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Interviewing for Compassion

BEDFORD, TX – One of the points that Andrew Pryor, Vice President of Human Resources for Beryl, made in the pre-conference workshop, “Recruit, Develop and Retain Optimal Call Center Performers” at the 21st Annual Conference of Physician Referral & Health Information Call Centers last June in Indianapolis was the importance of interviewing prospective employees for attributes that give your call center a competitive edge.

For the offsite call center company, Beryl, the most important attribute a prospective hire must have is compassion. In a follow-up interview, he explains that “our guiding principle is compassionate, personal touch. That is what we sell on.” So, appropriately the workforce must exhibit this characteristic.

“As we looked at how to screen people we concluded that we can teach our software system, we can teach people how to navigate it, but I don’t believe you can teach compassion. That is something that is innate,” he says.

Accordingly, the very first interview question he asks prospective employees, all the way from top executives to call

advisors is to define compassion. “We’re looking to see if people put parameters around it,” he says. “Our talent manager knows the power of the silent break. So you may have someone say, for example, that ‘compassion is helping others.’ If you allow silence after that, even for 15 to 20 seconds then usually the person adds something to it.”

The prospective employee might say something like- compassion is helping others one time, or helping other who try to help themselves, or if they deserve it. These are all limiting. “We don’t want parameters,” Pryor says. “We want them to be compassionate regardless of the circumstances; to be as compassionate with the 50th call of the day as the first.”

The company is really strict on this point. “One time we ran a search for an executive who responded that compassion to him was helping others, particularly if they had a lower education,” he says. “I took that to mean that he looked down on other people that didn’t have what he had.”

A number of people are eliminated from consideration after their response to this question. Indeed, a search for a CIO saw 30

percent to 40 percent weeded out after this question.

Pryor points out that at Beryl, success is 49 percent technical skill set and 51 percent corporate culture fit. As such, there are other questions that come into play after the initial compassion definition question is answered. A number of compassion-based interview questions are taken from the book, [High-Impact Interview Questions](#) by Victoria A. Hoevermeyer.

Pryor passed out a list of 13 of these questions to session attendees. Among the ones that Beryl uses regularly are:

- Tell me about a time when you needed to give feedback to an emotional person.
- Share with me a day when you were driving home from work and you said to yourself, “Today was a great day for me.” Why?
- Now share with me a day when you were driving home from work and you said to yourself, “Today was not a good day. At all.” Why?

With the latter two questions, the interviewer is trying to understand what individuals mean by a good day and a bad day as that can contribute to a picture as to who they are and where they sit on the compassion scale.

Then, once the new employee comes on, he suggests that the QA process is the place for ensuring that the compassion that was initially perceived in the individual is maintaining over time.

While the compassion edge fits right in with Beryl's culture and mission, Pryor says that it isn't necessarily the solution for all healthcare call centers. Rather, he says, the key is to understand your competitive advantage and hire people who can move through transactions rapidly. Or, if it is technical discipline, then that becomes the main characteristic one ought to look for in hiring. ■