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# The Creation of Organizational Learning Solutions in the Call Center at Direct Checks Through Action Research

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Running head: ADDRESSING CALL CENTER LEARNING CHALLENGES

The Creation of Organizational Learning Solutions in the Call Center at Direct Checks through

Action Research

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### Abstract

Maximizing potential revenue and profitability performance continues to be a key objective for Direct Checks as the company's core product - personal checks - moves through the decline stage of the product life cycle; and, the department with the most potential to positively impact the financial performance will be the Call Center, as a majority of the company's orders are captured through this channel. This department, however, continues to struggle with the establishment of a culture where the learning and sharing of information is embedded into the operating norms and values of employees, specifically around how to best sell to and service its customers. In order to address this challenge, a collaborative team was formed and Pearce and Robinson's Six-Step Model was used to collect the data necessary to accurately diagnose the apparent and underlying problems. Data gathering methods are reviewed and the results discussed, including the interpretation process, the specific action plan recommendations, and rationale for selection. A survey was used to collect feedback from representatives. Finally, the overall project is analyzed in light of the implications of the work and resulting organizational learning.

## The Creation of Organizational Learning Solutions in the Call Center at Direct Checks through Action Research

The Call Center at Direct Checks has many reasons to look back over the last 2 decades with a sense of accomplishment. A tremendous amount of change has taken place as the department transitioned from a service group of less than 20 employees who supported customers with order information to a dynamic inbound sales center made up of over 400 employees. The department evolved from a pure cost center to the company's primary revenue generator, as it significantly out performs the company's other two marketing channels, direct mail and Internet. It has also transitioned through several leadership changes which resulted in drastic changes to how the department was driven. While this success is noteworthy, the Call Center remains challenged by several key issues that may hinder its ability to sustain its strong level of contribution, particularly in light of the fact that sales of the company's core product, personal checks, are now declining.

As a direct result of diminishing sales, the company evolved from a stage of maturity to one of decline. Maximizing the potential revenue and profitability performance during the decline stage, a key strategy for companies experiencing a drop off in sales due to the end of a product life cycle (Pearce & Robinson, 2003) will most certainly be impacted by the department's ability to share and maintain its knowledge base. Specifically, information about how and why the department's most effective sales representatives are able to sell to and service customers needs to be effectively and efficiently moved across the entire floor in order to elevate the performance of all employees. The department, however, continues to struggle with the establishment of a culture where the learning and sharing of information is embedded into the operating norms and employee values. How the Call Center addresses this issue can, and most likely will, factor greatly into both the short- and long-term success of the company in general.

This effort - to create organizational learning solutions - therefore looks at the conditions that have caused this problem and presents action research as the preferred method to generate those potential solutions.

To complete this process, a collaborative team was formed from several members of the Call Center team, as well as from other departments with a direct tie to Call Center operations. Using Action Research, the team conducted an extensive data collecting effort and then analyzed that data to identify several key factors that influence the department's ability to share and grow organizational skill and knowledge. Taking into account both process and cultural influences, the team formulated three primary issues to be addressed and four potential interventions to address those challenges. Those solutions, if implemented will provide positive movement in the Call Center's efforts to increase operational efficiency and effectiveness over time, ultimately making a positive impact on the company's primary focus: revenue and profitability maximization.

### *Organizational Background*

Current Checks was established in 1986 as a division of Current, Inc., a direct-mail cataloger that markets greeting cards, gift-wrap and associated gift items to customers primarily in the United States. The personal checks business initiative represented a break from the general strength of Current, which was to manufacture products using standard four-color printing processes and market them through a catalog. It also represented the nation's first direct-to-the-customer check printing and marketing effort. Before this particular distribution channel was established, the customers' only option was to purchase checks through their bank. By the end of that decade, the check-printing division began to grow rapidly on a strong business model that focused on customer acquisition through discounted pricing. All operational areas of the company, including order capture, manufacturing, and customer service focused all energy

toward keeping up with ever-increasing order demands. Very little time and financial resources were devoted to maximizing revenue or controlling cost.

During the late 1980s, Current was acquired a couple of times, eventually becoming a part of Deluxe, Inc., the nation's largest check printer for financial institutions. This acquisition was attractive to Deluxe because Current's check printing division was experiencing a high level of initial success in a marketing channel, personal check products sold directly to consumers, in which it was not yet a player. Deluxe maintains control over the venture today as a part of its Direct Checks business unit, renaming the company Checks Unlimited after divestiture of the greeting card side of the business, along with the Current name. In 2001, Checks Unlimited acquired one of its direct-mail competitors, Designer Checks, and eventually folded that product line into its offering as a second brand, complimenting the products and services of Checks Unlimited. This also led to the transition to the name of Direct Checks, as this represented the two brands now sold under a common business unit name.

By the mid-1990s, market saturation along with a general decline in consumer check usage flattened out growth curves, and the company began transitioning from a growth business into maturity. Corporate efforts began to evolve from activities that managed growth to those that drove efficiencies in both its marketing and manufacturing costs. Finally, during 2001 and 2002, Direct Checks slipped into decline as both total orders and average units per order peaked and began to decrease, completing the last of the four stages of industrial evolution. The four stages - start-up, growth, maturity, and decline - represent a framework to understand how the general business dynamics and requirements for success change over time (Pearce & Robinson, 2003).

Corporate goals set for the company by Deluxe during the last several years have directly reflected those outlined for a company in the fourth stage, decline, according to the four-stage

model. Those goals are: (a) reduce and reallocate personnel, (b) maximize cost control in manufacturing, and (c) boost investment recovery through profitability (Pearce & Robinson, 2003). Specifically, Deluxe continues to set aggressive revenue and profitability goals for Direct Checks as a way to pull capital dollars forward in the decline curve to immediately fund acquisition activity. This is the key element of the company's strategic direction in relation to its present competitive environment. In fact, the Direct Checks business unit is not mentioned as a part of Deluxe's mission statement, a sign that the board of directors does not see its direct-to-consumer business as a part of the company's sustained future growth, but rather a short-term solution to funding success in its Financial Services and Small Business Services divisions.

#### *Present Competitive Environment*

Direct Checks presently competes in a market with two other major competitors and a multitude of minor check printers who own a fraction of the market. The direct-check market is estimated at about 20% of the total check market, and Direct Checks (Checks Unlimited and Designer Checks) is presently the market leader. The fact that the direct-to-consumer market is in decline reflects the check market in general, which shows the use of personal checks as a payment method is declining. For the third straight year, the Federal Reserve has reported declining check usage. The Federal Reserve Board's 89<sup>th</sup> annual report approximates just 16.6 billion checks were processed in 2002, 1.9 % drop from 2001 (Cope, 2003). This number is consistent with industry estimates that usage has and will continue to decline for the foreseeable future at a rate of about 2 % (Bielski, 2003). While this seems dramatic, there is evidence from history that changes in the financial payment system have usually been overestimated, according to former Reserve Governor Susan M. Phillips (as cited in Cope). If this is true and there is some extended life for checks over the next decade or two, a critical part of Direct Checks' future will be influenced by how well the company addresses its competitive environment. A valuable tool

used to examine the nature and degree of competition in a proactive manner is the Five Forces Model.

According to this model, the five forces that influence competition in any industry are: (a) “the threat of new entrants, (b) the bargaining power of customers, (c) the bargaining power of suppliers, (d) the threat of substitute products or services (where applicable), and (e) the jockeying among current contestants” (Pearce & Robinson, 2003, p. 68). While all five continue to influence Direct Checks, the two primary forces to consider are the company’s relationship to its customers and its position in relation to competition. While the other three may cause challenges in the future, they are relatively stable compared to the other two. Because personal check is now in decline, it is unlikely that any new entrant would want to expend the capital necessary to begin competing in the market. While paper and postage costs have seen some volatility in the past, they have been stable enough to not be considered critical. Also, profit margins are high enough at present to absorb an increase in cost without placing the company in jeopardy. Finally, substitute products like electronic banking and debit cards are certainly a threat, and most likely at the heart of the present decline; but, this factor is also seen as less volatile since no major drop off in demand is predicted - as reflected in by former Reserve Governor Phillips. This leaves two critical forces: (a) the bargaining power of customers, and (b) the positioning of Direct Checks in relation to its rivals.

*The bargaining force of the customer.* The first concern, the bargaining force of the customer, is a primary one for Direct Checks. This is because the company’s core product, personal checks, is generally seen as standard and undifferentiated, and therefore provides the buyer with a certain power. That power is the ease with which consumers can switch to another supplier (Pearce & Robinson, 2003). While first-time orders may take longer to process as bank information must be verified, each player in the market has an introductory offer that is

significantly cheaper than reorder pricing. This gives the customer a strong economic incentive to leave, potentially jumping from one intro offer to another. Additionally, there are multiple brands marketed by the three major players, giving the customer a large number of options. With consumers using fewer checks, a savvy, price-sensitive customer could hop around for a decade or more before having to pay reorder rates. Making this threat even more daunting is the fact that any major swing in the economy toward recession could make consumers even more concerned with cost. Combine this economic concern with the fact that consumers tend to be more price sensitive when they are purchasing products that are undifferentiated, expensive in relation to their incomes, and a type where quality is not a major factor (Pearce & Robinson, 2003), then customer retention becomes a real challenge.

The factors noted above are certainly becoming more of an issue as the company is presently pushing the price of its products and services upward. A price increase was implemented in February, 2004 and another in May, 2004. While the second was later retracted in January of 2005, the aggressive approach to pricing still generally places the company's pricing between its direct-market competitors and what banks presently charge their customers. The challenge remains how best to achieve the previously mentioned objective of producing a strong influx of capital dollars to fund acquisition activity while at the same time minimizing the negative impacts the aggressive approach to revenue maximization has on its existing consumer base. Present sales-related activities and pricing decisions do little to establish long-term relationships with customers. For example, pricing increases, product feature reduction, and aggressive reduction of average handling time for telephone sales calls help to reduce costs and increase revenue, yet they give customers little reason to return.

In terms of the future, as long as new product lines and any acquired business initiatives will not need or want to use the Direct Checks brand or mailing list, this approach will probably

have little long-term impact. However, if a high level of synergy is ever expected between the existing check-product line and any new products being developed or companies being considered for acquisition, more effort should be put into building positive relationships with check customers, even at the expense of some short-term profitability. Or, if the company must continue to push toward revenue maximization, a stronger effort should be made to offset those potentially negative outcomes with other factors that can create more positive customer interactions. Finally, the company must continue to monitor how these factors impact consumer movement to substitute products like electronic banking or debit purchases. While this was not listed as a major factor for concern, it may quickly become one as price-sensitive customers begin to see other alternatives as significantly less expensive than checks. The same phenomenon that attracted people away from their banks to buy checks direct through the mail - lower cost - may also drive them from check use at increasing rates.

*The position of the company in relation to competition.* The second concern, the company's position in the marketplace as related to its competition, is also very important. Direct Checks is the market leader, which tends to result in a bit of a challenge in a declining market as smaller competitors are fiercer in their efforts to expand market share as a way to extend life. Competition is even more of a factor in a market where the consumer may not see a high level of differentiation between products and minimal cost to switch brands (Pearce & Robinson, 2003). Historically, Direct Checks has set the tone in the market with most competitors eventually following along with similar offers and pricing structures. This has always worked to the advantage of the company, as the major market players have always stayed relatively close to each other in offers and pricing. There is now a risk, however, that the other direct check providers will begin to see price as a major differentiator and will therefore go in the opposite direction. In this case, company leadership will need to be ready to quickly respond to any

sudden and drastic pricing pressures from the market. An example of this was the company's decision to retract the May 2004 price increase in January of 2005. While lowering the price most likely did help offset a significant decline in sales conversion that was realized after that second increase in 2004, pricing remains a competitive issue where further decreases may become a consideration based on competitive moves, and a delay in reaction could cause a continued drop in order conversion to be more substantial than necessary.

### *The Presenting Problem*

The presenting problem that must be addressed was: The Call Center at Direct Checks is presently facing challenges in how it creates and manages knowledge and skill both individually and collectively. The purpose of this research project was to determine why these challenges existed and determine an appropriate series of interventions to correct the situation. Ignoring the symptoms would not make the underlying factors disappear. If anything, the situation had a high potential to deteriorate. Rather, the Call Center saw this situation as an opportunity to examine the possibilities of how the department might look if those factors that were causing the lack of learning and loss of knowledge capital could be eliminated.

A defining characteristic of leaders who can drive change is the ability to close the gap between what is and what could be. "They exploit incongruencies and anomalies in the present to gain insight on what is needed in the future" (Ketterer & Chayes, 1995, p. 196). The "what is," is an environment where the process of generating knowledge is simply thought of as hiring people, training them, and allowing their accumulated skills and abilities to naturally combine. Unfortunately, knowledge does not naturally work this way on its own. It tends to stay put within individual silos. The "what could be," is an environment where people would purposely move together to help one another become more capable, where processes and infrastructure would allow collective knowledge to continually develop. The end resulting would therefore be

continuous improvement of organizational capability (Dixon & Ross, 1999). In order to fully understand what could be, an examination of the Call Center's past should be completed by looking not only at the general history of the department, but also at some of the potential issues which helped create the problem. Finally, the consequences of inaction should be considered as well.

*An examination of the Call Center's past.* A key element of achieving the company's strategic financial goals in relation to its present competitive environment has been creating long-term success through short-term profitability. A key to achieving this objective then was, and will continue to be, the maximization of the Call Center's ability to create the desired capital. While the department presently represents over 50% of the company's total revenue, 10 years ago it generated no incremental contribution to the bottom line. During the initial stages of start-up and growth, the Customer Service Department was formed to help support sales in passing on product information and assisting customers with issues after orders had been placed. As the company first began its shift from growth into maturity during the 1990s, the department began to change its primary focus from servicing customers to selling to customers. This happened through the establishment of a sales team that actively began to solicit the customer for an immediate purchase, rather than directing callers to mail-in check orders.

By the year 2000, the department had changed its name from Customer Service to Call Center, and employees were no longer Customer Service Representatives, but Call Center Representatives (CCRs). At that same time, all representatives were trained to take sales orders rather than just a select group, meaning that employees who used to see their job as only customer service needed to learn how to sell. This was just part of the effort to evolve the department's culture from one that reactively supported revenue generation to one that proactively drove revenue growth. Other actions also were taken that would begin to produce the

artifacts, or visible organizational structures and processes, of an environment where revenue would be the primary focus. Artifacts represent the first level of culture, or those tangible things a person can see, hear, and feel that indicate or define a company's working environment (Schein, 1992). Changes included the establishment of a sales training effort, a sales incentive program, and teams of CCRs who took on names like Peak Performers and Dream Team to build small group unity and competition across the floor. Revenue-oriented statistics began to be posted outside Team Manager's workstations listing individual sales totals for the previous day.

At the same time, Call Center leadership worked to establish those observable indicators of a sales culture by working on transitioning the values of the Call Center through the introduction of strategies and goals that were directly tied to financial performance. Values represent the second, less visible level of culture as they are a group's sense of what ought to be (Schein, 1992). The objective was to create a committed, sales-driven culture where employees (a) embraced their role as professional sellers, (b) valued and built sales skills and knowledge, (c) were willing to take on new selling challenges, and (d) were willing to try new selling approaches. All this was done because they understood the necessity to constantly adjust in order to improve performance. The ultimate goal was to change the existing individualistic customer service environment into a call center where sales teams worked to improve abilities and share selling secrets to advance overall performance -- a place where constant learning and growing would be systemic.

The department's production and efficiency performance suggest that this effort to create a selling environment has been successful. For example, average revenue per order on reorder more than doubled since the initial effort began. However, there is strong evidence that changes to the artifacts and values have not completely filtered down to the deepest level of organizational culture, which is the basic underlying assumptions, or cognitive structure which

guides behavior and tells individuals how to perceive, think, and feel (Schein, 1992). When values are told, and not learned, they are not real and are what can be referred to as espoused values, which then can predict what a person will say, but not what they will actually do in situations where values should be operating (Argyris & Schon, as cited in Schein, 1992). The fact that changes were often dictated is reflected in a consistent level of negative feedback and resistant attitudes by CCRs toward those changes in operational norms and goal structures resulting from recent strategic business changes. The end result is that the Call Center is changing in a way that will require its employees to change as well. The old must be let go, the new embraced. This requires learning new skills and growing knowledge in a culture which traditionally thrived on simplicity and standardization.

*Potential consequences of inaction.* The Call Center remains a product of its past, as many of the challenges it now faces are directly related to its history. And, while the department's leadership may continue to move forward without addressing some of those issues, it is important to consider the potential outcome if no action is taken, or even worse, if ill-conceived actions are rushed into with little forethought. There are two primary negative consequences that seem likely if no action is taken to correct the call center's operational norms around learning: the first is a loss of employee engagement, leading to high attrition and a constant loss of talent; and, the second is a loss in overall customer satisfaction, as inexperienced and de-motivated employees create a poor experience for customers calling in to order or ask questions regarding an existing order. The net result of both of these will be increase cost and loss of potential revenue, two financial elements the company continues to focus on.

The first potential outcome to avoid by taking action is a loss in overall employee engagement. This is a critical issue for a department that represents more than half of the company's revenue. For example, if selling can be defined as a transfer of enthusiasm (Tracy,

2002), then allowing a stagnant environment to continue, where employees have little to no opportunity to grow their job skills, will do nothing more than deflate a sales representative, negatively impacting the very selling performance needed to create results. Not only is it discouraging to work hard and continue to struggle, but watching others succeed without an opportunity to discover what makes them successful, or to feel like there is no one there to help, adds to the de-motivation. Call Center employees are asked to accomplish a great deal and at times, have been left to figure it out on their own.

Beside de-motivated sellers, another result of low employee engagement is higher attrition rates. Employees who lose their enthusiasm not only don't sell very well, but they often leave in search of better opportunities. The primary motivators which make employees work hard and remain in a position are: achievement, recognition, work activities, increased responsibility, advancement and growth (Gores, 2000). A primary contributor to all of these factors is personal development activities which focus on new knowledge and skills, because they accelerate the chances that these six factors will happen. When employees don't feel appreciated and championed, they don't stick around. And, when applied to the company's best sellers, the consequences only become more painful. Replacing a poor-to-mediocre sales representative may not be difficult, but finding excellent sellers who have intuitive skills to communicate and persuade is a much more daunting task. Additionally, these are the very same employees presently used to informally coach underachievers and give insights to improve the sales process for the entire department. Losing the best and brightest would have devastating results in the company's bottom line potential as their knowledge and ability of how to maximize each selling opportunity walks out the door with them.

One last consequence will be the decline in overall customer satisfaction as engaged, productive employees tend to take better care of their customers. For a company with a core

product in decline, customer retention should be a point of major concern. A department culture that does not drive to the types of behaviors that produce satisfied customers will ultimately cause those who are not serviced to go elsewhere, either to a competitor or to a substitute product. Additionally, as the company looks to add products and services, customers who were not taken care of during their check purchasing experience will most likely not come back to spend money on other products and services Checks Unlimited attempts to present. As Calloway puts it in his book addressing how to become the kind of company that customers can't live without: "It's the people." A cornerstone to success, he explains, is how a company leverages its asset of people, referring to it as a critically important driver to creating and sustaining momentum (2005, p.173).

#### *Entry and Contract Negotiations*

Conducting research in one's own organization always has a political dynamic, which if not addressed, will undermine the research effort and block the effort to bring about change (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). Additionally, the ultimate goal of the project was to seek solutions that allow those involved to "explore, collaboratively, beyond their initial positions ... to the values and needs that underlie those positions" (Napolitano & Henderson, 1998, p. 106). To address the challenges outlined as part of this project, it was recognized that taking a truly systemic approach would require work across existing boundaries, both within the Call Center and without. Therefore, a critical first step in the pre-planning process was to gain support and buy-in from all of those directly impacted by the research process and the results. By considering those key power relationships that must be addressed before entry was attempted, and then addressing those relationships in some manner, the chances for solutions that would maximize the benefit for the entire system were greatly increased.

*Relationship management.* In order to manage the political process effectively while ensuring a proper level of control and ultimately the effort's legitimacy, relationships with up to 10 key power positions were identified. For the purpose of this effort, four of those have been identified as important to gaining effective entry; the researcher's relationship to (a) the sponsor, (b) to peers, (c) to other departments, and (d) to subordinates (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). The first was accomplished by ensuring sponsorship to the project idea before work on the contract was initiated. Because the Call Center Sales Manager had direct control over the initiation of change projects which would have a direct impact on revenue, she was selected to be the project sponsor. Once the general concept was agreed upon, final buy-in was achieved through the submission of a plan summary (Appendix A) to the project contract that included a list of step-by-step action items, target dates for completion of those items, and documentation of how results would be tracked and reported.

The second power relationship to be considered, those at the peer level, was achieved by communicating the project plan to the entire Contact Center Leadership Team during a staff meeting, including a brief summary of the need and plan to conduct research. Within this communication, the intent to involve representatives from that team in the analysis and action planning steps was made clear. The third, relationships with other departments, was addressed by including a representative on the collaborative team from each of the two departments that would be most impacted by the outcomes of the project, Marketing and Human Resources. Finally, the fourth relationship, with subordinates, was addressed through communication with and involvement of employees. This was seen as the most critical of the four power relationships as it was the effective management of this relationship that ultimately determined the depth and sustainability of the solutions outlined as a part of this project. Once proper buy-in was achieved,

the methodology to approaching and achieving the necessary organizational change was determined.

*Collaborative team selection.* In order to ensure that a strong level of collaboration was achieved, stakeholders from several areas of the department were invited, along with two from outside the department as well (see Table 1). The person to serve as the change agent, or collaborative group leader, was the Call Center's Training Manager. Because the leader of the initiative as well as several of its members were from within the department, and all members were from within the company, special consideration was given to balancing the formal, organizational justification for the project with the agent's and the team's own personal justification. In order to maintain the overall impartiality of the overall effort like this one, the person driving the change needs to maintain credibility while remaining an astute political player, effectively assessing the power and interests of the relevant stakeholders selected to participate (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). To counteract self-interest, the leader constantly pointed the group back to the intent of action research and to the data which the process produced.

Another important step in maintaining a team focus was to for positions to be selected, not individuals. In addition to the change agent, the collaborative team consisted of three Call Center Team Leaders from different shifts, and a department Technical Specialist. These four would serve as the internal voice, along with the team leader. Additionally, representatives from Human Resources and Marketing, the Recruiting Manager and the Marketing Analyst assigned to the Call Center, were asked to join. These two departments have the greatest systemic connections to the department's activities. The team therefore consisted of seven individuals. Initially, a member of the department's training team was also invited; however, she was not able to attend the first three meetings and eventually dropped out. She was not replaced as the group had progressed to the point where bringing in a new member would have been difficult.

Table 1

*Project Collaborative Team Members*

Position	Department
Training Manager	Call Center
Team Leader	Call Center
Team Leader	Call Center
Team Leader	Call Center
<i>Trainer (never served)</i>	<i>Call Center</i>
Technical Specialist	Call Center
Business Analyst	Marketing
Call Center Recruiter	Human Resources

## Method

The overall method selected to examine the obvious symptoms and underlying problems affecting the Call Center's ability to create and maintain knowledge and skill, both individually and collectively, was action research. The process of action research can be defined as "a collaborative problem solving relationship between researcher and client which aims at both solving a problem and generating new knowledge" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001, p. 3). Action research by definition also implies that the effort of seeking solutions while creating knowledge is ongoing. It is a repeating cycle of (a) collecting data regarding a continuing system in relation to some objective, goal, or need, (b) feeding that data back into the system through interventions meant to change selected variables, (c) analyzing the outcomes for additional data, and (d) cycling the new data back into the system to drive continuous improvement (French & Bell, 2002).

*Action Research Rationale*

Action research was chosen as the approach to address this problem first because it provides a valuable model for the type of behavior necessary to create a true learning

organization, which is simply an environment where accumulating and expanding knowledge becomes a cultural and systemic norm. The past and present environment in the Call Center generally reflects a very individualized approach to knowledge creation. While some sharing takes place during informal side-by-side peer coaching sessions and team meetings for example, there are no consistent efforts to embed knowledge across the entire Call Center floor, which might represent up to 400-plus employees during the year.

If this is to change, any effort to build systemic knowledge should be similar to how adults generally learn at the individual level, which takes place as an ongoing process. A typical embedding cycle for an adult learner might look like this: (a) take action, (b) observe and think about the results, (c) draw conclusions, (d) choose a new action to execute and learn from, and finally (e) once again take action (Dixon & Ross, 1999). Action Research sets forth an excellent model for this type of behavior because it assumes these general steps in improving both the end result and the total sum of knowledge that can be applied to follow-up decisions. The objective is that both individuals and the system they operate in learn under the same mental construct.

Action Research was also selected because of its collaborative nature. As mentioned earlier, past efforts to create changes to employee perceptions and attitudes regarding their work environment have generally fallen short of expectations. While many factors could be pointed to as possible drivers to the enduring lack of commitment to change, a primary one is certainly that much of the change was driven from the top with little input from those dealing directly with customers. This is not to say that no effort was made to seek input about potential problems and possible solutions. The difficulty has arisen from the fact that the efforts have been inconsistent and disconnected for the most part, leaving employees with no connection that their voice had been heard and positive changes made based on their input. Through widening the circle of involvement to give employees a voice in the entire process – from analysis to resolution - the

Call Center will generate the critical mass, or grass roots support, that will be needed for the mobilization of the energy and innovation required to influence employee feelings and beliefs (Harvard, 2003).

#### *Action Research Model Selection*

The Action Research model chosen was Pearce and Robinson's Six-Step Model (see Table 2). This model dictates that the change agent facilitating the process does not dictate the specific problem, create solutions or evaluate results without collaboration (1989), and it also very much mirrors the adult learning cycle. These are the two key factors that were pointed out earlier to justify the use of Action Research as the method of addressing the presenting problem.

Additionally, this model focuses on gaining ownership of both the problem and the solution. This is accomplished by helping those involved see that they (a) are part of the problem, (b) share in the responsibility for the consequences, and (c) must participate in the identification and implementation of the changes that will be necessary to solve the problem (Pearce & Robinson).

Table 2

#### *Pearce and Robinson's Six-Step Model*

Step #	Activity
Step 1	Recognizing a problem
Step 2	Diagnosing the situation
Step 3	Identifying the problem and admitting it exists
Step 4	Selecting and "owning" a solution
Step 5	Planning and implementing the change
Step 6	Evaluating the change

Source: Pearce & Robinson, 1989

The emphasis on ownership is important because Call Center employees can still opt out of collaboration if they do not become closely connected to the process. For the Call Center, this is a likely scenario as department leaders have traditionally solicited employees' ideas about what

needs to be improved, but then assumed responsibility for implementing those solutions. The direct result of this is that employees are most likely conditioned to begin checking out somewhere short of true ownership (Napolitano & Henderson, 1998). In order to avoid this situation it will be critical to keep employees involved in any efforts to both implement and sustain the recommendations that are created. This is implied in action research as movement is always seen as a series of cycles of planning, data gathering, action and feedback, all involving the client group (French & Bell, 2002). The employees of the Call Center are members of that client group, and therefore should be involved at each step of the cycle of ongoing improvement.

With the problem identified (Step 1), it was then the objective of the collaborative team to complete the next three steps of Robinson's model: (2) diagnosing the situation, (3) identifying the problem and admitting it exists, and (4) selecting and "owning" solution(s). These solutions were then forwarded to the Call Center's senior leadership team for consideration and potential implementation, representing the final two steps of the model. The process for this team therefore began with diagnosis, or more specifically, the effort to create the data gathering tool needed to collect the information.

### *Validity*

A concern for this effort was to proactively address the concept of validity even before the effort began and throughout the effort as well. Validity speaks directly to the soundness and accuracy of the data collected, so that the resulting solutions will also be valid. In order for data to be valid, it must first address the issue it states it is addressing, and then it must also be accurate, reliable and complete (Nadler, 1977). The first major step in addressing validity was to set up the data gathering in a series of steps using different methods. This approach helped compensate for the deficiencies of any one method and also helped protect against misinterpretation, as one method often helps cross check against the others (Nadler). Also known

as triangulation, this process assumes that because no single method of data capture is effective, problems and solutions should be explored from different angles and perspectives (Regis, 2004). This project used data source triangulation by comparing what participants reported on the questionnaire to what was observed and recorded in the group orientation interviews and follow-up focus groups. Additionally, the Collaborative Team gathered data from members of several intact systems within the Call Center and compared their results.

The second major step in addressing validity was to pilot the survey with a small group of Call Center representatives before final distribution to all remaining employees. Piloting a survey is an effective way to ensure validity insofar as it indicates if the language used is clear and unbiased, or if the survey is too long (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998). Having a pilot group review and pretest the questionnaire is also considered a prudent step anytime a custom designed instrument is used as opposed to an existing one, as standardized tools are generally based on a model and have been pre-tested (Nadler, 1977). The pilot test for the data gathering instrument identified several issues concerning the wording of questions, and revisions were made accordingly.

The pilot group was made up of nine representatives, three from each grade level of sales representative and two Operations Managers from the Call Center. The group was allowed to take the survey and then each question was reviewed with the group for potential changes. Recommendations from the nine pilot members were discussed at a separate, follow-up meeting of the Collaborative Team members. While most changes the pilot group suggested were made, not all were, as the collaborative team considered context issues that were outside of the pilot group's understanding.

Additionally, several other steps were taken to ensure overall validity. First, the initial open-ended questions formulated for the orientation interview as well as those created for the questionnaire were reviewed by an outside source to ensure they did not introduce bias and were

generally understandable by the reader. Second, the orientation interview itself also helped with validity as it helped to ensure that no major issue was left out of the primary data gathering effort, the Call Center-wide questionnaire. Third, the questionnaire was anonymous so that employees felt free to answer honestly. Fourth, the questions themselves were a mix of forced choice and open-ended questions, which would allow for both qualitative and quantitative data to be collected, also known as methods triangulation (Regis, 2004). Fifth, change agent (Collaborative Leader) bias was minimized through active participation of the entire collaborative team, also known as analyst triangulation. And sixth, the questionnaire itself was reviewed by the collaborative team once more before piloting to ensure the questions were addressing those symptoms or potential problems identified earlier on in the process.

#### *Data Gathering Methods*

At the very foundation of any change effort is the process of diagnosis, which represents a continuous attempt to (a) collect data on the present state of the system and then (b) analyze it for meaning (French & Bell, 2002). For the Call Center, this system represented a vast network of individual sales representatives, the sales teams they form, the managers who lead them, and the support systems that serve them, including a process specialist, clerks, exception order representatives, collection representatives, technical specialists and trainers. This system then connects with many other systems outside the Call Center, including several other operational departments. The primary scope of this effort was to concentrate on the Call Center as a system, so that is where the first step of the diagnosis process, primary data collection, would take place. However, it was realized that some consideration would need to be given along the way to how potential interventions may influence the other systems which interact with the Call Center. This is one reason representatives from outside the department were included on the Collaborative

Team, and why the subsystems supporting the sales representatives would also be given the option to take the survey.

*Group orientation interviews.* The process of data collection was initiated before the first collaborative team meeting using several group orientation interviews, each consisting of three to five representatives. The purpose of group orientation interviews was to ask several clarifying questions aimed at helping those collecting and analyzing data gain a better understanding of the overall symptoms, and thus complete a more targeted and precise data collection effort. Additionally, interviews in general provide a key advantage in that they allow for in-depth probing and the use of open-ended questions, resulting in a potentially rich source of data (Nadler, 1977). By using small group orientation interviews, employee participants were able to feed off each other and all participants were allowed a chance to voice thoughts or feelings. The format of the session was a structured, open-ended interview, as this is what is typically recommended in the early stages when attempting to better familiarize a change agent with a situation before more systematic or comprehensive data is collected (Nadler).

Three questions were formulated (Appendix B), and each small group spent between 45 minutes and 1 hour giving feedback. An introductory paragraph (Appendix B) was read to inform all participants, regardless of the session, of several important norms for the group including the confidentiality of the group's discussion. These sessions included members of the department's training team as well as sales representatives (Appendix B). Care was taken to invite members with various levels of seniority in order to capture thoughts and ideas of both tenured employees as well as those new to the company. Data collected from those three sessions was consolidated into three summary documents for Collaborative Team members, as shown in Appendix C, D and E. With this step completed, the team was ready to meet for the first time to begin work to develop the questionnaire, and they did so February 16, 2005.

*Paper-and-pencil questionnaire.* The initial meeting for the group focused on member introductions and expectations, and also covered project scope, definition and expected outcomes. The purpose of this session was to build energy and excitement within the team by painting a vivid picture of how the group could impact the future through this effort. The summary document from the group orientation interviews was handed out. Each member was assigned the task of reviewing information collected from each of the three questions and identifying three critical themes from each question. This step set the group up for the second session, in which members completed an affinity diagram exercise to help consolidate each member's observations into one common list. The result of this exercise was that the group identified five major challenges to address and four learning approaches to consider. The summary document from the affinity diagram exercise is shown as Appendix F.

This information was used in the development of the primary data gathering tool, a paper-and-pencil questionnaire to be distributed to all 400 plus employees of the Call Center. It was decided at the outset of the project to not use a predesigned, standardized research instrument. While this approach might take less developmental time and save some work on validity of the survey tool itself, an instrument that is prepared in response to an individual study is generally seen as more accurate in the specific data it is able to collect (Jarvis, 1999). The survey was targeted at no more than two pages and was to consist of close-ended questions for a majority of the survey, with one or two open-ended questions at the end. The plan included a two-week window for survey collection with employees asked to complete the questionnaire during team meetings with only a facilitator present. The absence of the team's manager during the questionnaire's administration and the presence of a neutral facilitator was another way to ensure confidentiality.

As a starting point, collaborative team members were asked to create as many potential forced-choice survey questions as possible between the second and third meetings and submit their ideas by e-mail to the project lead. All questions were consolidated into one long list and grouped under three sections: (a) demographic information, (b) benchmarking questions, and (c) learning assessment questions. Team members were ultimately instructed to develop both forced-choice questions and open-ended questions. This was seen as a way to allow the core issues and beliefs to be addressed in a reliable way that is easy to use, score, and code, through the use of forced choice questions, while also allowing respondents to add insight in their own words into why they believe what they believe through the use of open-ended questions (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998). Members then spent the next three sessions reducing the number of questions and editing each for clarity.

While there is no set standard to survey length, considerations such as time allowed to complete the questions should be considered (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998). The team agreed that it should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire; therefore, it should be no longer than two pages. In order to accomplish this, 24 potential forced-choice questions were eliminated and 47 were kept. Later, just two open-ended questions were added bringing the final total to 49. The group went through several rounds of an exercise where they were asked to pick several questions to keep and several to drop from consideration. Votes were tallied and questions debated until a final list of questions was agreed upon. The final step was to review the remaining questions once more for any last observations before the survey was piloted. The final questionnaire is attached as Appendix G and the deleted questions are listed in Appendix H.

A total of 287 questionnaires were returned with 449 active employees who could have turned in a survey, resulting in a 64% response rate. While no single rate is considered standard, 70% is at times considered an adequate number (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998). Therefore, 64% was

seen as good as it is close to that 70% target. To ensure a large enough sample, surveys were handed out during team meetings held between April 18 and April 29, 2005, as this was seen as the most efficient method of distribution. Handing out surveys during all team meetings was also seen as a way to ensure that all sub-systems of the department were included, as employees were asked to turn in completed surveys before leaving, and all sub-systems would be represented at those meetings. A member of the collaborative team was personally assigned to all meetings and gave a brief introduction at each meeting before handing out and collecting completed surveys.

The process of distributing the survey to employees across the Call Center aligns with systems thinking, which states that the behavior of each element impacts the behavior of the whole, that the behavior of the elements and that of the whole are interdependent, and that no matter how each subgroup is formed within the system, each has an impact on the behavior of the whole with none having an independent effect (Napolitano & Henderson, 1998). Uncovering and understanding the underlying issues within each of these groups not only helped in addressing issues within those groups, but also helped lead to the possibility of extending an intervention across groups. Additionally, much can be gained by potentially linking separate interventions across different groups so that solutions can work together to create more meaningful change. Finally, while the interdependent relationship between the Call Center and the other systems that surround it will not be immediately addressed, systems thinking does make it clear that the analysis effort completed after data collection is completed within the Call Center should include each of the other departments that make up the whole.

*Voluntary focus groups.* The final data gathering step before recommendations were finalized was to take the findings and present them back to several small focus groups to gain additional depth and clarification. These sessions were made up of employees who were randomly selected and then also communicated a desire to participate. The process was

unstructured, insofar as only two open-ended questions were asked to spark conversation: (a) Do you feel the four concerns which were identified are valid? and, (b) what potential ideas would you have to address these concerns? The concerns were stated by the session facilitator and each group was asked to comment first on the accuracy of the each of the problem statements, and second to present their ideas on possible solutions. This open approach was taken as a way to allow the dialog to move in any direction the participants wanted to take (Nadler, 1977). Once again, the norm was set that all comments shared would not be repeated outside the session to ensure that those attending would be willing to contribute, validate they were not being forced to attend, and ultimately feel safe to express their real concerns. Most employees in organizations under normal circumstances are ready, and sometimes eager to share feelings and perceptions (Nadler), and this seemed to be the case in each of the three sessions, as employees actively participated.

There was consensus in all three sessions that three of the four issues identified by the collaborative team were accurate. There were also several comments in regard to these three that deepened the understanding of the issues. For example, the communication breakdown among Technical Specialists can be broken out into three primary challenges to include concerns about tech-to-tech communication, shift-to-shift communication among techs across the department, and regular tech-to-backup tech communication. This was good information that the collaborative team used in final intervention formulation.

The one issue of the four identified by the collaborative team that did not get strong confirmation from the participants was the one regarding the apparent lack of time given to representatives for learning activities. The feedback from technical specialists as well as sales representatives was that effective learning and skill building during work activities is possible in most cases, rather than taking time off the phones. The Intranet presently provides the

department's best resource, and while it can certainly be improved, it is generally effective in passing knowledge and information to employees. The opened-ended format of the sessions was key in identifying that this particular issue would not be one for the group to pursue, as the participants were not led in any way. A key to the decision to not address this issue was the realization that solutions were already in place to address this issue, and that renewed communication and some minor coaching could address the concern.

For the most part, the discussion centered on possible solutions. At times, all three groups had a tendency to move away from this focus and had to be reigned back in to the creation of solutions. All participants seemed very positive and several stopped by afterward to express thanks for being included. Not all Collaborative Team members were able to attend all sessions, but at least two to three were present at each. Those Collaborative Team members who were able to attend were asked to summarize their key observations and e-mail them to the team lead. One summary document (Appendix I) was created to be used as a tool so that all members of the team, even those not present, could take the feedback generated from all sessions into consideration. The information from this final step was then combined with the survey results and the pre-survey interview data, enabling the collaborative team to begin formulating interventions for improvement across information collected from more than one approach. This is commonly referred to as multistage research, and was a way to more accurately assess the data as well as more effectively create potential solutions (Jarvis, 1999).

## Results

In order to prepare to analyze the data from all three tools, summary reports of all feedback coming from the interviews and focus groups were prepared. Also, questionnaires were collected and tallied, with that information compiled into a report. The survey findings were divided up into three sections: (a) the first eight demographic questions (close-ended) were broken down as

percentages based on responses, (b) the remaining benchmarking and learning assessment Likert-type questions were cross referenced against the first eight to allow for the data to be analyzed from different demographic perspectives, and (c) a listing of all written responses to the two open-ended questions (48 and 49) was included. Care was also taken to separate out two subsystems from the sales floor, the I-Team and the Exception Order Department. This data was listed separately so that each functional area could be examined. Additionally, a few questions, such as the second one of the survey referencing the WOW incentive program would have been skewed if included with the data from sales representatives because employees in the Exception Order Department are not eligible for incentive.

The collaborative team was given a copy of the report and a timeline of 2 weeks to review the results. Each team member was asked to document observations on paper and be ready to discuss initial thoughts at the first of several scheduled data analysis sessions. The first meeting, with the purpose of discussing results, was rescheduled several times to ensure the entire team's presence, specifically the two members from outside of the Call Center. This is a critical step in any analysis process insofar as participants from outside of a system often have different interpretations of the data than those from within (Jarvis, 1999). While this resulted in a delay of about one month, the importance of the entire group being present was seen as more critical than timing. Once the team began meeting, several productive meetings allowed the team to overview all 39 questions from the survey and the documented comments from the group orientation interviews. Open, honest dialog allowed for candor with very little conflict.

Additionally, the make-up of the team allowed for a great deal of conversation to take place around the data as it related to the existing processes and culture of the department. Culture and processes are key factors to consider in examining organizational effectiveness as they are generally central to how well a system is functioning, and most significant problems often stem

from them (French & Bell, 2002). Therefore, taking into account the present operational context of the Call Center was a key element in the creation of interventions.

During the process of discussion, members were asked to narrow all observations to three or four to allow the entire group to begin focusing in on a few primary issues. That list was then narrowed through further dialog to just four primary observations or concerns. Those concerns came from four observations regarding the data: (a) one-on-one peer coaching was the most preferred method of how sales representatives would like to acquire new knowledge (Table 3), (b) daily work experience and peer coaching ranked first and third respectively in how representatives acquired their present job knowledge (Table 4), (c) technical specialists scored lower than their peers on many of the benchmarking questions aimed at measuring workplace attitudes (Table 5), and (d) exception order department employees scored lower than their peers on many of the benchmarking questions measuring workplace attitudes around organizational learning (Table 6).

Table 3

*Learning assessment questions regarding continued development of new job proficiency on a five-point scale where 1 is Not Important and 5 is Very Important*

Present Job Proficiency	Score
<b><i>One-on-one Peer Coaching</i></b>	<b>4.74</b>
One-on-one Team Manager Support and Coaching	4.54
Training Conducted during Team Meetings	4.37
Training Conducted as a Classroom session	4.34
Training Conducted by Outside Training companies	4.34
Information Passed on through the Intranet (cu_intranet)	4.13
Training Conducted On-Line Using a Personal Computer	3.58

Table 4

*Learning assessment questions regarding present job proficiency and where it was acquired on a five-point scale where 1 is Not important and 5 is very important – ranked from most to least important based on survey results*

Method of Proficiency Acquisition	Score
<b><i>Daily Work Experience</i></b>	<b>4.88</b>
New Hire Sales Training	4.85
<b><i>Mentoring by Other Sales Representatives</i></b>	<b>4.85</b>
Information and Training during Team Meetings	4.73
Mentoring by Team Manager	4.63
New Hire Process and Procedural Training	4.62
The Intranet (cu_Intranet)	4.45
Informal Interactions with co-workers	4.36
Contact Center Sales Training Enhancement Sessions	4.28
Prior Work Experience	3.88
Outside Educational Experiences	3.76

Table 5

*Tech scores on key benchmarking questions in relation to sales representatives (CS32/33/34) on a six-point scale where 1 is strongly disagree and 6 is strongly agree*

Question	CS-32	CS-33	CS-34	CS-35(techs)
10. I was given the skills and knowledge in new hire training to allow me to succeed.	4.28	4.17	4.94	3.50
11. I feel the general information I get from Contact Center information sources is accurate and consistent.	4.21	4.00	4.56	3.20
13. The sales floor is conducive to learning and skill development.	4.23	4.39	4.19	2.90
14a. In my current position, I feel there are enough opportunities for me to improve my skills in my current job.	4.54	4.22	4.81	3.50
14b. In my current position, I feel there are enough opportunities for me to obtain the skills necessary to do a different job.	3.94	3.72	4.19	3.20
16. I am provided with training when I am expected to learn new processes or sell new products.	4.43	4.39	4.69	3.60
17. My manager provides the support and development needed to train employees.	4.91	5.00	4.88	4.60
20. Given the opportunity, I would tell others great things about working here.	4.53	4.78	4.56	4.00

Table 6

*EOD scores on key benchmarking questions in relation to sales and I-team representatives on a six-point scale where 1 is strongly disagree and 6 is strongly agree*

Question	EOD	Sales	I-Team
10. I was given the skills and knowledge in new hire training to allow me to succeed.	3.56	4.24	4.24
11. I feel the general information I get from Contact Center information sources is accurate and consistent.	2.94	4.16	4.00
13. The sales floor is conducive to learning and skill development.	1.78	4.16	3.68
16. I am provided with training when I am expected to learn new processes or sell new products.	3.14	4.39	4.24
18. I feel valued and respected as a Contact Center employee.	2.97	4.36	3.56
20. Given the opportunity, I would tell others great things about working here.	3.06	4.52	4.08

## Discussion

### *Interpretation of Results*

With the first three steps of Robinson's model completed, the collaborative team was now ready to move to the fourth step: selecting and "owning" solution(s). Based on the series of meetings focused on data analysis, four primary concerns were identified:

1. The department is missing out on a primary learning avenue for representatives because of the lack of a formalized peer coaching program
2. There is a communication breakdown within the Technical Specialist team causing inaccurate and inconsistent information to be passed across the department.
3. The Exception Order Department's lack of training support is a significant issue with that team compared to the results of other department employees.

4. There is a strong perception by representatives on the floor that the department does not allow enough time for learning to take place on an ongoing basis.

Data supporting the first concern was reflected in both the learning assessment section (Tables 3 and 4) as well as the open-ended questions, as representatives repeated the need and preference for one-on-one peer coaching. Data supporting the second concern, a communication breakdown within the Technical Specialist team, was primarily drawn from the benchmarking section, where CS35s (Technical Specialists) scored lower on 8 out of 11 questions in comparison to the sales floor. A key question was 13, as this benchmarked how employees felt about the conduciveness of learning on the floor (Table 5). Data supporting the third concern was apparent when comparing the Exception Order Team's overall results on many of the benchmarking questions with that of the Sales Floor (Table 6). And, data supporting the third concern, a lack of time devoted to development, was primarily pulled from the open-ended questions as this theme was mentioned several times in two open-ended questions.

#### *Action Plan Recommendations*

The original intent of the collaborative team was to quickly review the data and formulate potential solutions, and two sessions were scheduled to accomplish these tasks. The first session was to be a review of the data collected where team members openly dialoged about major observations that might influence the formation of solutions. The second session then would have focused on deciding on the specific solutions the group would recommend to the Call Center's leadership team. As it turned out, the process took much longer than was originally planned. This turned out to be a much better approach, as team members later agreed that just two sessions would not have been enough time to correctly review the data and formulate solutions.

During the first scheduled session, the team seemed unfocused and unprepared to dialog on the issues, so the meeting was generally unproductive. Therefore, the second meeting was used to regroup and refocus the team on the objective – creating solutions. A discussion took place about why the group had lost focus and what could be done to reenergize the effort. Team members agreed on the fact that more time would be needed to review the data collected and decided on a common format to document solution details. In addition, the group was given copies of all data collected during the group orientation interviews and survey clarification sessions to review as part of their efforts to formulate solutions. At this point, the project lead created a standardized solutions worksheet for the group. Several examples of how each solution idea should be documented were filled in so that the team could move forward in a consistent way. The project lead then checked in personally with each individual to ensure understanding.

Each team member documented his or her ideas and e-mailed them to the project lead so that all input could be consolidated into one working list. That list was then reviewed by the team in order to consolidate redundant ideas or details. The process used was to separate all details into three categories based on the issue they addressed. Then, each idea was discussed as to whether it was a “new” detail, or repeat of one already discussed, with repeating ideas combined. This allowed for a final list of all group ideas to be documented (Appendix J) so that the final three-to-four recommendations could be selected (Appendix K). This process took place during a separate session where the group was asked ahead of time to review the list and select their top four ideas from the compiled list of solutions. Votes were tallied at the beginning of the session with the group starting with those ideas with the most votes. The team was able to openly debate the ideas based on which three to four would provide the best potential solutions for the Call Center based on feasibility and practicality. Four recommendations were made: (a) address team

size ratio, (b) create peer-coaching opportunity, (c) establish communication point for technical specialists, and (d) create training and recognition for exception order team.

*Address team size ratio.* The first recommended action the collaborative team agreed upon was to reduce team size ratios to allow increased time and focus for individual reps to be developed by their manager. The present team size average for Call Center Team Leaders is about 50. The collaborative team thought that a fundamental reason that all past peer-coaching efforts had failed was a lack of leadership support and oversight. While peer coaching was identified through the data as the primary way CCRs want to learn new skills and gain knowledge, it was noted that the Team Leader should still be taking an active and involved role in the development of representatives on his or her team. Present team size would not support the necessary level of involvement. Additionally, present Call Center culture better supports a leadership/peer coaching model where the Team Leader's role remains the primary driver to individual success with a peer coaching program that compliments a leader's efforts.

As part of the project, two analysis tools were created to support this recommendation. The first (Appendix L) was a comparison looking at how the cost of larger team sizes with fewer managers and a greater number of peer-coaching hours (fully formalized program) compared to the cost of smaller team sizes with more managers but fewer, more targeted coaching hours. The second (Appendix M) tool calculated a typical work week for a Team Leader with all administrative demands worked in based on team size. It shows how increased team size impacts time to coach and how fewer CCRs reporting to a manager equates to less administration time, and thus more coaching time.

*Create peer-coaching opportunity.* The second recommended action the collaborative team agreed upon was to create a certified seller program where representatives can complete a series of steps that allow them to assist the department in several different functions outside of their

normal job responsibilities. This program would coexist well with reduced team size and direct leader involvement by being a complimentary program, depending more on leaders to coach and less on peer interaction, and supplemental rather than a primary driver of sales growth. It would address concerns from past failed peer-coaching efforts by remaining results-based and rotational, so no one group of representatives would become an entitled group. It also would allow for a more targeted approach to a specific skill gap, insofar as a specific coach could be selected based on the exact need of the representative rather than one coach who would help in all areas - even those where true strength did not exist. Finally, a certified seller program could be used as a key recognition program for the department, helping to reward those who made significant efforts to contribute to the department's overall success by placing them temporarily in the spotlight.

*Establish communication point for technical specialists.* The third recommended action the collaborative team agreed upon was to establish a single point for training and information flow for the entire Technical Specialist group. This was seen as critical because the Technical Specialist Team acts as an information gate for the entire CCR team. When there is misinformation coming through this channel, the repercussion can be even more significant because the sphere of influence is enlarged. Also, getting different answers to the same question from multiple techs serves as a de-motivator to CCRs as it erodes trust and creates additional walls. By having one point of contact where all questions are researched and communicated to team members, consistency can be better achieved. This would also allow the Tech Team Manager to review critical information before it is published to the floor. One other benefit that comes from a single point of contact - potentially someone on the Department's Training Team - would be that that person could act as the trainer for the team, ensuring a consistent and up-to-date curriculum is used whenever new techs are hired.

*Create training and recognition for exception order team.* The fourth recommended action the collaborative team agreed upon was to develop training and recognition programs for Exception Order Department team members. This would include assigning one of the Call Center's trainers to this area, similar to how a trainer is slotted for both the Business Check Sales and Integration teams. Once assigned, this person could go about creating a training program similar to the one established for sales skills. This formalized training could then be issued to existing employees as refresher training as well and formatted for new hires entering a Verification Representative or Financial Institution Representative position. Creating this assignment would send a message that this area is valued and will be invested in to grow skill and knowledge in the same way that the general sales floor is.

Once those four solutions were finalized, the Collaborative Team met for one final session to dialog regarding the operational details that should be considered if any or all of the ideas were to be implemented. The team's objective was to get as much of the pre-planning process done for the Leadership Team so that the four solutions might be easier to potentially implement.

#### *Rationale for Action Items Selected*

While the general rationale for the action items selected is outlined above, it is important to note that the overall focus of the group was to be realistic in its assessment of ideas to ensure that a strong level of do-ability was present for all four recommended interventions. This included examining both the potential cost and cultural ramifications of the potential ideas. This was accomplished through a brief communication to the Call Center's department manager by the collaborative team lead over viewing the four final solutions right after they were selected, before any detail was developed. This was seen as a way to ensure final buy-in by the department manager, who had become the project sponsor after the sales manager position had been eliminated. All four ideas were seen as potentially feasible and given a blessing to develop.

Additionally, several discussions took place during the solution development and selection process to ensure a direct tie back to the survey data. On at least two occasions, the project lead redistributed the survey results and associated data, and redirected the team to consider that information while formulating ideas.

Ultimately, final decisions were made by the team after discussing each plan and reaching consensus on which to recommend. The decision was made based on the group's consideration of how each potential intervention would work and the potential positive outcomes if all or any were implemented. After the four were selected, the team felt that all could be put into action either together, or separately. This was particularly important when it came to the recommendation regarding team size and the one recommending a peer-coaching opportunity. This was because these two would ultimately complement each other, in that smaller team sizes would allow for more direct coaching time with the team manager, but those efforts would be supplemented by a peer coach when specific sales skills needed to be addressed.

### *Implications of Research*

The first and primary implication of this research is that it brought an important topic, how the company manages its information and knowledge, to the forefront. As one business leader from Japan so aptly put it, "In an economy where the only certainty is uncertainty, the one sure source of lasting competitive advantage is knowledge" (Nonaka, as cited in Napolitano & Henderson, 1998, p. 69). That is the value of this kind of effort. It helps bring an important issue into consideration when it might have otherwise been missed. Knowledge and skill development will be critical areas of concern no matter what the strategic direction of the company. Even if the business settles into a harvest mode through the remainder of the decline curve, this factor will help those who remain to completely maximize its efforts to finish strong. Also, a well developed communication and development program could also have positive impacts to

employee retention even as the company downsizes; those who remain feel some benefit to remaining, other than just a paycheck.

### *Organizational Learning*

The overall focus of this initiative was to further develop a culture within the Direct Checks Call Center to be one that values knowledge creation and dissemination. To accomplish this, individuals throughout every department will be required to think and act differently. This will not be accomplished through training or dictation, as one can not be commanded to change his or her attitudes, beliefs, capabilities, perceptions, or levels of commitment (Senge et al., 1999). Rather, the idea of this project was to not dictate, but to set in motion the kinds of behaviors that would allow employees to voluntarily become participants in growing knowledge. This is because organizations that develop the ability to learn must first set about developing the tangible activities that will eventually enable the learning process to take place: new governing ideas, innovations in infrastructure, and methods and tools that change the way people work (Senge et al.). This is an important outcome of this project because the solutions presented represent those tangible changes that can potentially bring about cultural change, and ultimately, help the business sustain and potentially even thrive in the future.

By example, the establishment of behaviors that reinforce the learning process started with those serving on the collaborative team. Learning how to slow the decision-making process down to the point where critical data can be collected and considered before moving forward was certainly a concept this project sought to teach. Additionally, taking the time to consider both the project highlights, as well as the potential lessons learned from the areas of the project that did not go well, was also a critical part of the learning process. This is the point of action research: that newly gained experiences and knowledge is cycled back into the system to drive continuous improvement (French & Bell, 2002). By understanding what went well, and what did not, the

collaborative team can make better decisions on how to more effectively drive change initiatives in the future. This was the topic discussed at the collaborative team's final meeting.

The purpose of this session was to dialog and learn from the experience. A tool used for guiding the discussion on project performance was Kotter's (1996) Eight-Stage Process of Creating Major Change. This model is built on the primary premise that change does not happen easily for a long list of reasons. The tool helps to break out many of the most common errors that undermine successful change. The eight stages are as follows: (a) establish a sense of urgency, (b) create a guiding coalition, (c) develop a vision and strategy, (d) communicate the change vision, (e) empower broad-based action, (f) generate short-term wins, (g) consolidate gains and produce more change, and (h) anchor new approaches in the culture. The collaborative team reviewed these eight points as a means for examining successes and weaknesses during its efforts to move through the first cycle of the Action Research process. During that discussion, the group identified three primary successes and two primary weaknesses from which to learn. The three successes were: (a) the initial creation of a strong vision and a clear understanding of the potential outcome of the project, (b) the team's ability to work together to develop a strong survey document and get it administered to a large group of employees, and, (c) the team's persistence in working past several obstacles to create strong recommendations directly from the data generated by the survey. The two general weaknesses identified were (a) the general loss of urgency in driving the project to completion in a timely manner, and (b) a general lack of communication around the effort's progress to both leadership and employees who completed the survey.

*Project highlights.* The first of three project successes identified by the collaborative team was the initial creation of a strong vision and a clear understanding of the potential outcome of the project. Vision can be referred to as a compelling picture of the future with a reason why

people should seek to create that future (Kotter, 1996). This was certainly a highlight as the group's energy and level of creative participation in the project was high during the first two steps of Pearce and Robinson's Six-Step Model: recognizing the problem, and then diagnosing the situation. The initial project team meeting went extremely well and generated a high level of interest in the process and potential outcomes. During that session, the team members were introduced to the project purpose, or vision, which was to move the Call Center toward a culture that values and actively nurtures organizational learning and knowledge management. That meeting - along with the Affinity Diagram exercise to consolidate the initial general data into a focused list of issues or observations - were seen by the group as very successful. The project certainly seemed to start strong all as members confirmed having a high level of engagement and commitment to the project based on their feelings that the project could, and would make a difference for the department and its employees. In the end, a well established vision helps to clarify direction, motivate participants, and coordinate actions (Kotter). While setbacks occurred in all three of these areas, the team's ability to work past them to eventually bring forward the proposed solutions was impacted by that vision of how the Call Center would be if it embraced learning as an organizational norm.

The second project highlight identified was the team's ability to work together to develop a strong survey document and get it administered to a large group of employees. Also taking place during the second step of the action research model, diagnosing the problem, this second win took place while creating the primary data-gathering tool used during the process, the Learning Organization Questionnaire (Appendix G). Two major elements necessary for any effort attempting to bring about change is first trust and then the presence of a common objective (Kotter, 1996). The team agreed that during the project both of these elements were in place. There was an overall lack of personal agendas, and every member agreed that the goal of

creating the survey and using it to create solutions provided a common bond that helped keep all members working together.

This was most apparent during the survey development, when the entire team actively participated and openly dialoged on the potential questions. Each team member seemed to have favorite questions that he or she championed, but through the process honest and open debate resulted in consensus, and the team was able to narrow down to the final list of questions with no major conflicts. Several of the team's members commented afterward that they had enjoyed the process and felt the group had produced a good final product. Additionally, there was positive interaction during the pilot survey as several valid concerns were brought up by members of that pilot group, with all members of the collaborative team remaining open to the feedback and the resulting changes to the survey document.

The final highlight identified was the team's persistence in working past several obstacles to create strong recommendations directly from the data generated by the survey. The success came at a time when the team was actually struggling to stay on task and complete its goal of creating several solutions to recommend to the Call Center Leadership Team. While the collaborative team initially lost focus during this phase (step four of Pearce and Robinson's model - selecting and "owning" a solution), the group was able to come together to formulate several recommendations that could have a very positive impact to the department. A key to this success was first recognizing that the team was off track, and rather than forcing solutions to meet an initial goal of having this step completed sooner than later, agreeing that it should regroup and spend the extra time to complete this step correctly.

Another related problem that was corrected at this same time was the development of a common template on which to format potential solutions. This was created and distributed by the collaborative team lead, and allowed each member to approach the process in the same way: to

provide a one-sentence summary with some detail broken out separately when necessary to complete the thought. This extra step allowed for a more efficient and effective session when the team met to dialog and narrow down the many potential ideas to several final solutions.

Redirecting focus and adding structure to the solution generation process were key in that they helped remove barriers to progress. When issues like these are not addressed in a timely manner, there is a high risk that employees will sour on the change effort, and the energy needed to create the vision will be lost (Kotter, 1996). While much energy was lost, the group was still able to overcome and eventually reach its goal.

*Project weaknesses.* The first of the two general weaknesses identified by the collaborative team was the general loss of urgency in driving the project to completion in a timely manner. Complacency is the first primary killer of a change effort, as it causes people to feel like they don't want or need to make any special efforts or sacrifices (Kotter, 1996). It creates employees who feel like other issues are more important than the one being sponsored, resulting in a series of steps that place an initiative lower and lower on the prioritization list. This certainly was a factor due to other department initiatives often taking precedent over this effort. Additionally, initiatives that fall on the prioritization list are often dropped even further when leadership changes take place, as they did in the Call Center in the last year. Keeping sponsorship in place as key players rotated in and out of the Call Center environment was also a factor in a lack of ongoing urgency related to this project.

The initial time line (Appendix A) established a target of January, 2005 for potential implementation of interventions. The reality was that recommendations for action items were not formulated by the Collaborative Team until September of 2005 and not presented to the Call Center Leadership Team until March of 2006. The initiation of the process moved from October of 2004 to February of 2005, with survey distribution occurring in April of 2005, resulting in a

window of 5 months from survey completion to action item formation. During this time, several major actions occurred that impacted the effort: (a) the implementation of a sales coach program (separate from this effort) by the department manager and then its eventual elimination, (b) a multi-variable test (MVT) around key Call Center metrics including revenue, average handle time and conversion; (c) multiple changes in department leadership occurred in the third quarter of 2005, including a new department manager, the departure of the Sales Manager to a Marketing position (serving as the project sponsor), and the departure of the Collaborative Team Leader to a corporate training position. While the new Department Manager would take on the role of project sponsor and the Collaborative Team Leader would remain in his role even after leaving the Call Center, these changes certainly caused the overall progress of the project to slip.

The more time passes, the more likely these types of challenges will be faced, forcing an adjustment to the project plan. Adding to these challenges was the fact that the project addressed an issue – organizational learning – that typically is seen as not having an immediate and apparent bottom-line impact. Therefore, it was often addressed as a lesser priority than other more visible tasks, such as the MVT conducted from May to August of 2005, and the eventual rollout of the test result throughout the end of 2005. Learning to establish and maintain a high level of urgency is a fundamental key to a leader's ability to drive timely and sustained change (Kotter, 1996). Learning ways to keep initiatives like this one from falling down the prioritization list is certainly a potential learning from this project. Continuing to promote the potential good that can come from an improved learning environment and providing cost justification for improvements could have helped keep this initiative from losing focus. Also, a better effort to keep Collaborative Team members engaged might have also helped. A primary element impacting all of these points is the second general weakness identified, as better

communication throughout the process might have helped the entire team and the project sponsor remain more committed to the timely completion of the project.

The second general weakness identified was a general lack of communication around the effort's progress to both leadership and employees who completed the survey. During any initiative aimed at bring about changes, communication must be continuous, ongoing and personal to those involved (Jaffe & Scott, 1999). Once the initial work of the Collaborative Team started, the representatives who completed the survey lost connection with the project. Informal, implied communication took place as the focus groups were conducted and those employees participating talked of their experiences, but no call-center-wide communications took place to inform the entire department about progress happened. Additionally, no formalized communication process was put into place to keep the project sponsor up-to-date on step completion; rather, just informal communication occurred from time to time. Finally, while the Collaborative Team itself did communicate while work was in progress, the team lost contact during times of no progress. Team members on several occasions would have to ask when the next meeting would be, and what if anything they should be working on. This created a loss of focus as members tended to disconnect from the work during times of prolonged inaction. Those times of no progress also tended to stretch out as a regular schedule was not established which could have forced accountability to established dated and clarify task expectations.

Communication in general, and frequent and timely communication specifically, is a key to any change initiative. That communication effort should use several different vehicles, rely on repetition, and be simple, direct, and use well-chosen words to be memorable (Kotter, 1996). This effort could have been greatly helped through the establishment of an organized and purposeful effort to communicate. When the project began, a plan to allow for frequent, scheduled and visible messages should have been planned and executed along with the survey

tool development and solution design stages. This plan could have addressed not only progress, but also how the work was building on the project vision. Also, it could have provided recognition of those who made contributions, the announcement of short-term wins, and the solicitation of additional insight from Call Center employees – all of which are key elements of a sustained change effort (Kotter).

### *Analysis of Entire Experience*

The experience of leading an Action Research initiative was valuable to me personally for several reasons. First, it reinforced that real, lasting change takes an immense amount of forethought and work, and even then, the risk of derailment is high. Many factors can negatively impact even the best of change efforts. For example, during this project the challenge of maintaining team motivation was difficult almost from the beginning. While the team seemed energized during the second and third steps of Porter's model - diagnosing the situation, and identifying the problem, and admitting it exists (1989) - the team lost momentum when starting the fourth step, selecting and owning a solution. There are two potential reasons why this happened. First, the team should have been better about setting objectives, communicating progress and celebrating success along the way. "Real transformation takes time. Complex efforts to change strategies and restructure businesses risk losing momentum if there are no short-term goals to meet and celebrate" (Kotter, 1996, p. 11).

While the team did establish some short-term objectives, the effort was inconsistent, and there was no celebration or recognition for the team along the way, which could have helped sustain the energy and creativity during the long process of completing the project. Stopping to celebrate accomplishments can benefit any change effort in several ways: a) fulfills need for self-esteem, achievement and recognition, b) helps the team bonding process, c) allows for downtime to reenergize, d) shows appreciation and builds respect among members, and d) gives value to

the effort (Matejka, 1991). To keep momentum building rather than eroding, team members must be engaged in their work and continue to realize progress. When nothing is officially tallied and recognized as completed, a team members may begin to believe that they are not making progress when they really are. Planning for short-term wins to recognize accomplishments along the way provides milestones that allow for a pat on the back along the way while providing concrete evidence that the over-riding goal is progressing toward completion (Kotter, 1996).

Second, there were several large gaps from start to finish during the development of the potential solutions. For example, the survey was distributed in April, 2005, but the review of the results and solution formation process did not start until August, 2005. The team had several chances to disconnect from the process, and each time, when forward progress was again initiated; most members had a difficult time getting reconnected with the project. For the most part, the gaps were business driven as several key initiatives were initiated during 2005 that pulled time and energy away from the group. The primary example was the roll out of a multi-variable test in the Contact Center during June and July. I believe that this project also was challenged by a factor common to most organizational learning initiatives when it comes to prioritization: its potential benefits are not perceived as immediately impactful to bottom-line performance. To counter this, a better job could have been done to calculate cost benefits and keep those numbers visible to department leadership. Also, more consistent communication during the longer breaks in work to reinforce the vision and value of the project might have helped the team to get back-on-track sooner, shortening those windows of slowed progress.

A logical question for this project is also to consider if the solutions presented have a good chance to be implemented. The end result of any organizational learning effort is to develop employees who actively share information and grow into an intricate network of personal relationships where relevant know-how is employed at the right time and in the right way in

order to create superior value (Pearce & Robinson, 2003). For this project to accomplish this goal, at least one of the solutions developed by the Collaborative Team should be introduced. Representatives needing help in a specific area should be able to get the specific coaching they need to improve performance as quickly as possible, from both their manager and a peer coach – working in tandem to complement each other, rather than duplicate an effort or ignoring a concern. Technical Specialists should be passing on consistent and accurate information to all sales representatives, regardless of team or shift assignment. Exception Order Department representatives should have a consistent process or vehicle for developing their overall skill and knowledge, one that allows them to share their expertise outside their team. While any one could have an impact, the largest impact would come from all actions being taken, insofar as together they begin to create the cumulative force that would be necessary to change the patterns and habits of the present. The Collaborative Team's goal was to create the additional operational detail and cost benefit tools included as part of this project to help make it easier for the Leadership Team to take immediate action on any or all of the four proposed solutions.

### *Conclusion*

As the solutions developed through this effort were considered by the Call Center Leadership Team, the Collaborative Team made several suggestions regarding the overall implementation of any or all of the solutions. The focus of the collaborative team's recommendations was to move the process of learning forward, learning from the mistakes of the past and ensuring that positive actions or behaviors were carried forward. Out of that discussion, four recommendations were made. They are as follows: (a) to include members of the Collaborative Team in the effort to incorporate any selected interventions, (b) to consider submitting the survey to the floor once again within one year after any interventions are implemented, (c) focus on the establishment of urgency and constant communication during the

implementation process as to not repeat the mistakes of this collaborative effort, and (d) to revisit the vision and focus on the intent of this project – which is to improve the work environment for all employees through the establishment of a culture which embraces learning and nurtures and cultivates knowledge as a valuable corporate resource.

The first recommendation was for the Call Center Leadership team to include members of the Collaborative Team in the effort to incorporate any selected interventions, as well as several new members who are new to the process, which allows for the continuation of learning as those with the history behind the recommendations can share with those who will bring in a fresh perspective. The second recommendation was to consider submitting the survey to the floor once again within one year of any interventions being implemented. This would allow for an examination of progress in the Call Center in regard to organizational learning. Thirdly, the group felt that steps should be taken to not repeat the mistakes made around the loss of urgency and insufficient communication. If any of the suggestions are chosen for implementation, the team suggested that those team members selected to drive the implementation of any of the recommendations should spend time discussing how to drive accountability around a timeline and be structured in planning and communicating the changes to those impacted.

Finally, the group suggested that those completing the work of intervention implementation spend time up-front revisiting the vision of how the work environment can be improved for the employees of the Call Center through the creation of a true learning environment. The Business Leadership Team at Direct Checks recently heard a presentation by Joe Calloway, author of the book, *Indispensable: How to Become the Company That Your Customers Can't Live Without*. In his book and presentation Calloway reinforced that successful companies make themselves the default choice of their customers. It's not that they can't live without a certain product – they don't want to. This is accomplished – according to Calloway -

by answering three questions: (a) “What do we do best?”, (b) “What do we love?”, and (c) “What do our customers value?” (1995, p. 5).

The reality of the vision of this project was to ask the same questions around the employees we as leaders serve. How can leadership make Direct Checks indispensable to its employees? While there are many places for our best and brightest to seek employment, how can leadership ensure that they will chose this company over others who might offer better pay, better hours, or better benefits. The answer comes as those who lead discover how to elevate the company’s employees through becoming the best company at teaching and developing them to be better at their jobs and prepare them for greater opportunity. Through the creation of a learning organization, Direct Checks not only equips its employees by developing their skills and knowledge, it increases its organizational effectiveness and thus provides an improved customer experience.

In closing, because Direct Checks has traditionally been an environment where organizational effectiveness is measured primarily on revenue and profitability performance, it must be recognized that organizational learning plays a critical role in sustaining long-term financial results. Direct Checks has traditionally taken the first of two approaches to change: the E Theory approach. This approach works toward near-term economic improvement, while the second of the two approaches, O Theory change, focuses on improvement in organizational capability (Harvard, 2003). The goal of E Theory change is “to dramatically and rapidly increase shareholder value, as measured by improved cash flow and share price,” while the primary goal of O Theory change is “to develop an organizational culture that supports learning and a high-performance employee base” (Harvard, p.10).

Research into these two solutions demonstrates that pursuing purely Theory E or purely Theory O tends to wind up producing more pitfalls than resolutions. Rather, companies that

pursue a combination of the approaches typically reap both profitability and productivity improvements that drive sustained competitive advantage and reduced anxiety levels during times of corporate restructuring. A prime example is General Electric, where former CEO Jack Welch used both approaches by first squeezing out all redundancies and eliminating all underperforming units through Theory E actions - like his 25% headcount reduction or his be #1 or #2 in your market, or be sold, tactics. Then, he followed those up by implementing a series of Theory O interventions meant to improve the competitiveness of the company's culture by making it faster, less bureaucratic and much more focused on the customer (Harvard, 2003). Based on this, the Call Center has the opportunity to create more of a balance between the already present financial focus of Theory E by initiating actions around the under utilized Theory O, it can improve the company's chances for not only achieving the Board of Director's focus of short-term financial gain, but also long-term sustainability of that performance through employee learning and talent pool capability.

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## Appendix A

## Action Research Summary: Attachment to Professional Project Contract

Project lead: Joel Lamoreaux

Project Sponsor: Kara Stegman

Checks Unlimited Call Center

The following is a summary of the action research Project being initiated by Joel Lamoreaux in the Call Center at Checks Unlimited. The Purpose of the project is to develop specific interventions that will address the Call Center's present challenges around growing and maintaining it's knowledge skill regarding selling and service customers. The project will follow a specific model to ensure the intent of action research is achieved, which is to both solve a problem and generate new knowledge. This process will include the use of several data gathering tools, including interviews, a questionnaire, and focus groups. The primary requirement of the project will be time, as the data collection process will require the involvement of almost all employees. The questionnaire will be distributed during team meetings, with the idea that this will help ensure a greater level of participation. The questionnaire will be no longer that 20 questions and should take no longer than 10 to 15 minutes to complete. The following timeline should allow for effective collection of data while also ensuring that interventions are ready for potential implementation by end of year. Results will be measured through the redistribution of the questionnaire sometime in 2005, as several questions will be included which will benchmark employee attitudes and perceptions about how well knowledge flows and is maintained in the department.

*Project Timeline for Data Capture and Intervention Development*

Step	Completion
Formulation of Interview Questions	8/27
Group Orientation Interviews	Week of 9/3
Complete Analysis of Interview Data	9/10
Formulation of Questionnaire	9/17
Collaborative Group Overviews Process and Reviews Questionnaire	Week of 9/24
Pilot Group completes Questionnaire and gives feedback	Week of 10/1
Call Center Wide Questionnaire Distribution	Week of 10/8
Complete Compilation of Questionnaire Data	11/5
Formulation of Discussion Points for Focus Groups	11/12
Conduct Voluntary Focus Groups	Week of 11/15
Create final summary Document of all Data Collected	Week of 11/29
Collaborative Group Reviews Summary Information	Week of 12/10
Collaborative Group Brainstorms potential Interventions	Week of 12/17

## Appendix B

## Group Orientation Interview Information

*Introductory Statement:*

Thank you for your participation. The purpose of our meeting is to begin uncovering the issues that keep information and knowledge from flowing easily across the Call Center. The ideas gathered through this process will be used to create a more specific questionnaire, which will be distributed to all employees in the department in September. The results from that survey will help direct the development of solutions to those issues identified today, and through the survey. All information documented will be kept strictly confidential, and nothing said should be repeated outside this session by any participant. There are three questions we will openly discuss, and the session will last no more than 60 minutes. Do you have any questions before we begin?

*Questions:*

1. In what ways are you presently able to gain new knowledge or share your knowledge with others?
2. What keeps you from gaining new knowledge, or sharing your knowledge with others?
3. What new ideas would you suggest that would allow you to gain new knowledge or share your knowledge with others?

*Attendees:*

Session 1: Laura Crawmer, Elise Erickson, Immy Underwood

Session 2: Bill Wade, Henry Medina, Heidie Bowen, Shirley Jaramillo, Jason Karoub

Session 3: Misty Hein, Sandi Gerrard-Gough, Heike Jones, Jose Alfaro, Christopher Todd

## Appendix C

## Group Orientation Interview - Question 1 Feedback:

- Coaching and 1-on-1 time is crucial, as you can't give more specific direction to really fine tune without it. You need coaching from someone who is good at it.
- In the past, new reps were always put with senior reps to work at a buddy for up to two weeks. I have done on my team with several and they now are some of the most improved and have better attitudes.
- Reps need to be proactive and manage their own skill development – If I need to work on rush, I go to every team manager's stats sheets and find the very best. Then, I go and ask the manager – even if it is not my manager – and ask to spend time with those who are selling the most.
- You want to spend time with different people, depending on what you are working on. We all have things we're good at, and it's different for every one... don't go to one team specific... I go to the best, no matter what team they are on...
- Listening for 30 minutes... three or four calls, you are good. Then, you might be good to switch off. I listen to them, they listen to me.
- Need a day to practice, and then listen again. Don't try to get it all at once. Only one skill or selling point at a time. Wait until that skill is mastered and then move on to another... may take several weeks.
- Good to have reps present at team meetings to talk about what works.... peer to peer works.... When feedback comes back from manager, there is more pressure. When it's from a peer, it feels better. Much more supportive and affirming than a manager... feedback from a manager is usually more dictated. Fellow reps take a much softer approach. It is more of, "if you are willing to listen, I think I can help you because I can share with you what works for me."
- Enhancement classes were great... like to hear from other reps during group discussions...and working with the trainers was good as they remind you of some of the mechanics. Always good to hear the basics again, not because you are not doing well, but so that you can do better. Classes were not perceived well because those who were picked first were those not selling well and you didn't want to be selected into this group... would have been better if groups were done randomly...people were upset about being singled out as someone struggling.
- Need to adjust to people's differences. Team Leaders should know each person and how to approach them.
- The Intranet is good, but for procedural updates right now, but not sales tips or fresh approaches – as it is never updated – so reps don't take the time to look. Team Leaders rarely do anything with it, so things like UPS status checking and daily updates are good, and most of the product knowledge stuff. If things were going on all the time – changing, reps would look more often.
- By the internet- it's good for procedures, process changes, daily checking and revisiting hot memos to stay current in job proficiency – hear about price changes. However, sales stuff comes from team meetings, and from peers on break and lunch – sales corner needs to be expanded, changed.
- Why don't we have programs like sales modules, complete it and learn.
- Team contests, team activities, team discussions are all good, as we all hear the same thing. One-on-one contact with other members of the team not always the best as sometimes the information is not correct. Team meetings are good as all hear same message. Good place to ask the question, what's your secret – best sellers answer and others take notes.
- Used to have the pulse check – monthly test where it was given each month and turned into manager.
- Can get information from mentors – used to have an official process, and it used to be a good source. Certain people were identified as mentors – where to get answers. Reps had something at desk to identify who served as mentors on a team – that is where you get your information.
- Team Leaders identify team members to have employees who are struggling listen to those who are good at certain skills. Every team has reps who specialize in selling points, they coach on that topic. Get it from other reps ...like what they are saying. This needs to be more automatic to get those who won't ask for help the help they need. Many are not incented so they don't participate.
- Advanced modules were good.

- Intranet is good, but does not always have everything. It does not always work and there are links that don't work.
- Techs are a source of information, but only a select few. They are too inconsistent with information.
- Will go to others in the company, like trainers or Kim in marketing. Call them out to ask, or seek them out.
- Would go to team leader in the past, but most are too new. Never had a team manager who could tell me how to sell... not even Gabby... she'd get you motivated but would side-by-side you with another rep for selling skills. Team leaders know how to sell would be great
- I just thing about it - try to come up with my own way of going about call flow – and then try with customer – what works, what does not – learn through experimentation.
- From the Intranet - mainly the daily memos. When I first sit down for the day, or when it's slow, I will look over tip of the day, sales manual, hot memos
- I ask those around me – when it's slow and listen to them to see what is different from my understanding – look for people who make WOW – those who almost always get WOW and ask them for sales tips
- You can ask manager to be put with someone who is a strong seller
- Some techs are very knowledgeable – like I sit by my tech, Jerry, so I talk to him a lot, and he gives me a lot of tips and suggestions.
- Had a meeting with a representative on our team who gave us information on TheftGuard and another talk about best practices in Call Flow
- Know a lot of people who work here – some are good, others are not – talk to those friends who are good at break and at lunch or even from home about work. Learn from them.
- Manager review of statistics – helps point out good and bad and get suggestions on how to improve – depends on manager. Some know, others don't. Managers should get on phone more often so that they understand.

## Appendix D

## Group Orientation Interview - Question 2 Feedback:

- If you give all your tips out, the bar will be raised. If you are a top rep, you want to protect your position. You give out some of your best techniques, but not all. It's because if everyone improves, the bar goes up and we are trying to make bonus money. You can move down. All reps have several aces that they hold back...
- Lack of time given by managers to support others... they ask for you to help but want it done in 30 minutes or less. It takes time to help others improve, and we seem not willing to put in the time.
- Environment feels like you are not valued, so its very demotivating – the company will find someone else to replace you if you don't work out. Not able to do every thing.. most have many issues.
- Managers don't have the time to work with everyone one-on-one. My manager had every rep listen to me for about 30 minutes, but I did not give them any feedback... did it do some good, maybe, but most likely, no much. Seems like the effort is there, but very little and no follow-up is given....
- More time is critical in training. We need to listen to reps to see what points are needed and then begin an action plan even during training. One additional week could be used to create an action plan to identify where a new rep needs to improve.
- Hard to find the time to develop... most days, you don't even have time to look at the Intranet to get updates... many of our reps can't multitask to do many things at once, like popping over to the Intranet while you are on hold for tech support. People are not organized enough to have the time and they develop bad habits from the start. We more work on efficiency skills upfront.
- Intranet is not updated enough
- Don't get information from Marketing... slow coming.
- Inconsistencies from techs... most give you different information... Three different answers from three different techs.
- Team Meetings and Dept meetings turn into complaint sessions, rather than helpful times where information is shared.
- Fear – reps are afraid to talk to team leaders and there are no open lines of communications. They are afraid to be singled out.
- Competing needs... phone are busy so we cancel meeting time.
- Lack of knowledge on the manager's standpoint. Most of the team managers won't know the answers, so representatives don't take the time to ask. Reps are generally scared and intimidated by their manager and afraid of the repercussions of even asking questions. Culture seems to be threatening, rather than supporting.
- What's in it for me... free lunch is nice, but time off the phones to help others costs me WOW.
- Lack of time... I'd like to get to things, but I'm on the phone and can't get to it. Don't even bother because I have to push myself to meet AHT so I don't have the time to learn.
- Attitude hurts some... Not willing to do the basics, so learning can't happen at a higher level. Too many bad habits – reps carry things over from previous jobs. Think they don't have to learn.
- Time – when it's busy, you have no time to get off the phone – no aux time allowed to share ideas. When I'm on break or at lunch, I don't want to spend that time sharing
- Repetition – you tend to get stuck in a rut in taking call after call – because doing the same thing is actually easier than trying new things
- When you do have available time, people bother you about personal issues when you want work - even while on phone people distract you. Noise – there is a lot of inconsiderate talking by reps. You have to repeat things to customers, makes phone time more difficult – code 88 is still difficult
- When you experience a lot of system down times – need to take manual orders – impossible to progress.
- Amount of change – something new here every day, and we generally are not informed about changes. Hear about it the day it happens. And you don't always have the time at the beginning of your shift to check in on changes.

## Appendix E

## Group Orientation Interview: Question 3 Feedback:

- Put the buddy system back in for new hires, for at least two weeks. Once done in training. First two weeks on floor. Need buddy who will help on everything – from stats to breaks to building good, healthy habits right out of the gate... This also needs to be done by managers, but they don't seem to have time. New employees are afraid of techs, have no one to go to, therefore they are afraid to ask.
- It is good now that we group people together by team in training – they know people... they have someone to talk to. They also know the trainers and trainer assistants, often in other classes. This is because we combine sessions and they more exposure to people. Ts and TAs, also more training assistants is good for that reason.
- Those selected to be a buddy should meet certain requirements – can't be everyone. Need good attitude, etc.
- Need refresher courses for all seasoned reps on soft skills, all the basics – shortened version of training... quick overview of all information, procedures, standards, etc. This would be good for primary sellers as they tend to forget the service stuff when they don't use for long periods of time.
- Would look at doing a quick soft skills overview – need new one to replace what done in training now.
- Use recorded calls to coach - make some tapes of good calls and bad calls – let reps hear both – most reps think they are doing it correctly, but hearing themselves could help them see where they are not strong ....
- Mail box should not be used for anything important... Sharing can be done team meetings, but it needs to come from reps – more receptive coming from peers. What to hear if from their peers.
- There should be rewards and incentives once you hit the floor – balloons are good for some – who does not want to be recognized – but other things would work – used to have bingo contests, etc. Candy bars, etc. People drop off in their attempt to improve and get better because of a lack of motivation and affirmation from someone else. Like having someone on the floor staying on top of motivation... cheering them on... sprinkling them with “selling dust.” Also, having a “board” with names on it... most reps are very competitive.
- Have leaders stop by daily, and attempt to connect more throughout the day. It's exhausting but worth it, however, if reps don't think someone cares, they will not care. Every morning, Roxanne would go by and say good morning... each day, then she would do stats and then stop by every rep's desk to share numbers with them individually.
- Devote more resources to the Intranet to make it better. Many memos written on intranet are so poorly written. Not clear – so messages need to be proofed and thought out. Need to be better at writing them correctly. One person is doing what three used to do. Allow more time to make this a more useable tool, and to get information in that is presently being missed. A lot happens that never even appears on the Intranet.
- Create a flow chart to look at information and how it gets to representatives. Take the time to get everything in place and be more proactive about getting information out.
- Marketing focus groups are good – pull together focus groups to generate ideas, both top performers and new people with ideas. Get info out.
- Assign a specific person on each team to get information out so that everyone is on the same page.
- Enhancement classes are good - small groups to work on topics such as sales and procedures, like resend procedures. Need to relearn basic points of jobs. Reps who have been out of training for a long time have forgotten many details. Sales reps spend too much time on sales so they forget Gate 3 information and procedures. This causes problems. Need basic refresher classes.
- Need a quality assurance department to really give reps good feedback... managers don't have the time to really give the necessary feedback.
- Should try to set up having official mentors on each team to get right answers.
- Need to have flow of communication improved by developing a checklist from managers weekly on what needs to be communicated... maybe a standardized list of topics to cover. Needs to be in writing and stored on the sup drive for accuracy.
- Should be able to go back to recorded calls – for yourself to be able to think about what you are saying. Critique your own calls – some managers do already this.

- Need a longer training period – didn't know a lot of things when you graduate. Need an additional class to review some time after training is completed. More phone time with the trainers around to learn more answers. You do learn when you jump in, but still, it would be nice to have more time.
- Need at least two weeks of phone, with the second week potentially being discretionary, you should not hold someone back if she is ready, but could give option for an additional week if new rep thinks it would be necessary.
- Need to find a way to help reps get past just reading call flow when first come out of training – if it's just read, it does not work – needs to be personalized. Need to study and get better - and needs to be adjusted to your own language - say it in a way you would say it – there needs to be time allowed to “restate” call flow in own words.
- Need training on mechanical customer statements, set answers or suggestions on the most common statements or questions for customers. Tips or rebuttals on most of the more common challenges. This could be done by meeting periodically, brainstorming answers to specific questions or challenges, like - I only need one box because I'm moving, etc... maybe two or three are documented and distributed to the floor. Distribute through managers.
- Word of mouth is most powerful because it comes from a representative
- Sales coaching works – do for a whole week. Listen to an hour each day and give feedback - more experienced people give feedback. Listen for an hour per day and give feedback – really get to know rep rather than just surface stuff
- Need additional class after reps are first out of training, reps need to get comfortable – month or two after, have follow-up training rather than right out of class. Maybe a month or so after training, then have the final week of phone work.
- Training does not prepare you for the fast paced nature of your job, and talk time is not stressed – more training on talk time. I just wanted to survive during first four weeks... I would look at seasoned reps and wonder how they do it... listening to others, I would get intimidated and defeated. Just try to get better.
- One on one better for many, but classroom training is good because of discussion and sharing. You don't get bored, even in eight hours. Things are chucked and there is a lot of variety.
- Pre-shift meetings work well .... Look over information and share sales tips.
- A lot is experiential learning – when you get on the phones – repetition is what helps. In about two weeks, I was good. Now, I would love to have someone help me tweak my sale

## Appendix F

## Affinity Diagram Exercise Observations and Grouping Results

*Five major challenges to address:***1. LACK OF MANAGER SUPPORT**

- Managers don't have time to meet with us – they are too busy
- Not enough contact from managers
- Time spent with reps
- Lack of time from managers – managers seem threatening
- Managers do not have time and often can't coach how to sell

**2. POOR INFORMATION FLOW**

- Inconsistent information
- Not sure where to get the right answer
- Inconsistent information from the leadership, techs and managers
- Hard to keep up with changes – always something new
- Tech Specs – answers vary, need consistency
- Inconsistent/inaccurate info from techs/managers
- Information sharing from marketing to sales floor (lack of)
- Inconsistency

**3. LACK OF TIME**

- Too fast paced to have time for training
- More time spent training and coaching
- Never have enough time to train
- Not enough time spent on coaching, training, one-on-ones

**4. LEADERSHIP CREDIBILITY**

- Trusting the Techs and Managers
- Leadership: team leaders, managers, techs

**5. LEARNING DEMOTIVATORS**

- Sales enhancement training is effective but should not be targeted at low performers
- Recognition: what else besides coupons and balloons?
- What's in it for us?

*Four Learning Approaches:***1. INTRANET**

- Intranet is not up-to-date
- Intranet is good, but don't have time to look –and sometimes does not have the latest information

**2. PULSE CHECK**

- Monthly test where it was given to the manager

**3. REFRESHER CLASSROOM TRAINING**

- Refresher training is needed as sometimes you forget stuff over time
- Need additional training when starting – new hire training too short
- Refresher courses, 30-day follow-up to review after hitting the floor

**4. ONE-ON-ONE MENTORING**

- Peer coaching in team meetings, side-by-sides
- Need buddy or transition to the floor
- Buddy system worked
- Side-by-side coaching seems to be very effective – if you have the right coach
- Reps would like to have coaching to include call recording (theirs and other reps)
- More peer coaching is needed – buddy system – witness calls
- Best source of info is reps who are successful
- A buddy system or mentorship program would be good – use best sellers
- Sales buddy/mentor system is preferred by new reps

Appendix G

Data Collection Tool: Learning Organization Questionnaire

**Direct Checks Contact Center Organizational Learning Survey: March 2005**

	CS-32	CS-33	CS-34	CS-35	Other
1 What is your present Grade Level?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Have you earned WOW more than once during the last 4 months?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
	Yes	No	Unsure		
3 Number of years of total work experience before joining Checks Unlimited:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	none	less than 1 year	1 to 4 years	5 to 9 years	10 years plus
4 Number of years of sales experience before joining Checks Unlimited:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Number of years working in the Contact Center at Checks Unlimited:		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 How do you rate your selling proficiency in your present job?	<input type="checkbox"/> expert: consistently exceeds sales goals <input type="checkbox"/> proficient: at times exceeds sales goals <input type="checkbox"/> competent: generally meets sales goals <input type="checkbox"/> novice: still acquiring many sales skills				
7 How do you rate your overall job proficiency in your present job?	<input type="checkbox"/> expert: excellent overall skill/knowledge, able to train others <input type="checkbox"/> proficient: easily navigates systems, advanced knowledge <input type="checkbox"/> competent: familiar with all systems, good overall knowledge <input type="checkbox"/> novice: still acquiring basic computer skills and job knowledge				
8 What two learning styles best describe how you learn?	<input type="checkbox"/> Reading memos, Intranet information, or other training materials <input type="checkbox"/> Listening to peers, managers, or others explain concepts to me <input type="checkbox"/> Watching a peer or trainer execute a task <input type="checkbox"/> Performing a new task myself while someone sits with me <input type="checkbox"/> Explaining back to someone a new concept I just learned				
9 How long do you feel it took you to become proficient in your job after training was completed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	1 month	2 months	3 months	4-to-6 months	more than 6 months
10 I was given the skills and knowledge in new hire training to allow me to succeed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree
11 I feel the general information I get from Contact Center information sources is accurate and consistent.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 I know where to find the information that I need.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13 The sales floor is conducive to learning and skill development.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14 In my current position, I feel there are enough opportunities: - for me to improve my skills in my current job. - for me to obtain the skills necessary to do a different job.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15 Overall, I have access to the tools and training I need to do my job well.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16 I am provided with training when I am expected to learn new processes or sell new products.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17 My manager provides the support and development needed to train employees.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18 I feel valued and respected as a Contact Center employee	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19 Successful sales reps are willing to share all their "best practices" with other representatives.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20 Given the opportunity, I would tell others great things about working here.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**PRESENT JOB KNOWLEDGE:** In this section, we ask you to provide us with information about the knowledge necessary to do your job and which areas are most important to YOU regarding your own development

	Does Not Apply	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
21 Product Knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/>					
22 Offer and Pricing Knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/>					
23 Customer Service/Soft Skills	<input type="checkbox"/>					
24 Basic Computer Knowledge, System Navigation Skills	<input type="checkbox"/>					
25 Selling Tools and Techniques	<input type="checkbox"/>					
26 Order Processing Security Procedures	<input type="checkbox"/>					
27 Interpersonal Communications Skills	<input type="checkbox"/>					
28 Basic Internet (checks.com) navigation knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/>					
29 Keying Standards	<input type="checkbox"/>					

**PRESENT JOB PROFICIENCY:** In this section, we ask you to provide us with information about how you developed your job proficiency and the relative importance of each compared to each other:

	Does Not Apply	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
30 New Hire Process and Procedural Training	<input type="checkbox"/>					
31 New Hire Sales Training	<input type="checkbox"/>					
32 Mentoring by Other Sales Representatives	<input type="checkbox"/>					
33 Mentoring by Team Manager	<input type="checkbox"/>					
34 Prior Work Experience	<input type="checkbox"/>					
35 Outside Educational Opportunities	<input type="checkbox"/>					
36 Contact Center Sales Training Enhancement Sessions	<input type="checkbox"/>					
37 The Intranet (cu_intranet)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
38 Information and Training During Team Meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>					
39 Daily Work Experience	<input type="checkbox"/>					
40 Informal Interactions with Co-Workers	<input type="checkbox"/>					

**GROWING KNOWLEDGE AND PROFICIENCY:** In this section, we ask you to provide us with information about how effective certain methods are in helping you improve your job performance:

	Does Not Apply	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Effective	Very Effective	Extremely Effective
41 One-on-One Peer Coaching	<input type="checkbox"/>					
42 One-on-One Team Manager Support and Development	<input type="checkbox"/>					
43 Training Conducted During Team Meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>					
44 Training Conducted as a Classroom Session	<input type="checkbox"/>					
45 Training Conducted On-Line Using a Personal Computer	<input type="checkbox"/>					
46 Information Passed on Through the Intranet (cu_intranet)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
47 Training Conducted by Outside Training Companies	<input type="checkbox"/>					

48 What presently keeps you from taking advantage of additional job improvement opportunities?

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49 What other ideas do you have for creating new opportunities or improving existing opportunities that would allow you to improve your job performance?

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## Appendix I

Summary of the Primary Observations of Collaborative Team Members Present at the  
Clarification Focus Groups

## Session 1

- Would be good to force sales reps onto Gate 3 for short periods of time each week to maintain skill – as a set standard
- Need more real-time feedback from coaches so we learn as we go
- The sales coach role needs to be defined with specific structure and expectations written out
- Need to create selection criteria for managers to follow when selecting new sales coaches
- There should be a more balanced approach in coaches listening to reps and visa versa to ensure learning is taking place
- Don't need more time off of phone to learn, just need better processes and tools that allow learning to take place while working
- Some kind of consistent learning tool, like the old Pulse Check is needed to review and build knowledge
- Periodic refresher training courses
- Not enough hands on training during new hire training – on the job learning is best approach
- Would suggest a short course on the Intranet – how to use and where to find information
- Techs within a team tend to communicate, but outside of that, there is a breakdown – need a way to communicate across teams and shifts – could be through an e-mail or meeting
- Would be great to have a log on the Intranet of issues documented by individual techs and the solution – that could be accessed by all techs – then give techs first five minutes of shift to read over

## Session 2

- The sales coach process needs an informal or formal leader to guide actions, give direction and build consistency
- There is presently no consistent coach to coach communication, so good ideas generally stay within a team, or two. Needs to be a way to share – such as regular coach meetings
- The passing off from one sales coach to the next is not very fluid and much time and effort wasted – maybe a short window of time working together
- Should be some structure around expectations which would ensure a mix of approaches are used – side-by-sides, witness, peer sessions – something in writing to document actions and progress
- Could use some training sessions on coaching – as some sellers are not good communicators
- Intranet is a great learning tool but is not set up for ease of use – could be better to help manage learning while on the phones
- Need an ongoing knowledge refresher process to help reps maintain details not used everyday - use or lose stuff
- Team would benefit by a standardize schedule of team meeting topics which could be facilitated by guess speakers
- Techs could benefit by having weekly knowledge building sessions – could rotate so that service level is not impacted
- Back-up techs need to attend training or be involved to a greater degree in knowledge building efforts – and should have regular time schedule to force time on phones a tech so that skill and knowledge can be sustained
- Techs and floor reps could benefit from a key word quick reference on most common issues

- Need a single point of expertise to make final decisions on process/procedure questions – and then that person communicates to team
- Would be cool to have a place on Intranet for employees to submit process questions that could be answered and publish to a page.
- Might be good to establish a quick reference guide for techs on certain common issues
- Formalized training for new back-ups and new-hires in a classroom environment - Trainers should be a select group of senior techs
- Those in-training should be required to go through Gate 3-Customer Service training
- Once the trainees have gone through the formalized training, a test should be administered and additional training and testing should occur for those who do not pass with a 90-95% grade or higher
- Management should value the training team's input when it comes to a particular trainee that doesn't make the grade
- A group of senior techs should be allowed in the interview process whether they actually interview with the manager or at least give input to the manager on the potential prospects
- Managers and senior techs should listen to potential prospects for a day or at least a 1/2 day to gather information about the prospects-the prospects the techs and managers are listening to should be changed to gate 3 for that day since 100% of our job is about customer service
- All techs and backups should be required to go through periodic refresh training (quarterly, biyearly or yearly)
- Currently we have had back-ups and full-time techs assist in the training classes: this should be extended to all techs and back-ups on a rotational basis because this is another way that we can stay up on the latest keying standards, security matrix and customer service questions

### Session 3

- Create an incentive program in EOD – to build motivation and togetherness
- Need more time to learn before being held accountable – for example, script compliance
- EOD Employees feel that “family culture” in their area has eroded on team because of little to no group time as well and focus on individual performance metrics
- There is no perceived regularity in EOD team meetings or any other opportunity for the group to learn together
- EOD employees feel that there should be a core curriculum developed to train basic skills and build better understanding for their area – including system knowledge, customer service skills, etc.
- There is a general feeling that WIP is an ongoing weight that does not allow for employees to progress – including employee attitudes (negative) about spending time off the phone when Saturday overtime is being called
- Day-to-day on the job learning in EOD is greatly impacted in a negative way because of a lack of ongoing tech support – and it is not easy (and not clear) how to go about getting answers when techs are not available

Appendix J

Possible Action Items formulated by the Collaborative Team

		Solution	Detail
20	C	Create a “Master Seller” program that will identify best sellers in a specific metric each month and assign them to a group of sales reps who need improvement in that specific area	<p>Coaching window might be one-to-two weeks</p> <p>Analysis Team could identify top performers and those most needing improvement based on two-week run rate</p> <p>“Masters” would need to be “certified” by manager based on critical factors including tone, compliance, ethics, etc.</p> <p>Great recognition opportunity for those selected as “Masters”</p> <p>“Masters” could be assigned to five-to-ten reps each</p> <p>Improvement target could be set against prior run rate – with “Master” earning a reward if target is achieved</p> <p>Target metric could be changed each month</p>
26	G	Add FAQ functionality to the Intranet that would allow reps to research consistent answers to repeated questions	<p>Functionality already exists on the CU Intranet site, and could be adapted to the intranet, however it is static and has no search functionality</p> <p>Software packages are available that allow for submission, documentation and searchability by topic or key word</p> <p>Could be administered by the training department</p> <p>Value would increase over time as “library” of information is built</p> <p>Could serve as an effective new-hire tool as well as decrease call for to techs on many common issues which have standardized answers</p>
15	O	Have a single point of contact for Tech Specs	<p>Either a Trainer, Core Team Tech Member</p> <p>Or Call Center Manager can serve as point of contact for all information to be disseminated to tech team members</p>
19	O	Establish a single point of information flow for the entire Tech Spec group where all process and procedure questions can be sent and answered	<p>Single point could be a trainer</p> <p>Responsible to update a page on the intranet or sent a weekly “Tech Talk” e-mail over Lotus notes detailing out information: Lotus notes would be more visible, and provide tech access only</p> <p>Update would be sent to all techs, back-ups and trainers to ensure consistency across Contact Center</p> <p>Questions or concerns could be e-mailed to the Point of Contact by other techs or managers</p>
30	O	Establish a single point of contact for Tech Specs	<p>Designate a team manager to be the single point of contact for all tech specs (tech specs still report to their specific team manager, but for all concerns or issues related to customers or reps the tech specs should report to the designated team manager)</p> <p>Team Manager assigned to techs specs will distribute information in a timely manner on all issues and concerns</p> <p>Team Manager will conduct bi-weekly meetings for all tech specs to discuss specific topics and training</p> <p>Team Manager will do refresher training on customer service on a bi-monthly basis</p> <p>Establish a place on the intranet for all tech specs to find information on topics and issues</p> <p>(Designated team manager will update the website)</p> <p>Designated team manager will conduct training for back- up tech specs on a bi-weekly basis</p> <p>Back-Up tech specs will be included in tech spec meeting periodically</p>
32	O	One manager responsible for the entire Technical Specialist group.	<p>Unify the team.</p> <p>Evaluate performance expectations and ensure compliance.</p> <p>Develop a formalized training procedure for all new technical specialists and backups.</p> <p>Responsible for the dissemination of information to all the tech specs and backups.</p> <p>Ensure cooperation &amp; communication between all areas of the company. (Floor reps, EOD, Training, Scheduling, Data Entry, Manufacturing, Marketing, IT, Management, etc.)</p> <p>Reestablish the Technical Specialists’ “Team” mentality.</p>

35	O	Establish a single point of accountability and information flow for the entire Tech Spec group	<p>Single point should be a manager to ensure consistency and act as a final decision maker</p> <p>Responsible to coordinate updating an Intranet page, weekly/daily meetings, and other communication within the Tech Spec group to include backup Techs</p> <p>Ensure collaboration/communication between Tech Specs and Trainers</p> <p>Leverage a Trainer to develop a standardized training program for all Tech Specs and backup Techs</p>
17	P	Reorganize Tech Department and Assign Single Point of Contact.	<p>Relocate Techs to one location in Call Center.</p> <p>Have one Manager for all Techs and Backup Techs.</p> <p>Formalize a Training Program for Techs and BU Techs.</p> <p>Conduct Bi-Weekly meetings and split meetings into A's and B's. Assign Scribe to each meeting to communicate Minutes to all Techs/BU Techs, Managers, Connie, Shawn, Julie and Don.</p> <p>Create an "Ask the Tech" site on Intranet. Rotate Techs who answer questions [Tech Lead or Manager to review and approve prior to posting on Intranet].</p> <p>Tech Manager to communicate all departments of any changes/updates affected by Tech activities.</p>
5	Q	Better incentive the EOD area, all other areas are recognized through incentive programs.	<p>Some sort of monetary incentive program, similar to WOW for the reps.</p> <p>This could be measured by production, attendance, schedule adherence, etc... (the use of the attendance and schedule adherence is due to the lack of metrics as opposed to customer service/sales metrics)</p>
6	R	Provide a better bridge of EOD reps to the Sales department	<p>Provide more communication and information to the EOD representatives with respect to the procedures in the sales department. This will help alleviate any tension between the sales department and EOD.</p>
8	S	Create a team atmosphere for EOD department.	<p>Create EOD coaches who could assist other EOD members – similar to sales coaches</p> <p>Regular weekly team meetings.</p>
18	T	Develop Training and Recognition Programs for EOD.	<p>Assign Trainer to develop Training and Review Programs for new and seasoned EOD Associates. Training and Review is also needed for Labor Loan Reps.</p> <p>Conduct Weekly Team Meetings with Agenda's.</p> <p>Develop Follow Up Procedures for Action Items from Team Meetings.</p> <p>Implement Recognition Program for Top/Most Improved Performers. Including reps that receive Kudos from customers and co-workers.</p> <p>Develop Back-Up Plan for when Manager is out of office. This also serves as an opportunity for cross-training in the Call Center.</p>
24	T	Formalize a training curriculum for the EOD area to train new employees and potentially to provide ongoing refresher training for the area's	<p>Could be developed using EOD techs and a representative from the Contact Center's training department</p> <p>Start small by determining core skills and building one-hour modules on each</p> <p>Modules could be rotated on a set monthly schedule for refreshing knowledge</p>
31	T	Ongoing training and development for EOD	<p>Training needs to be conducted on a monthly basis with weekly team meetings to establish unity with the team</p> <p>Training will be conducted by the EOD manager and periodically a rep from EOD will be selected to conduct training on a specific issue concerning the department</p> <p>Communication on wip and customer concerns will be conducted by the team manager on an ongoing basis</p> <p>Establish team unity with contests and motivation from team manager</p>
34	T	Implement a formalized training program for the EOD area.	<p>An EOD Tech and a Trainer could develop the training core curriculum.</p> <p>The Training program could include a classroom environment and side by sides with veteran EOD reps.</p> <p>New EOD reps and labor loans would be required to successfully complete the training course before working in EOD.</p> <p>Refresher trainer could be included in regularly scheduled team meetings.</p>
37	T	Implement a training program for the EOD	<p>A Trainer could build this program and ensure standardized training for existing employees</p> <p>New employees would go through training and come up to speed quicker</p> <p>Team meetings should be held regularly and include a component of refresher training</p>

Appendix K

Final Four Recommendations with Operation Detail

**Solution One**

Solution	Detail
<p>Reduce team size ratios to allow increased time for individual reps to be developed by their manager</p>	<p>This should eliminate the need for a full-time sales coach approach, which pulls a skilled sales person from the floor for an extended amount of time to act as the primary point of information and coordination for peer coaching. The Team Leader would now have the opportunity to complete this responsibility - cost/benefit demonstrates that the cost of additional would be offset by loss of productivity by Representatives consistently cited that managers do not have time to help them - decreased team size would allow for more one-on-one time</p> <p>This should help Team Manager retention, which would increase continuity and consistency, and help alleviate the negative impacts resulting from decreased leadership coverage when even team manager positions are open</p> <p>Team managers could be required to devote much more time to monitoring, coaching, and arranging for 1-on-1 peer coaching of reps - based on weekly time management analysis (attached)</p> <p>Team manager focus would revolve around identifying individual strengths and weaknesses and arranging coaching experiences to leverage those strengths to help others with specific weaknesses. This would help establish a rapport with representatives that lends to the betterment of the representative in the way of career development.</p> <p>Ensures that team managers are focused primarily on team member performance. This will help managers to train and coach different skills that are critical to the success of the representative.</p> <p>Team managers would share and implement "best practices" from other team managers, based on regular team manager meetings</p>

**Solution Two**

Solution	Detail
<p>Create a "Certified Seller" program where representatives can complete a series of steps which allow them to assist the department in several different functions outside of their normal job responsibilities</p>	<p>Requirements could be grade level, meeting grade level requirements, time in department, quality evaluation scores, sales incentive earned, etc.</p> <p>Opportunities available to "Certified Sellers" could include: training assistant, peer coach, MVT assistance, sales training "guest" instructor, marketing feedback participant, etc.</p> <p>Would be structured as a monthly qualification, so that list would be determined at end of each month for the following month. Names would then be posted for recognition and for Team Leader awareness on who to tap into for peer coaching help</p> <p>Could include modules or a checklist that needs to be completed in order to become certified</p> <p>Analysis team would need to create an Access Database to enter criteria and generate current list each month</p> <p>Could create a brief "train the trainer" program for all new Certified Sellers to attend to ensure coaching skills are in place before mentoring</p> <p>Allows for inter-team cooperation as certified sellers are not restricted to their own teams - but can meet the need wherever it exists</p> <p>Certified Sellers could train "one on one" with their team Technical Specialist to develop their customer service/soft skills.</p> <p>Certified Sellers would be an excellent resource for the new reps on the floor, and help bridge the gap from Training to the floor.</p> <p>Certified Sellers would be certified in one or many sales categories (upsell, delivery services, ID theftguard, cross-selling, etc.). This will enable the specific strengths of each certified seller to be maximized for coaching.</p>

**Solution Three**

Solution	Detail
<p>Establish a single point for training and information flow for the entire Tech Spec group</p>	<p>The point of contact could be a trainer, or a member of the core team.</p> <p>Responsible to send out a weekly update over Lotus Notes called "Tech Talk" which will document all informational and procedural questions - e-mail provides an informational channel for tech access only, and ensures all get the information even when out</p> <p>Update would be sent to all techs, back-ups and trainers to ensure consistency across Contact Center</p> <p>Questions or concerns could be e-mailed to the Point of Contact by other techs or managers</p> <p>Contact would verify all information with the training manager before publishing, or ops managers, process analyst, scheduling manager, etc. when necessary</p> <p>The contact would verify all information with the technology manager before publishing, or ops managers, process analyst, scheduling manager, etc. when necessary</p> <p>This would allow for one person to coordinate training for all new techs and back-ups, rather than the "by committee" approach presently taken - should allow for more consistent training</p> <p>The Trainer would develop a standardized training program (agenda) for all new Tech Specs and backup Techs - might use other techs, but they would coordinate training and establish the subjects covered - create a certification process</p> <p>By having one team manager devoted to all Techs, this provides for a single point of contact to ensure consistency and act as a final decision maker</p> <p>Responsible to coordinate updating an Intranet page, weekly/daily meetings, and other communication within the Tech Spec group to include backup Techs</p> <p>Evaluate performance expectations and ensure compliance.</p> <p>Training should be completed on the trainer's scheduled shift. After completion the new techs would start their assigned shifts.</p> <p>The point of contact could establish a dedicated ext. or "help line" for the new techs and backups. This ext. could be manned by senior techs.</p> <p>This person could coordinate bi-annual refresher training (use standardize material for new hires) schedule for all techs to "recertify" on the basics</p>

**Solution Four**

Solution	Detail
<p>Develop Training and Recognition Programs for EOD.</p>	<p>Assign Trainer to the EOD area and develop Training and Review Programs for new and seasoned EOD Associates. Training and Review is also needed for Labor Loan Reps.</p> <p>Training should be developed using EOD techs and - they could help administer the training when needed - serve as "back-up" trainers</p> <p>Start small by determining core skills and building one-hour modules on each - should happen for both verifications and FIR work</p> <p>Modules could be rotated on a set monthly schedule for refreshing knowledge - conducted during team meetings</p> <p>The Training program could include a classroom environment and side by sides with veteran EOD reps.</p> <p>New EOD reps and labor loans would be required to successfully complete the training course before working in EOD - certification process</p>

Appendix L

Optimal Team Size Analysis

Administrative Requirements	Measurement	Value (hours)	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4	Scenario 5
Total weekly time	Fixed per week	40	40	40	40	40	40
Team meetings	Fixed per week per 20 employees	0.75	1.50	1.50	1.50	0.75	0.75
Staff meeting	Fixed per week	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
1-on-1 w/ Shift Supervisor	Fixed per week	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
"On target" meetings	Fixed per week	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.50
Review/post stats and reports	Fixed per week	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50
BLT meetings / company meetings	Fixed per week	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.50
ETT	Per 10 employees per week	0.75	3.00	2.25	1.88	1.50	1.13
Policy/logistic questions from reps	Per 10 employees per week	1.00	4.00	3.00	2.50	2.00	1.50
Change notices/ STD & paperwork	Per 10 employees per week	0.25	1.00	0.75	0.63	0.50	0.38
Disciplinary actions	Per 10 employees per week	0.75	3.00	2.25	1.88	1.50	1.13
Informal communication	Percentage of total time	5.00%	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
Vacation days	Percentage of total time	7.50%	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
<b>Total Administrative Allocation</b>			<b>24.00</b>	<b>21.25</b>	<b>19.88</b>	<b>17.75</b>	<b>16.38</b>
<b>Total Available Coaching Time</b>			<b>16.00</b>	<b>18.75</b>	<b>20.13</b>	<b>22.25</b>	<b>23.63</b>

Coaching Requirements	Measurement	Value	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4	Scenario 5
Coaching & Call Monitoring	Minutes Per employee per day		5	8	10	13	19
	Hours per employee per week		0.40	0.63	0.81	1.11	1.58
	Minutes per coaching/monitor session	12					
	<b>Total number of monitors per day</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>24</b>

Staffing Levels	Measurement	Value	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4	Scenario 5
Total PC Sales Representatives		400	400	400	400	400	400
Required PC Sales Team Managers			10	13	16	20	27
<b>Team Size</b>			<b>40</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>15</b>
Existing PC Sales Team Positions			10	10	10	10	10
Kelly Earwood, Isaac McGuffin, Jeff Huddleston, Rachel Lovato, Michael Ada, Laura Walker, Judy Speroff, Nathan Bantau, Cami Benge, Lori Mendicino's team							
<b>Required Additional Positions</b>			<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>

Appendix M

Team Size Cost Benefit Analysis

<b>Annual Profit Impact</b>		<b>Annual Impact</b>	
Additional Team managers	6	(\$396,000)	
Reduced Coaches	-12	\$297,000	(11 PC coaches + Spanish, excl. 1 BC coach & 1 AR coach)
Coaches RPO	12	\$105,840	Assumes coaches perform on avg. \$2 higher on RPO
Net Impact		\$6,840	

  

<b>Evaluation of Team Size</b>				
	Existing Staff	Existing Positions	Add'l	Total
Team managers	8	10	6	16
Reps	400	400		400
Ratio	50	40		25

  

<b>Cost of Staff</b>				
	Manager	Coach		
Salary	\$40,000	\$15,000		
Benefits	\$26,000	\$9,750	65%	
Total	\$66,000	\$24,750		

*Call Center cultural background.* The Call Center at Checks Unlimited has experienced a great deal of success over the last several years in its efforts to transform its Customer Service Department to a Call Center where the primary focus is on sales. The financial outcomes have been a significant increase in average revenue per order as well as an equally impressive decrease in the costs of taking the order through minimizing average handle time. While a good portion of the revenue improvement has resulted from other drivers such as increases to the per-box prices and the handling fees associated with each box, a good portion has come from Call Center sales related initiatives like the move from a more general sales approach supported by sales training to standardized sales scripting. Ironically, the same initiatives, which worked so well for the company while it was in the maturity stage, have come back to create a problematic culture as the company slips into the decline stage. There are four primary examples that illustrate this challenge.

*Required use of sales scripting.* A powerful tool for the Call Center over the last several years has been the development of a standardized sales script, which was enforced across the sales floor as the mandatory approach to every sale. The script had been developed by a top performing team who had begun outperforming all other sales teams by a significant margin. The script allowed for a consistent, concise approach that set up offers using sales techniques like assumptive selling. The tool worked well because CCRs were selling a product that was relatively simple, personal checks and related accessory products and complementary services. Rather than spending time and energy creating an individualized approach, CCRs focused solely on completing all offers and the overall delivery. The script also provided for a strong level of call control, which allowed for average handle time to drop, lowering overall cost per call. While generating a great deal of success in the short term, a certain level of sales atrophy was being

created as employees either never learned, or lost the ability to creatively and dynamically sell to their customers.

*Entry level recruitment practices.* To save on cost, Checks Unlimited has for the last several years recruited entry level employees with little to no sales or call center experience, as starting wages remain low. Additionally, very little screening of candidates happens as the hiring decision is made based on a single 15-minute interview. Therefore, new employees tend to need a substantial level of skill development to develop into consistent, proven sellers. Because an established sales script was in place and an acceptable level of success can be achieved through just reciting this tool, only one day of the three-week training period was devoted to teaching how best to sell over the telephone. Additionally, Team Managers hired to lead the employees typically have had little-to-no expertise in telemarketing. The focus has been more on hiring managers who could drive compliance to scripting and accountability to sales metrics. Rather than sales coaches, Team Managers have served as process regulators.

*Focus on immediate results.* All call centers must maintain a focus on controlling the expenses necessary to field each contact, whether sales or service. While generating incremental increases in the average revenue of each order, the Call Center also took action to reduce its costs during the later years of maturity. For example, sales team sizes were pushed at times to 60 representatives, with an average of about 40 to 50 at any given time. This reduces the amount of time a Team Manager has to spend coaching and developing team members. Compounding this issue, employee attrition rates often averaged well over 100%. This meant that new hire classes were happening every month or two, adding to the challenge of establishing stable, knowledgeable teams. Another related dynamic is the fact that remaining representatives constantly re-bid for new shifts, causing team assignments to change. A struggling representative might have three managers in a year, each of whom starts the development process anew.

Additionally, organized time away from the phone for training activities or information sharing was and continues to be sporadic, as CCRs are either kept on the phones to take calls or sent home for the day using a voluntary go-home-early list.

*What's in it for me mentality.* While there is some focus on team and department, the underlying emphasis remains on the individual. Promotional opportunities within the CCR position are based solely on individual performance. CCRs are eligible for two separate grade level promotions based solely on their ability to meet the operational standards of the next grade level for 8-out-of-10 weeks. No additional requirements tied to assisting others or building team performance is required. Additionally, the sales incentive program pays out monthly to the top half of the department at the individual CCR level. Therefore, the performance of some eliminates others from qualifying. There is also a sense of survival as minimum grade level standards are constantly pushed upward to drive ongoing improvement. This creates an environment of stress as the improved performance of a few constantly makes it harder for others to even maintain their job or make a sales bonus.

Each of these four cultural factors reflect what can be classified as the first of the two primary approaches to change based on expected outcomes: E Theory change. This approach works toward near-term economic improvement, while the second approach, O Theory change, focuses on improvement in organizational capability (Harvard, 2003). The goal of E Theory change is “to dramatically and rapidly increase shareholder value, as measured by improved cash flow and share price,” while the primary goal of O Theory change is “to develop an organizational culture that supports learning and a high-performance employee base” (Harvard, p.10). For the last several years, the Call Center has obviously taken an E Theory approach as reflected in the company’s background and present direction based on its competitive environment, and this approach has certainly produced the intended financial results. Therefore,

a major consideration should be whether to risk the minimization of this effort in favor of an approach more reflective of O Theory. This will continue to be a challenge as aggressive annual operating goals from the Deluxe's Board of Directors seems to send a message that short-term financial results should not be put at risk by actions that tend to favor more sustained, flattened out results.

Research into these two solutions finds that pursuing purely Theory E or purely Theory O tends to wind up producing more pitfalls than resolutions. Rather, companies who pursue a combination of the approaches typically reap both profitability and productivity improvements that drive sustained competitive advantage and reduced anxiety levels during times of corporate restructuring. A prime example is General Electric, where former CEO Jack Welch used both approaches by first squeezing out all redundancies and eliminating all underperforming units through Theory E actions like his 25% headcount reduction or his be #1 or #2 in your market, or be sold, tactics. Then, he followed those up by implementing a series of Theory O interventions meant to improve the competitiveness of the company's culture by making it faster, less bureaucratic and much more focused on the customer (Harvard, 2003). This balance, then, should also be an underlying overall objective to this process. For, as the Call Center can create more of a balance between the already present Theory E and the under utilized Theory O, it can improve its chances for not only achieving the Board's focus of short-term financial gain, but also long-term sustainability through employee learning and commitment.