

# Leading A

Whether you are a single dealership or part of a larger chain of retailers, leading sales people is a challenge. Between the lackluster performers, the egos of the star performers, the internal conflicts and the inevitable communication gaps, it can be a tough job for a leader. Even the strongest among us is faced with daily challenges from the field. This article addresses three key leadership strategies. These are the tools that will enable you to move past the struggles to create enduring success.



## LEADERSHIP BASICS

Before addressing the strategies, we have to define leadership. It is simply one's ability to influence, both vertically and horizontally. How well do you influence peers, subordinates and superiors? Leadership is exercised on three levels: individual, group and organizational. On the individual level, leaders are responsible for mentoring, coaching and motivating. They are responsible for inspiring action, commitment and dedication. On the group level, they are responsible for building effective teams and workgroups. Additionally, they are charged with helping team members resolve conflicts and build strong communication. On the organizational level, leaders help to build culture. They establish acceptable norms of performance by modeling the desired behavior and attitude.

So, if we accept that leadership is exercised on these three levels, how do these impact sales teams? Skillful leaders work diligently on the individual level to understand the needs, aspirations and interests of each team member. They tap into these unique motivators to challenge each team member to be their very best. They give assignments based on both individual capacity and organizational dictates. These are the sales leaders who recognize the flaws in the "one size fits all" approach to

# Dynamic Sales Team

management. They modify their approach and style to deal with individuals, their talents and the unusual situations they inevitably present.

On the group level, wise sales team leaders know that more is accomplished by teams than individuals. They work hard to build mutually accountable collectives with shared goals and purposes. Using collaborative processes, they gather feedback and input so that team members feel respected and included. These leaders are careful not to promote too much competition, though they recognize the fact that some competition is healthy and drives the team to higher performance. These are the leaders who favor interdependence over independence. They encourage their team members to draw on each other's skills and abilities.

Moving to the organizational level of leadership, this is the true test of a leader's mettle. The culture of the sales team reflects the strengths and weaknesses of leadership. If trust is high, leadership typically displays integrity, honesty and humility. If an entrepreneurial spirit is evident, leadership is probably unconventional and nonhierarchical. If commitment is strong, leaders are displaying the same faith in the enterprise. The reverse is also true. When the culture is defined by paranoia and suspicion, leaders are probably poor communicators, unable to build bridges with the rank and file.

## ASSESSING STRATEGIES

There are three key strategies for leading an exemplary sales team. The first is a forward focus. The second is the ability to inspire. The third is process driven. These three strategies form a triad by which you can measure your abilities. Before beginning our discussion of the strategies, let's see how you measure up on each of the categories. There are nine questions. The range of responses is from 1 to 5. Answer them honestly and then tally your scores.

## SALES LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT

1. never   2. seldom   3. occasionally   4. often   5. always

SCORE	STATEMENT
	We use a flexible model for business development.
	Our referral tracking system yields significant new business for the company.
	We regularly train sales staff on an acceptable selling model.
	I know what drives the individual players on my team.
	I revise incentives based on the changing needs of the team.
	I listen to ideas and incorporate suggestions from team members.
	I communicate my vision in concrete, easy to understand terms.
	My goals reflect larger trends in this industry.
	We use flexible long-range planning mechanisms.
	<b>Total Score</b> 



The ability to inspire is, in fact, the ability to communicate the vision in ways that encourage long-term commitment from the troops.

So, how did you measure up? If your score was from 36-45, you are already an exemplary sales leader who regularly uses the practices mentioned throughout this article. You should be mentoring others in your company. If your score was from 27-35, you are an above average sales leader who still has room for growth. Read the article and highlight the areas that you'd like to focus on for your on-going development. Those of you who scored from 18-26 are about average. You have lots of room for growth and would be well-served by finding a mentor. You should also use this article as a developmental guide. Decide which areas you are going to work on and

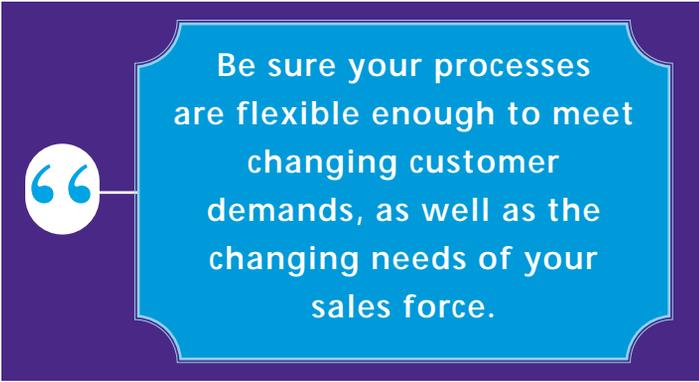
then plan specific activities to build your abilities. If you scored between 9-17 you are to be commended for your honesty. You have a lot of room for growth. The truth is, you may want to consider another livelihood; sales management may not really be for you.

## USING THE STRATEGIES

Let's start working on the strategies. The first, forward focus, means that you have to look beyond today's pressures and plan for the future. This leader gives people something to strive for. This forward focus is supported by several smaller goals that create opportunities for successive little victories. A forward focus implies not just a sense of direction, but also clarity of purpose. Leaders using this strategy can clearly articulate what the team will accomplish and why. They also have a sense of the gains the team will achieve for the organization and the larger industry. This forces the myopic among us to remove their blinders, see a broader picture and consider broadly when planning for the future. A forward thinker sets goals that require all team members to really stretch. A forward focused leader makes decisions with an eye to the future. While none of us can be soothsayers, we can at least try to judge the impact of decisions on the future of the team and the company.

The ability to inspire is, in fact, the ability to communicate the vision in ways that encourage long-term commitment from the troops. This ability is often seen in charismatic personalities, but it is not reserved for them. While a healthy dose of charm and charisma are helpful, sincerity is discernable in most personalities. And, sincerity is the real root of being able to inspire and motivate, a sincere belief in the company, its products and services. This translates into being confident and committed to the goals. It translates into sharing that confidence and commitment in every interaction. Team members sense this leader's dedication and want to sign on for the long haul, if for no other reason than the fact that they want to see the dreams become reality.

Inspirational leaders rely heavily on their ability to listen. They listen to the more senior executives. They listen to their peers. They listen to everyone else in the organization. Once they have heard, they synthesize the information and link it to the bigger goals of the company. These leaders share their insights. They are able to create meaningful linkages between daily activities and reaching goals. ➡



Be sure your processes are flexible enough to meet changing customer demands, as well as the changing needs of your sales force.

The last strategy is being process driven. Processes are essential for enduring success, and creating structure for the sales team. They also provide clear, discernible standards and guidelines. Leaders are responsible for providing flexible processes to guide all aspects of the sales process, from prospecting to closing. When processes are nonexistent, so is accountability. Processes give you the opportunity to put teeth into your goals and objectives. They also provide a framework that will help the team maximize its productivity. Moreover, processes level the playing field. They reduce, almost eliminate, cries of favoritism.

Be sure your processes are flexible enough to meet changing customer demands, as well as the changing needs of your sales force. Be sure your processes are flexible enough to allow room

for individual creativity. Don't dictate the little details; trust your people enough to allow them to mold the process to meet their needs. Evaluate the processes regularly so they stay relevant. Processes that don't get evaluated become stale and obsolete. They can also become institutionalized barriers to creativity. Be very careful to monitor, measure and modify sales processes so that they meet their intended objectives.

#### DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Successfully leading sales teams is no small feat. It requires focus, process and an occasional bit of divine inspiration. Leadership, the ability to influence, is an evolving process. The assessment will help you see how you measure up. It will also guide you in starting your developmental activities. Remember that the strategies cited in this article take time and effort to implement. Work on them one at a time. When you have mastered one strategy, move on to the next. This developmental work occurs in successive stages, each building on the next. These strategies present themselves as a journey. You may have to return to a previous destination to revisit the learning for you and your team. You may also find that some skills come naturally to you and require less effort. Either way, the team and the organization that will benefit from your committed efforts. 

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