

Employee Satisfaction Insights from “Undercover Boss”



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If you walked into your own contact center as a new agent or manager, what would you see? Would you be surprised to find agents being rude to customers on the phone? How many dedicated unsung heroes would you encounter? More importantly, how would you later interpret and address the situations you observed?

A new CBS reality show called “Undercover Boss” gives CEOs the opportunity to go to the front lines and use stealth observation to find out how satisfied, dedicated and effective their employees are.

In every episode, the undercover boss finds a consistent link between the thoughts and attitudes of each employee and the performance of the employee. In the end, what the boss learns about the employee’s states of mind provides a roadmap for changing what needs to be changed. The upshot is a new control over the company environment, reputation, and bottom line.

The Ideal Dialogue Company has invested years of research and solution development into finding out the thoughts and attitudes that form the root of performance in the contact center. Ideal Dialogue Company’s survey and analytics tools provide a more viable alternative to the Undercover Boss approach for learning and addressing the perspectives that drive performance.

EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION INSIGHTS FROM “UNDERCOVER BOSS”

Immediately after the 2010 Super Bowl, CBS debuted a new reality show: “Undercover Boss.” As the voice-over introduction bills it: *“The economy is going through tough times. Many hard-working Americans blame wealthy CEOs out of touch with what’s going on in their own companies ...But some bosses are willing to take extreme action to make their businesses better.”* My first reaction was, “I think I’ll pass.”

A couple of weeks later I was reviewing the results of an employee satisfaction survey with one of my Ideal Dialogue Company colleagues, Joyce Filupeit. Joyce and I had recently completed the survey for one of our contact center clients. Joyce surprised me when she mentioned that she had watched “Undercover Boss” and was seeing several of the show’s themes echoed in responses to our employee satisfaction survey. Not so surprisingly, many drivers of employee satisfaction –and dissatisfaction – are common across a variety of workplaces. This paper will outline some of the points illustrated in “Undercover Boss” as they relate to the dominant dimensions of employee satisfaction that the Ideal Dialogue Company has identified in contact centers.

On Joyce’s recommendation, I watched the show. In each episode, the executive has clearly defined objectives in mind. They gather their executive teams into a board room and announce something along the lines of: *“I have decided to step down as CEO ... < camera pans across stunned faces, capturing gasps and bewilderment > “... for a week... to go undercover ... to see what’s really happening on the front lines.” <camera captures further bewilderment punctuated by sighs of relief as bubbles of opportunism pop>*

Invariably, the executives all tapped more into the human factors that shape the success or failure of their organizations as they visited their facilities. In their own ways, each one was encouraged by some of the talent they found, yet also disappointed by some blatant examples of broken policies and failed leadership.

Contact centers are, by their nature, people rich. Employee satisfaction matters not only to the work environment, but to your company’s reputation and bottom line as well.



The 4 Key Dimensions of Employee Satisfaction:

1 Employee Engagement – We define this as “Intrinsic motivation, united with a mastery of communication, that compels an agent to be present with customers.” Note this concept has three distinct but interrelated parts:

- Intrinsic Motivation – The worker believes in the job because work directly reflects her/his attitudes, beliefs, and values. *Work is meaningful when it reinforces one’s values and beliefs.*
- Continuous Learning – Work must be complex enough *to develop talents and skills continuously*, but not so challenging that it causes anxiety, fatigue, and eventual burnout.
- Autonomy – The individual chooses the optimal way of reaching goals based on talent, training, skills, and situation. *The price of autonomy, however, is accountability.*

For more information about Employee Engagement, please check out the webcast at www.idealdialogue.com/media.php?cdf=12.)

2 Organizational Affinity – This captures the employee’s disposition about how well they relate to the success of the company, the importance of job, and their perception as a valued and respected team member.

3 Supervisor Support – A factor of the communication environment the leaders have established, together with how approachable they are to their employees and the degree to which they help the individual be successful.

4 Climate of Success – Whereas Supervisor Support reflects the interpersonal aspects this dimension addresses the organizational issues that contribute towards a positive workplace. Some examples are training, policies, available tools and processes.

What if you could go undercover, camera crew in tow, to see what’s really happening in your company? Spying on the contact center isn’t practical in the real world, but you do need to find out what drives success and how to create the optimal environment to support those drivers.

Ideal Dialogue Company has a solution for finding out what people are truly saying and thinking at their desks. Following several years of contact center experience and extensive research, we have developed and statistically validated four key dimensions that measure employee satisfaction:

1. Employee Engagement
2. Organizational Affinity
3. Supervisor Support
4. Climate of Success

With this framework in mind, let’s see what one executive finds. Ask yourself, “Do any of these situations seem familiar?” You may find some similarities in your own organization.

Joe DePinto, 7-Eleven President and CEO, wants to see how communication flows from the company’s Store Support Center, the lifeline for their business model, to their various franchise locations. Because he routinely monitors corporate reports, he knows the operational performance metrics of the various stores. He wants to understand what sets each one apart so that he can capture best practices. At the show’s kick-off staff meeting he explains, “*I’m going to see what we’re not doing well, and that’s only going to make us better in the long run.*”

When you step back and look at them, certain key factors are common among convenience stores and contact centers:

- Both often run on a 24/7 basis
- Policies and procedures are planned centrally, but executed in a decentralized environment
- Logistic and infrastructure support are essential for smooth operations
- Efficiency and productivity are critical to profitability
- Quality customer service can make or break the business

Let's ride along and see what Joe found across the four dimensions of employee satisfaction and their impact on his operations.

Employee Engagement

Contact center managers are often in search of the "WOW call." When you observe a great representative, you automatically think, "They've really got it together." On the flip side, we all have witnessed one of those calls with a contact center agent who "just couldn't give a flip."

Joe finds a "WOW" experience on the first stop. He visits the store that sells the most coffee of all, *"This store is the epicenter of coffee for 7-Eleven ... Coffee is a huge business for us. We sell over a million cups a day."* Joe wants to find best practices to share across all of their stores. He works alongside Dolores to learn the store's secret for selling coffee. Having worked for the company for nearly two decades, Dolores is the epitome of a loyal and committed employee. Through his undercover observation, Joe finds out that it is Dolores' engagement with the customers that makes this store stand out. *"You know everybody here,"* he notices. He also recognizes how well Dolores balances the business and customer

needs: *"There is a lot of interaction with the customers, and you have to keep the coffee going ...That's why we're selling 2,500 cups of coffee ... not because we have great coffee, but because we have Dolores there."*

It's clear in watching her interact with the customers that she connects well with them and genuinely identifies with 7-Eleven. At the conclusion of the visit, Dolores says, *"It's a nice store. We love it."* She feels a deep sense of purpose, communicates well with those around her, and is actually an extension of the store.

As you evaluate the people, processes and technologies of your business, how often do you overlook the significance of the people component?

Organizational Affinity

The contact center industry is notorious for its high attrition rate. I'm sure you've seen your share of "churn and burn" facilities. When I first got into the business, we faced new competition in many of our service locations. I used to think people were joking when they said that employees would leave for a few more cents in pay. As I learned more, I could see why – there was no emotional connection for people at some of those failing places. To employees, it was just a job.

Topping Dolores would be tough, but the 7-Eleven episode brought to light another example of someone who really identifies with his job. Igor from Kazakhstan drives the late night delivery truck. Joe recognizes the important role the drivers have in replenishing the stores: *"The distribution folks are really the unsung heroes,"* he says. Real

employee engagement (combination of intrinsic motivation, continuous learning, and autonomy), when properly developed, can actually extend into a strong commitment to the success of the company. This bond, along with how important employees feel that their job is and how valued they feel make up organizational affinity.

Igor obviously has fun while he works. As he lowers the ramp of his truck to deliver supplies, he spontaneously hollers *“Roller coaster, Six Flags! Woo-hoo!”* Igor also comments, *“My truck is my baby. If I could, I would hug it.”* While making his delivery stops, Igor introduces Joe to the store clerks. It's evident by their comments they value Igor's solid work ethic and his contribution to their success. They clearly enjoy working with him. Igor's humble reaction is, *“I just do my job,”* but what resonates all along his route is his enthusiasm. Towards the end of the shift, when Joe asks him how he stays so motivated, Igor explains, *“I am so thankful for this country, which allowed me to survive and be happy.”* To him, the job is more than just a job.

What's holding your employees back from really committing themselves to and identifying with your company?

Supervisor Support

One rude awakening I had during my introduction to the contact center industry is what I refer to as the “eating our seed corn” syndrome. For the most part, little attention is given to developing those first-line supervisors who, in turn, have a direct and daily impact on anywhere from 10 to 35 agents. Depending on call length, these same agents touch at least 40 to 100

customers a day. Doing the math, that means that one supervisor indirectly influences anywhere from 400 to 3,500 customers a day! Companies, driven by expediency, often “reward” a good customer service rep or brilliant tech support agent with a promotion to the supervisory ranks. Unfortunately, the promotion comes with no real professional development! In order to be an effective supervisor or manager, one must be not only technically competent, but able to communicate openly with and be approachable for helping their team members.

Joe, the 7-Eleven CEO and I share similar backgrounds, having both graduated from West Point. The first tenant of leadership we all learned as cadets is *“Take care of the troops, and they'll take care of the mission.”* Taking care of them does not mean coddling employees. On the contrary, it means ensuring they have the resources they need to do the job and are challenged to do so. The leader sets the example. “Undercover Boss” shows several examples of poor leadership. Here, we'll visit the positive.

We see real supervisor support during Joe's undercover stop to a production bakery in Baltimore, where employees turn out more than 60 million pastries a year. Phil, with eight years of experience there, handles the training department. His training approach is outstanding. He coaches Joe side by side, with specific and positive feedback on how to improve his technique of loading pastries on the conveyor belt. Making small talk, Phil and Joe share that they've both served in the military (Phil in the Marine Corps and Joe in the Army).

Joe later admits to Phil that he was nervous at first about working at the bakery, *“... because I didn't know how I was going to*

do." When Phil asks what changed his mind, Joe comments "You guys are helping me out. I appreciate that. Phil remarks, "Just like the Marine Corps and the Army ... always working together." With leaders like Phil in place, Joe can be confident that the bakery products are up to the company's high standards.

Why do your employees aspire to advance to management ... to "get off the phones" or to really support their team members?

Climate of Success

Our final dimension of employee satisfaction captures the more structural and organizational aspects that contribute to a positive and productive workplace. Policies, tools and procedures fall under this category. Some contact center environments are criticized as overly controlled or scripted and "dead end" — often rightfully so. Innovative and driven people have a hard time dealing with some of these situations, but tapping the talents of these same people is what allows a company to grow. In the contact center industry, you're either growing or dying; there is no in between. As the western humorist and philosopher Will Rogers said, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."

Joe shadows one of the store managers and is confronted with ineffective facilities-support policies. A policy of rules helps the Store Support Center run efficiently but fail to address some of the store's "customer facing" priorities. Lights have burned out in the store's back room, creating a safety issue, and in the store area, creating a customer-service disadvantage. The manager assigns Joe the task of calling a maintenance request in to the Store

Support Center. According to the Center's repair guidelines, the light issues would have to wait another month until the next scheduled, routine visit. Miffed and facing the risk of blowing his cover, Joe intervenes by stepping out to place a phone call directly to the responsible executive.

Who is supported by your company's policies and procedures – the front line or the support departments?

Joe takes a shot at the overnight shift at one of his stores. "These are the folks that are really the anchor for 7-Eleven and allow us to be a 24/7 business," he comments. "It is important for me to figure out how we keep these folks motivated." Joe shadows Waqas, who chose the night shift because it allows him to go to college. He explains that he has never seen his job at 7-Eleven as a position with a real future. Joe was disappointed: "The thing that just absolutely hurt was the fact that (after four years) he doesn't believe he has an opportunity with 7-Eleven. ... Great people make great companies, and we can't let them think their job is a dead end ... You can't win the battle without great soldiers," he says.

Do your good employees believe they have a fair chance at promotion or advancement?

At the end of week, Joe was truly impressed by what he found. Admittedly, he set out to discover some "tips and tricks" that they might replicate across the entire business.

What he found instead was how much his people made the difference. *“Every single employee I met was amazing. What we need to do is better support them.”*

**How closely do your employees tie their personal success to the success of your company?
How committed are you to their success?**

It's a Wrap

We have taken a journey along with one of the “Undercover Boss” executives to find out what was really going on in the organization. As fun and enlightening as it might be, most of us will not be starring in “Undercover Boss” anytime soon. Yet we all need to understand for ourselves what our employees are thinking. A more viable plan is using employee satisfaction surveys.

A well-designed, professionally conducted survey provides important insights into:

- How engaged your employees are in the business
- How closely they identify with your company
- What contributes toward—and detracts from—their success
- How well your leadership and management team support the front-line people who serve your customers.

Once you know exactly how your employees feel about their work, their roles and their values, you can address your company's people component. As a result, you'll gain control over your company's environment, reputation and bottom line. And by using customer satisfaction surveys, you'll do it without baring your company's ups and downs before a TV audience.



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