

Case study: Frontline Telephone Answering Services (TAS)

Based in Hampshire, Frontline TAS was founded in the mid-1990s by Tricia Jones. It provides a 24-hour answering service, 365 days a year. Frontline's success depends on maintaining consistently high standards in the work of its highly trained operators. Having initially used manual record systems, the Company now employs state of the art call handling software.

In 2004, Frontline moved to new offices in a high quality new development. Very soon, to Tricia Jones's surprise, staff morale dropped, despite the move to 'ideal' surroundings from relatively cramped conditions. People were grieving for the familiarity of the old office, and the move highlighted cracks in the consistency of service delivery which had not been apparent when people were physically closer both to each-other and to their boss.

It is important to Jones that staff not only deliver a good service, but that they are happy to work at Frontline. She says "to give a good customer service, you've really got to think beyond yourself, to the customer, and I think that everyone was too inwardly focused, too insecure about where they sat themselves, and about what was going on. That really stopped them from giving good service." She set out to understand and reverse the downturn and asked me, her coach, to help her do it.

Focus on Customer Service

Initially I worked with Frontline's senior management team as they devised an approach to taking their company forward, based on identifying a vision, and identifying the behaviours they wanted to see in Frontline. They began by answering such questions as:

- What is your vision for Frontline?
- How do you want your customers to see you?
- How do you make sure you communicate this?
- What is important to you about the way you treat people in Frontline?
- What is good about your communication with your customers? With your staff?
- What needs to improve?

The vision identified by Frontline's directors was "to give the best customer service in our sector in the UK". It was stretching and aspirational, but would enable them to benchmark their performance on a range of measures against others in the industry.

After the initial workshop, I facilitated a meeting at which the top team invited staff from across Frontline to comment and help develop their thinking. The meeting was frank, open and animated, and resulted in a description the values and behaviours of a Frontline leader, putting respect for customers and colleagues at its heart.

Once staff were involved, the energy in the Company began to shift. Tricia Jones says of this period, "...it made everybody feel that something was being done. They were able to air their views of what they felt was going on, and (together) we developed a plan of action to correct it. And that was brilliant. The ownership from the people was vital, I think."

Practical steps to delivering Frontline's vision

This done, we involved some staff in creating a customer care statement, from which to identify the standard of customer service expected and to enable them to understand and deliver this on a personal and committed level.

Then we asked the team what needed to happen to make the customer care statement a reality. An improvement in clarity was top of the list for many employees. Jones remembers "... a lot of things were in my head. I felt I had all the knowledge. As long as I was there, saying "do this, that and the other", it worked. I wanted to rise above it. I wanted it to work without me there. I had



Email: ann@annlewiscoaching.com
Tel: 01273 553026
Mobile: 07885 291410
Website: <http://www.annlewiscoaching.com>

quite a bit of input at that time – I was doing accounts, training, all sorts of things, and eventually we trained other people to do those things”.

Over several months, we laid the foundations for future development. The principle underlying Frontline's review of its business and HR processes was simplicity. No processes were created for their own sake, and each one was kept as streamlined as possible. It was also really important that Jones and her team could progress independently of outside help once the foundations were in place, and the organisation has developed organically as it has matured.

Keeping up the momentum

Since the initial work was done, Frontline has continued to refine how it operates and to incorporate its new ways of working into subsequent developments.

Maintaining effective communication continues to be a challenge, and Jones is very keen to work with people's priorities and commitments. Jones and her team have developed solutions in line with the company's ethos, which are as practical as possible for staff. In a sector notorious for high staff turnover, Frontline has kept most of its people, and some are returning after leaving to try other ventures.

Reflecting on the journey her company has taken, Jones says “One of the biggest things that I've learned is that you can sit there and ponder a situation that comes up, and wonder what's gone on, but it's ever so simple – you just go and ask somebody, ‘what do you think?’ And you get the answer. But that seems to be the hardest thing to do for a lot of businesses.”

Three years on, Frontline has more than doubled its turnover and is poised for significant further growth. Tricia Jones believes that putting leadership and customers at the heart of the service has made a significant contribution to its success. She is clear that what made the difference is the engagement of people. “I think the staff know that we listen to what they say and do. It's worth them speaking out now, because we take notice of them” she says. “If we're open and honest with them, then we get the same back, and so it has proved to be, time and time again.”

Ann Lewis

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Email: ann@annlewiscoaching.com

Tel: 01273 553026

Mobile: 07885 291410

Website: <http://www.annlewiscoaching.com>