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Transforming the Enterprise Selling Machine

Changing the selling behaviors of your sales team requires change management tools

A sales training event is not sufficient to cause sales people to change they way they sell. If your team is struggling to sell more effectively, sell new products, sell to new stakeholders – including executive stakeholders, or improve other key selling metrics, this paper will set your expectations for the tactics required by their leadership to facilitate a change in selling behavior.

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The Beginning of a Long Road

Your sales team is struggling to make their quota, or they aren't selling the new or acquired products, or they're complaining that market conditions are making it difficult to hit their numbers. Whatever the reasons…

You select a sales trainer or sales methodology that taught you some powerful lessons somewhere along the way. You set up the meeting place and communicate expectations. Your team shows up, albeit with a look on their collective face that explains how much they are -not - looking forward to this event. To your pleasure and the trainer's credit, the team begins to engage the material and actually become excited about the new lessons. At the close of the event, your arm is getting tired from all of the hand shaking and your ears begin to hum from the voices of gratitude that are flowing like honey. The event is deemed a success.

They jump on planes and rush back to their offices, and just a few short days later…they're back to their same old habits: same discussions, same contacts, and worst of all, the same results!

Voila!

You have "training de jour"!

The successful transition of a sales team's behavior doesn't happen by accident. And it doesn't occur because of a single successful training event. That, you can forecast at 100%.

So how do you change their behavior, especially if your business is counting on the change? The complete answer depends on the size of your team, your company's culture, the existing processes, and your leadership skills. As you might imagine, just describing the status of these conditions could take more time than you have to read this article: so for the sake of time management, mainly yours, let's take a brief look at some leadership activities that are commonly required regardless of size or culture.

Change Management

A sales team's behavior transition is a challenge in change management. While there are many models for change management, the most commonly cited model is the ADKAR model:

1. **Awareness** – of why the change is needed
2. **Desire** – to support and participate in the change
3. **Knowledge** – of how to change
4. **Ability** – to implement new skills and behaviors
5. **Reinforcement** – to sustain the change

If you review the scenario I painted at the beginning of this article, you'll surmise the sales manager portrayed in the scenario unconsciously implemented the first three steps in this model (with the help of the sales trainer and some good curriculum that is). He or she acknowledged the problems preventing a successful outcome, and they engaged an outside consultant who could help instill desire and impart knowledge. However, most sales training initiatives fail in the last two steps of the change management model: Ability and Reinforcement.

But what does “Ability” and “Reinforcement” mean?

Surely, if the training event was successful, they must be “Able”, aren’t they? After all, wasn’t that the purpose of the sales training event? Well, yes and no. The training event usually has some exercises like role-plays or analytical diagnosis designed into the curriculum to develop their ability. But that’s akin to having a teenager play a video game focused on driving, and then giving them the keys to the car for the first time. I think you get the picture. The real world includes many moving challenges that make crashing sounds that resonate much more than even the most sophisticated home theatre system – the dismissal by a new prospect is worse than hearing the screech of tires and the sound of metal being instantaneously reformed. For the seller and the teenage driver, there is a major follow up process that requires observation and guidance for some period of time. I’ll get to that in more detail, but let’s tackle the definition of the second issue, “Reinforcement”.

Reinforcement is the practice of examination and review that brings the core principles to light on a regular basis. Unfortunately, the reinforcement strategy of most sales managers usually consists of requiring the sales team to fill out the sales tool they used during the training event and submit it for review. While good in theory, the actual review usually consists of a quick read and very little, if any, feedback. Best case, this reinforcement strategy lasts for a month or two. Given the timing of the next quarter end, and the associated closing drill– you can predict when this strategy gets shelved with uncanny accuracy. Moreover, there are several other more effective reinforcement strategies that have longer sticking power and produce less grumbling than an added paperwork drill.

The purpose of this paper is to quickly give you some insight into the scope of a successful sales methodology or sales behavior transformation. In summary, the larger your sales team and the more ingrained your current culture, the more you will have to do to support the development of their “Ability” and provide more sufficient “Reinforcement” than a paper trail of sales tools. For illustration purposes, I will outline some typical examples that can be modeled in most cases; however, if your case involves deeply ingrained cultural obstacles and a large team, I will provide you with some additional steering at the end of this article.

Ability

The ability of the sales person to execute new sales behaviors is aided by role-plays in the classroom, however, real life throws more complications than can be modeled effectively in the classroom. The two most common real life impediments include the ingrained behavior of the customers and the messaging of your company. Namely, both factors push the sales person into dialogs about their solution. Further, just as in sports, certain key skills amongst the many, or lack thereof, can prove to be the key to winning or losing. So diagnosing further, to refine the development of their ability, is critical.

Let’s start with what happens to the sales person when they leave the event and go back to their visit their prospects or customers. The first challenge they encounter is the customer's expectations for the sales or buying dialog. They have been conditioned for years to steer the sales person into a dialog they can control; usually, a discussion about the seller's product or service capabilities. If you've ever heard the phrase, "just tell us what your product does", you know what I mean. Given the customer's skill and relentless proclivity towards this type of dialog, the seller feels compelled or pressured to address their request, and unfortunately, usually gives up on the lessons they learned about selling more effectively just a few days before.

How do they overcome this challenge? It takes effort, guidance and some teamwork: Namely, guidance and teamwork with their manager acting as their coach. So what happens if the manager has never had the experience or developed the skills to implement the new skills themselves? Does this prohibit their ability to coach effectively? The answer is they need to learn <u>with</u> the sales person. The book, "Credibility", by Kouzes and Posner, cites discovery and developing capacity as two of the six key factors for developing credibility with your team. In effect, taking the time to learn with your team, and develop the skills together, adds to your credibility, their motivation to try it, and their ability to execute the new behaviors.

The sales manager that returns from the sales training event and turns his team loose to execute on their own, can only predict with certainty that most, if not all of the team, will regress to their previous modus operandi.

Let's continue the train of thought with a look at sales tools - or messaging tools, provided to the sales team. Do they support the new behaviors or reinforce the old behaviors? For example, if you are striving to get your team to break out of a speed and feeds discussion to explore the business impact your solution can deliver to the customer, but your datasheets or corporate presentations spout mostly product or service capabilities, you're encouraging the customer and the sales person to have the same old unproductive dialog. Further, if the product training they receive is focused on product capabilities versus customer challenges, then they will certainly fall into the trap of talking about the product capabilities. It's as if your company set them up to fail.

The messaging of your sales support tools must align with the new behaviors you are seeking. If you want your sales people to call higher, your sales tools need to highlight the topics that an executive cares about – business issues like time to market, cost management, competitive differentiation and so on. If you want your people to introduce new products more effectively, your product training needs to be tuned for need creation – identifying where to find a problem to solve, not focused on a solution that has no problem tied to it.

Next on the list of "ability" is to diagnose the shortcomings of the team and address the identified areas with additional training or coaching. For example, let's say you implement a sales methodology to move from a point product focus to a broad portfolio sale involving many of your products and/or services. After a short period of time, you take an inventory and notice that a majority of your team has been implementing the new dialog, but has been having difficulty getting to the senior executives who oversee a broader problem set.

The role of the leader driving a successful transition would be to schedule a focused skill building solution; whether to require the team to read a book on the subject, attend a more focused training on the subject, or bring in experienced subject matter experts to share their best practices, for example. In essence, diagnosing the lacking skills and taking the steps to further develop their ability. This is somewhat like moving their education along from a college level course, to a graduate level course, to a post graduate level course on the subject.

Action to promote Ability

- Schedule sales calls with your team to learn how to navigate obstacles and implement new behaviors together.
- Inspect the messaging of your sales tools and solicit help to remold their key points to support the new behaviors.
- Identify the weak link in the skills chain and develop an initiative to overcome the deficiency.

In a nutshell, the ability of the seller to implement the desired behaviors is dependent on; 1) successfully navigating the customer pattern the first few times they attempt it – coaching them through the process; 2) inspecting the messaging tools and tweaking to support the new behaviors; and 3), identifying any critical skills that need further development and focus.

Reinforcement

Commonly, most sales managers naturally implement a reinforcement strategy that consists of inspecting for desired behaviors by requiring the methodology sales tool to be filled out (worse yet, some methodology providers have developed their entire curriculum around this concept). As mentioned earlier, this invasive inspection approach tends to fade out quickly. More importantly, it's difficult to tell whether the sales person is telling you what you want to hear or telling you what really happened. There may be some connection between the rapid demise of this tactic and the tendency to supply the manager with the information he/she is expecting to see. "It looks like they're all implementing the behaviors, so I guess I don't need to inspect it anymore."

So how do you reinforce and get a real picture of the sales person's behavior?

Review the communications they're sending to their customers on a regular basis; emails, follow up letters, proof of concept agreements, and proposal cover letters. All of these individual messaging elements will give you insight into the behaviors of your sales people.

If the proposal cover letter simply thanks the customer for the opportunity and attaches a price quote, you can bet they didn't talk much about the customer's business challenge or the impact of not taking action.

If the proof of concept agreement simply states that they customer will be evaluating the software for 30 days, its likely they didn't discuss what the customer will be evaluating, who will review the findings or what the next step is after a positive outcome.

Another example; one of the most powerful reinforcement opportunities that occurs on a frequent and regular basis is the forecast discussion. Think of the opportunity to prepare the forecast while looking for the behaviors you desire.

So if your standard forecast inspection sounds something like this: When is the order coming in? Who has to sign off? Where is the purchase requisition in the process? Is the budget approved? Etc…

Consider adding a few questions to reinforce the new behaviors. I call these level 1 reinforcement questions:

- What business initiative is compelling the customer to purchase a solution?
- What challenges are they facing that differentiate our solution?
- What is the impact if the customer doesn't buy anything?
- Do we have a proof of concept agreement in writing?
- Do we have access to the person who ultimately signs off on the purchase requisition?

The idea is to consistently ask the same questions over and over again, until the individual sales people realize they need to behave differently with the customer in order to answer your questions with a positive result.

Of course, you have to be careful to detect if they are telling you what you want to hear, so consider double checking with what I refer to as level 2 and level 3 review questions like:

Level 2 Review Questions (Validate)

- How do you know this information?
- Did the customer confirm this?
- Is it in writing?

Level 3 Review Questions (Coaching)

- What's the impact of not knowing this information?
- Was there any value in my questions?
- What was the value of my questions?
- What are you going to do next?

To summarize the reinforcement topic; there are plenty of daily discussion opportunities that don't require a new piece of paper to be filled out. Simply look at their existing confirmation trail (emails, proposals, and presentations), modify your forecast dialog to include an eye out for new behaviors, and consider designing a list of review questions that can be used over and over again to surface the key behaviors on a consistent and effective basis.

Action for Reinforcement

- ☐ Review outgoing communication on a regular basis to confirm the practice of key behaviors.
- ☐ Modify the forecast discussion to look for key behaviors.
- ☐ Develop a list of review questions to insure a consistent, effective, and valuable coaching process.

Culture and Team Size

As I mentioned earlier, culture and team size are very relevant to the scope of the leadership challenge when transitioning a sales team. Relatively speaking, the bigger these factors, the more you have to pour into your transition leadership effort.

While the examples I gave earlier can work very well for an individual manager with a team of fewer than ten sales people, the second or third level manager may have to consider applying more reinforcement and ability building initiatives to scale to the size of the organization. For the most part, this has to happen to make up for some of the first level managers that don't take a leadership role in the transition and leave the leadership initiatives to the second and third level of management.

As for culture, consider the pressure you might feel from your peer group if you suddenly changed your hairstyle, clothing and speech pattern. The larger the peer group, the more pressure there is to fit into the norm.

Cultural and Team Size Diagnosis

- ☐ Are all of the first level managers capable of conducting the leadership initiatives required for our successful transition?
- ☐ Does my span of control cross oceans to include other cultures?
- ☐ Has the culture of the company developed around old behaviors?
- ☐ Are my supporting organizations like marketing or other executives ready to support the transition?

There are many leadership initiatives that can be applied to overcome cultural inertia. A common cultural change practice is to change hiring practices to bring in outsiders who demonstrate the desired behaviors. Other initiatives might include consciously changing reward and recognition practices, communication practices, or meeting agendas for example. In short, the level of culture change sophistication will need to match the scope of your organization.

Summary

My primary objective for this article was to illustrate that the average sales transition requires a larger leadership scope than commonly understood or applied. The good news is that the leadership effort actually required for a successful transition is not much more than typically expended, and can appear small when compared to the potential return. As clients of ESG, many companies have witnessed significant increases in their largest transaction sizes, considerable decreases in average discounting practices, and demonstrable increases in average productivity with successful sales model transitions.

My secondary objective was to acknowledge that some sales methodology or behavior transitions may be larger than the current leadership bandwidth of the organization. In these cases, the help of an outside organization may be necessary to fully realize the potential for a sales transformation.

About ESG

As companies mature from a single successful product offering to broad solution portfolios - including acquired and developed products, a sales model transition is critical for meeting expectations in productivity improvements. The Enterprise Selling Group was formed to address the leadership challenges associated with successfully navigating sales model transitions of all sizes.