

## How Most Successful Companies Develop Sales Teams

*By Jonathan Farrington*

Not enough companies have learned how to employ sales training as a strategic tool. Those that have are leaders in their industries, offering their shareholders maximum return on investment. They are able to quickly adapt to changing market conditions, are respected by their customers, and provide consistent sales performance. The sales people that work for these companies are motivated and stay in their jobs longer.

Quite often sales managers and executives don't have the time and experience to do this correctly. Companies with internal training departments often provide guidance, but sales training is quite different from designing and delivering training to other constituencies within an organization, such as customer care, engineering, or human resources.

The first step for any company deciding to make a change in its sales approach is always an assessment of the situation. What processes and methods are currently being employed by the company? What has their sales performance been? What percentage of sales people are delivering against plan? What are the biggest obstacles to success? How dynamic or stable is the company's environment? What are the practices and expectations of the buyers? These are only a few considerations.

Designing or adopting a sales methodology is critical. Without that methodology in place, training is a tactical attempt to fix a larger problem. The selling methodology must be developed based upon the company's unique situation--their market, their customers, how those customers buy, the complexity and price levels of the products and services the company offers, competitive pressures, reporting requirements, the participation of partners, the skill level of their current sales people, etc.

The primary objective of creating an individually tailored Organizational Development Program has to be this: To achieve consistently superior results through the performance of every key individual. After all, our people are our most important and indeed expensive resource; it therefore makes sense for us to want to see a full and proper return on that investment.

Specifically, we should seek to achieve optimum performance levels via a process and an all encompassing framework for defining performance standards. This involves assessing, appraising, developing, implementing, reviewing and providing continual feedback on performance. Emphasis is placed on creating an environment in which the 'can do - will do' mentality thrives and becomes the norm - success and achievement are expected and as a consequence are much more likely to happen.

This total approach enables forward thinking organizations that are committed to looking 'outside the square' and are not afraid to mentally cross bridges that their competitors have not even identified. It also offers the opportunity to develop excellence in the performance of the company's teams and to build the capabilities necessary to consistently meet and exceed short, medium and long term objectives. In my view, we should never lose sight of the following premises:

1. Whatever got you where you are today will not be sufficient to keep you there.
2. You can only succeed in business today if you understand what you are doing, how you are doing it and why you are doing it.

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3. It is difficult to control external events if you do not have control internally.
4. Being competitive is an ongoing process, not a single event.

I believe it is essential to bring together a number of key factors when aiming for optimum performance levels and the simplified formula would be:

**Attitude + Skills + Process (ASP) = Success.**

**Attitude** is fundamental to any achievement because individuals with the right attitude are far more likely to embrace the essential skills and at the same time recognize the control that process brings.

**Skills** are the 'tools of the trade' and have to be developed on an ongoing basis. They also need to be specific, because too much time can be wasted over-burdening employees with inappropriate and irrelevant skills without any identifiable plan for their future requirements. The implementation of any skills development program has to be well thought out and logical in its approach if a proper return on that often-considerable investment is to be achieved.

**Process** brings organization, efficiency and control, both for the individual and for management. Effective process provides objective analysis and indicators that can be benchmarked and accurately measured. Many of the largest corporations around the world have created a position for a V.P. Process role to oversee the implementation of process systems including Information Management and Customer Relationship Management.

There is of course also a need to build in **Knowledge** and that can include knowledge of products, industry, market sectors, competitors, business, etc..

Recognition of the **ASP** formula is only the beginning, and in truth, most organizations merely pay lip service to it, preferring to regard any form of ongoing training as a cost rather than an investment. And yet there is substantial evidence to indicate a direct correlation between continuing education and consistently high achievement, increased job satisfaction, and enhanced levels of motivation and loyalty.

Our commercial functions, including the sales team, represent our forward line. If they are not scoring regularly we cannot possibly achieve our overall commercial objectives - i.e., nothing happens until somebody sells something and all of that investment in costly accounting systems, new office equipment, expensive IT systems, etc. will count for nothing.

As Sir John Harvey-Jones famously said: "Most companies fail not in their attempts to be innovative or creative. In this country most of them fail because they undervalue the importance of professional selling."

A rapidly changing environment is the regular background against which organizations must develop. Change is continuous and will become more rapid as we move forward over time. Senior management must be capable of reacting to those changes and be prepared to take advantage of them and yet stay within the overall framework and agreed strategy.

The role of strategy is fundamental if the people within the organization are to be enabled to make the level of contribution of which they are capable. Strategy, based on a good grasp of the core competencies of a business, is an essential precursor to achieving optimal shareholder value.

***In Summary:***

Dependence on people is key to delivering the latent capability of a business. Our people are the greatest source of competitive advantage we have and that is precisely why we should continue to invest in them and fully develop them. This is particularly true now that in most market sectors competitive advantage is continually being eroded, i.e., international barriers are coming down, selling time is becoming limited, competitors are getting smarter, fewer and fewer names are appearing on companies' databases, and product uniqueness is rare. Undeveloped personnel can bring down a company through inadequate performance, leaving the competition to harvest the marketplace.

**About the Author**

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