

THE EXTRA MILE HAS RULES

How to best set them up and follow them.



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HOW TO BEST SET THEM UP AND FOLLOW THEM.

This year's Customer Service Week theme is "The Extra Mile." It's an admirable cause, and something every agent and contact center leader should want for their team.

But have we really considered what going the extra mile means in practice?

- Sometimes it looks like an agent staying on the line for 15 minutes while a caller digs up their child's Social Security number for authentication.
- Sometimes it's calling three different transportation providers to help a member get a ride to tomorrow's doctor's appointment.

Both feel like these are the right things to do.

But the extra mile can also look like an agent relaxing company protocol to help a caller, skipping an authentication step, or waiving a costly same-day shipping fee.

Some of that may sound harmless. But some of it can quietly backfire on your business.

That's the problem with celebrating "the extra mile" without defining it. When agents are expected to go above and beyond without a clear sense of what's okay and what isn't, friction follows.

- Callers start expecting fees to be waived every time.

- Agents holding the line for 15 minutes stack up calls behind them, and callers waiting get frustrated and take it out on the next agent who picks up.

- In the worst cases, loose protocols open the door to bad actors: identity thieves probing for a way in, or phishing attempts disguised as a routine request.



...HAVE WE REALLY CONSIDERED WHAT GOING THE EXTRA MILE MEANS IN PRACTICE?

So how do we go the extra mile without handing a stranger the keys to your company's vault?

START WITH THE MINDSET

Mother Teresa once said, "We can't all do great things, but we can do small things with great love."

That's a good way to think about service excellence. It's rarely the big, heroic gesture that wows a customer on a single call; creating that kind of moment on every call, for every agent, is hard to sustain. It's the accumulation of small things, done consistently, and done well. Such as:

- Playing pleasant hold music.
- Using the CRM software to gather up-to-date information on the customer.
- Setting and complying with hold time limits.
- Practicing greetings and closings until the tone feels warm and genuine; the kind that makes a customer comfortable calling back if they need to.

None of these actions look like "the extra mile" on their own. But together they shape whether an agent has the time, tools, and support to deliver something great, or whether they're set up to struggle before they even log in for their shift.

BUILD IT IN, DON'T LEAVE IT TO CHANCE

Above-average service isn't an accident, and it isn't just a matter of hiring people with the right attitude and hoping for the best. It's a deliberate design choice, built across four main areas.

1 Ensuring Products That Meet Customers' Expectations

The company's offering(s) has to hold up. When they don't, that's when the understandably disappointed and frustrated customers call in.

No amount of agent goodwill can make up for a product that fails on the basics, and when a company knows about the failure and doesn't fix it, the burden lands squarely on customer service.

ABOVE-AVERAGE SERVICE ISN'T AN ACCIDENT, AND IT ISN'T JUST A MATTER OF HIRING PEOPLE WITH THE RIGHT ATTITUDE AND HOPING FOR THE BEST.

Last December, I ordered my daughter a hoodie for Christmas; right color, right size, with her standing next to me to make sure we got it right.

We selected everything correctly, but when we reached the payment page, the site silently changed the size to whatever it had in stock.

Unfortunately, we didn't catch it in the moment. The confirmation email that landed in my inbox showed the truth: right color, wrong size. A week later, the hoodie arrived but two sizes too big, exactly as the receipt had warned, if we'd caught it sooner.

A week later, the return arrived, and I placed a new order; right size, but now a different color, since the original was gone. But by the time the second hoodie showed up, Christmas had passed.

The company knew about the check-out glitch. It was sitting in their own reviews. But they left it unfixed, which meant their customer service team spent the holiday season fielding a problem the product team could have solved with one line of code.

That's not agent goodwill failing; that's a company asking its service team to apologize for something it chose not to fix.

2 Establishing and Following Effective Processes

This is where the extra mile either becomes safe to give or turns into a liability. Here are several critical processes to consider implementing:

- Defined hold time limits.
- A *real* escalation path.
- And critically, a good recovery process for what happens when something goes wrong, such as a package being delivered to the wrong address. It turns a mistake into a moment that builds trust. It also protects the agent, who isn't left improvising alone under pressure.

Authentication belongs here too. And it's worth being specific about.

A caller stuck on hold for 15 minutes digging up a Social Security number isn't proof your protocol is thorough; **it's proof it's badly designed.** The fix isn't loosening it, and it isn't making the caller suffer through it either. Instead, it's building an authentication process that's fast *and* secure.



Here's what should have happened. If the size we wanted wasn't available in that color, the product page should have told us that upfront, before we ever paid; not swap it silently at check-out and hope we didn't notice.

After some digging, I found reviews describing the same problem, so this wasn't a one-time glitch. It was a known flaw in the site's inventory handling.

I reached out to customer service. They were polite and did what they could: sent a return label, had me drop the package at the post office, and told me I could re-order once the return was received.

This process should include:

- Multiple verification paths so a caller isn't stuck if they don't have one piece of information on hand.
- Systems that flag unusual patterns, instead of relying on an agent's gut feeling under pressure.
- Clear escalation rules so an agent never has to decide, in the moment, whether to bend the rules for a caller who sounds legitimate.

When that structure exists, an agent doesn't have to choose between protecting the company and being kind to the caller. The process has already made that choice for them.

3 **Having the Right Working Environment**

This is the environment an agent works in, down to the details customers never see. The hold music. The CRM. The high-quality background noise-canceling headset (unless they are on video chats).

Whether an agent can see a caller's full history on one screen or has to dig across five different systems while the caller waits, each of these feels small on its own, but they compound.

A clunky system doesn't just slow an agent down; it shows up in their tone, their patience, and their ability to focus on the person on the line rather than on the screen in front of them. The same issues occur when hearing noise from co-workers or from a construction crew working next door to the agent's home.

The goal is an interaction that feels seamless on both ends of the call; for the caller and for the agent making it happen.



4 **Hiring and Retaining the Best People**

Hire for attitude as much as skill; the right temperament can't be taught the way a script can. Then keep investing: ongoing coaching instead of one-time onboarding, and ensuring feedback that flows both ways and says something specific rather than vague.

Also:

- Tie motivation and rewards to providing real moments of great service, not generic perks.
- Offer pay and benefits that make an agent want to show up for their shift, not just show up to avoid a write-up.

Leadership matters. The person leading a team shapes whether the agents feel supported enough to go the extra mile or are too depleted to bother.

Here's what that looked like in practice. I noticed a handful of agents who were genuinely exceptional with callers - not scripted, just naturally good at the job - and got curious about what set them apart.

I ran a skills gap analysis, comparing what a top performer did differently from a lower performer on the same type of call.

Then I built training around it: a web-based course, listening to recorded training calls, newsletters, and short emails, each focused on a single skill at a time rather than everything at once. Every training class was paired with a mentor who actually had the skill we were trying to teach.

It worked, slowly. Agents who wanted to grow began adopting the same instincts as their mentors. Take a routine call regarding the status of an enrollment application:

- The standard version: verify the caller, give the status, done.
- The version the top performers landed on: verify, give the status, then — with the caller's permission — walk them through the self-service option to check status themselves, and give them a realistic timeline for what happens next.

Nobody asked for any of that. It just became the best way the agents handled the call.

That extra minute mattered. It meant more first call resolutions and fewer repeat calls, because callers actually knew how to find their own information next time. That's not a soft "nice-to-have"; it shows up in your call volume.

None of that happened by accident. It was a deliberate choice to study what good looked like, build training around it, and keep reinforcing it on the floor, again and again, as time went on.

None of this works without Leadership living it first. A team can have every tool and every training module in place, but culture is set from the top down; agents watch what their leaders tolerate, reward, and model far more than what's written in a handbook.

If Leadership cuts corners under pressure, agents learn that cutting corners is fine. But if Leadership stays calm, curious, and consistent, that becomes the standard the floor holds itself to.

Culture isn't a poster in the break room. It's what decides whether everything else in this section actually sticks.

LEADERSHIP MATTERS. THE PERSON LEADING A TEAM SHAPES WHETHER THE AGENTS FEEL SUPPORTED ENOUGH TO GO THE EXTRA MILE OR ARE TOO DEPLETED TO BOTHER.

When these four areas are built with intention, "the extra mile" stops being a wish everyone makes and nobody quite reaches; a bit like buying a lottery ticket and hoping. But even with all four in place, the job still asks something of the people doing it.

PROTECTING THE PEOPLE WALKING THE EXTRA MILE

Even with all of that in place, going above and beyond takes something out of a person, especially when the caller on the other end is upset, or worse, hostile. That cost adds up over time.

Sometimes there's no good answer, no matter how well-trained the agent is.

A customer whose refrigerator breaks down in the middle of a snowstorm, with their state under a declared state of emergency, isn't wrong to be desperate. Still, there may be no technician, no truck, and no way to make "immediately" happen, no matter how much the agent wants to help.

Other times the caller isn't just upset. They're cursing, berating, or reaching for a racial slur.

In both cases, agents need real de-escalation training first: the skill to stay calm, acknowledge the frustration, and steer the call back toward something productive.

But training has a ceiling. Once a caller crosses from angry into abusive, no amount of skill should be expected to absorb it.

That's where policy has to take over: like one on call disconnects that tell an agent exactly when they're allowed to end a call and backs them up for doing it.

Here's what a well-built policy does with that fridge call. Instead of leaving the agent to guess in the moment, an AI-assisted system is already listening, flags the situation as a weather-related emergency, and surfaces the right policy on the agent's screen before they even have to ask.

- A triage guide for what counts as urgent.
- A list of possible solutions to offer, such as an expedited repair slot, a temporary loaner unit, a food-spoilage allowance, and a prompt reminding the agent to acknowledge the caller's stress before jumping to logistics.

GOING THE EXTRA MILE CAN'T BE LEFT UP TO CHANCE.

The agent still can't make a truck appear faster than the roads allow. But they're not improvising anymore, and neither is the caller. That's what it looks like when a company thinks ahead: not eliminating hard moments, but making sure the agent walks into them already equipped.

Even the best policy doesn't finish the job. An agent needs somewhere to put that call down before the next one starts.

A few slow breaths, a grounding technique, something small an agent can lean on in the seconds between hanging up and the next call coming in.

But the real fix isn't a coping trick; it's built into the schedule: a five- or eight-minute break after a hard call, treated as a normal part of the day rather than something an agent has to ask for permission to take.

Some centers go further and build a specific code into their scheduling system, so an agent can take extra time to recharge after an abusive call and still get paid for it. **The point isn't to make agents tougher. It's to make sure the system never expects them to be.**

This is where recovery matters again, but now for your team, not just the customer. Hiccups are inevitable. The extra mile isn't really tested when everything goes smoothly; it's tested when something breaks.

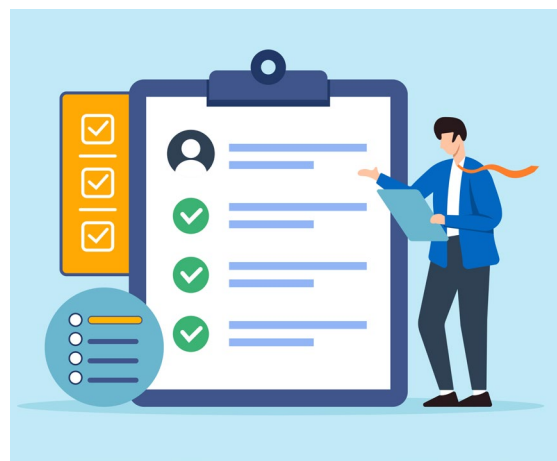
A team with clear authority and a process that doesn't assign blame emerges from that moment with the customer's trust intact, without the agent carrying it home as a personal failure. A team without that support absorbs every hiccup as stress, and that's exactly how burnout takes hold.

WHY THE RULES MATTER

The agent is the front line. They're the ones who reply to emails, pick up the phone, answer the chats, or respond to comments on social media. And they can go the extra mile with real ease when the company has given them the support to do it.

Think of it like boiling water. You can do it on the stove if that's all you have, and it'll get there eventually. Or you can use a microwave, which takes a fraction of the time: same result, different tools.

An agent without the right products, processes, working environment, and people behind them can still go the extra mile; it'll just cost them more, take longer, and wear them down faster.



THE SMALL THINGS, DONE WITH GREAT LOVE

Going the extra mile can't be left up to chance. It has to be intentional; built into the product, the process, the environment, and the people, and modeled by the leaders who set the tone for everyone else.

Even when a call goes off the path, and some will, those same four areas I discussed become the GPS that gets an agent back on track: a process to fall back on, an environment that supports them, people who trained them well, and a product worth standing behind.

Small things, done with great love, and done on purpose. That's what going the extra mile should really mean. 📍



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