

Why Is It So Hard to Improve a Sales Force— and Why Do We Tend to Lose It Once We Change It?

Does this sound like your sales organization?

George was flying home after having spent time riding with the last members of his new sales team. He had recently joined his industrial equipment manufacturing company as the VP of Sales. Having spent his life selling in this industry, he was confident he understood what it would take to be successful in this competitive a market.

On his flight home George is thinking about the first few months he has spent riding with all 12 of the sales reps who now report to him. He is glad he had felt it was so critical to get out and meet their larger customers as soon as possible and to assess the skills and experiences of his new sales team.

George is laughing as he thinks about his new situation. He wonders if his glass is half full or half empty. On the positive side he has a sales team he thinks he can work with. His assessment is that he has four real pros on his team: years of experience and strong sales

ARE YOU AND YOUR SALES ORGANIZATION GOOD ENOUGH TO GET BETTER?

numbers but with a collective “just leave me alone unless I ask for help with shipments and pricing” attitude. These four are generating about half his total sales. They have a lot of really strong larger customer relationships in (for the most part) stable territories, are proficient at maintaining these relationships but do not cultivate a lot of new growth, he thinks.

Two sales reps are probably not savable. While they are nice people who have been in their territory several years, they aren’t selling much of anything and don’t even seem to be trying. They deserve a fair shot, he thinks, but they are both clearly in over their heads.

He was surprised to learn he also has two brand new “rookies” to outside sales; each has less than a year in the job. Both moved up in the company through the customer service side but were completely green to outside selling and territory management.

His final four reps are “middle of the pack” types. Not your best performers but still doing okay. George saw lots of opportunity with this group and the rookies as well, but they are also in need of a lot of work and attitude adjustments.

Now for the heavy lifting to start, George thinks. He is going to have to meet with Maggie, the president of the company and his boss to begin discussing what would need to change to achieve the kind of growth expectations Maggie identified when he was hired.

Why is change so damned hard? He knows his team is good, and he knows, for the most part, they are good enough to get better. He just isn’t seeing a real clear path of how to get himself and his team there, and then to maintain that level of performance.

Does George’s situation share any similarities to the sales team you are leading? Is your sales team performing at the levels you want and need? What techniques have you employed in your efforts to increase the success and profitability of your sales team? How well did those techniques work?

After almost 25 years as a sales and sales management consultant researching, training, and coaching sales teams like George’s, I’ve seen a significant number of attempts to change that have not worked.

Want to increase the professionalism, skills, and selling success of every member of your sales team? The majority of sales situations can be improved, but they will require you to invest a significant amount of effort to make the changes necessary in you, your company, and all the members of your sales team.

Though you can lead this process, you cannot successfully complete it alone. Want help? This book has been written to provide you with proven straight answers of what it takes for you and your team to increase your awareness, guidance, structures, and philosophies of successful selling.

Throughout this book there are a series of informal tests for you to administer to various members of your team. The expected responses from your team are also identified as well as suggestions of how to begin leading your sales team to increase your competitive success.

This first chapter offers several very specific tests you can administer to members of your sales team to validate the assumption that the majority of the Invalid Leadership Assumptions that follow are present within your company.

Next, we discuss guidelines to create the best possible environment for your sales team to be successful. Then we cover how to evaluate both yourself and each member of your sales team to understand the current sales (and leadership) levels of your entire team. Once you have a clear and quantified understanding of your current level of performance you can get to work designing, then implementing a learning growth strategy for all members of your team.

You will also learn how you can track various aspects of your team's improvement through the implementation of a Selling Skills Performance Plan and then finally how to lead your team, with their new skills and awareness toward a more successful future.

A note of caution as you proceed with evaluating your company's answers to both these questions and the other evaluation tools provided in this book. All of the evaluation questions asked in this book are meant to help improve your company as you move forward, not to assign blame and/or responsibility for what hasn't happened in the past. As you evaluate and discuss these questions with others in your organization you will need to work to keep all conversations *positive looking forward* instead of *assigning blame and responsibility looking back*.

Evaluating each of these questions alone will most likely only be restating the obvious. The real value to your organization will be if you can ask these questions to several in your company. The more members, from numerous departments, who provide their opinions, the more help you and your company will receive to define and improve the bias and direction of your business. The goal is to generate discussions and awareness so your entire organization is working and supporting your

ARE YOU AND YOUR SALES ORGANIZATION GOOD ENOUGH TO GET BETTER?

efforts to build a stronger and more profitable competitive position within your market.

To help you generate this change, you first need to see if you as a sales leader believe in any of these invalid leadership assumptions.

Invalid Leadership Assumption #1 Believing that experienced = trained.

How do you grow your salespeople's skills and success if they don't feel they need any sales training or coaching? The sad reality is that most salespeople selling today have never been through any type of formal sales training at any time in their careers, yet they still feel they don't need any additional training due to their seniority and experience levels. How many times have you heard managers say ". . . we don't need to provide any sales training because we only hire experienced salespeople"?

Coaching Question #1 Do you want to know if your sales team believes that experienced = trained?

Test: (Ask each sales rep) How much "nonproduct specific" sales training have you had in the past year? How many books on selling have you read or seminars have you attended that were not provided by your company?

Expected Results: The majority of experienced salespeople have done nothing to improve their training or awareness of selling in the past 12 months. Even though they are in a job where if they sell more they'll make more, most don't invest in the skill building efforts necessary to increase their proficiency and total revenues. They believe that experienced = trained.

The majority of attendees of my advanced "business to business" sales training programs enter the room assuming (1) there is nothing new in selling, (2) with their experience they have heard it all before anyway, and (3) with their seniority and success they should be the ones teaching the class, not attending it. Does this describe any of your more senior salespeople?

This book outlines a system to help you evaluate your sales team, shows how to design and implement an ongoing sales skill building process, explains how to track each team member's progress, and helps you strengthen your sales leadership abilities.

Invalid Leadership Assumption #2 The majority of my sales team already knows how to sell our products.

Most salespeople assume they can sell anything to anybody. But how many members of your sales team actually demonstrate organized, structured, and consistent selling skills? Have you ever had a salesperson explain his or her technique by saying, "I can't really explain it but I just know what to say when I get in front of a customer?"

Strong intuitive selling skills are important for anyone involved in selling. But the vast majority of salespeople feel their intuitive skills are all they really need to be successful. Most experienced salespeople see selling as an intuitive art instead of a structured, repeatable science. Their sales calls have no structure or consistency. On one call they are persuasively brilliant, but on the next they "crash and burn." They believe each sales call is so different and unpredictable that they just "wing it" on each call hoping that when they open their mouths they will say something persuasive.

Coaching Question #2 Want to see if your sales team has any understanding of the most basic structures of selling?

Test: (Ask each sales rep) Write down the steps of a sales call.

Expected Results: Salespeople who see selling as a structured science will think and plan out their sales calls following a specific series of steps. If they have been trained, know what they are doing, and have some type of process that works for them, they will be able to write down all of their steps in a minute or less. How long did it take each member of your team? And how clear and effective were the steps they identified?

Though this is one of the most basic questions in selling, the majority of sales reps, even the more successful ones, cannot write down the steps of a sales call because they were never taught, have forgotten what they

ARE YOU AND YOUR SALES ORGANIZATION GOOD ENOUGH TO GET BETTER?

learned years ago from a lack of use, or just see each sales call as being so completely different they don't even understand or see how there could be any kind of consistent steps identified or followed.

Test: (Ask each sales rep) Describe what you plan to accomplish during a sales call.

First, ask each salesperson to identify their best accounts or new growth opportunities. Next, ask them three questions. It's important to allow a salesperson to fully answer each question before asking the next.

Question #1: "What do you plan to accomplish on your next call to this account?" Write down all the things they identify.

Question #2: "What do you plan to accomplish on your second call to that account?" Again, write down anything they say.

Question #3: "What do you plan to accomplish on your third call to this account?"

The majority of sales reps, even the more successful ones, tend to have a strong set of answers to the first sales call question. But the two most common answers to the second sales call question is, "Whatever I don't get done on that first call . . ." or "How am I going to know what I'll do on the second call until I see how far I get on the first call?"

Only a few will have an answer for the third sales call question. How did your sales team do?

Expected Results: A salesperson who plans out their calls and thinks ahead will be able to answer these questions with little thought. But a sales rep who relies on an intuitively biased selling process will answer with a lot of ". . . it depends," or ". . . we'll have to see when we get in there."

Most salespeople are like the "Hellarewe" bird. "Hellarewe" birds are three-foot birds living in four-foot grass and spend their entire lives saying, "Where the hell are we?"

How many moves ahead are your sales reps thinking and planning? Most sales reps spend their entire careers thinking only what their next move will be.

The benefit of thinking multiple moves ahead can be related to playing a game of chess. Your opponent is thinking only one move ahead, but you are consistently thinking two or more moves ahead. How

many games will you win? Unless you make a major error, you will win all of them due to your thinking more moves ahead. So how many moves ahead are your salespeople thinking and working? Would getting your team to consistently think more moves ahead help increase your team's competitive advantage?

Randy is an experienced janitorial and cleaning supplies salesperson. He has a solid set of accounts and normally performs in the upper half of the sales team. Randy has always believed that really exceptional salespeople are born that way. "Either you've got it or you don't," has always been how he accounted for the success of the best salespeople.

But Randy's manager Sandy has some concerns and feels that Randy could be generating a lot more sales from the territory he is managing. Randy works hard but does not seem to have any account plans or structure to his selling efforts. His entire plan each week is to work his territory, respond to customer questions, and solve any problems that come up. "Keep tracking your customer until they order something," seems to be his only sales strategy. Sandy has ridden with Randy on several occasions and has noticed some inconsistencies. On some calls Randy is brilliant, but on others he just wastes his customers' time with idle chitchat. He can provide great answers after a call as to why it was successful but never seems to be able to accurately predict what will happen before going into a call.

Randy is a solid performer but could be so much better. Sandy sees that Randy lacks any consistency in his selling and territory management skills, but she can't seem to figure out how to help Randy improve his performance and success.

Coaching Question #3 Do you have any salespeople performing at Randy's level?

Selling doesn't have to be this inconsistent and disorganized!

Invalid Leadership Assumption #3 Even without ongoing management leadership and involvement our sales reps will all be working on opportunities to proactively grow their territories.

The job of a sales rep is to proactively grow sales, but the majority of salespeople, like Randy, tend to only reactively work their territory.

ARE YOU AND YOUR SALES ORGANIZATION GOOD ENOUGH TO GET BETTER?

Are your salespeople rainmakers looking for and making things happen in their territories? Or are they only reactive weathermen/women just waiting for the customer to give them business? Too many salespeople spend their days servicing existing accounts and working hard on their personal relationships hoping their customers (or company management) will tell them of additional business opportunities. “How many of your sales reps have recently complained you are not giving them enough sales leads?”

Relationships are a critical component of any salesperson’s success, but too many salespeople view maintaining relationships as the only way to grow their territory. By maintaining client friendships, they hope the customer will think of them and ask to buy something. The proactive salespeople continue working their relationships but also are actively searching, questioning, and proposing new business opportunities.

So many salespeople are so busy reactively supporting their existing accounts that they invest no time in activities they initiate on their own.

Coaching Question #4 Want to evaluate how much your salespeople have invested in proactively growing their territory?

Test: (Ask each sales rep) “How much new business prospecting have you conducted in the past three months?”

Expected Results: Most salespeople do little prospecting. They also tend to focus on responding to customers’ requests rather than on going out and initiating actions to either stabilize their existing customers or to look for new business opportunities.

Don’t just ask if they have made any new sales calls. Ask them to explain their ongoing system for new business prospecting. Do your people seem to only talk about their new business generation efforts as “random prospecting events” or are they able to explain the specifics of their new business generation system?

Test: (Ask each sales rep) How many additional support and/or new selling activities have you initiated at your best accounts within the past 60 days?

Expected Results: Most salespeople initiate efforts toward acquiring additional business only from an existing account after first being asked by

the customer. Much of their time is instead spent managing difficult accounts rather than soliciting new business from the accounts that are lower maintenance. How many members of your sales team seem to give your more irritating customers, the ones who complain all the time, a better level of support just because they keep asking and demanding?

Proactive efforts are a strong way to identify and develop new business opportunities both within new prospects as well as existing accounts. If you want to move your sales team to a stronger competitive position, you will need to make sure every member of your team is initiating proactive efforts to prove to their customers their value and the value of their product.

Invalid Leadership Assumption #4 Your sales team doesn't need to invest in a strong manager/leader because you already have a tightly organized sales organization functioning as a solid team.

Are you managing a group of mountain men guerillas or are you leading a SWAT team? Excuse my choice of terminology here; however, the more politically correct "mountain persons" just doesn't seem to make much sense. Assume for a moment your company is a fort in the wilderness and you have hired a bunch of mountain men guerillas (aka salespeople) to keep your fort fed. They are a fiercely independent group, each bringing their own weapons, each with their own hunting style, and each convinced they are the best and don't need any help from you or the rest of the fort.

They have all disappeared into the woods and right now you have no idea where any of them are except for hearing the occasional gunfire or catching a glimpse of smoke. Once in a while one of them comes out of the woods dragging game they have shot. Food supplies have been increasing, so your mountain men have been doing a good job.

Even though you are their manager, they really don't seem to be interested in listening to your suggestions or directions. When you ask to ride with them, their first response is to ask, "Why are you picking on me?" and to remind you that you will not only slow them down but will probably get hurt because this is a rough territory and you are a soft manager.

ARE YOU AND YOUR SALES ORGANIZATION GOOD ENOUGH TO GET BETTER?

How much communication is there among a group of mountain men? What is the potential that if one figures out a better way to hunt, he or she will share that idea or experience with the others? And what's the likelihood they will share the mistakes they made to help other members of their team to avoid those same errors?

Mountain men/women salespeople think they are in competition with the other members of their team, feel any coaching and/or training assistance is a sign of weakness, and fear they will lose face in front of the rest of the team if they share any mistakes or errors they made in their own selling efforts. How many of these mountain men/women do you have on your sales team?

But it doesn't have to be this way. Compare the mountain man team approach to a police SWAT team. SWAT teams are constantly in training to insure they function as a single team. All team members are in constant radio contact and have a central leader to direct all activities. They also debrief as a team after each assignment to identify what went wrong and to identify how they can do better the next time. SWAT teams have a motto: "What one learns, benefits all."

Coaching Question #5 Are you managing a team of mountain men/women or are you leading a SWAT team?

Test: (Ask yourself and your sales leadership team) How often do you, as the leader of your sales team, conduct account strategy planning sessions with multiple members of your team?

Expected Results: Most sales managers conduct only "operational" or "transactional" planning sessions to identify what their sales reps' "next best sales steps" need to be. How often do you conduct longer-range account planning sessions where you involve multiple salespeople in a discussion/planning session of what your overall account plans and strategies need to be?

Test: (Ask yourself and your sales leadership team) How often do you, as the leader of your sales team, conduct "account loss review" meetings when a significant selling effort is not successful or a major account was lost?

Expected Results: Most sales managers, and their teams, tend to focus only on positive future planning and avoid debriefing to identify why an

account was lost. Accounts lost to your competitors are some of the best learning tools a sales team has but because of strong sales egos the efforts that contributed to a lost account tend to never be discussed with the entire team. Are you and your team learning from team members' mistakes and omissions so that what one learns benefits all?

Coaching Question #6 Is your sales leadership contributing or inhibiting your success?

Too many times companies promote their best salesperson to sales management, give them no training or direction, and yet expect them to know how to lead a team. After all, you assume, they were a great salesperson so of course they will also be a great sales leader.

Test: (Ask yourself and your sales leadership team.) What is the definition of the job of a sales manager/leader?

Expected Results: Most sales managers have no idea what the description of their job is, or should be. Remember almost all sales managers have never been trained on how to manage or lead others. Most managers when asked this question will supply you with a list of responsibilities they have to do (hiring, firing, special pricing, problem solving) but cannot describe their core focus or strategic responsibility to their sales team.

When sales managers can describe their job, most identify the main objective as "to make sure all of my people are performing above minimum." Consider what George, the VP of Sales mentioned earlier, should do about strengthening his sales team.

Look at George's challenges. Where should he invest his time over this next year? Which of his 12 sales reps should get the most attention? What would you do with four senior but plateaued reps generating half your sales, four "middle of the pack" reps, two rookies, and two most likely not able to improve and stay with his team?

George decided he needed to first invest his time where it was most critically needed—with the two in trouble and his two rookies—but he also realized he couldn't just ignore his top performers. He knew if he centered all of his time on just fixing the two he doubted would make it and his two rookies, he might only actually impact a small percentage of his company's total sales. Every one of his team needed, and could bene-

ARE YOU AND YOUR SALES ORGANIZATION GOOD ENOUGH TO GET BETTER?

fit from at least some of his help and direction. George realized the best description of the job of sales manager is “*to help each of your people achieve more than they would have achieved if just left alone.*”

What sales management definition and strategy are you following?

Coaching Question #7 What have you learned about your current sales team based on their answers to these coaching questions and tests?

How did you and your team do with these four leadership assumptions and eight tests? The common reality is the vast majority of sales teams do believe in the majority of these assumptions and do fail the majority of these tests.

As a sales and sales management consultant, I have observed that organizations believing in these invalid leadership assumptions are neither interested nor committed to any type of long-term positive change to their sales organization or selling efforts. When they do implement training, they aren't willing to invest either the money or the time to actually generate the type of changes that lead to long-term improvements.

You now have a choice. Do you want to just be a manager of a sales team working to maintain and hopefully randomly grow your sales, or do you want to be a proactive team leader helping them redesign and re-define their selling success?

You Can Always Sell More will lead your team through this exciting Sales Improvement Strategy to help increase your competitive advantage and selling success. We know you and your team are good. Are you good enough to get better?