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Every Team Was Green

The last mile of strategy, and where it breaks

> A customer is failed by a handover no team was built to own. One honest count and one difficult conversation show how it can change.

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How this was made. This essay was AI-drafted. The author directed it, shaping the argument, structure, sourcing and edits, rather than writing each sentence personally.

By Friday afternoon Priya had rung three times about the same dead router, and the company's dashboards had counted three successes.

It started on a Monday evening, when the broadband went down. Priya rang, braced for a fight, and got Asha, who was kind. A remote test on the line passed, so Asha booked an engineer for Thursday, gave her a reference number and said, "You're all set." She meant it. Priya believed her, thanked her twice, and for about ten minutes felt looked after.

On Wednesday night, at a desk Priya would never see, a technician called Marcus picked up a ticket on her line. He ran his own test. It passed. He had eleven tickets waiting, and a rule that existed for a good reason: engineers had been spending whole days outside lines that were fine, while customers with real faults waited a week. The rule says a passed test closes the ticket, and closing tickets inside the promised time is what his team is judged on, so he closed it as "no fault found". That cancelled Thursday's visit automatically, a side effect nobody had chosen when the two systems were joined up. Nobody rang Priya. Marcus broke no rule; he went home with three tickets cleared and a good day on his screen.

Priya took Thursday off and stayed in from eight until six, listening for the van. At six she looked at the router. The same amber light.

On Friday morning a different agent, Neha, told her what had happened, and Priya could hear that Neha hated telling her. Neha could see everything: the test, the cancelled visit, the closed ticket. She could not reopen it or reach the team that had closed it. She could log a new one and offer the following Wednesday, a date set by a team she could not call. She could add a note, and she did, and the note went to a queue nobody was assigned to read. Priya said things she was not proud of, and Neha took them. Priya rang a third time that afternoon, with nothing left in her voice but anger, and

got someone who could do even less. When that call ended, the screen asked how it had gone. “Resolved” was the option for a call that ended without a transfer, and it was the only one that did not count against the agent.

WHO	WHAT THEIR DASHBOARD SHOWED
Contact centre	Three calls answered within target, each marked resolved because it ended without a transfer
Field engineering	No missed appointment, since the visit was cancelled before dispatch
Network operations	Priya’s ticket, closed inside the promised time
Priya	Three calls, two tickets, and a fault still there

The company’s strategy that year began with the words “customer first”. It reached each team as a number: calls answered, visits kept, tickets closed on time. Every team delivered its number. Nobody’s number was Priya. On the company’s dashboard every team was green. Priya’s router was still amber.

Priya was not the only one. On the first Tuesday of the month Rekha, who runs the contact centre, sat in the review with a slide she had built in her own time. It showed customers ringing back about the same fault, within days, after a ticket had been closed. Tom, who runs network operations, had never seen the figure. His team hit its number every month, and he knew what a stricter closing rule would do to it. “Interesting,” he said. “Can you pull it by region?” It went into the minutes as an action to look into, and next month it was there again.

Nobody was hiding anything. Tom’s rule governed a handover, the point where one team passes work to the next, and it did what it was built to do. The cost of a wrong closure landed somewhere else, and no one above either of them had ever chosen between closing fast and checking that the fault had gone.

Rekha did not bring it to the review again. She decided what a repeat was: the same customer ringing about the same fault within 30 days of a ticket closing. She asked her analyst how many of last month’s customers with a closed broadband fault had done it, counted by customer, not by ticket, so a repeat could not be hidden by opening a new one. Nineteen in a hundred. Her own “Resolved” button was in that number too, and she knew it.

She found Tom at the end of the day, in his office, with nobody else there, and put one sheet on his desk. “It isn’t a complaint,” she said. “Half of it is mine.” Tom read it twice. “That rule exists because I had a van sitting outside a working router for forty minutes while somebody with no connection waited a week.” “I know,” Rekha said. “I’m not asking you to undo it. One product, two weeks. If the test passes and the customer has rung before, the ticket stays open for the engineer.”

“No.” He said it without heat. “Not because it’s wrong. Because my closure time goes red the first week, a visit takes a day, and I report to a man who reads one number. When he asks, I’m the person who made it worse.” Rekha had expected that and had not planned an answer. “Then I’ll come in with you,” she said. “I’ll say it was my slide and my request, and that the baseline is in writing. And from

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Monday my team stops pressing Resolved on a call where the customer has rung before, which makes my number worse too, and nobody on my floor gets marked down for it; that's mine to carry. And I'll put it in writing that this count goes in nobody's bonus. It's only there to tell us where to look."

Tom did not move. "Your number has a hole in it," he said. "Some of those people ring back about a storm, or their own wiring, or a fault that really is new. Not all nineteen are my closures, and you can't tell me how many are." "No," said Rekha. "I can't. Not yet. That's what two weeks would show." "And you'll come in once," Tom said. "He asks every quarter." "Then I'll come in every quarter." He picked up a pen and did not sign anything. "Two weeks," he said. "If it turns out to be mostly storms, I stop it, and you don't argue. If my closure time drops more than five points, I stop it too. And I'll tell Marcus's team myself."

It did not go cleanly. In the first week the share of Tom's tickets closed on time slipped four percentage points and the man who reads one number asked about it, and Tom and Rekha went in together. Rekha's analyst matched each repeat to the ticket closed before it: about two thirds were Tom's closures, and the rest were storms and customers' own wiring. Marcus was partly right, too. Twice that fortnight an engineer lost a day outside a router that was fine, because the ticket stayed open on a customer who had rung about something else. Tom said so, and Rekha did not argue. When Tom told Marcus's team, Marcus asked, "So I'm the one who phones people now?" Tom said yes, and gave him ten minutes a shift to do it, a two-line script, and permission to hand an angry customer back to the contact centre. They changed the rule: if the test passes and the customer has rung before, Marcus rings the customer first, and the engineer goes only if the fault is still there. Rekha also had her agents' repeat notes sent to her own sheet, which she reads every Monday, instead of the queue nobody read. Under the first rule the repeats fell from nineteen in a hundred to fifteen. Under the second they fell to eleven. It was two weeks on one product with nothing to compare against, so the figures were directional, not a tested effect, and Rekha said so every time she presented it.

Three months on, the broadband went down again, and Priya rang Asha. Wednesday afternoon Marcus's test passed, and his screen said repeat contact. He rang her. "The test says your line's fine. Is the light still amber?" It was. On Thursday the engineer found a fault no remote test could see, and by six the router was green. Priya never rang on Friday. Asha had typed repeat in the note, and it had gone to Rekha's sheet. Priya never learned Marcus's name or Tom's. Tom's four percentage points never fully came back, and each quarter he and Rekha still go in together and say the same thing again. Rekha thinks the trade was worth it. Tom is not sure, and neither of them says the other is wrong.

The step.

- **Manager:** ask your analyst for last month's count of customers who rang again within 30 days about the same problem, counted by customer, your own team's share included. Take it to the team whose rule causes the repeats, say what you will change on your side first, and ask for two weeks on one product, with the result that stops the trial agreed beforehand.

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- **The team whose rule closes the ticket:** when an automated test passes and the customer has rung before, check with the customer before closing, and keep the visit or task open if the fault is still there.
- **Agent:** write “repeat” in the note, do not press Resolved on a call where the customer has rung before, and ask who reads repeat notes each week. Your manager should agree beforehand that you are not marked down for it.

The companion field note gives the query, the trial, and what to do if the count is hard to get.

Notes and Sources

John Seddon calls this failure demand: demand caused by an organisation’s failure to do something, or to do it right, for the customer. Priya’s repeat calls are one example. A figure that becomes a target tends to drift from what it measured, which is Goodhart’s law. The broadband story is invented: every person, company and number in it.

Goodhart, Charles A. E. “Problems of Monetary Management: The U.K. Experience.” In Papers in Monetary Economics, Vol. I. Reserve Bank of Australia (1975).

Strathern, Marilyn. “‘Improving Ratings’: Audit in the British University System.” European Review, 5(3) (1997), pp. 305–321. The source of the common phrasing of Goodhart’s law: when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.

Seddon, John. Freedom from Command and Control. Vanguard Press (2003).

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