KPIs Around Your Neck and Underperforming Call Centre Teams: What Managers Need to Address

Call centre managers are under constant pressure to deliver results, with KPIs often feeling like a permanent fixture around their neck. While ways of working may have shifted since the pandemic, the root causes of employee underperformance remain largely unchanged.

Most performance issues can still be traced back to a handful of familiar challenges:

- People placed in roles that don't suit their strengths
- Incomplete or inconsistent training for new starters and existing employees
- Low engagement and emotional disconnect from the organisation
- Employees feeling overworked, undervalued, or invisible
- A lack of peer support, often unintentional rather than deliberate.

Engagement Doesn't Disappear Overnight

When someone is hired, engagement is rarely the problem. New employees typically start full of motivation—keen to do well, build relationships, contribute positively to serving customers, as well as the team. If disengagement appears later, it's worth asking what has changed in the environment, not blaming the individual.

There's a simple leadership truth: There are no "bad" employees—only systems and management practices that fail to support them.

The Critical Role of Early Feedback

The first weeks and months for a new employee are pivotal. This is where managers and HR teams can either set people up for success or unintentionally allow underperformance to take root. Regular, positive feedback in the early stages:

- Builds confidence
- Reinforces the behaviours and skills you want to see more of
- Creates psychological safety, making it easier to address issues early
- Helps employees feel seen, valued, and appreciated for their contribution
- Demonstrates that an employee's work matters, strengthening their sense of value within the organisation.

When underperformance is tackled quickly and constructively, it prevents unhelpful habits from becoming ingrained—and spreading to others.

As confidence grows, feedback may be needed less frequently, but it should never disappear altogether. Every employee, regardless of tenure, wants to feel noticed and valued. A simple "thank you" or recognition of effort can significantly increase sense of belonging and commitment.

Avoiding the Downward Spiral

Managers who feel uncomfortable in situations can lead to potential conflict avoidance, feeling untrained, or unsupported often results in avoiding difficult conversations around performance. Perhaps understandable, avoidance fuels a downward spiral allowing:

- Issues to go unaddressed
- Engagement to drop
- Service quality and productivity to suffer
- Teamwork disintegrates as more experienced employees compensate for less experienced employees
- Pressure on KPIs increases further.

Giving Feedback to Inspire

Positive and inspiring feedback should:

- Be specific and timely (within 24 hours)
- Reinforce desired behaviours and outcomes
- Acknowledge effort as well as results
- Thank the employee genuinely for their contribution

Constructive feedback should:

- Be delivered early and privately
- Focus on behaviour and impact, not personality
- Be a 2-way conversation to understand the “why?”, the employee’s point of view
- Encourage the needed change in behaviour through clear guidance
- Genuinely encourage and support, showing confidence in the employee to make the necessary performance improvements.

For call centre managers and HR teams, performance management isn’t about pressure—it’s about creating the right conditions for people to succeed. When feedback, support, and engagement are consistent, KPIs tend to take care of themselves.