

Sales and Service: Calming the Conflict

Editors Note: This is part two of a three-part series: Sales and Service: Creating the Winning Combination

We began this series of articles by focusing on the leadership responsibilities for creating the sales/service link. The basic assumptions are that you understand that sales impact revenues and service, both technical service and customer service, and service impacts customer loyalty which impacts market share. The second assumption is that you understand organizational alignment. If you spout the rhetoric of customer satisfaction, then every policy, procedure and practice will support smooth customer relations, customer retention and customer loyalty.

These basic assumptions are seldom the problem when leaders start creating the link. The biggest problem is getting people to work together, gleefully, or even just willingly. Conflicts, turf battles and other forms of dissension naturally emerge. Sometimes these little rumblings can be quietly smoldering below the surface. Other times they are reminiscent of the Ali-Frazier Rumble in the Jungle, complete with the left hooks and body blows.

Either way, unmanaged they damage the fabric of the organization. And, more important, they can spell trouble for a collaborative effort such as this. Dr. Cathie T. Siders, Washington, D.C. based psychologist and executive coach specializing in conflict management, says that conflict is a natural occurrence when people are working collaboratively. According to Siders, "People are coming together with different life experiences, ethnic, racial and familial backgrounds. They also have different perceptions of how processes should be handled."

Case in point, Ted, an office equipment dealer, wanted his sales team to be less competitive and more cooperative. He knew he had to accomplish that before he could begin uniting the sales and service departments. His sales team was openly sabo-

taging each other, not delivering messages, not passing on leads, hiding samples and hoarding supplies. His team also spent a lot of time having very loud, heated disputes about territory, lead management and all sorts of other things.

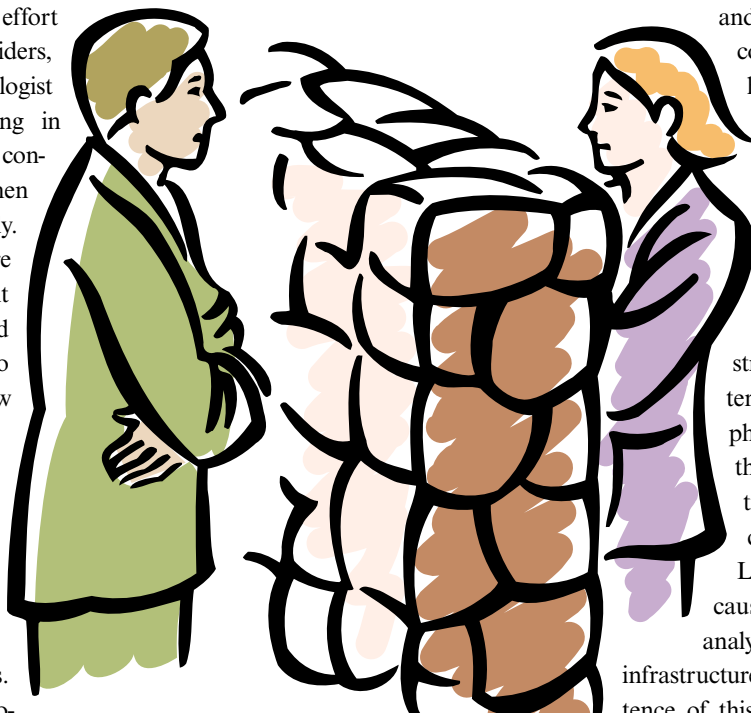
When Ted decided to use sales meetings to address these unproductive behaviors, he was met with open hostility, resentment and finger pointing. Rather than push harder for resolution and a new modus operandi, Ted gave up and decided that his team was at least making its goals, so why rock the boat. Big mistake. Things never got better, turnover rose sharply and the tenor of the entire enterprise went from bad to worse. This comes as no surprise. Siders points out the fact that poorly managed conflict erodes trust, reduces productivity and puts a lid on creativity.

Types of Conflict

There are all sorts of conflicts that arise in companies, especially in those seeking to build collaboration. Experts like Siders believe that today's manager encounters compound, complex conflicts. Some are based on values. This is when there are incompatible belief systems, either between individuals or between individuals

and the organization. Had Ted conducted exit interviews when his mass exodus began, he would have probably uncovered some very clear conflicts between the values of the people who were leaving, their managers and the organization.

Other conflicts are structural in nature. These patterns of dispute emerge when physical resources are limited, there is too little or too much time and the organizational constraints are cumbersome. Limited physical resources also cause structural conflicts. An analysis of Ted's organizational infrastructure would have revealed the existence of this type of conflict. There was



too much work for the existing staff and inadequate space for the people, their equipment and supplies.

The third type of conflict is based on interest. These conflicts are caused by competition over perceived and/or actual incompatible needs. These conflicts can emerge over substantive (rewards and physical resources), procedural and psychological (trust, fairness, respect) issues. The evidence of sabotage on Ted's sales team indicates that there may have been some interest-based conflicts.

The fourth type of conflict is data related. These problems pop up when people don't have enough information, are misinformed, disagree over what is important, have different interpretations or have competing methods for assessing the data. In either case, the conflicts that emerge are very real and can raise the level of disharmony in the company. Data conflicts can be caused by poor communication either between the people experiencing the conflict or in the larger organization. They can also emerge when data collection and/or assessment methodology are incompatible. Imagine a dealership that lacks easy-to-discern commission structures or one that has convoluted pay plans. Data conflicts will emerge whenever it is time for sales people to get paid. Sales people will interpret their efforts in their favor and, most likely, the company will not.

Approaches to Conflict Management

The very obvious first step in quelling the conflict that arises when attempting to build organizational linkages is a long-term commitment to problem resolution. It isn't sufficient to simply identify problems; you have to delve deeper to reach satisfying solutions.

It helps if you can search for solutions informally. An informal approach is less threatening and allows all parties to feel at ease. An informal approach allows for open discussion of issues, positions and interests.

This approach is voluntary in nature and allows the interested parties to remain in control. It helps to build stronger, healthier long-term relationships in the workplace.

When an informal approach is not possible, as it likely would not have been in Ted's case, a more structured, formal approach to conflict resolution is required. One of the most common tactics is negotiation; negotiating participants voluntarily join in an effort to educate each other about their different needs and interests. This would entail Ted's sales people honestly assessing what they need from each other as team members, what they need from sales managers and from the company. Negotiation also necessitates resource exchanges and promises of different behavior. This means that everyone involved has to both give something and commit to behavior that supports collaboration.

Negotiation of this sort can become adversarial when parties decide to focus exclusively on self-interest and use hard-line bar-

gaining rather than finding or creating common ground. In these instances, it is especially important to have a skilled facilitator who can help guide the process so that both parties become more co-operative problem solvers. The facilitator, whether a manager or some other credible person in the company, is responsible for helping the data flow. The exchange of information is essential to problem resolution. It enables all parties to make better-informed decisions.

Whatever approach to conflict management you select, evaluate its usefulness by asking these five questions:

1. Does this method build trust, respect and equal participation?
2. Is this method practical in terms of time, money and other resources?
3. Is this method neither overly simple nor overly complex?
4. Is this method likely to yield mutually satisfactory resolution?
5. Will this method enable the parties to focus more on the interests of the organization than on their own positions?

If the model you select does not pass this test, revise the model so that you can maximize your efforts with conflict resolution.

Tearing Down the Wall

Creating linkages throughout the company calls for a commitment to expanding your repertoire in conflict management. While many of us possess Ted's penchant for conflict avoidance, it does little to help create the cooperation that we desire. So, rather than turn a deaf ear and blind eye to the rumbles in your organization, opt instead to develop the competencies that will enable you to build bridges throughout the organization. **B**

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