

CONTACT CENTER OF THE FUTURE: EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT KEY TO CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

IBEW News Posted November 9, 2007

Pacific Gas & Electric is looking to its employees for help in transforming company call centers into high functioning "Contact Centers of the Future."

The joint effort by company and union to rethink this crucial front-line work reflects renewed company interest in transforming the rhetoric of customer satisfaction into the reality of satisfied customers.

In November the group was putting the finishing touches on recommendations to be reviewed in December by company and union leadership. Ideas have ranged from improving efficiency, to targeted consolidation, to resolving customer inquiries on a "first call" basis through enhanced training for customer service representatives.

PG&E President and CEO Bill Morrow, attending a preliminary roll-out of the committee's findings in early October, praised the group "for bringing the people who actually do the work to the table" to deal with the issue.

The issue is satisfied customers. While PG&E has seen some recent improvement in ratings that compare its performance to other utilities, the company still falls short of its very ambitious goals.

PG&E's call centers are a strategic concern for the company. For many members of the public, their first contact with the utility is the customer service representative. It's a crucial moment, when lasting impressions are made.

In the utility industry today, making a good impression involves a lot more than just being polite or referring the customer to another employee who might know the answer. The most successful customer contact is one that resolves the customer's issue right on the spot.

You can call it "one stop shopping" or "first call satisfaction," but no matter what slogan you use, in the end you're talking about the flesh and blood people who take the calls. They can resolve customer problems only to the extent that they are given the training to do so.

Richard Vasquez, a Customer Service Rep in San Jose and 5-year member of IBEW, told Morrow that employees have seen many new ideas and slogans through the years. "Too often it's the flavor of the month." The important thing, Vasquez said, is "following through with what is being said."

"We would like to see the employees get the tools they need to make the customers happy," Assistant Business Manager Dorothy Fortier added.

Morrow acknowledged that the role of customer service rep has been viewed in our society as an "entry point," where no formal education is required and employees are sometimes accorded little respect. Morrow recalled one phone center he visited where employees "had to put out a frog (toy) to indicate they needed a bathroom break."

He contrasted that view of customer service reps with the view held in Japan. "In Japan," Morrow said, "supervisors put CSRs almost on a pedestal" because they are the link to the customer.

"No Boundaries"

PG&E has made it clear through the work of this joint committee that it wants real participation from its customer service reps in shaping the Contact Center of the Future.

"We've given this team no boundaries and they've taken advantage of it in several positive ways," said Phil Balistrieri, Contact Center Director.

Members of the committee "came together as strangers," noted Local 1245 Business Representative Arlene Edwards, but were able to work together to address this issue:

"How do you find an operating model where employees want to come to work, and how do you provide them the tools to take care of the customer?"

To gain some perspective, members of the joint committee visited several call centers operated by other companies in California and Nevada. They looked at everything from employee training opportunities, to facility layout, to expanding the use of reader boards for safety, training, rewards and recognition—not just call statistics.

Culture of Service

Ideally, these things add up to a “culture of service,” and the committee spent a fair amount of time trying to describe what such a culture looks like, based on practices they observed at some of the facilities they visited.

“It’s being proud of who you are, looking at the business as a whole but also at the employees who do the work,” said Vasquez.

At the more successful centers, employees “really believed in the message that was being communicated—it wasn’t just words on the wall,” said Cecelia de la Torre, a customer service rep in Stockton and IBEW Local 1245 Treasurer.

Local 1245 Business Rep. Debbie Mazzanti noted that corporate terminology sometimes works at cross purposes with employee empowerment.

“It’s when you have to get employees to “buy in” to something that you have a problem,” she said, because it implies that you’re trying to sell somebody something that’s already been decided rather than trying to develop a model together that everyone can believe in.

The committee is schedule to meet a final time in San Ramon on Nov. 8, ending “Phase 1” of the project. Its recommendations will go to a Steering Committee that includes Business Manager Tom Dalzell on Dec. 17.

Edwards believes the committee will be able to identify “quick wins” that can be implemented through policy changes, such as emphasizing the resolution of problems on the first call rather than creating arbitrary time limits for completing a call whether the customer’s problem is solved or not.

Other changes could involve the consolidation of facilities, which would raise significant budget issues for company management.

But even if the company does not incorporate all of the joint committee’s ideas into its final plan of action, Edwards believes the exercise has been a valuable one.

“They solicited input, they’re trying to actually listen to what the bargaining unit members are saying. And I think they do want to act on most of those things, but the budget could change a lot of it or put it on hold,” she said.

In any case, change is in the air for union members at PG&E’s contact centers. In phase two of the project, teams of committee members will visit PG&E’s own call facilities to engage in dialog with employees and discuss policy changes on the horizon.

“We’ll be looking for indications the committee is heading in the right direction, or if there are things that need to be looked at that this committee hasn’t seen,” Edwards said.