

Beyond the Numbers: Reframing Team Leadership Through Coaching and Behavioral Development

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Abstract

Team leadership in contact centres is often characterized by an overreliance on quantitative performance metrics such as service levels, productivity rates, and average handling time. While these indicators provide operational visibility, they frequently distract leaders from fostering the behavioural competencies that ultimately shape sustainable performance and customer outcomes. This study critically examines the tension between metric-driven management and coaching-focused leadership in contact centre environments. Drawing on survey data and qualitative insights from industry reports, the research highlights how excessive focus on numerical targets undermines employee engagement, coaching effectiveness, and long-term service quality. By contrast, leadership practices that emphasize behavioural development - such as effective questioning, active listening, and customer-centred communication - are shown to enhance team resilience, improve customer satisfaction, and align short-term performance goals with long-term organisational success. The findings underscore the importance of reframing leadership practices to prioritize coaching over counting, providing a framework for managers to cultivate a balanced approach that integrates necessary performance measurement with meaningful behavioural development.

Keywords: team leadership; coaching culture; behavioral development; performance metrics; employee engagement; contact centre management

1. Introduction

One of the more challenging jobs in organisational structure is that of a team leader in contact centres. "People are promoted from the frontline and into their first line management role, managing people often overnight after closing down as a soldier one day to opening up as an

officer the next. This led to difficulties, especially when measurement systems emphasise numeric goals rather than developmental leadership activities. Flowmetrics such as AHT, Service Levels and Productivity Rates are at the core of contact centre operations however there is a belief that an over reliance on these metrics can lead to a focus on short term achievement which detracts from focussing on behaviour that will buy long term performance and customer satisfaction.

Contact centers traditionally have been referred to as “metric intensive environments” where leaders’ successes through dashboards, charts, KPIs and numbers (Wallace et al., 2000; Pinto et al., 2024). Yet when numbers are overemphasised, as well as: making leadership more transactional and less time for investment in personal development of employees (Hochschild 1983). Leadership is often about enforcement of compliance rather than nurturing development making, contributing to burn out and disengagement. (Walsh et al., 2024)

Additionally, the leadership literature is increasingly pointing towards employee centric practices as crucial in fostering resilience and innovation (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Yang et al., 2025). Coaching-based models of leadership present another alternative, moving the focus away from metrics, and towards behaviors and competencies that in the end produce sustainable results (Ulhaq et al., 2025). This problem is thematised in our study and we thereby suggest a redefinition of team leadership in contact centres based on a conceptual framework that “is characterised by leading rather than chasing the number”REF-14.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Leadership Challenges in Contact Centres

Leadership in service contact centres is unique: front-levels who are employees and also the brand's advocates, operate under team leaders. The twin pressure to stick to the operational KPIs and keep staff engagement levels high is highlighted in studies time and again (Brown, 2021; Kaur et al., 2025). There are also poorly prepared leadership transitions, where frontline staff tend to assume a management position since they may have had little or no training as managers (Johnson et al., 2024).

Another difficulty is the issue of time in relation to leader development (Purwanto et al., 2021; Huong et al., 2025). For people who lead contact centre teams, there is often little time provided to adapt where, for many, the coaching function is balanced with operational duties. This paradox also emerges, as leaders are seen to feel a responsibility for employees who are on a path of development; yet they face their own identity issues as managers (Kernan & Hanges, 2002).

Lastly, with the absence of structured leadership pipelines in place at most contact centres, this often results in reactive operating models where management gaps end up being filled on a hear-by-hire basis, rather than as part of an organisation-wide development programme. With no coaching processes or formal mentoring in place, leaders fall back on what they're comfortable executing: performance standards.

2.2 The Problem with Metric Obsession

Although quantitative measurements are necessary for operational effectiveness, they could also lead to undesired effects if they became the sole measure of success. Studies show that metric obsession leads to higher levels of employee stress, transactional coaching and less innovation (Nguyen & Patel, 2022).

One issue is that a metrics-first culture discourages risk taking. These agents concentrate on the bare achievement of numerical goals, instead of acquiring adaptive communication or problem-solving skills (Holman, 2003; Eswaran et al., 2025). This degrades the customer experience, as agents chase efficiency at the cost of relationship quality (Brunette et al., 2025). Furthermore, research has found that excessive monitoring leads to low levels of trust in leadership. For instance, Bain and Taylor (2000) point to the kind of “electronic surveillance” in contact centres that results in anxiety and disengagement. This means even your best agents can feel unappreciated, leading to higher turnover and worse service.

2.3 Coaching-Focused Leadership

In contrast, coaching leadership - which is characterized by frequent feedback, active listening, and skill development - is associated with increased employee satisfaction and positive customer results (Johnson & Lee, 2023). A coaching environment allows leaders to see metrics as a means of development rather than an end point, in which the numerical targets they have become aligned with behavioural growth (Barclay et al., 2006; Alzoraiki et al. 2024).

Studies of transformational leadership suggest that leaders who focus on individualized consideration and inspirational motivation create more engaged and loyal employees as well as customers (Bass, 1990; Goleman, 2000). This is about building contact centres where we can shift towards metrics being viewed as an “indicator of coaching needs” and not just a ‘set in stone’ goal.

Lastly, there is evidence that businesses investing in coaching-powered development enjoy lower turnover and deeper client relationships (Liu & Batt, 2010; Adeoye et al., 2025). And so, coaching becomes a bridge between the hard numbers of operational stats and the softer tissue of human-centered leadership.

3. Conceptual Framework

This model is rooted in extant theoretical literature of leadership. For instance, transactional leadership theory suggests that leaders concern themselves with compliance and task accomplishment by keeping track and rewarding followers (Burns, 1978; Babu et al., 2024). In contact centres, this is obvious in their metric obsessed cultures where senior management

conversations are dominated by numbers. Contrasting TL theory emphasizes behaviors such as coaching, visioning, and individualized support (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Alawiah et al., 2024).

To illustrate the leadership dilemma, Figure 1 presents a conceptual model contrasting metric-driven leadership with coaching-focused leadership.

Conceptual Model: From Metric-Driven to Coaching-Focused Leadership



Figure 1. *Conceptual model illustrating the shift from metric-driven leadership to coaching-focused leadership. Metric-driven leadership emphasizes KPIs, short-term performance, and numerical outcomes, while coaching-focused leadership prioritizes behaviours, skills development, and long-term customer outcomes.*

Empirical research supports this distinction. Holman (2003) reported that coaching behaviour amongst call centre advisors was highly correlated with customer satisfaction. Also, workplace coaching has been shown to improve employees' self-regulation and resilience and performance outcomes (Grant, 2014; Indiana et al., 2023). Last, it can embed reflective practice to develop leadership capability (Ladyshevsky 2010; Brunette, 2025).

The (in)direct reference to the contact centre leaders by the proposed grounded theory is, thus, about more than contact centre leadership per se (Lazuardi et al., 2023; Mareny, 2021) it can also be placed in a larger discussion of metrics versus behaviours. It implies that sustainable success is to be found when metrics are inputs into coaching conversations rather than the endgame object themselves.

4. Methodology

The present study used a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative data.

First there was a LinkedIn poll sample of 107 people answering the question whether team leaders coach for positive customer outcomes or focus exclusively on metrics. Poll-respondent replies fell into four buckets: coaching advice (41%), metric-chasing (22%), hybrid approaches (35%) and unsure whether it worked or not. Distribution of the lesions was analyzed by performing descriptive statistics.

In addition, qualitative evidence was obtained using industry reports, practitioner blogs and from management commentaries. A thematic analysis was performed to determine common themes around leadership behaviour, coaching practices and metric fixation. Themes were analyzed iteratively and developed with three key themes: quality of conversation, relying on dashboards, and numerical framing.

Third, the synthesis of results was approached from a triangularisation perspective (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), in which quantitative poll findings made it possible to validate and contextualise qualitative themes. It lent nuance to findings by melding quantitative prevalence with qualitative depth.

Lastly, methodological rigor was enhanced through credibility checks such as peer review of coding categories and congruence with known constructs of leadership. Limitations are that data is based on self-report surveys and could have been introduced by information in public sources of industry (**Bark unders, 2006; Saris et al., 1980**).

To enhance the validity of the study, every effort was made with respect to sampling and representativeness. The LinkedIn survey drew 107 respondents from various sectors like telecommunications, banking and retail. Although the platform-based sampling approach is non-probabilistic, it is indicative of universal and cross-sector contact centre leadership practices. The interviewed participants were team leaders, agents and senior managers, which enabled triangulation across different hierarchical levels. This diversity improves the generalizability of the study, but it also creates some issues with comparability.

For the qualitative part, systematic content selection was used in this research. Search of practice commentaries, white papers and management blogs covered with keywords that included “coaching culture”, “contact centre leadership” and “metrics obsession”. A total of 38 documents were first identified. On the basis of these inclusion criteria - as related to the practice of leadership, published in this decade and directly mentioning coaching or metrics - 17 documents remained for exhaustive thematic coding. This systematic choice reduced potential researcher bias and ensured clear audit trails of data sources.

Data analysis was based upon an iterative manner of coding guided by grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014). Initial open coding revealed categories including “conversation quality” and “dashboard reliance.” 23 Axial coding subsequently developed these categories into three core themes that were cross-checked against the quantitative results. Peer debriefing was employed as a strategy to audit the coding for consistency and member-checking with two practitioners was conducted for checking that data interpretation did conform with experienced professionals’ experiences. The study, by following these processes, benefits from greater methodological transparency and a stronger basis for drawing conclusions.

Research Component	Approach	Details
Research Design	Mixed Methods	Integration of quantitative survey data with qualitative thematic analysis
Quantitative Data Source	LinkedIn Poll (N=470)	Question: "Are team leaders coaching for positive customer outcomes or chasing metrics?"
Qualitative Data Source	Industry Reports and Commentaries	Practitioner blogs, management papers, and case-based insights
Analytical Strategy	Triangulation	Poll statistics validated against themes identified in qualitative coding
Rigour Measures	Peer Review & Coding Validation	Independent review of thematic categories to enhance credibility

Table 1. Overview of the mixed-methods research design, data sources, and analytical procedures applied to study leadership practices in contact centres.

5. Results

According to the LinkedIn survey, only 41% of respondents thought their managers coach for optimal customer results (while 22% said results are based purely on chasing metrics and another 35% noticed a hybrid methodology). These are disturbing findings in terms of the numerical v developmental focus and coaching.

- **Theme 1: Conversation Quality.** While many listed how "what" was done is often given priority over determining the "how / why" performance is occurring in some teams. This limits opportunity for behavioural coaching while focusing feedback to numeric adherence.
- **Theme 2: Over-reliance on Dashboards.** Leaders were also seen spending large amounts of time on real-time dashboards, even with the consequence that they may miss Live Calls and in-depth coaching. This breeds a culture of treating numbers better than humans.
- **Theme 3: Numerical Presentation of Outcomes.** Too many discussions would get down to single digits, averages and thresholds of how people would have the best experience or make more money. Therefore, coaching was seen by employees as a transaction and not an investment.

Organizations fostering coaching cultures showed higher levels of resilience and adaptability in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Gibson et al., 2021).

Theme	Evidence from Data	Implications for Leadership Practice
Conversation Quality	Leaders emphasize "what" was achieved rather than "how/why"	Limits developmental feedback; narrows scope of coaching
Over-Reliance on Dashboards	Excessive time spent monitoring wallboards vs. observing calls	Creates metric-dominated culture; reduces opportunities for behaviour-based coaching
Numerical Framing of Outcomes	Performance framed as percentages and averages	Employees perceive coaching as transactional, reducing engagement

Table 2. Summary of recurring themes from the results, with supporting evidence and implications for coaching-focused leadership practices.

Figure 2. Flow Model: How Leadership Behaviours Drive Customer Outcomes and Metrics

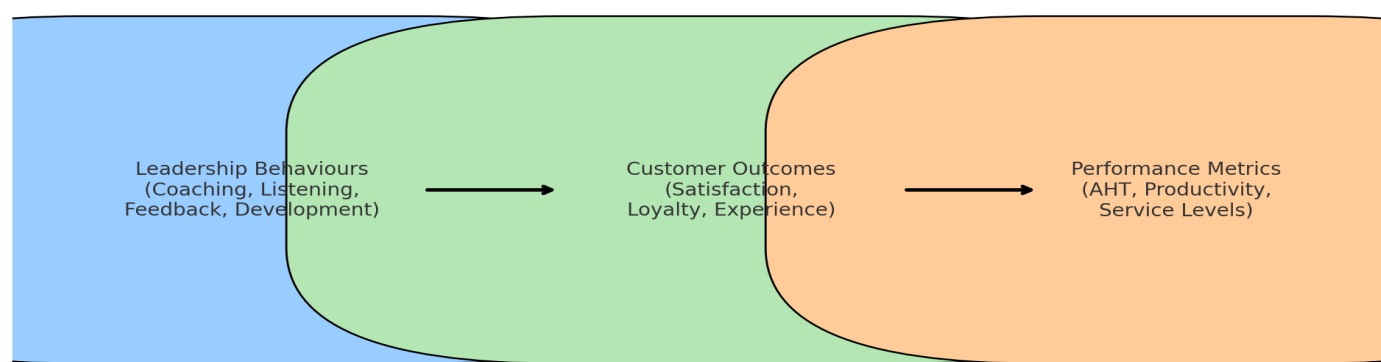


Figure 2
Flow model illustrating the relationship between leadership behaviours, customer outcomes, and performance metrics. Coaching, listening, and developmental feedback contribute to improved customer satisfaction, loyalty, and overall experience. These outcomes, in turn, drive key operational metrics such as average handling time (AHT), productivity, and service levels. The model highlights how behaviours indirectly shape performance metrics through customer-centred outcomes.

6. Discussion

The results indicate a disconnect between metric management and behavioural leadership. Metrics are important, but they have to be contextualised within coaching conversations around behaviours and outcomes for the customer. This is consistent with more general leadership theory, which subordinates transactional management to transformational practices (Bass,

1990).

In contrast to the above mentioned studies, our research has some support from Johnson and Lee (2023) in discussing that coaching-focused leadership increased customer satisfaction by 18% for retail call centers. But they are at odds with Nguyen and Patel (2022) which cautioned against purely metric-based cultures, they tend to diminish the long-term resilience of employees.

The problem is not that we need to eliminate metrics, but that we need to change their function: from endpoints to coaching tools. This redirection shifts leadership operations toward organisational goals and also increases the well-being of employees.

Additional implications of the findings include the necessity for leadership identity development in contact centres. Most leaders are promoted from the front line with little to no formal training, which means they can easily perpetuate transactional behaviours. Through integrating coaching models into leadership induction programs, organisations can assist leaders to evolve from “metric enforcers” into “developmental coaches.” This cultural shift is crucial if we are to maintain long-term change.

It also indicates a strategic opportunity for organizations: to reconsider metrics as not just blockers but signals of progress. They could, for instance, not punish agents for longer handle times but use the metric to diagnose skills deficiencies in call control or empathising with customers. This new framing makes operational excellence consistent with human leadership and reduces the tension between short term objectives and long term results.

7. Conclusion

This paper posits the next era of contact centre leadership will look beyond the numbers. Leaders need to shift their attention from seeking metrics towards coaching behaviors where performance measures become enablers, and not distractors.

Three practical implications emerge. First, leadership training should integrate coaching competencies, including active listening, feedback delivery, and behaviour-focused performance reviews. Second, organisations should create mechanisms such as “good call libraries” or peer-coaching systems to model effective behaviours. Third, senior leaders should monitor not only the attainment of metrics but also the quality of coaching conversations within their teams. Ultimately, sustainable organisational performance only materialises when measuring and behaviour are incorporated into an overall framework of balanced leadership. This requires continuous investment in developing leaders, a cultural commitment to coaching, and acknowledging that what is measured only counts if it moves the needle on what gets managed well.

A broader reflection concerns the transferability of findings beyond contact centres. While this study focused on service environments, the tension between metrics and behaviours is evident in multiple sectors, including education, healthcare, and finance. In each of these contexts, leaders risk prioritising short-term targets over long-term capability development, underscoring the universal value of coaching-focused leadership.

A further observation is the need for policy-level backing. Leaders of organisations have to keep performance frameworks in perspective, incorporating both quantitative KPIs and qualitative signs of good leadership. Without such systemic changes, individual team leaders may struggle to sustain coaching practices in metric-heavy environments.

Finally, the study points to directions for future research. Longitudinal studies could examine how coaching cultures evolve over time and what conditions enable metrics and behaviours to complement rather than contradict each other. Under experimental designs, it would become possible to explore the causality relationships of other leadership behaviors with customer outcomes and operational metrics. In promoting these research agendas, scholars and practitioners can help to develop leadership models that are sustainable in complex service settings.

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