



Building Sales Teams

It requires patience, dedication and courage

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Most people would agree that collaboration is the way to go when building a sales team. Most would agree that it improves operational efficiency, reduces wasted resources and just makes life more bearable. So, if we all agree on this, why is it so difficult to create real, working sales



teams? I'm not talking about those groups of people that we just throw together and call "teams" because that's the easiest and most popular term to use. I am talking about interdependent collectives that share goals, communicate openly and are mutually accountable — true teams.

These are the groups that have a healthy sense of competition, but not at the cost of providing support and encouragement to each other. This article covers five factors that contribute to the creation of cohesive sales teams that support the dealership and ultimately build the entire industry. The five factors are: decision-focused team leadership, trust, shared resources, complementary skills and clear performance goals.

The Factors

Beginning with the first factor, decision-focused team leadership, team leaders are responsible for making decisions, both popular and unpopular. They are charged with deciding a good portion of the who, what, where and even some of the how. This means that team leaders have to know which skills each team member brings to the table and where those skills will fit best with the overall organizational strategy. The leader is responsible for decisively communicating assignments, territories and even deter-

mining which sales processes will be employed. This is not a job for wishy-washy wimp types.

In their decision-making capacities, team leaders are well served by having a high level of consciousness about their own decision traps. We are all subject to any number of biases that create hidden traps for which we must compensate. When we are unaware of the traps, we are more prone to making bad decisions.

Two of the most common traps are the status-quo trap and the deficient-data trap (adapted from "The Hidden Trap in Decision Making," John S. Hammond et al, *Harvard Business Review*, Sept.-Oct. 1998, pp. 47-58). The desire to maintain a smooth flow, not ruffle any feathers and not rock the boat are all signs of the status-quo trap. It keeps team leaders from ever making tough calls. They look for reasons to do nothing, to wait, to ponder and to analyze even more. Making difficult choices requires courage and commitment. You can get beyond this trap by inviting input, ideas and opinions. This forces you to weigh alternatives beyond that status quo.

The second trap is the deficient-data trap. Using few or very limited sources of information leads to serious deficiencies in the data that formulates the foundation of decisions.

This trap is widely evident in organizations that have lots of influential cliques. Team leaders will often unwittingly rely on those cliques for data, information and opinions when, in fact, a broader pool would be beneficial. Getting beyond this trap requires the team leader to build coalitions outside the cliques.

Broader coalitions will yield more accurate information. They will also yield more resources for the team. Get beyond this trap by both considering the sources of information and probing for more data to either verify or contradict the initial sources.

The second factor, trust, is the most difficult to quantify, but we are all painfully aware when it is low or nonexistent. Organizations that have low trust experience a paranoid culture, little or no loyalty and high turnover (adapted from "Can You Manage Trust?" Ron Zemke, *Training*, February 2000, pp.76-83). Leading a sales team, or any team for that matter, requires that you first be trustworthy. This means that you are able to make the tough decisions alluded to earlier, that you be willing to communicate difficult messages and that you demonstrate consistently ethical behavior. It also requires that you keep your word and avoid even small untruths. Building trust calls for team leaders to consistently honor their agreements, even when it is inconvenient.

Once you have worked on your own behavior, you can work on building trust within the team. Do this by honoring commission, bonus and other related financial arrangements. Further the process by squelching infighting over territories, customers and referrals. Encourage people to

discuss their differences. When you are met with dishonesty, address it immediately. If you find that there are repeat offenders, have the courage to send them in search of their right livelihood (fire 'em!). You can further build trust by creating and maintaining standards of equity in performance reviews, promotions and rewards. Work to build interdependent relationships by creating partnerships either between salespeople on large accounts or between sales and technical people.

Trust is facilitated by clear communication. Team leaders are charged with keeping the entire team aware of changes in the company and the industry. Additionally, they are well served by keeping everyone up to date on product and process changes. It is critical that team members know what is going on, why, and how it could impact their work. In addition to building trust, these simple acts foster commitment.

Moving to the third factor, shared resources, it is important to encourage team members to share their unique arrangements of gifts and talents, which builds on the interdependence that is required to have a superior sales team. When your team members become comfortable pitching in to help one another, they will be more comfortable sharing leads and referrals. They will also be more comfortable giving collaborative presentations to clients. This enables clients to see the company, not as individual employees, but as a group of interconnected people working to meet their needs. Creating a broader identity for the enterprise will eventually result in more sales.

The notion of sharing resources, once it becomes a habit with your team, will spread to the larger organization. The ultimate goal is to reduce territorial boundaries and create a more cohesive organization. Eventually this behavior will position your team as a valuable resource for the entire company. Get in the resource-sharing habit by educating people in other parts of the organization on your sales strategies, largest clients, hot prospects and

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special skills. People in other departments will be interested in your work. They may even pass along a lead or two. Offer to lend salespeople with special expertise to other teams for special projects. Offer to conduct brown-bag lunches or other types of training on products that your salespeople are especially familiar with. Create ways for regularly sharing the unique resources of your team.

Sales teams cannot be comprised of a single type of person; you need a variety of complementary skills, the fourth factor, to excel. Think about it; if every team member is an exceptional business-development person, but no one can close, you will never get the business that you are targeting. Building complementary skills enables you to provide thorough, integrated solutions for clients. It also allows you to develop internal mentoring and coaching relationships on the team, offering several opportunities for team members to learn the areas mastered by their peers. There are several skills that are components of successful sales organizations that can be imparted through these relationships, including business development, closing, negotiating, making presentations, mining referrals and resolving conflicts.

Skills of particular importance, both for team members and team leaders, include conflict management, communication and analytical abilities. Conflict is an inevitable component of working together. Everyone on the team has to be able to hear, respect and incorporate diverse perspectives without being defensive. Conflict can be a great source of innovation and fresh ideas. The capacity to communicate well, in writing and orally, is critical to the success of the team. Everyone must be able to get his or her point across accurately. Skillful communication

enhances relationships with customers as well as colleagues. Analytical abilities are the last of the essential skills. Everyone on the team has to be able to process and analyze information. This requires the patience to sort through data, the tenacity to persevere through puzzling or contradictory information and the common sense to identify obvious incongruities.

The fifth factor, clear performance goals, institutionalizes accountability. This is the factor that helps people not only know what is expected, but also know that they will be measured and monitored on very specific criteria. Performance goals eliminate uncertainty because they provide a metric for behaviors, processes and productivity. Each team member knows that there are targets that must be met. If you are a savvy team leader they will also know that you will be available to coach them through the steps to reaching these goals.

The goals that you set will be well received if they are created collaboratively. Gathering insight from team members will give them ownership of the goals, making them far more meaningful. And, because team members are in the field every day, the goals will be more realistic. Remember the old saying that goals have to be SMART — specific, measurable, attainable, require reach and time driven. This little formula will help you formulate goals that have teeth.

Building a successful sales team is no small feat. It requires patience, dedication and a healthy dose of courage. Using the five factors addressed in this article will help you systematically create a team that can meet and beat all of your company's sales objectives. ■

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