MICHIGAN
ROSS SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

Is Courtesy Enough? 'Solidarity ' in Call Center Interactions

Colin Clark
Centre of English Teaching
University of Sydney

Priscilla Rogers
Stephen M. Ross School of Business
at the University of Michigan

Ulrike Murfett
Nanyang Business School
Nanyang Technological University Singapore

Soon Ang
Nanyang Business School
Nanyang Technological University Singapore

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Is Courtesy Enough?
'Solidarity' in Call Center Interactions

Colin Clark

Centre of English Teaching, University of Sydney

C.Clark@cet.usyd.edu.au

Priscilla S. Rogers

Associate Professor of Business Communication

University of Michigan Ross School of Business

<psr@umich.edu>

Ulrike Murfett

Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University

AUMMurfett@ntu.edu.sg

Soon Ang

Goh Tjoei Kok Chair Professor of Management & IT

Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University

<asang@ntu.edu.sg>

Abstract

Polite self-presentation is expected of call center agents even through they must convey complex and unfavorable information speedily via the telephone. This study identified and evaluated the use of response strategies that are strongly associated with courtesy. Data were drawn from 587 stressful calls in a corpus of 3000 calls recorded at a large Singaporean insurance company call center. We adopted a grounded theory methodology together with a rich triangulation of qualitative (linguistic and rhetorical) and quantitative (scalar and correlational) methods. Tools for coding response strategies (independent variables) and courtesy (dependent variable) were developed via analyses of calls, interviews with call center agents and management, and a series of evaluations involving blind coding and subsequent consensus. We identified four categories of response strategies that are tightly related to each other and to courtesy: *shows solidarity*, *anticipates needs*, *shows attentiveness*, and *asks for direction*. Correlations and analysis of their enactment in stressful calls led us to propose "solidarity expression"—responses that engage the caller in search of meaning to work on the task as a team. We argue that solidarity expression challenges traditional views of politeness and is less about the presentation of self and more about enabling collaboration with the other.

Key words – Call centers, customer service, politeness, courtesy, solidarity

Is Courtesy Enough?

'Solidarity Expression' in Call Center Interactions

> Agent: You can refer to the illustration. On the top portion, there is your
> bonus. . . . Should be five thousand five hundred something…
> Caller: Sorry I was pretty harsh to you…. Yah yah, you're very
> understanding. Ah… Anyway, how old are you?
> Agent: Huh?
> Caller: How old are you?
> Agent: Very old ah… 30 plus.
> Caller: Cannot be. You are so, so patient (laughing).
> Agent: (laughing) No problem. Because you don't understand… We try
> to, I mean, we try to rephrase, we try to um… explain to … ah
> hopefully.
> Caller: Yah yah. I think you're, you're doing a very good job.

Politeness is social norm widely expected in social interactions in a civil society (Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, if one is required by the nature of work to display a high level of customer service and concern, while conveying complex and sometimes unfavorable information under time pressure and through the medium of a telephone, then expressing courtesy may be challenged.

A call center (also known as a customer service, contact or satisfaction center), and the individuals who handle calls on behalf of its organizational entity, comprise such an environment. As the new voice of customer service, call center agents are asked to embrace polite self-presentation. A feature of call center communication is that "display rules" be followed (Wilk & Moynihan, 2005; Goldberg & Grandey, 2007). These implicit "rules" exist in any occupation where the job demands "emotional labor," or the expectation that certain emotions be expressed (as opposed to actually felt). People in service roles--flight attendants or shop assistants, for example—are expected to be friendly and cheerful, while remaining courteous and respectful (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993).

Call center agents must also juggle competing goals to meet performance requirements. Their managers have the technological means to easily monitor their

efficiency, one goal being minimum handling time—agent time is expensive and callers grow impatient waiting in a queue (Deerie & Kinnie, 2002, Deery, Iverson & Walsh, 2002). Further, some customers dislike using a telephone or suffer from "telephone apprehension" (Reinsch, Steele, Lewis, Stano & Beswick 1990). Can courtesy be achieved in a rush?

Sitting as the point of contact between a firm and its customers (Jones, 1999) locates the call center agent in the middle. Pulling one way is the imperative to meet the customers' needs, a goal being customer retention. This may tug against the organization's mandate to maximize profits (Peaucelle, 2000), an objective sometimes complexified by the limitations of the organizations' service capabilities: "Can we make money if I tell the customer that the policy she holds is not beneficial in her circumstances and we don't have anything better to offer?" The conflicted call center environment shows clearly the need for and limitations of politeness routines, making it fertile ground for research.

Purpose

Our purpose was to identify and examine types of call center agent responses that are strongly associated with courtesy in stressful interactions. We wondered if agents used a full range of response strategies, including those associated with politeness in the literature. (Since courtesy is used for politeness in call centers, we these terms interchangeably.) Also, we sought to identify strategies that might be associated with courtesy in the call center environment and any tie that these strategies might have with an agent's ability to serve the customer.

A second purpose concerned theory development and adaptation to a specific communication that previous work on politeness has not specifically considered. Politeness theory (e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1987) and action-implicative discourse analysis (Tracy, 1995) influenced our research. We did not impose a typology on our data, such as counting occurrences of Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive politeness strategies. Rather we let the calls and the agents themselves inform us, taking their particular role and the call center environment into account. Iterative interviews with agents and management, textual analyses, and coding types of strategies that emerged as significant led us to

propose "solidarity expression"—using responses that engage the caller in search of meaning to work on the task as a team.

Although we became keenly interested in how solidarity is expressed via response strategies, our intent was not to create scripts for its enactment. The solidarity expression we propose stems from an agent's collaborative attention as it is experienced and sometimes even acknowledged by a caller. Stressful calls high on solidarity, as we envision it, might garner a caller response like the one above: "I think you're, you're doing a very good job."

Politeness Theory

Our study of call center agent-caller dyads builds on politeness theory, particularly Brown and Levinson's 1987 publication, which recasts their 1978 version in light of "significant advances . . . made in the study of language use and social interaction" (1987, p. 2). Recent research suggests how Brown and Levinson may be extended.

We summarize Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory with five points: (1) rationality and cooperation are assumed; (2) individuals have positive and negative face needs; (3) verbal and nonverbal communicative acts can threaten face; (4) face threatening acts (FTAs) can be mitigated through politeness strategies; and (5) the need for efficiency may supersede the need for face saving.

First Brown and Levinson's theory assumes that interactants tend toward rationality and cooperation. Rationality is "the ability to weigh up different means to an end, and choose the one that most satisfies the desired goals" (1987, p. 65). In call center interactions an agent's goals are tied to those of the organization they represent. Maintaining caller goodwill for the benefit of the organization motivates agent response, but this is challenged when organizational requirements conflict with caller needs. Appeals to caller reason—"Please understand, Sir, that the policy does not allow this kind of claim"—may be accepted more readily when wrapped in polite discourse.

Another background presumption is Grice's cooperative principle: to "make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted

purpose or direction in which you are engaged." He proposed four subordinate maxims that define "the basic set of assumptions underlying every talk exchange," Brown and Levinson explain (1987, p. 95).

1. *The maxim of quality:* Try to make your contribution one that you believe to be true.

2. *The maxim of quantity:*

   a) Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.

   b) Do not make your contribution more informative than required.

3. *The maxim of relation:* Make your contribution relevant.

4. *The maxim of manner:* Avoid obscurity and ambiguity, be brief and orderly (Grice, 1975)

They find these maxims broad enough to characterize motives that give rise to polite exchange yet robust enough to accommodate situational variations impacting implementation.

Consider the situation when a caller asks for information about an insurance policy, and the agent suspects or intuits that the caller is not whom s/he claims to be, although there is no direct evidence of imposture. The agent is bound to reveal the information if the caller can answer security questions such as "Please may I have your date of birth?" The agents that we interviewed expressed frustration that they were obliged to answer and could not challenge the suspected imposter directly. In such cases, they revealed no more than was strictly necessary, gave short answers, and were uncharacteristically unforthcoming. Here the criteria for cooperation could be met and politeness markers used, as is the norm for call center agents. Indeed, the number of politeness markers might be increased to compensate for the agent's decision to offer no more information than necessary (a Gricean idea), the result being a highly formal tone. In this case, politeness creates distance rather than intimacy. The agent's sense of what is right is violated, and although explicit challenge is not permitted the agent could cooperate politely.

Second Brown and Levinson argue that interactants have positive and negative face wants. Face is the public self-image that every individual wants to claim for him or

herself. Positive face is an individual's "desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired" (1987, p. 62), for example when a call center agent says, "I agree with you." Negative face is an individual's claim to "territories, personal preserves, [and] rights to non-distraction" (1987, p. 61). It is an individual's desire that his or her actions go unimpeded; that others do not impose upon him/her. When an agent asks a caller to write an email in order to obtain a policy change form, the caller is presented with imposition that may take some courage to counter—"I'm sorry, but can't you simply send me the form?"

The observation that interactants find some verbal and non-verbal acts innately face threatening is a third idea. Face threatening acts (FTAs) such as ordering, requesting, and reminding, which pressure the addressee to do something, show negative politeness by imposing. Offering or promising something may also threaten face negatively as these acts carry an implicit expectation of commitment. Threats to positive face wants include criticism, accusation, and challenge. Also relevant are acts showing a lack of caring or indifference toward the addressee, such as non-attention, interrupting, or even carelessness in naming the addressee, a possible challenge to his or her status. We find all these acts in call center interactions as a matter of course.

Fourth Brown and Levinson observe politeness strategies as a means for goal achievement. Strategies can mitigate the impact of FTAs, allowing the interaction to proceed successfully. They selected the word "strategy" to imply the role of rationality in interactions and to suggest the evolving plans of action interactants employ for facework. These plans may be unconsciously used or appropriated from previously constructed routines. "There is a basic assumption in talk that there is underlying method in the madness," they conclude (1987, p. 95).

Strategies for positive politeness we find in call center interactions included claiming common ground, use of humor, offering to help, being optimistic, and providing explanation. Negative strategies to attenuate imposition on the caller included questions, hedges ("I'm pretty sure we can help you with this"), attempts to minimize the imposition ("I can provide you with a template for the letter you need to write to cancel the policy"), showing deference ("Yes, our letter might have been clearer. I can see why it might have been confusing"), apology, passive constructions, stating the

FTA as a general rule ("The policy follows international regulations"), and offering partial compensation.

A "face-bearing rational agent will tend to utilize the FTA-minimizing strategies according to a rational assessment of the face risk to participants," Brown and Levinson conclude (1987, p. 91). However, their strategies are provided as observations on the process of facework and as a source of linguistic structures that have potential for face preservation rather than as modus operandi. "[T]he distribution of politeness . . . is socially controlled: it is not as if there were some basic modicum of politeness owed by each to all; in contrast, language usage principles of the Gricean sort do indeed generally obtain, principled exceptions" (1987, pp. 4-5). This opening seems to accommodate Craig, Tracy and Spisak's (1986) conclusion that one or more politeness strategies do not equal more politeness.

The politeness we describe derives not only from linguistic forms, but also from the substance of what is and is not said in context, as discussed by Tracy and Tracy (1998). One may choose to criticize or not to criticize and the form that criticism should take. One may ignore, repeat, or paraphrase a caller's concern. In our context, this substance is the decision about what tack to take with a caller in a stressful situation. Therefore, the question to be addressed in call center research is what makes substance choices, not just words, polite?

Finally and fifth is the notion that any rational interactant will do what s/he can to minimize face threat unless the need for efficiency is greater than the need to preserve their interlocutor's face. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) this involves weighing at least three wants: (1) "the want to communicate the content of the FTA," (2) "the want to be efficient or urgent," and (3) the want to maintain the interlocutor's face (1987, p. 68). In some situations, the aim of politeness is "a major source of deviation from . . . rational efficiency, and is communicated precisely by that deviation" (1987, p. 95). Denying a request outright or giving bad news directly and unambiguously may require less time than buffering with explanation, for example. Or it may not. The absence of politeness strategies may incite caller retort, making call closure more difficult. Brown and Levinson's notion of trade-offs is one basis for

explaining the competing values of courtesy and efficiency we see operating in stressed agent-caller interactions.

Implicit in Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness is the notion of situated responsiveness to the interlocutor. Interactants draw inferences about polite behavior from their mutual awareness of face sensitivity, means-ends reasoning, and inclination to cooperate. Interactants consciously and unconsciously select strategies for facework. The expediency of these is measured against situational variables with the need for efficiency sometimes supplanting face needs.

In proposing solidarity, we build on and extend these ideas by exploring the potential of interaction in search for meaning to work on the task as a team. Here we draw on Rogers and Lee-Wong's (2003) definition of solidarity as acknowledging an obligation to work with others by expressing tasks, issues, and problems in communal terms and by assuming a collaborative role, even when expressing an opposing point of view, with discourse suggesting cohesion, trust, commitment and delight in the interaction. Admittedly, the subordinate-to-superior dyad they studied is different than that of the agent-caller. But in their study, as in ours, successful interactions include those that not only incorporate cooperative principles, but also exceed them.

Literature on Call Centers

An increasingly important form of customer service, call centers are worth a great deal to modern economies. In the UK, for example, call centers contribute £20.6 billion annually, employing 960,000 workers at 5040 call centers and growing at an annual rate of 6%, despite outsourcing (Hummerston, 2007). Call centers are a large source of employment in countries such as India and the Philippines where companies can exploit differences in wages. UK and US banks, for example, typically outsource 40–50% of their call center operations (Anderson, 2007).

It comes as no surprise then that call center research has grown. A search of the ABI Inform database for the phrase 'call center' in scholarly journals in February 2008 produced 666 hits, 600 of which were published after 1999. An increasing number of organizational behavior journals refer to the call center as a workplace, most frequently

European industrial and human resources journals such as *Industrial Relations, Management Research News, Industrial Journal of Human Resource Management, Journal of European Industrial Training, International Journal of Service Industry Management* and *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*. The vast majority of these articles discuss operational matters such as predictive dialing (e.g. Samuelson, 1999), scheduling (e.g. Kadir & Bader, 2008), call center-specific human resource and workflow issues (e.g. Frenkel, Tam, Korczynski & Shire, 1998; Wallace, Eagleson & Waldersee, 2000; Taylor, Hyman, Mulvey & Bain, 2002), or industrial relations (e.g. Bain & Taylor, 2008; Malhotra, Budhwar, & Prowse, 2007).

Numerous studies also examine topics related to customer expectations and satisfaction with call centre services. Feinberg, Kim, Hokama, de Ruyter, and Keen (2000) point out that most call centers focus on performance metrics such as speed of answering, talk time, percentage of calls resolved on first contact, etc. Their study showed that these metrics may not or only weakly predict caller satisfaction. By evaluating the metrics only, call centers may be measuring the wrong thing, if the aim is to gauge customer satisfaction. Getting the performance metrics right does not ensure customer satisfaction and call centers need to look to other factors. So what does influence customer satisfaction?

Taking the customer's perspective, empathy, an emotional understanding of the customer's needs, interest in the customer, and a willingness to engage with the customer have been identified as important tools to increase customer satisfaction (e.g. Dorman & Zijlstra, 2003; Kantsperger & Kunz, 2005 Axtell, Parker, Holman & Totterdell, 2007). The issue of "emotional labor" performed by call center agents who have to preserve a polite, helpful front at all times, who cannot react to provocations, and who must "smile down the phone" is also discussed in numerous studies (e.g. Belt, Richardson, & Webster, 1999; Erickson & Wharton, 1997; Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002; Poster, 2007).

Despite growing interest, comparatively little of the existing literature explores the enactment or verbal expression of call center work and the unique contextual expectations for courtesy in this context. Is this significant? Franken and Wallace view interactions between call center agents and customers as a negotiated enterprise but question the extent to which there is mutual engagement. They describe call center interactions as "between

strangers, quick, and not sustained over time," perhaps like one-night stands (2006, pp. 146–7). Further, agents' responses can be imposed by the company, scripted, and manifest a lack of authentic engagement, they continue. In this context, Franken and Wallace wonder if politeness strategies will be received as genuine and trustworthy.

On the other hand, Fielding sees call centers involving "the richest of all human communication codes: natural language and the associated paralinguistics. This "rich" channel allows conversations of considerable variety and complexity that can encompass not only the task and informational components of a conversation, but also the social relationship and personal-emotional aspects" (2003, p. 258). The potential for lean or rich interactions remains to be fully investigated, however.

What we do know is that this mode of customer service is becoming pervasive and with it the need to prepare agents to handle caller misunderstandings and complaints. A March 2008 interview with the manager of the call center from which we got our data revealed anecdotal evidence that callers are becoming ever more demanding and willing to "escalate calls." Finding common ground with such customers is indeed a challenging undertaking. Might establishing some sort of agent-caller solidarity help? If so, how might this be enacted? We looked to the communication and customer service literature for information on the notion of solidarity.

Solidarity in Customer Service Literature

In the customer service literature, there is a rich discussion on the emotional aspects of call center work, but there is no study we know of that elaborates the notion and enactment of solidarity between agent and customer its research focus. If mentioned at all, solidarity receives greater attention as an element of worker-to-worker relationships than of agent-caller interaction (Holtgrewe 2001; Korczynski; 2003; van Bentum and Stone, 2005). If solidarity does get a mention in the service provider-customer dyad, it is subordinated to other topics. For example, in their work on the importance of asking questions in service encounters, Schuster and Danes (2003), refer to the need of the service provider to make relationship-building, socio-emotional efforts termed "solidarity comments," examples of which are "…laughing at a customer's joke, acknowledging a

customer's response, …or showing approval of a customer's choice" (p.23). Bailey's (2000) study on the conflicts experienced by African-American customers and Korean storekeepers in the US mentions the desire and efforts by the customers to create solidarity and intimacy in service encounters, but only to explain how the lack of reciprocity of these efforts by shopkeepers is a major source of conflict.

Many studies touch on agent behaviors that may be seen as encompassing the notion of solidarity with the customer, but do not specifically refer to it. For example, Pontes & Kelly's (2000) discussion of customer relationship management and oral competencies of call center agents and Franken & Wallace's (2006) investigation into the language use of call centre agents highlight the need for personalizing a relationship by using a customer's name and engaging in a collaborative dialog. Ford and Etienne (1994) do not use the term "solidarity" either, but their distinction between courteous service and personalized service comes close to defining solidarity. Courteous service helps to establish "positive relations with customers" (p.417), while personalized service is tailored specifically to meet the customer's individual needs and, thus, requires a greater effort and commitment from the service provider. While this is an intriguing discussion, the main point of their paper is to propose a framework for research on customer service encounters.

In her study of the identity issues experienced by Indian call center agents, who have to pose as Americans, Poster (2007) describes the effort and commitment that these agents sometimes show to customers, which clearly goes beyond the requirements of their jobs, and benefit not only the firm, but the customer as well:

> These agents caution customers from divulging their personal information like social security numbers over the phone; check customers' financial circumstances before signing them up for expensive items and spend extra time to assess customer finances so they do not put their credit reports at risk (p.290)

But such manifestations of solidarity are not the focus of her study.

Some studies associate desirable service provider behavior, such as an organization providing individualized attention to its customers; putting oneself into the customer's shoes; showing attentiveness; or having the customer's best interest at heart with

"empathy," but do not mention solidarity, although the behaviors described above are so broad that they can be said to connect in one way or another (Dorman & Zijlstra, 2003; Korczynski, 2003; Ford, 1995).

We determined that the notion of solidarity in the agent-customer dyad is under-researched.

Call Center Context for this Study

This study was conducted in a call center in an MNC in the financial services sector in Singapore. As is typical with such inbound centers, calls are automatically channeled through an Automatic Call Distributor (ACD) system, which directs them to waiting agents. If all agents are occupied, incoming calls are "stacked" (put on hold) and distributed in sequence to agents as they are "freed up." Agents never know who or what questions they will get.

For monitoring purposes every fiftieth caller is directed to an interactive voice response system which asks them to state whether they are satisfied with the answers they received to their questions, the courtesy of the agent with whom they worked, and the speed with which their call was handled. Armistead, Kiely, Hole and Prescott (2002) note that all call centers have many internal measures including the length of "talk time" with a customer, the "wrap up time" (time to finish a transaction after the completion of a call), and the cost of "lost calls" through a failure to match the capacity of resources with call intensity. These comprise criteria against which agents in our call center are evaluated.

This call center context brought several advantages relevant to our focus on responses and issues of politeness. The agent's role is intended to be supportive rather than sales—e.g. "I'm supposed to help this caller, even if his request is difficult." Agent-caller interactions are spontaneous rather than scripted. Agents receive suggestions for opening and closing calls and calls are sometimes reviewed for instructional purposes, particularly challenging ones. Agents also get in-depth training on the firm's products and services, including briefings on changes and information on mailings that may prompt calls. But in terms of the individuals who call and the questions these individuals may ask, agents have to deal with what they get. There is no script beyond a recommended greeting and

goodbye. By contrast, outbound call centers typically involve telemarketing, a form of calling that relies on scripted sales pitches and predictive dialing.

Size and growth also proved advantageous. In Singapore, the number of call center seats grew by 1% (from 10,000 to 10,100) in 2004, which is small in contrast to the growth in China (41%), India (65%), and the Philippines (100% from 20,000 to 40,000 seats) (Callcentres.net, 2003). Still, on a per-capita basis, the call center industry in Singapore is fairly large.

Method

We adopted a grounded theory building methodology, together with a rich triangulation of qualitative (linguistic and rhetorical) and quantitative (scalar and correlational) methods. Tools for coding courtesy (dependent variable measured with four items), and response strategies (independent variable) were developed via shadowing agents, interviews with call center agents and management, and analyses of calls. Throughout the process, we let the actual calls inform our work.

Our study drew on Tracy's (1995) a*ction implicative discourse* approach, which begins with an examination of the problems that practitioners face, with the often contradictory goals that must be navigated in their discourse. Then the grounding proceeds to the technical level, the routines and strategies that practitioners employ to resolve these problems. From this, situated ideals may be derived. These are "…the inchoate normative principles used by participants to reflect upon and criticize action" (Tracy, p. 197). In our study, this relates to three stages.

First, conversations with call centre agents and supervisors provided insight into the problems and concerns of agents and company, whose problems did indeed conflict in the area of call times (to be minimized) and the need to understand and respond fully to customer concerns (which is time-consuming). This is described below as the exploratory phase.

Second, strategies were identified on the part of agents. This is discussed below under the heading *Development and application of tools*. Tools were tested and refined

through a series of pilots involving blind coding and subsequent consensus reaching with reference to the calls.

Finally, the application of the tools led us to examine selected calls at a deep textual level, in an effort to identify the application of our identified strategies. We content-analyzed calls scoring high and low on types of responses associated with courtesy. Through this process our notion of solidarity emerged slowly, first as a category for some types of strategies that we saw operating in the calls and finally as a concept that challenges how we look at courtesy and, possibly, customer service.

Exploratory Phase

The exploratory phase involved becoming familiar with the call center environment through interviews with call center agents and management, observing operations, watching and listening as agents handled calls. From these we selected 30 calls that proved challenging for agents and had sufficient dialogue for substantial analysis. For example, calls requiring very little from the agent, such "yes, that's correct," or routine calls, such as to change an address or to obtain contact details, were eliminated. Two of the authors listened to these 30 calls independently, making notes on the following questions: (1) Was the agent's handing of the call good, average, or poor on the company's criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, and courtesy? (2) What linguistic and rhetorical strategies might have contributed to meeting these criteria? (3) If I had the opportunity to consult with this agent on his/her communication strengths and areas to improve, what key observations would I make? From these activities we began to compile a list of strategies used by agents to manage calls, paying particular attention to responses that distinguished the more effective agents. Strategies in Bales' (1950) coding system ("shows solidarity" is one of these) gave us some ideas for names and definitions.

Next, we asked the supervising manager of the call center to collect calls from three agents (25 for each) who demonstrated the range of ability within the center: a top, a medium, and a low performer. We were not informed of their performance levels, but later the supervisor confirmed that the conclusions we reached after analyzing their calls were accurate. Two authors independently reviewed and subsequently discussed this targeted

sample of 75 calls to develop a tool for response strategies, which included definitions and examples.

Using this tool we met with each of the three agents. Our meeting protocol included listening to recordings of calls that proved particularly challenging for the agents. After listening to each call, the agent was invited to comment on what s/he was thinking at various points during the call, what s/he felt had been done well, and if there were any ways the call might have been handled better. Having identified these areas for improvement, we introduced our tool and asked agents to indicate which types of responses they might consider using in the future. Following these discourse-based interviews, we refined the tool and subsequently one of authors used it for interviews with all the agents.

Selection of Calls

Subsequently, more than 3000 calls were collected from our call center. From this corpus, we excluded very short or incomplete calls, calls of inferior sound quality, calls handled by non-regular staff (occasionally staff from other departments were seconded to fill in for agents on leave or breaks), calls from colleagues, other insurance agents, or personal calls, routine requests such as requesting an address, and calls in Chinese or Malay. Calls in the colloquial Singapore English, sometimes called "Singlish," the local *patois* (English leavened with grammar and vocabulary from Chinese dialects and Malay), were retained. This left us with roughly 1800 calls.

All 1800 calls were blind scored by two raters (one of the authors and another faculty member), using the two scales based on Dorman and Zapf's (2004) published items for the customer social stressors of verbal aggression and ambiguity (four items for each: see Appendix A). A positive score meant that the call had an element of potential social stress for the agent. No perceived source of stress yielded a score of 8 (1 on each scale). A score exceeding 8 meant the call was classified as stressful. Of the 1800 calls, 587 were identified as stressful and formed the basis of the next stage of investigation. It was also possible to identify the source of stress, whether ambiguity or aggression, so calls could be identified at the extremes of 1) high aggression / high ambiguity, 2) high aggression / low ambiguity, 3) low aggression / high ambiguity, and 4) low aggression / low ambiguity.

These extremes provided the maximum variance in terms of response strategies, and were the basis of the sampling below.

Development and Application of Tools

Two tools were developed to code these data: one for the call center's three performance criteria, effectiveness (goal accomplishment), efficiency (handling time), and courtesy, which comprised our dependent variables; the other for types of response strategies, our independent variables.

To build the tool for the dependent variables we drew on the company's definitions and the literature. After some minor modifications and piloting, it was used to code a sample of 80 calls selected from the corpus of 587 stressful calls. This sample consisted of every fifth call until 20 was reached when the data was sorted according to the four permutations of high/low ambiguity/aggression, sorting the data and taking the most extreme examples first. When the same call was selected twice, the next call was taken instead.

Developing the coding tool for types of responses, our independent variables, began during the exploratory stage described earlier. By the time we coded the sample of 80 calls this tool consisted of 19 strategies divided into four clusters of strategies (relational, management, elaboration, and inquiry).

Correlations of scores from the independent and dependent variable tools revealed a strong association between courtesy (showing deference, respect, self control and being able to regulate the caller's emotions (Appendix B) and eight independent variables: *shows empathy*, *shows solidarity*, *anticipates needs*, *shows attentiveness, asks for direction*, *explains wait time* (e.g. narrates the search for records process), *redirects*, and *changes topic*. The association between courtesy and *solidarity* proved strongest, suggesting the merit of focusing on this relationship, particularly as courtesy is a source of customer satisfaction.

Throughout this process we kept the independent and dependent coding separate. For the sample of 80 calls, one of the authors, an instructor with call center experience, and a trained research assistant coded the dependent variables (inter-rater reliability being .92) and two other authors coded the independent variables, with inter-rater reliability as below.

Table 1: Interrater reliability: Independent variables—Sample 1

	Use
Shows empathy	0.75
Solidarity	0.95
Attentiveness	0.77
Explains wait	0.92
Anticipates needs	0.94
Redirects	0.98
Changes topic	0.70
Ask clarification	0.93

N=80

Coding Courtesy Alone

The 80-call coding provided us with an 8-item tool with only those strategies correlated with courtesy. Three of the authors used this tool to code a new sample of 50 stressed calls. These 50 calls were the extremes of high/low ambiguity/aggression. Initially the authors listened to 10 calls together, scored, and discussed them. The remaining 40 calls were scored blind by at least two authors. Interrater reliability on the 40 calls is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Interrater reliability of response strategy scores—Sample 2

Shows empathy	.90
Shows solidarity	.80
Shows attentiveness	.76
Anticipates needs	.92
Asks for direction	.81
Explains waiting time	.91
Redirects	.76
Changes topic	.26

The few outlying calls were subsequently scored by a third author to resolve differences.

Results surfaced the relative importance of strategies for *shows solidarity*, *anticipates needs*, *shows attentiveness*, *asks for direction,* and, to a lesser extent, *shows empathy* (described in Appendix C).

Using the quantitative results we identified from coding the 50 calls, we identified 18 calls that we analyzed at a deep textual level: 11 calls receiving the highest (5 or higher) and 7 with the lowest (4 or below) scores on courtesy, *solidarity*, *anticipates needs*, *shows attentiveness*, and *asks for direction*. Two of the authors independently reviewed these calls three times with note taking followed by discussion and re-listening to some calls. Calls of interest were then transcribed for further analysis. Throughout this analysis, we focused on items that might explain the scores, such as topic management, pronoun usage, and turn taking. Our driving question was: How is solidarity enacted in or missing from these calls? Findings are detailed the Qualitative Results section.

Results of Quantitative Analyses

Quantitative results consist of intraclass correlations for reliability and Pearson correlations to reveal relationships among variables.

Categories Correlating With Courtesy

Recall that from the 80-sample, eight types of response strategies from the list of 19 correlated highly with courtesy (Table 3).

Table 3: Highest correlation with courtesy—80 sample

Shows empathy	.262*
Shows solidarity	.333**
Shows attentiveness	.305**
Explains wait time	.252*
Anticipates needs	.306**
Redirects	−.152
Asks for direction	.291**
Changes topics	.066

(The use of * and ** denotes significance at 5% and 1% levels respectively.)

There are two observations to be made of this result. First, those eight strategies from the list of 19 that correlated with courtesy were not in all cases those that may have

been expected. *Shows attentiveness*, *shows empathy*, and *explains wait time* are unsurprising, as these are social functions that grease the wheels of conversation. However, *anticipates needs* and *asks for clarification* involve the content rather than the purely relational aspects of a call. This suggests that courtesy extends beyond the purely relational or "emotional labor" (e.g. Grandey, Dickter & Sin 2004).

Second, solidarity emerged as the strongest component of courtesy, ahead of the more familiar concepts mentioned above. Although the strategies of *redirects* and *changes topic* did not show strong correlations, it was desirable to include a negative strategy as these had emerged from discussions with colleagues regarding call center experiences. Redirection, or being transferred between agents, or having one's call "escalated" with topic change were commonly mentioned irritants. However, we found no support for this in either sample.

Solidarity showed the strongest correlations with the four items representing courtesy (more than .3 in all cases). *Anticipates needs* refers to the ability of the agent to perceive the caller's problem and suggest a fix, while *shows attentiveness* is the ongoing process of acknowledging, paraphrasing, and summarizing to show that the caller's words are being understood. Attentiveness may be said to be a prerequisite for *solidarity*, which is in turn required to *anticipate needs*. *Asks for direction* correlated with courtesy measures and with *solidarity* as well. The association of these suggests that agent courtesy involves more than just the niceties often associated with it.

Interestingly, emotional/sympathetic component of *solidarity* is supported by a moderate (.381) correlation with *shows empathy*. *Shows empathy* refers to explicit acknowledgement of a caller's feelings, such as "I'm sorry to hear that" or "that must be difficult." This tactic proved surprisingly rare, although these agents frequently deal with callers suffering painful or debilitating health conditions, or having family members in that situation. There appears to be an understandable reluctance to cross into the territory of personal feelings, and it is common that a caller mentioning a life-threatening complaint at the start of a call is answered with a request for their identity number rather than any gesture of sympathy.

Solidarity Related to Other Categories

Coding the 50-sample yielded Pearson correlations between the variable *solidarity* and the other response strategies shown in Table 4. The *solidarity* strategy correlates most strongly with *anticipates needs* (.795) and with *shows attentiveness* (.666). Mathematically, this would suggest that the three variables are isomorphic, however we suggest that the close relation is rather because the three strategies are interdependent.

Table 4: Correlations between "shows solidarity" and other variables—50 sample

Shows empathy	.381**
Shows attentiveness	.666(**)
Explains wait time	.184
Anticipates needs	.795(**)
Redirects	-.079
Asks for direction	.459(**)
Changes Topic	.321(*)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlations between *shows solidarity*, *explains wait time*, and *redirects* are not significant. Explaining wait time is only an issue when callers are asked to wait for a significant period. However, this is not an issue in every call. Although there is usually a short wait while the caller's details are retrieved from the computer, this is likely to be congruent with expectations of waiting time and therefore not a source of dissatisfaction. Houston, Bettencourt and Wenger (1998) find that waiting time produces significant negative affect when the length exceeds expectations, but this effect is reduced when there is an apology or the agent is perceived as having no control over the cause of the delay. However, beyond the basic "hold on a moment" or "give me a minute," there were too few examples of *explains wait time* or *redirects* in this sample to draw a conclusion.

There is a significant, although weaker (.321) correlation between *solidarity* and *changes topic*. Changing topic may occur when, for example, a customer complains about

having been directed to the interactive voice system (an automated service which responds to vocal commands) or having been on hold for too long. As there is little agents can do, they typically attempt to turn the conversation in a more productive direction, focusing on the original need: ("I'm sorry to hear that, I'll feedback to them. Anyway, how can I help you?"). This is not in itself a form of courtesy, but plays a role in regulating customer emotion (discussed below) by avoiding potentially damaging topics. However, the weak reliability and correlations of *changes topic* in our sample prevents us from drawing firm conclusions on this topic.

Results of the Qualitative Analyses

Our qualitative results draw on knowledge accumulated from analyses of calls at every stage of the research--the calls led us to the categories which we then coded with results subsequently reviewed against the texts, which prompted refinements in the coding tool for the next round etc. Recorded notes and comments on coding sheets informed the entire process. Our last textual analysis involving 18 calls provided us with the examples used here.

Like our quantitative results, our textual analyses of calls suggests a strong relationship between *shows solidarity* and courtesy, *anticipates needs*, and *shows attentiveness*, while the relationship of *shows solidarity* with *asks for direction* and with *empathy* is more moderate. Qualitative analyses also tell us that none of these categories fully captures the notion of solidarity, but rather they are bits and pieces of it.

Following, we describe and illustrate the relationship between *shows solidarity* and courtesy, *shows attentiveness*, *anticipates needs*, and *shows empathy*. We also flesh out the notion of solidarity that emerged.

Solidarity and Courtesy

Courtesy and *shows solidarity* correlated most highly. But we found that routine polite speech acts, such as greetings and endings of calls, which are standard job requirements for agents, could be enacted without achieving solidarity. Formulaic in nature and, therefore, easily replicable, such routines were performed in calls

evidencing little or no solidarity (e.g. "Good morning. This is ABC customer service. How can I help you?"). Craig, Tracy, and Spisak's (1986) observation that more politeness strategies do not ensure more politeness jibes with our data.

Mitigating face-threatening-acts, a major concern in politeness literature, resonates more with the notion of solidarity that evolved here. Even though the agent and caller cannot see each other, we find face concerns in stressed calls. Agents who implied through their words or tone that the caller should catch on sooner (e.g. "As I said Mr. X. . . .Listen to me Mr. X") or should have known better (e.g. "You should know that there's a law that prevents change of beneficiary for this plan."), seemed unmindful of facework and lacking in solidarity expression.

Deference also appears in high solidarity calls. In the following conversation, an agent adapts his greeting to match the one given by the caller and is willing to accept a gaffe for the sake of customer focus. The time of day (afternoon) had become clear from a preceding agent-to-agent exchange, in which the caller was referred to the call center agent by another department.

    A: Good afternoon, Mr. X
    C: Good morning
    A: Good morning, Mr. X (Call #1)

Another aspect associated with politeness, cooperation, is also evident. Solidarity expression involves supplying the information required for the current purposes of exchange, as Grice (1975) would have it. However, while cooperation may be a prerequisite for solidarity, it is by no means its entirety in our data. Solidarity digs deeper, we think. It is more than cooperative; it is collaborative.

The collaborative essence of solidarity becomes evident in a question like as "How may I address you, Ma'am?" Here the agent personalizes the agent-caller interaction, giving the caller the freedom to choose the way s/he wishes to be addressed. But this response comes early in a call where there is no history and it's relatively easy to enact. More challenging is *maintaining* give-and-take throughout the call. Consider the agent's response to a caller.

A: Actually the nature of this plan is like this. What happens is
   that, ah (slight pause), *don't mind I explain to you, hah?* (Call #11a)

Here the agent seeks agreement from the caller before proceeding to explain. The caller has a choice to either accept or refuse the offer of the explanation, but to a greater degree than the earlier "How may I address you, Ma'am?" By contrast, "don't mind [if] I explain to you, hah?" acknowledges the caller as an equal whose choice, theoretically, has the power to shape the rest of the conversation. We have heard the expression "don't mind if I *do something*" used a few times in place of the imperative "let me *do something*" in conflicted calls.

In sum, polite speech acts are not always manifestations of *solidarity*. But if they help to personalize the fleeting call center encounters, meet the specific needs of individual callers, and indicate that the agent sees the caller as a unique individual rather than a "job" that has to be dealt with quickly, they can be thought of as enactments of *solidarity*. To flesh out the construct, we consider four categories of response strategies that correlated with *solidarity*: *anticipating needs, showing attentiveness, asking for direction*, and *showing empathy*, (.795), (.666), (.459) and (.381) respectively.

Solidarity and Anticipating Needs

Our quantitative analysis has shown that *solidarity* correlates most strongly with *anticipates needs* , which we see expressed as offering suggestions, solutions, or resolution without the caller's direct request, in other words, thinking ahead on the caller's behalf. This is an expected correlation and borne out by our qualitative findings.

In the excerpt below, the caller has expressed great unhappiness over needing to change her advisor. The call center agent anticipates that the caller may not be in her office all the time and, given the pervasiveness of mobile phones in Singapore, realizes that a mobile number would significantly increase the chance of the new advisor reaching the caller.

A: Can [I] have your contact number so that we can arrange for a female [policy advisor] to give you a call to take over all three policies?
C: *Gives number*
A: This one your office number?
C: Yes
A: Then maybe any mobile number, so that they can reach you? (Call #1426)

In the following example, the agent has to calm the fears of a caller who has misunderstood the term "auto-cover." Repeatedly in the course of the call he expresses that he finds it "very frightening." The agent attempts to explain once that there is a misunderstanding ("Okay, maybe there is some misunderstanding" – notice the polite, passive phrasing of the problem as a possibility, instead of the blunter "you misunderstood"), but the agent is immediately cut off by the caller. So instead of continuing an explanation that may ultimately not reassure the caller, the agent offers to send him a letter, an offer the caller accepts immediately. The agent has correctly predicted the caller's desire for some hard evidence rather than transitory words, no matter how reassuring.

A: Mr. X, if you want I can actually send you a letter.
C: Yah, you send me a letter. I don't feel very comfortable, because even in your terms and conditions so very frightening, because you put all okay and then you come to this part only and you state it also here and there. So I want [a letter] for my wife and me, because is very important…" (Call #2022, also below)

The agent goes on to suggest that the caller might send a letter describing the issue but does not anticipate the caller's needs fully. The caller has to ask: "Okay, so what's the right procedure?" Fully anticipating needs, the agent could have offered the procedure before the caller had to ask for it.

In another call, *anticipating needs* would have been offering to calculate the interest before the caller had to ask for it in the example below.

C: For the interest how much do I pay? Five?
A: Six percent a year. Six percent a year ma'am.
C: How much is that?

Solidarity and Shows Attentiveness

The quantitative analysis also showed strong correlation between *solidarity* and *shows attentiveness*. We came to understand showing attentiveness as being present in a conversation, for example via acknowledgment tokens ("Mhm," "Yah," "Aha"), commenting, giving feedback or explanations that suggest the agent listening. Our qualitative analysis highlights the close links of all three strategies, *shows solidarity*, *shows attentiveness* and *anticipates needs*. Our textual analyses suggest that neither *shows solidarity* nor *anticipates needs* can be enacted without attentiveness. As such, the strong correlation between *shows attentiveness* and *solidarity* is not surprising.

For example, one call scoring high on *solidarity* and attentiveness consisted of 24 agent turns. Eleven (or nearly half) of these were acknowledgements (e.g. "Alright." "Yah. Understand."); five were questions (e.g. "…do you actually have any agent in mind?"). The eight remaining agent responses in this call were clarifications ("Yeah, usually, they will follow up"); explanations of the agent's actions (e.g. "I check, one moment"); an extensive summary of previously discussed actions (e.g. "Okay, so what I'll do is that I shall…") to ensure that agent and caller shared a common understanding of what would happen; and an invitation for further personal contact (e.g. "Anything you need, you can always get back to me."). Throughout the call, the agent showed the caller she was dedicated to finding a solution.

In high solidarity calls, agents also *showed attentiveness* when callers did not respond to questions. In the exchange below, the agent demonstrates awareness that his question may be less relevant at that moment.

> A: Ma'am, are you . . . ?
> C: This is a generic enquiry.
> A: Ah, okay. (Call #1687)

Showing attentiveness to the caller's needs may also mean that the agent is willing to adjust his or her speech acts to match the caller's language competency, an issue of particular concern in Singapore, as there are four official languages with English serving as the lingua franca along the three community-specific "mother-tongues". In the following conversation, the agent demonstrates such an adjustment:

A: How do I address you, Sir?
C: (pause) Hah?
A: How do I address you, Sir?
C: Address me?….wah ha…..
A: What's your name?
C: Ah! The name is X (spells it) (Call #1986)

The agent tries the more sophisticated "How do I address you, Sir?" twice before she picks up the caller's obvious bewilderment indicated by pauses and non-verbal utterances ("…wah ha…?") and switches to a register more suitable for the caller.

Solidarity and Asks for Direction

The response strategy of *asks for direction* is defined as asking the caller to explain or elaborate on their problem or request. To score high on this category, an agent might request follow-up information (probing) to make sure inferences or assumptions were correctly interpreted in conjunction with finding out what the caller needs.

A: Who promised that to you?
C: By the ABC staff
A: ABC staff?
C: Yeah, in Yishun.
A: Have you spoken to the ABC staff about this?
C: No that's why when I called ABC they told me that [you] would be able to advise me on this. So everybody is pushing the responsibility now.
A: [I see from my screen that] it's actually whatever the amount you invested minus of the surcharge. [Is that] what you are made aware of? So I'm not sure how it was conveyed to you.

Here the agent acknowledges that she lacks information ("So I'm not sure how this was conveyed to you."), but works together with the caller to ensure she gives the response he needs.

In following call, the agent does not at all understand what the caller wants, but tries hard to discover it. As such, the first five agent responses to the caller consist of direction questions only.

C: Good afternoon, I try to make to make an investment ah.
A: You try to make an investment?
C: Yah
A: I don't get your question. What do you mean you try to make
   an investment? You say that you have an investment policy?
C: I try to make an investment policy, ah.
A: You want to check your investment policy, is it?
C: No, at the moment I haven't make ah any investment; this
   is only the first time that I try to make investment.
A: So you are saying that you want to get an investment policy,
   is it?
C: Yeah, yeah correct.
A: So you don't have any policy with us at all, is it? (1986)

In calls scoring low on *asks for direction*, the agent makes assumptions about the caller's perceived information needs that often turn out to miss the mark completely, as is the case in the next example (which is completely transcribed in Appendix D). The caller wants a form emailed to him, but the agent fails to catch on that the caller has missed some vital information. The request for this form to be sent via email has to be made through email also, and not through the telephone. This leads to considerable frustration on the caller's part. Notice that it is always the caller who asks the questions, not the agent.

C: Email me the . . . form.
A: I cannot email, Sir. If you want us to email then you've got to
      email to us. If you want I can send the form to you.
C: How come you all do not email to me ah?
A: No, for surrender I think you've got to request ah. If you want
      I can send the form to you.
C: Yah lah, I'm requesting whether you just email to me and I can
      just print out.
A: But I cannot email from here. Email will be done by backroom.
C: Then, ah lah, you will ask the backroom guy to email to me, lah?

Consider how different the call would have been had the agent immediately asked the caller to send his request via email rather than the phone: "Sir, would you mind submitting your request via email?" instead of the very negative "I cannot email to you,

Sir", which is the only thing the caller heard. The caller did not pick up the agent's subsequent response "If you want us to email then you've got to email to us".

Solidarity and Empathy

Empathy as used in the customer service literature seems to be an elastic term encompassing a wide range of behaviors. We define empathy as an awareness of and responsiveness to a caller's feelings (Lewig & Dollard, 2003; Pontes & Kelly, 2000). In our quantitative analysis, the correlation between *solidarity* and *empathy* was only moderate, which can be explained by the fact that empathy as defined above may be counter-productive for the enactment of *solidarity* in some instances, even when the caller's personal circumstances are bleak. Consider the following exchange.

> C: Or, I may die of cancer…
> A: It doesn't matter….as far as the bonus….the full amount payout…. (Call # 1687)

Contrary to how it sounds, this response showed great regard for the caller. Diagnosed with breast cancer the day of the call, the caller has questions about her medical and life insurance policies. The agent demonstrates *solidarity* by responding to the initial desire of the caller to keep the discussion in the realm of possibility rather than fact. The caller begins the call with this question, hypothetically framed:

> C: Phoning for inquiry. Let's say about the critical illness policy.
>   If I'm diagnosed with breast cancer, and I don't need the money . . . I don't claim?

This hypothetical approach is maintained by the agent, who responds using the third person singular ("she") instead of "you":

> A: If she doesn't want to claim first, but next time she decides to
>   claim, just make sure she has all her medical reports with her.

When she asks later, again hypothetically phrased ("I may die from cancer, I may die from road accident"), how a death might affect this kind of policy, he responds with the

same businesslike approach and respects the caller's desire for emotional distance implied by her choice of framing the discussion as a hypothetical one. Notice the absence of "you" and the choice of "the person."

> C: You wouldn't ask for the cause of death?
> A: No, [it's] a living policy, living policy also cover death, so we don't
>   look at whether it's a major disease or not….the person die already,
>   so we just admit the death claim. (Call #1687)

The agent uses no responses we would characterize as empathic (e.g. "I'm sorry to hear that."). While his tone of voice is reassuring, the agent's words remain neutral and task focused. His candid advice to the caller is a kind of reassurance.

> A: Ah that's right. No use that you doing such a thing.
> C: No use to continue or no use to stop?
> A: No use to continue. Like what I've explained just now. . . .
>   You understand my concept?
> C: Ah, okay (Call #1687)

Solidarity expression, therefore, is as much about offering empathy to the caller as it is about withholding it, if the caller indicates that this would be preferred. To get it right, the agent and the caller need to be "on the same page" and work in a spirit of togetherness to resolve the caller's concerns.

Elaborated Definition of Solidarity

Taken together, the analyses for this study suggest that solidarity expression involves two intermingled aspects: "meaning engagement" and "authentic engagement."

Solidarity is "Meaning Engagement"

Calls earmarked as high in solidarity involved a complex of information giving and seeking. But more than this, we find that these calls involved what Mokros and Aakhus (2002) called "meaning engagement practice." Mokros and Aakhus characterize meaning engagement practice as an alternative conceptualization that "views needs as

generated through social connection and the circumstances that arise from engagement with others and efforts to realize or avoid such engagement" (2002, p. 12, see also Kuhlthau, 1993). Our high solidarity calls suggest that meaning engagement is a quest for mutual understanding regarding a caller's real concern and how to address it.

We found that agents tackled meaning engagement in several ways: (1) using inquiry, as seen in the examples for *asks direction* and *shows attentiveness*, (2) employing paraphrase or repetition, (e.g. A: "Oh you mean…"), (3) employing varying degrees of explanation, sometimes facilitated by referring to a flyer or letter the caller has at hand, and (4) remaining focused on the task despite distractions such as caller provocations. Consider "explanation" (3) and "focus" (4) below.

Explanation proved tricky. An example is the agent who persisted in using the term "integrated" although clearly the caller did not understand its meaning. Contrast the agent who used a flyer or letter the caller had on hand as an explanatory tool.

C: So in simple terms I only want to know, if I want to surrender [the policy] at 21 [years], what is my cash value? Okay, so I get my cash value with the cash bonus.
A: Add up to that year.
C: Add up to that year
A: Plus the surrender value on the right hand side [of the text].
C: Aha.
A: Plus the 5000 on top [of the text]
C: I think that is very simple
A: Not bad, ah? (laughing together) (Call #11a)

Meaning engagement is also enhanced when an agent stays focused on the task rather than getting sidetracked by responding to a caller's emotional outburst. Two agent responses from the same call illustrate:

A: This is your area of complaint, right?
A: Hmm. Let me see … who I can ask … to speak with you. (Call #2022)

Solidarity can only develop if the agent becomes engaged with the caller to fully (not superficially) understand caller's needs. Most callers do not seem to prepare

for these calls and often calls are a consequence of caller confusion. One key agent response for meaning engagement is asking questions throughout the call. It may take some probing for the agent to distinguish what is important and what is peripheral in what the caller says. The agent has to discover what information the caller really needs to know. Meaning engagement is about navigating the interplay between information provided and information needs. It's about information soliciting, selection, and sequencing.

Overall our observations show that agents sometimes overwhelm callers with tangential details, burying the key information in a mass of irrelevant facts. We suspect that this prolongs a call unnecessarily, and diminishes agent efficiency.

Solidarity is "Authentic Collaboration"

In calls high in solidarity we find the agent is an "authentic collaborator" rather than primarily a negotiator trying to finesse the tension between company goals and caller needs. In high solidarity calls the agent and caller work together to do what they can amidst the constraints and opportunities the company provides, as illustrated in Figure 1.
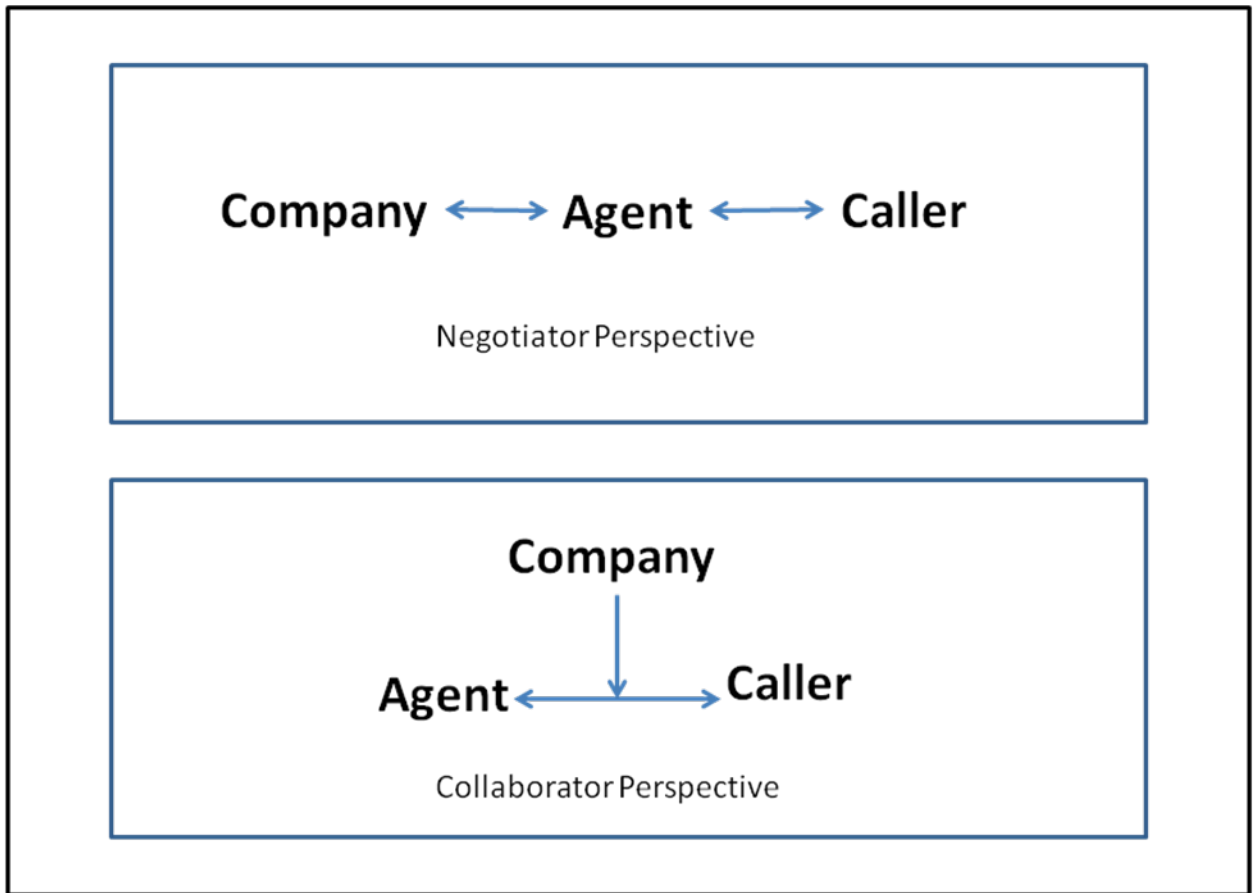
Figure 1: Negotiator vs Collaborative Perspectives

The authentic collaborator takes pains not to place the caller in a passive role or to thwart feedback the caller may wish to express. In this the agent does facework, showing deference and regard for the caller (Tracy & Tracy, 1998; Hubler, 1983). There is politeness in the fullest sense as Brown and Levinson (1986) would have it. Neither does the agent assume a passive role him or herself, as we have heard in many failed calls by our measures. Solidarity involves collaboration in which both interactants are actively involved (Figure 2).
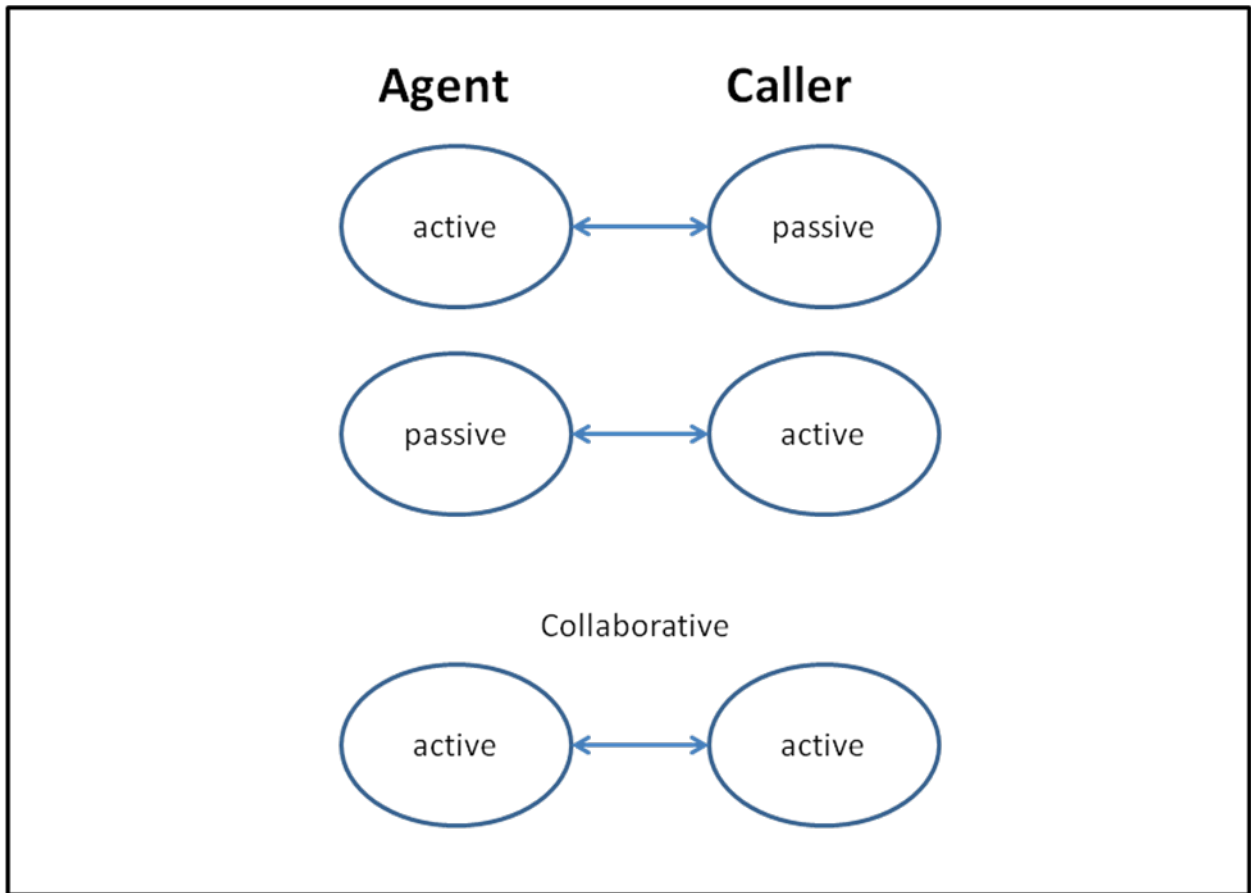
Figure 2: Collaboration is Interactive

This notion of collaboration exceeds what some regard as possible for the call center context. Recall Franken and Wallace's (2006) conclusion that agent–caller interactions are a negotiated enterprise and the extent to which there is mutual engagement is debatable. They observe agent responses imposed by the company, even scripted. However, our data indicate that "authentic collaboration" is achievable, although it's not easy in stressed calls. Perhaps this occurred in our data because agents receive only "suggestive scripts" for opening and closing calls, the content of their calls is left to their individual discretion. With this came some freedom to suggest actions that are in a caller's best interest even though it may mean less money for the company in the short run, as in the following.

A: I don't encourage [that you] do such thing, ma'am.
C: Why?

A: The premium you have to pay [would] far outshoot the bonus . . . .
that means the bonus we were going to credit to you each year . . .
will not be as much as the premium you pay. (Call #1687)

Solidarity expression related to collaboration might also involve admission that the company can learn from the caller. Notice the agent's suggestion that his company's materials might be the reason for the misunderstanding.

C: Is very frightening word "auto-cover."
A: Okay, maybe there is some misunderstanding.
C: No
A: Maybe there is some problem with our phrasing. . . .
A: Mr X, if you want I can actually send you a letter.
C: Yeah you send me a letter. I don't feel very comfortable, because even in your terms and conditions . . . [you suggest all is okay] . . . and then you come to this part.

By contrast, there are calls where the agent seems to resist any form of collaboration, like persisting to focus on an action the caller does not want to take. Such calls scored low on *solidarity*. But evidence from high scoring calls shows that even the most skilled agents can slip in and out of mutuality. Take a call referenced earlier under anticipates needs. Recall that the agent starts off well with a series of inquiries.

A: Who promised that to you? . . . ABC staff? Have you spoken to the ABC staff about this? . . . [Is that] what you are made aware of?

But notice how the call depreciates into "there is nothing we can do."

C: Is there anyone that I can speak to, lets say your management . . . .
I find this is very unfair to me . . .
A: If you speak to my management there is nothing that we can do. .
. . [W]e are not the ones who actually sold you the plan . . . .
C: So who can I speak to now? . . . . What was being conveyed to me was very different . . .
A: Hmm, let me see who. . . . [Y]ou know we are not in a position to actually tell you about . . . .
C: I understand, I understand. . . . I mean I'm not making things difficult for you. I just need to speak to someone who is able to authorize…

35

A: Okay can. You just hold on ah. (Call #2022)

Returning to solidarity, the agent tries to define caller's problem and build some level of understanding, a first step toward working together to address the caller's problem.

A: Hello, yeah I've spoken to my manager about this. I think your complaint is more on the misrepresentation. . .

But consider the difference if this statement had been phrased collaboratively as a question, which the agent does later:

A: Is it the personal financial consultant failed to actually reveal some information to you or did he or she tell you another story, no surcharges or so?

In the same call further collaborative opportunity was missed when the agent finally suggested an action the caller can take.

C: I don't know whether is it because . . . at that time you guys want to clinch a deal . . . and I'm not very interested to know about that.
A: That is your area of complaint right? . . . If your area of complaint is . . . then you need to give us a letter [that] we can forward to our compliance department to actually investigate this case. (Call #2022)

Granted the agent remains focused on the task suggesting what can be done and ignoring the caller's implication of blame (C: . . . you guys want to clinch a deal . . . .). But the agent still places the full burden on the caller. The agent could have helped to outline the letter content or offer to send the caller a template or form as suggest in the rewrite below.

A: If your area of complaint is. . . . you can write a letter to our compliance department and they'll investigate your case. I can suggest what you can state in the letter if that would be helpful.

Conclusion

Our notion of solidarity slowly revealed itself as we examined stressed calls, first as a category for types of strategies we saw operating in the calls, second as a challenge to how we look at courtesy, and third as a concept with potential for changing the way we conceptualize customer service in the call center context.

While solidarity was tightly tied to our dependent variable, courtesy, we found that routines commonly associated with politeness, such as understatement, hedging, and honorifics ("Yes, Miss Goh") were helpful at times but not always necessary for its achievement. Solidarity expression involved a wide range of response strategies employed to genuinely engage a particular caller in an effort to understand fully his or her meaning and to invite active-active collaboration. Playing a role were responses for showing attentiveness, anticipating caller needs, asking for direction, and, in some instances, for expressing empathy. But these occurred in no predictable quantity or sequence in high solidarity calls. Certain types of responses occurred in high solidarity calls, such as inquiry and targeted explanation, but we would not prescribe templates for enactment. Calls show that achieving solidarity depends on the evolving agent-caller interaction. It results from active listening, an ability to adjust behavior in real time drawing from a repertoire of linguistic and rhetorical strategies, and from a willingness to prompt two-way interaction. We believe training may facilitate this if it is approached from a choice-based rather than a rule-based approach, introducing trainees to adopt a wide range of strategies and opportunities.

Of course, partnering with customers of the kind we envision cannot happen unless there is a basic level of goodwill on the caller's part. Solidarity requires cooperation on some level. But listening to skilled agents taught us that cooperation could be facilitated, an example being an agent's willingness to give a caller time to emote. We saw the result of this in the caller's response transcribed at the beginning of this paper.

> Caller: Sorry I was pretty harsh to you…. Yah yah, you're very understanding. Ah… Anyway, how old are you?

Generating active participation from the caller takes time, although whether there is some connection between agent efficiency and achieving solidarity remains for another study. We hypothesize that there may be one.

Our data show that achieving solidarity is difficult. Even agents who exercise it slipped in and out of its use. But our analyses suggest that it is achievable to some degree, particularly if the context allows—e.g. the call center we observed placed considerable trust in the agents to manage their own calls without scripts provided by the center.

References

Anderson, B. (2007, 10 May 2007). Hello, South Africa. *Finweek*.

Armistead, C., Kiely, J., Hole, L., & Prescott, J. (2002). An exploration of managerial issues in call centres. *Managing Service Quality, 12*(4), 246–257.

Ashforth, B.E. & Humphrey, R.H. (1993). Emotional labor in service roles: The influence of identity. *Academy of Management Review 18*(1) 88–115.

Axtell, C., Parker, S. K., Holman, D., & Totterdell, P. (2007). Enhancing customer service: Perspective taking in a call centre. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 16*(2), 141–168.

Bailey, B. (2000). Communicative behavior and conflict between African-American customers and Korean immigrant retailers in Los Angeles. *Discourse and Society, 11*(1), 86–108.

Bain, P., & Taylor, P. (2008). No passage to India? Initial responses of UK trade unions to call centre offshoring *Industrial Relations Journal, 39*(1), 5–23.

Bales, R. F. (1950). *Interaction Process Analysis: A method for the study of small groups*. Cambridge, MA: Addison Wesley.

Belt, V., Richardson, R., & Webster, J. (2000). Women's work in the information economy: The case of telephone call centres *Information, Communication & Society, 3*(3), 366–385.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: some universals in language use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Callcentres.net. (2003). Hong Kong call centre industry benchmarking study.

    Retrieved July, 2006, from

    http://www.callcentres.net/CALLCENTRES/LIVE/me.get?site.sectionshow&C

    ALL140

Craig, R. T., Tracy, K., & Spisak, F. (1986). The discourse of requests. *Human*

    Communication Research, 12(4), 437–468.

Deerie, S., & Kinnie, N. (2002). Call centres and beyond: a thematic evaluation. *Human*

    Resource Management Journal, 12(4), 3–13.

Deery, S., Iverson, R., & Walsh, J. (2002). Work relationships in telephone call centres:

    understanding emotional exhaustion and employee withdrawal. *Journal of*

    Management Studies, 39(4), 471–496.

Dorman, C., & Zapf, D. (2004). Customer-related social stressors and burnout. *Journal*

    of Occupational Health Psychology, 9(1), 61–82.

Dorman, C., & Zijlstra, F. R. H. (2003). Call centres: High on technology - high on

    emotions. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 12*(4),

    305–392.

Erikson, R. J., & Wharton, A. S. (1997). Inauthenticity and depression: Assessing the

    consequences of interactive service work. *Work and Occupation, 24*(2), 188–

    213.

Feinberg, R. A., Kim, I. S., Hokama, L., de Ruyter, K., & Keen, C. (2000). Operational

    determinants of caller satisfaction in the call center. *International Journal of*

    Service Industry Management, 11(2), 131–141.

Fielding, G. (2003). Taking conversation seriously: The role of the call centre in the organisation's customer contact strategy. *Interactive Marketing, 4*(3), 257–266.

Ford, W. S. Z., & Etienne, C.N. (1994). CAN I HELP YOU? A framework for the interdisciplinary research on customer service encounters. *Management Communication Quarterly, 7*(4), 413–441.

Franken, M., & Wallace, C. (2006). Women's work: the language use of call centre representatives. In M. Barret, & Davidson, M.J. (Ed.), *Gender and Communication at Work*. Aldershot, Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Frenkel, S., Tam, M., Korczynski, M., & Shire, K. (1998). Beyond bureaucracy? Work organization in call centers. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 9*(6), 957–979.

Goldberg, L. S., & Grandey, A.A. (2007). Display rules versus display autonomy: Emotion regulation, emotional exhaustion, and task performance in a call centre simulation. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 12*(3), 301–318.

Grice, P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and Semantics* (Vol. 3, pp. 41-58). New York: Academic Press.

Hagge, J., & Kostelnick, C. (1989). Linguistic politeness in professional prose: A discourse analysis of auditors' suggestion letter, with implications for business communication pedagogy. *Written Communication, 6*, 312–339.

Holtgrewe, U. (2001). Recognition, Intersubjectivity and Service Work: Labour Conflicts in Call Centres. *Industrielle Beziehungen. Zeitschrift für Arbeit, Organisation und Management, 8*(1), 37–54.

Houston, M. B., Bettencourt, L. A., & Wenger, S. (1998). The relationship between

    waiting in a service queue and evaluations of service quality: A field theory

    perspective. *Psychology and Marketing, 15*(8), 735–753.

Hubler, A. (1983). *Understatements and Hedges in English*. Amsterdam: John

    Benjamins.

Hummerston, G. (2007). UK contact centre industry still in rude health. *Precision

    Marketing, 19*(8), 12.

Jones, S. (1999). Communication at the call center. *Strategic Communication

    Management,* 3(5), 22.

Kadir, E., & Bader, B. (2008). Developing staff schedules for a bilingual

    telecommunication call center with flexible workers. *Computers & Industrial

    Engineering, 54*(1), 118.

Kantsperger, R., & Kunz, W.H. (2005). Managing overall service quality in customer

    care centers: Empirical findings of a multi-perspective approach. *International

    Journal of Service Industry Management, 16*(2), 135–151.

Korczynski, M. (2003). Communities of coping: Collective emotional labour in service

    work. *Organization: the interdisciplinary journal of organization, theory, and

    society, 10*(1), 55–79.

Kuhlthau, C. C. (1993). *Seeking meaning: a process approach to library and

    information services*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Lewig, K. A., & Dollard, M. F. (2003). Emotional dissonance, emotional exhaustion

    and job satisfaction in call centre workers. *European Journal of Work and

    Organizational Psychology, 12*(4), 366–392.

Malhotra, N., Budhwar, P., & Prowse, P. (2007). Linking rewards to commitment: an empirical investigation of four UK call centres. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 18*(12), 2095.

Miller, D., & Salkind, N. J. (2002). *Handbook of research design and social measurement* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Mokros, H. B., & Aakhus, M. (2002). From information-seeking behaviour to meaning engagement practice. *Human Communication Research, 28*(2), 298–312.

Mulholland, K. (2000). *Emotional labour and tacit resistance in call center employment 'insisting on quality'.* Paper presented at the 18th Annual International Labour Process Conference, University of Strathclyde.

Parsons, T., & Bales, R.F. (1956). *Family Socialization and Interaction Process.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

Peaucelle, J.-L. (2000). From Taylorism to post-Taylorism: Simultaneously pursuing several management objectives. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 13*(5), 452–467.

Pontes, M. C. F., & Kelly, C. O. (2000). The identification of inbound call center agents' competencies that are related to callers' repurchase intentions. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 14*(3), 41–49.

Poster, W. (2007). Who's On the Line? Indian Call Center Agents Pose as Americans for U.S.-Outsourced Firms. *The Journal of Industrial Relations, 46*(2), 271–304.

Reinsch, N. L., Steele, C. M., Lewis, P. V., Stano, M. & Beswick, R. W. (1990). Measuring telephone apprehension. *Management Communication Quarterly, 4*(2) 198-221.

Rogers, P., & Lee-Wong, L. (2003). Reconceptualizing politeness to accommodate dynamic tensions in subordinate-to-superior reporting. *Journal of Business and Technical Comunication, 17*(4), 379–412.

Samuelson, D. A. (1999). Predictive dialing for outbound telephone call centers. *Interfaces, 29*(5), 66.

Schuster, C. P., & Danes, J. E. (1986). Asking questions: Some characteristics of successful sales encounters. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 6*(1), 17-27.

Spitzberg, B. H., & Cupach, W. R. (1989). *Handbook of Interpersonal Competence Research*. New York, NY: Springer.

Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss what Matters Most.* Tandem Library.

Sypher, B. D., Russo, T.C., & Hane, A.C. (1989). Listening, communication abilities, and success at work. *The Journal of Business Communication, 26*(4), 293–303.

Taylor, P., & Bain, P. (1999). 'An assembly line in the head': Work and employee relations in the call centre. *Industrial Relations Journal, 30*(2), 101–117.

Taylor, P., Hyman, J., Mulvey, G., & Bain, P. (2002). Work organization, control and the experience of work in call centres. *Work, Employment and Society, 16*(2), 133–150.

Tracy, K. (1995). Action-implicative discourse analysis. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 14*(1), 195–215.

van Bentum, R., & Stone, M. (2005). Customer relationship management and the

impact of corporate culture - A European study. *Journal of Database Marketing
& Customer Strategy Management, 13*(1), 28–54.

van Waes, L., & van Wijk, C. (2000-2001). The influence of politeness on the

perception of product recall notices. *Document Design, 2*, 272–279.

Wallace, M. W., Eagleson, G., & Waldersee, R. (2000). The sacrificial HR strategy in

call centres. *International Journal of Service Industry Management, 11*(2), 174.

Wilk, S. L. & Moynihan, :. M. (2005). Display rule "regulators": The relationship

between supervisors and worker emotional exhaustion. *Journal of Applied
Psychology, 90*(5) 917-927.

Zeithaml, V. A., & Bitner, M. J. (2000). *Services marketing : integrating customer

focus across the firm* (2nd ed.). Boston: Irwin/McGraw-Hill.

Appendix A: Social Stressors Scales

Stressor scale

Verbal aggression subscale
1. The customer raised his/her voice at the agent.
2. The customer personally attacked the agent or company verbally.
3. The customer showed irritation, even over a minor matter.
4. The customer argued with the agent.

Ambiguous demands subscale
1. The customer's wishes were contradictory.
2. It is not clear what the customer is demanding from the agent.
3. It is difficult to make arrangements with the customer.
4. The customer's instructions complicate the agent's work.

(Scale: 1 = not at all true; 7 = absolutely true)

Appendix B: Coding Courtesy

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Moderately disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Moderately agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree

1. DEFERENCE: The agent showed politeness & deference to the customer.
2. RESPECT: The agent demonstrated that he/she respected the caller.
4. SELF CONTROL: The agent controls his/her temper and handles difficulties rationally.
5. CANNOT REGULATE CALLER EMOTION: The agent is unable to make the caller feel good.

Shows empathy
--Calming, reassuring, expressing understanding, sympathy or regret
--Demonstrating concern for a caller's problem or point of view
--Using a "human touch" to address underlying concerns

- o *I'm sorry to hear that*
- o *I'm sorry. Can you hear me now?*
- o *I understand. I see what you mean*
- o *That's really frustrating isn't it?*

Shows solidarity
--Personalizing as in a relationship rather than simply a depersonalized task—e.g. asking for and using the other's name rather than just saying "hello"
--Enhances the spirit of togetherness—e.g. "inclusive we" rather than "royal we"
--Framing differences from the perspective of commonalities
--Working with the other on the task, issues, problem(s), as if a team

- o *(noise in background) Some building going on your end?*
- o *How should I address you?*
- o *Let's see what we can do about this. How about we…*
- o *How about I send you the form, you submit it, and then when it comes back "denied" you can use the denial as evidence for your argument?*
- o *What we might do…..Do you think this would work?*

Show attentiveness
--Expressing the presence of the other via acknowledgement tokens—e.g. mm, uh-huh
--Extending words or phrases to confirm, affirm, show attention.
--Commenting and gives feedback and/or explanation demonstrating listening and attention throughout.

- o *Uh-huh. Yes. Correct. Mmm*
- o *I understand what you're saying.*
- o *That's right. Every year.*
- o *I hear you, I hear you. Do you mean that. . . ?*

Anticipates needs
--Giving undertaking, in response to requests or hints by the other
--Offering help or information without being asked or pushed by the other
--Grasping unstated needs or concerns, making an effort to confirm and address them

- o *Do you want to check the amount?*
- o *Do you want me to send you a copy?*
- o *Let me (do something)*
- o *Yes, that's true. In addition, you need to call your bank.*
- o *Actually, you can check this with OCBC bank. Their customer service number is..*

Asks for clarification/suggestion/probes
--Asking other to explain, or elaborate on problem or request
--Checking inferences and assumptions by means of requests for information
--Using questions to uncover what the other may be thinking or require
--Inquiring about the workability or possibility of an approach or solution

- o *What do you want to know?*
- o *By "how about this" do you mean…?*
- o Other*: Do you understand what I'm trying to say?* Response*: I'm not sure. Do you mean…?*
- o *Is there anything else I can help you with?*
- o *How is it if I ask XYZ to call you?*
- o *Would you consider changing your payments from monthly to annually?*

Appendix D: Call # 1792

A: Good afternoon…. Great Eastern America Customer service

C: Hello?

A: Hello… good afternoon sir

C: Yah yah.. no I was asking well lah… I dunno why I have to ask so many people. Ahh, can you email me the ahh ILP _____ premium surrendering form

A: ILP?

C: Yah

A: Ah, send it to you lah? You give me the <u>real posi</u> number?

C: No no. Email me the surrendering form

A: I cannot email sir, if you want us to email then you've got to email to us. If you want I can send the form to you.

C: How come you all do not email to me ah?

A: No, for surrender I think you've got to request ah. If you want I can send the form to you.

C: Yah lah, I'm requesting whether you just email to me and I can just print out.

A: But I cannot email from here. Email will be done by backroom.

C: Then, ah lah, you will ask the backroom guy to email to me lah

A: You email to _____ to email to you lah. I couldn't ask them to email because they need the _____ to, to request

C: Yah, which I'm requesting right now ah

A: Ok, I'll send it to you if you want

C: Huh? (sigh) You… You don't understand English or what? I said you email to me…

A: I cannot email to them they need the ___ to email to them in order for them to send out. If it's surrendering a policy, we discourage surrendering.

C: Personally, so I'm not ah, aiyah, so you'll not email to me.

A: I can email for you.

C: And who, who can I speak to? For, For them to email me

A: No, you email it to our email address. They will send to you via email. I give you our email address…

C: (long silence) huh… (sigh) Okay, you give me your email address...

A: Okay… We care

C: Uh

A: at life is great

C: Okay

A: Dot com dot sg

C: Okay, thank you

A: Thank you