—not because they didn't want to or they didn't think it was important, but simply because they were not including it in their schedules. Eventually, they simply blocked off two 15-minute segments or one 30-minute segment each

day and conducted as many 3-minute meetings they could during these segments. The goal here was to see an increase in repetition. They also did something to fit this into their typical days: they added these segments to the front end or back end of other meetings they had when they had to travel to other parts of the facility. It was on their schedule, but it wasn't on their peoples' schedules.

2. **"You know the drill."** James made a commitment, like his managers, to spend 30 minutes on the floor each day. (Keep in mind that he works in a culture where there are meetings and conference calls booked all day. It is not uncommon to have triple bookings in this company.) He'd walk over to supervisors or managers when they were on the floor or in their offices. At first, he'd ask them a simple question



They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.

— Andy Warhol

like “what’s your best coaching interaction you’ve had today?” After a few weeks, he changed it to: “you know the drill.” Initially people responded with “what do you

mean?” He’d then say something like “I’ve been coming around asking the same sort of question for a few weeks now, what have I been asking about?”

The supervisor or manager would say something like “my best example from today or this week?” and then James would sit back and listen to their best recent example. After a period of time, he’d just walk up to them on the floor or when they were in their offices and they’d begin sharing their best example without being prompted by a question or by “you know the drill.”

3. **Good results plus specific behaviors.** Leaders got good at conversations that connect the behavior (the how) to best achievement or outcome from that day or week. The 30 minutes they spent on the floor and the answers to the “you know the drill” prompt had some sound behavioral science to them. It wasn’t about being positive or saying good job to someone. The conversations were simple: asking individuals (whether they were agents or supervisors) to identify a good outcome (a good customer interaction or a good coaching interaction) and ask them to describe how they did that. Being specific helped here: “how did you manage to handle that call quickly and ensure you provided good customer service?” This was a significant breakthrough for the supervisors who started to see their balanced results improve. Most of their agents knew how to answer this question because they figured

out not only how to do something productively but also with good quality and good customer impact.

- Two essential benefits here were: i) that coaches started to gather very specific tips that could be shared immediately with others who are struggling to find out how to do something well and ii) this line of questioning helped all employees improve their self-management and self-direction (which increased their individual accountability for making something happen on their own).
4. **The Swarm.** The managers and director agreed to be on the floor at least 30 minutes per day. They wanted the supervisors on the floor for longer periods of time coaching, developing, and influencing the agents in positive ways. They wanted supervisors to help. The Swarm was put in place as an all-hands-on-deck period of time when all leaders (director, managers, supervisors) were out on the floor for a 60- to 90-minute period each week. The goal here was for coaches to demonstrate mostly positive coaching during this time period. This also provided time for managers and the director to see the coaching



If you want to change attitudes, start with a change in behavior.

— William Glasser

in action. When they first started this process, there was concern for others watching coaching like this in real time. People would be nervous. People wouldn't show you what was really happening. After a few weeks of the Swarm and daily commitments by supervisors to coach more often on the floor (especially based on what was working), supervisors started to say "Watch us all you want. This is what we do every day. The conversations are mostly positive, so what would be the downside to have someone watch us in action." During a recent Swarm, supervisors were flagging down the director, managers, and visitors from Corporate to watch them in action. At the conclusion of each Swarm, the director and managers share what they observed. They started with the best interaction they observed. They also described the kind of coaching and suggestions they offered. On occasion, they would highlight someone who is struggling with the techniques.

5. **Embedding the tools into other naturally occurring meetings and gatherings.** The local leaders also made efforts to build the positive examples into other naturally occurring meetings that they have like the weekly "All Leader" meeting. They would also reference an occasional rapid change example in other meetings among leaders.
6. **Managing poor performers and dealing with poor performance effectively.** Two things occurred here.
 - Each employee's balanced results were evaluated. Those who were struggling were identified (as defined by the score card which included results and a few behaviors) and a clear message was



sent to them by their reporting manager. This group included agents, five supervisors, and one manager. Those supervisors who struggled the most were also those least likely to be using the rapid change tools. There was weekly review of how these individuals were progressing. Those who showed signs of progress had a chance to be part of the team later. Those who did not, continued along the HR process (and this could lead to loss of job).

- When something that was not working was observed (in behavior or in results), these were quickly addressed. James described it as "when we see something like that, we get in and get out. We are clear on what we saw, clear on what needs to be done, and clear on our follow up." They started to have these conversations in real time and this helped move along those who were struggling.
7. **Speak up, we're listening.** When James first joined the team, he met with employees across all levels just to hear what was on their minds. This was meant to show he could listen to their issues and to hear the truth. He encouraged employees to share

what was happening, what was working, and what wasn't. He used this to begin shifting the culture. This also provided a starting point for some of the 3-minute meetings, which may need to simply start with leaders showing employees that not only can they set direction, address problems, but they could also listen to what the employees had in mind.

NOW WHAT

The point of this story is to provide you with an example of how one group figured out how to accelerate change and

how they spread the Coaching for Rapid Change process across hundreds of employees. The majority of employees in this facility can describe to others not only what their results are on any given day, week, or month, but importantly they are able to describe what they are doing to handle customer or coaching interactions well. The key here is that this team stressed accountability for each employee, at every level. In particular, individuals here are more self-directed as the leadership encouraged employees to be articulate their self-reinforcement, self-management, self-correction and self-assessment.



[About the Author]

JOE LAIPPLE, PH.D.



Joe Laipple is author of Precision Selling: A Guide for Coaching Sales Professionals and Rapid Change: Immediate Action for the Impatient Leader, both available for purchase in the ADI Store.

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