

## **Empowering Sales Forces: Advanced Strategies**

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The economic climate over the past few years has made business more challenging and competition more heated. At all levels, employees have been charged with doing more with less resources, heavier workloads and, in some cases, a reduced sales force. In today's business environment, it's vital that companies looking to grow have sales teams comprised of highly motivated individuals who know how to sell the company and its products and services, position key competitive differentiators, access and speak to the needs of C-level executives, and even position themselves as knowledgeable, trusted advisors. To reach this end, organizations can institute a series of strategies to keep their teams energized, motivated and empowered. As we know, a highly effective sales force contributes significantly to a highly regarded, successful business.

Sales professionals can be among the most challenging—and rewarding—groups to train. Most are confident, and many have rock-solid, thriving careers, which leads some to feel that they don't need ongoing coaching and development. Providing learning for this type of sales professional is like teaching an old dog new tricks. You must first appeal to them by capturing their attention. Most of the time audiences are on your side, but with sales, you have to "win it." Further, if you're introducing change, you have to "prove it" as well.

### **Know Your Audience**

Before embarking on any learning endeavor, it's important that senior-level managers understand the issues and the sales environment. They must experience and address the most challenging problems firsthand, and then apply solutions through learning and training techniques. There are several challenges and common areas of breakdown that today's sales teams face. While the economy has been the most prevalent challenge in recent years, a number of other factors and trends have contributed as well.

Customers are more savvy now than ever before, and the Internet provides access to just about any type of information they need, any time of day. The need for human interaction in buying commodities and consumables has decreased. Customers can price, compare and purchase most products by clicking a button. Sales representatives have to be at the top of their game each and every day to use the human touch as an advantage in closing deals.

Even for introductory meetings, prospects come to the table armed with information not only about your company's products and services, but also about competitive offerings and pricing. This puts more pressure on sales professionals to know their offerings inside and out, along with those offered by the competition.

More importantly, sales teams must be prepared with a thorough understanding of the prospect's needs and business challenges. Doing their homework and asking important, probing front-end questions is key. They must be well-versed on the prospect's industry challenges, opportunities and intricacies, as well as their business objectives and criteria.

C-level executives are becoming more visible and involved in buying decisions, so sales professionals must be able to cater to an array of audiences. During the sales-pitch process, it's critical to address their specific needs, speak their language and even "read" their audiences to get them to respond in specific ways. Communicating with C-level management, who want to understand the big picture, the enterprise impact and the outputs versus outcomes differs from techniques used with middle management and their staff, who ultimately will be held responsible for the project's success.

Training and role-playing can be quite effective tactics, teaching sales professionals to read the group through practice simulations. It's important that they quickly identify the decision-makers, so they can address them directly.

In the heat of the deal, some sales representatives are guilty of selling solutions or repositioning their product or service capabilities in ways beyond their reach. This can cause huge ripple effects. When they sell offerings that are not available or talk too aggressively about future innovations that are more conceptual than real, the burden can fall on engineering, marketing and other departments, including management, to jump through hoops. The result generally equates to failed expectations and customer dissatisfaction. Promoting what can be considered "vaporware" in the short term can throw a real wrench into the sales cycle and put the credibility of representatives and their organization on the line. In the long term, these tactics might result in irreversible damage to the company's brand and reputation.

Another macroeconomic trend in business today is consolidation. The technology industry in particular has experienced a high level of merger and acquisition (M&A) activity. When organizations go through such combinations, there's a massive potential for breakdowns in the sales process.

M&As tend to have a higher success level and less "pain" when the same lines of business come together. Conglomerates are much more complex. Bringing employees together and teaching a positive mindset about those who used to be the competition is a fine art. Team-building, realignment and education are crucial. Part of the blending process must include addressing biases head-on and regularly to keep staff from reverting to their areas of comfort.

### **'PEDL-ing' Your Way to Success**

While there are many factors that make up the environment in which our sales teams operate, a particular learning strategy has been especially successful in keeping teams aligned, collaborative, motivated and intact. This continuous strategy incorporates learning around leadership, communication and having a shared game plan—all with the intent of improving and sustaining development at the individual, team and organizational level. The model centers on the PEDL (plan, execute, debrief and learn) principle.

PEDL is an interactive, cyclical process that creates meaningful change over time and provides the foundation for sustainability and achievement in sales environments. This principle is grounded through four guiding traits: honesty, willingness to give and receive constructive feedback, honoring differences as

assets and the ability to take feedback about whether intentions are in alignment with behavior.

The first level is personal best, which takes place through setting goals at the individual level. Keeping a journal is a key strategy for reinforcing these aspirations. This technique focuses on personal responsibility and learning in a nurturing environment, while encouraging individuals to actively challenge themselves and receive team feedback on goals and resulting performance.

The “coach to learn” method is another way to accelerate individual learning, as well as deepen awareness of team dynamics. Each team should receive training on coaching, interpersonal skills and sales psychology. When team members know they have to teach it to others, it takes on a heightened meaning and responsibility.

The next level—team best—focuses on the promotion of a shared vision among teammates. Because of the high-stress atmosphere in sales, uniting each member of the group into one powerhouse is critical. “Pass the rock” truth-telling sessions can be an effective method for improving team functionality and fostering open, constructive feedback. In this process, team members take turns sharing their feelings, challenges and successes, and then the floor is opened for discussion. The objective is to be honest and forthright, disclosing important personal truths that create understanding. In the end, participants have provided the communication necessary to address conflict, clear the air, refocus and support one another.

Bringing in outside experts to coach a sales team is another way to achieve team best. This tactic brings new ideas into the mix. Adding a third party to the sales environment can contribute to a high-performance team and reinforce the concept of improvement and innovation. Often, sales professionals feel there’s only one way to sell, but in reality, there are several effective ways to close deals.

Another effective tactic for sales teams is the use of visualization and imaging to learn how a truly successful sale looks from start to finish. The sequence of events is outlined for each member using relaxation and visual images. Acting out these scenarios through role-play also demonstrates the effectiveness of different approaches and moves the team toward best practices.

Organizational best is critically important because it works on unifying a culture of excellence, inspiring growth throughout the organization. To obtain organizational best, participants must focus on the whole system, including key stakeholders and support groups closely associated with the team. To open the lines of communication and develop an understanding among groups, a variety of methods can be applied, including retreats and one-on-one connections. Quarterly, semiannual and annual gatherings can facilitate alignment with all stakeholders. It also is useful to build the foundation for an open, inclusive environment and a collaborative learning system.

Team decision-making processes help achieve organizational best. At both the team and organization levels, major decisions are made by consensus. The delineation between these methods becomes clear with practice and use of the PEDL model. While slow at first, the decision-making process produces a high-trust, high-

commitment culture.

### **Aligning the Three Levels**

Within this system, strategy is centered on the belief that growth and development is achieved through getting the best at the individual, team and organizational levels. The three must be in sync to succeed. Proper alignment happens only when you have leadership, communication and shared vision.

Leadership is the most important element in the alignment process. There are three forms to take into account: formal, shared and consultative. Formal leadership provides direction with compelling messages that develop clarity and passion, which result in commitment to a united purpose. Shared leadership develops trust, respect and accountability, and helps make each participant responsible for team performance. Consultative leadership helps individuals, teams and the organization improve.

However, for a positive environment, roles, rules, boundaries and processes should be established. Often, the head of the group helps formalize the team's long-term vision, provides directive leadership and requires a level of commitment from team members. All three leadership styles play a key role in establishing a positive, effective sales team.

The second supporting element is communication. It creates the coordination and openness required to optimize continuous learning at every level. It's vital that open communication be present when aligning the three levels of the system. There are two unique strategies that sales teams can use to ensure that open communication takes place. The first is the "contract for working together," which is when teams commit to being honest, being open to and willing to give and receive constructive feedback, accepting differences as assets, and becoming personally accountable for aligning behavior with stated intentions. Secondly, teams must commit to process behaviors at the individual, team and organizational levels.

Ideally, open and structured communication should be applied at all levels. Communication quality inside the team will separate it from the competition by enabling members to confront, understand and use conflict for learning. In addition, structured communication instills the exchange of ideas and the sharing of best practices. The structured communication process permits all three levels of the system to work in tandem to achieve success.

The third piece of the system is a shared vision or game plan. It's vital that sales teams have a clear vision that all members understand and agree upon. They will then be committed to transforming energy into action. Establishing a long-term vision is important, as it ensures the team's efforts support each individual's values and goals. The shared vision is instrumental in generating commitment and accountability among all team members.

### **The Sum of the Parts Creates a Better Whole**

Continuous improvement through sustainable learning develops a culture of high achievement through challenge, collaboration and caring. Here are some questions that can be answered to help measure success:

- Does each member of the sales force have a sense of personal responsibility that's reinforced within a nurturing environment?
- Do sales team members have a common sense of purpose and a shared game plan?
- Is the sales force aligned with the organization's overall vision, focus and priorities?

The golden rule is the alignment of leadership, communication and a shared vision. Making the "whole" successful requires keeping all of these elements aligned. However, it's important to remember that this is a journey without end. Creating high performance through sustainable learning requires constant nurturing, patience and attention. Practice makes perfect in everything we do, and repetition is invaluable to motivate and maintain an energized sales force.

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