5. Case Studies: Implementation of Performance Improvement Strategies

Case Study #1: Best Practices for Call Center Operations, Consumer-Focused Staff, and Sharing Effective Solutions—The Case of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Vermont

Overview of Case Study #1

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Vermont (BCBSVT), the state’s largest health insurer, is committed to providing affordable, high-quality coverage to Vermonters, with a focus on outstanding member experience and responsible cost management. The company uses a variety of strategies to create high-quality member experiences, including:

- Always putting member experience first.
- Rigorous selection and training process for call center personnel.
- Frequent and comprehensive assessments of staff performance.
- Comprehensive and targeted coaching for customer service representatives.
- Reward systems aligned with measurable goals.
- Information management.
- Collaborating with the state Marketplace.

These strategies have resulted in high-quality consumer experiences for BCBSVT members. For example, the call center has reduced call-handling time, the number of calls necessary to resolve an issue, and calls per 1,000 members while increasing member satisfaction. In addition, BCBSVT has received repeated national recognition as a high-quality call center and numerous awards for staff performance.

Moving forward, BCBSVT intends to continue putting members first by advocating for them throughout their health care experience via greater involvement with key stakeholders, including community health teams, provider offices, hospitals, accountable care organizations, social service organizations, and the state Health Insurance Marketplace.

About the Organization

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Vermont is an independent, nonprofit, locally governed health insurance company serving Vermont residents. The state’s largest health plan, BCBSVT has 400 employees and provides health coverage to more than 240,000 members statewide. As part of the national Blue Cross and Blue Shield system, BCBSVT has arrangements that allow for its members to receive coverage anywhere in the United States and in most countries.

Like the Marketplaces, a core component of BCBSVT’s daily operations involves meeting the needs of consumers who need help managing their health insurance plans. The company has excelled at serving consumers, as evidenced by the following accolades:

- Its call center was recognized as a World Class Call Center twice in the last three years: 2012 and 2014.
- It received the number one ranking among all Blue Cross and Blue Shield plans for Member Touchpoint measures in 2014 and 2013.
- It ranks in the top 25 percent of the 400 call centers internationally as ranked by the Survey Quality Measurement (SQM) Group.
• In 2012, one of the BCBSVT customer service representatives (CSRs) won CSR of the Year, beating over 200 CSR nominees.
• In 2014, the Director of Customer Service received the SQM First Call Resolution Champion Award.

Quality Improvement Strategies
Many of BCBSVT quality improvement strategies are relevant to strategies that Marketplaces may want to implement, including optimizing call center operations, developing consumer-focused staff, and sharing effective solutions. These strategies, which were initiated over a decade ago and have been accelerated over the last 5 years by the current CEO, include:

• Always putting member experience first.
• Rigorous selection and training process for call center personnel.
• Frequent and comprehensive assessments of staff performance.
• Comprehensive and targeted coaching for customer service representatives.
• Generous reward systems.
• Information management.
• Collaborating with the state Marketplace.

1. Putting member experience first
Creating a member-centered organizational culture was an important early step in initiating, executing, and supporting BCBSVT’s quality improvement strategies. Shortly after the current CEO was appointed, he revised the mission statement to reflect the organization’s member-focused culture and objectives (see exhibit 5.1.1). Staff helped revise the mission statement by participating in focus groups hosted by senior leaders. Revision of the mission statement was followed by intensive training to help employees understand how to put customers first and spread the word that the members-first focus was a core organizational value and priority.

• The HR department tests a candidate’s writing, reading comprehension, and basic math skills. These tests are designed to assess whether a candidate has the critical thinking, reasoning, and technical skills to perform the CSR role effectively. Only candidates who pass the tests are advanced to the call center leadership staff for interviews.
• **New hires receive 8 weeks of formal training.** During this training, BCBSVT communicates the organization’s commitment to member satisfaction and instructs new hires on the organization’s systems, policies, and procedures. In addition, BCBSVT partners with a vendor, Ulysses Learning, and utilizes Ulysses’ strategies to train new employees on how to effectively and efficiently resolve member issues while promoting high member satisfaction. Employees are tested on comprehension of the information provided during the new hire training throughout the training and after completion.

3. **Frequent and comprehensive assessments of staff performance**

BCBSVT assesses staff performance frequently and in multiple ways both during and after training. A quality assurance analyst samples five calls per representative per month and assesses the CSR’s performance on such factors as:

- Call management (e.g., HIPAA privacy practices, identity verification process).
- Communication skills (e.g., the extent to which the CSR uses Ulysses techniques related to professional pace, tone, language, and call control).
- Knowledge application (e.g., the extent to which the information provided was complete and accurate).
- System interactions (e.g., the extent to which the CSR executed the member’s request and documented the call accurately).

In addition, supervisors monitor efficiency statistics for CSRs that are produced by the call center’s information management system. Included in these statistics are talk time, hold time, the time it takes to document the call, and time spent unavailable to assist members. These statistics are monitored but not used in the rewards system. The supervisors provide feedback to any staff who are not performing as well as their peers.

Customers also provide feedback on staff performance. BCBSVT partners with the SQM Group to survey member satisfaction. Three days after calling BCBSVT, customers receive a phone survey from the SQM Group asking if their issue was resolved and how satisfied they were with BCBSVT and the CSR. Survey results are reported monthly by CSR. SQM samples six calls per CSR per month.

Data gathered through performance assessments are used to determine whether an employee demonstrates the competencies necessary to be promoted and to target staff coaching.

4. **Comprehensive and targeted coaching for customer service representatives**

Team leads and supervisors coach CSRs in a variety of ways:

- The coaching focuses on skill development, performance feedback, and burnout prevention.
- Team leads provide on-floor assistance to CSRs while calls are in progress.
- Each day, team leads review two calls for each CSR and provide just-in-time feedback to CSRs based on these reviews to reinforce the Ulysses strategies learned during training.

“What we’ve found is that when we recognize great behavior and provide positive reinforcement around that great behavior, we get outstanding results. And letting the frontline people that are talking to those customers know that they are supported and invested in their success.”

– Director of Customer Service
Team leads also have one-on-one meetings with CSRs weekly, biweekly, or monthly, depending on individual needs. During these meetings, team leads provide coaching based on information gathered through performance reviews.

5. Generous reward systems

BCBSVT has a series of performance-based reward programs for customer service staff:

- CSRs are eligible to receive biannual bonuses of up to 1 week’s pay for meeting customer satisfaction and quality performance standards.
- Managers can give “spot awards” to recognize CSRs for a job well done. These awards include small financial rewards, such as a gift certificate to the movies or a local restaurant. Staff can also recognize peers through the “cheers for peers” program.
- Supervisors share customer compliments of CSRs with the entire team via email.

BCBSVT also prides itself on paying employees a living wage and offering a robust benefits package. It offers a broad wellness program that rewards employees with $500 for taking a health risk assessment, receiving regular annual medical and dental preventive care, and participating in one of many health and wellness education and fitness classes sponsored by the company.

6. Information management

BCBSVT makes information that can help resolve members’ issues easily accessible and up to date. Desk procedures and premium quote guides are available online and are always available to call center staff, including during calls. Examples of the kind of information this system contains include:

- Clarifications about benefits and billing.
- Organizational policies and procedures.
- Caller verification and HIPAA privacy practices.
- Proper documentation of calls, emails or other contacts with the call center.
- How to handle different kinds of escalated issues.

Various staff members are responsible for reviewing and updating the information in the system as appropriate. These updates are communicated to the customer service team via departmental emails or during weekly staff meetings.

7. Collaborating with the state Marketplace

The call center created an entire department dedicated to helping customers with Marketplace enrollment, with “Marketplace consultants” designated to assist customers. The plan also has more staff available during open enrollment in anticipation of high call volume. The customer service and dedicated departments collaborate and regularly communicate with the Marketplace about common issues and possible systemic solutions; they also make sure there is consistent customer messaging and information provision across the organization. In addition, when members contact the call center but need to consult with the Marketplace to resolve their issue, CSRs offer to call the Marketplace for members and stay on the line as they work with Marketplace staff to resolve the issue.
Quality Improvements Achieved

Together, these strategies have helped BCBSVT improve on several key quality measures:

- BCBSVT’s focused efforts on coaching and development of CSRs has resulted in a 49 percentage point increase in the number of CSRs who earned the World Class Certification.
- The call center reduced calls per 1,000 members by 32 percent between 2009 and 2014.
- BCBSVT has made an 8 percent improvement from 2010 to 2014 in the average number of calls necessary to resolve an issue.
- First call resolution has increased by 6 percentage points and call center satisfaction increased by 12 percentage points during that same time period (see figure 5.1.1).

Improvements in First Call, Call Center Satisfaction, and CSRs with World Class Ranking (Figure 5.1.1)

Challenges Along the Way

The path to an internationally recognized call center has not been without challenges, including the following:

- **Making coaching a priority.** Call centers get busy and sometimes the desire is to prioritize the phones over coaching. To overcome this challenge, BCBSVT directs team leads to have all scheduled sessions even when the call center is busy.

- **Helping staff transition from peer to supervisor.** To fill the team-lead roles, the call center promotes high-performing CSRs. This was challenging because high performance as a CSR does not necessarily translate to strong coaching skills. BCBSVT turned to Ulysses Learning to train team leads and supervisors on effective coaching skills. Ulysses Learning is a consulting firm that helps organizations improve customer experience by improving customer service, coaching, call center sales, quality monitoring, and leadership performance. The firm provides face-to-face, virtual, and Web-based just-in-
time training and coaching, as well as self-directed, self-paced modules and peer learning opportunities through blogs and chats.

- **Managing the relationship with the Marketplace.** BCBSVT communicates frequently with the Marketplace to resolve member issues.

### Critical Success Factors

The following key factors have been critical to BCBSVT’s success:

- **Customer-focused culture.** BCBSVT has worked hard to embed a customer-focused culture throughout the organization with continued focus on the organization’s member-first mission and resources devoted to fulfilling the mission. Examples of these efforts include:
  - Annual reinforcement training for all employees on the importance of member experience.
  - Quarterly “Town Hall” meetings with the CEO.
  - Weekly department staff meetings.
  - Daily recognition when compliments come in from customers.

In addition, the emphasis of having CSRs act as advocates for members when it is necessary to contact external stakeholders, such as the Marketplace, a pharmacy, or a clinical organization, demonstrates to members that BCBSVT has their best interests at heart. Regardless of whether the CSR can resolve the issue, the customer feels supported through the process and is satisfied, as indicated by the survey that customers receive after their encounter with a CSR.

- **Using the right measures.** Having routine and specific feedback on customer satisfaction through regular surveys has been invaluable in helping the call center meet customer expectations. Some of the early measures of quality that BCBSVT used included whether the right information was given, the accuracy of the information, and the length of the call. The company has broadened quality measures to assess the number of calls it takes to resolve a question and customer satisfaction with the call center and the organization more broadly. These measures provide a more robust understanding of whether customer needs are being met. In addition, reporting these measures by CSR gives concrete information to supervisors to develop general and CSR-specific plans to improve quality.

- **Commitment to staff support and development.** Even when the call center is busy, team leads do not cancel coaching sessions because they believe that these sessions are vital to supporting CSRs in successfully performing their responsibilities and serving members well. The staff support and development programs work in tandem to retain employees with strong customer service skills who are committed to meeting customer needs and remaining positive about their jobs.

- **Managing vendors’ quality goals.** BCBSVT works with a number of vendors to administer specialized health benefits, such as pharmacy benefits. Because these organizations sometimes have different measures of success, BCBSVT articulates core values and measures of success frequently and consistently during the selection and contracting process, as well as during day-to-day management to ensure that vendors work to meet BCBSVT goals.
**Next Steps**
Moving forward, BCBSVT plans to sustain strategies to deliver high-quality customer service. New possible focus areas include a greater advocacy role on behalf of members with various stakeholder organizations that could influence member satisfaction with BCBSVT, including hospitals, accountable care organizations, and the state health insurance Marketplace. BCBSVT also is exploring ways to improve the safety and quality of the care members receive throughout the health care system.

**For More Information**
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