

Psychology of the Sales Professional

I mentioned earlier how one's attitude has a lot more to do with the level of her/his success than one's aptitude, ability, IQ, education or other factors do. I'd like to get into the details of a salesperson's psychology so that, when it comes to building your team and individual team members, you are equipped with the knowledge of what's really going on in there. As a holder of a management or other sort of leadership position, you may have already experienced being a salesperson yourself. However, it never hurts to review and be reminded of what it's like to "carry the bag." I also want to emphasize the mental game because so many companies focus on external things, like product knowledge, licensing, etc. And while these things are all important, companies that focus on such externalities often neglect the cultivation of their salespeople's proper mindset. I've always found this selling mentality ironic, because it's what's going on in the inside that will most dramatically affect sales.

A direct relationship exists between self-image and sales performance. If you don't already, try to get a handle on how your reps perceive *themselves*. What kind of self-talk plays in their brains all day long? You and your team will never experience exponential success if it is not something they can mentally conceive of first. And the major precursor to vivid envisioning of success in the workplace is vivid envisioning of success in oneself and one's abilities. How can you, as a sales manager, cultivate healthy, solid self-confidence and self-belief? One of the easiest ways to do so is to offer sincere praise. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Every man is entitled to be valued by his best moments." There is no need to fear that you will create an egomaniac by giving someone simple but honest praise and appreciation for good, hard work.

Often, it is more effective to praise the specific act rather than the person. This way, your praise is attached to something distinct and concrete. Praise is harder to be interpreted as flattery or favoritism when there is a specific and concrete thing being praised. General compliments may produce a temporary effect, but they can incite jealousy in others and create even more insecurity in the recipient if the specific activity that merited the compliment remains unknown. Then there is a new pressure to live up to this higher

standard, even though the praised individual is not sure how s/he set it. Even more insecurity is bred if the praised individual fears you will retract your praise. That's because in not knowing concretely how s/he earned it, s/he doesn't know how to keep it. One single person feeling this kind of anxiety or insecurity can really cause your entire teambuilding effort to backfire. Have you ever witnessed (or experienced) coworkers who huddled together to complain after a "pep rally" with the boss? Instead of feeling inspired and motivated, all they could do was gripe. Unfortunately, it only takes one person's bad attitude to drag down the rest.

We know that when a specific behavior is praised, that behavior will increase. At a small college in Virginia, 24 students in a psychology course decided to see whether they could use compliments to change the way women on campus dressed. For a while, they complimented all the female students who were wearing blue. The percentage of the female student population wearing blue then rose from 25 percent to 38 percent. The researchers then switched to complimenting any woman who wore red. This shift in the color being praised caused the appearance of red on campus to double from 11 percent to 22 percent. Praise is a simple but often overlooked concept. If you want to use this technique to your best advantage, be sure you give honest and sincere praise.

Closely related to praise is acceptance. We all long for acceptance. We want to feel like our actions and contributions help an effort or cause. We all want to be noticed by others. We also all want to be someone of significance who is held in high regard. Knowledge of this common craving from acceptance can help you motivate your team. If you can make them feel that their help is appreciated, that they are personally accepted and that their contributions are essential, they will be more inspired to perform. When your team members feel accepted unconditionally, with no strings attached, their doubts, fears and inadequacies will go out the window. One way to make your team feel accepted is to offer them genuine thanks. Seek to make a conscientious and deliberate effort to thank people in all aspects of your professional life. Don't assume your team members know you care about and appreciate them. Don't make the mistake of thinking that a paycheck

is thanks enough. One of the main reasons why people are dissatisfied with their sales job is because they are never thanked or given any recognition for their efforts.

Often, individuals increase their feelings of acceptance by building their association with certain people, places or things. This sense of identification has been referred to as the Social Identity Theory. For example, a sports fan may enhance his sense of belonging by plastering his walls with his favorite team's sports paraphernalia. Even though no one on that team has any clue who he is, he feels better about himself anyway, just because of the association and identity he has created for himself with that team.

Are there ways in which you can use the Social Identity Theory to your advantage? Think of ways to create strong team association. These methods should be things that are unique to the team and that help team members individually feel like they are "insiders." Maybe your team needs a mascot, a mission statement or even a theme song. I once knew a sales team that played the theme music from *Rocky* over the loud speaker every time someone closed a sale. Things like this might seem silly, but they really build team spirit and morale. If you worry that things like this will be distracting or disruptive to your particular workplace, look for ways to adapt. The energy that grows from each team member feeling accepted is worth the effort.

Goal setting is another powerful way of keeping sales psychology on the up-and-up. We all know that goals dictate future performance by giving team members a sense of purpose and direction. I can think of nothing less motivating than not knowing why I've been asked to do something. Instill in your team members what the end objective is and explain to them the necessary steps to get there. It is much easier to put forth the effort when we can answer who, what, where, when, why and how. Make sure your goals are realistic and attainable, but lofty enough that they are inspiring.

It is a general rule of thumb that greater or more difficult goals actually increase performance. The reason for this tendency is that loftier goals or objectives set higher expectations, and expectations in turn strongly influence behavior. The power of effective

goal setting or setting a target can be seen in the following example: In a particular production plant, workers with little experience were divided into two groups. One group was told to simply observe the experienced workers and try to be able to perform at a skilled level themselves within twelve weeks. The second group received specific weekly goals that were progressively more and more demanding. Needless to say, the second group fared much better. Similarly, Yale University once conducted a striking twenty-year study that found that the 3 percent of students who put their goals in writing had significantly higher incomes than those who did not—in fact, higher incomes than the other 97 percent of students combined. From these examples, it is obvious that proper goal setting goes a long way toward promoting sound sales psychology amongst your team members.

Years of observation and study have produced personality profiles of what are considered to be outstanding salespeople. Perhaps the most recognized of these profiles is the model that was developed by Gallup Management Consulting Group. Gallup has spent more than two decades interviewing hundreds of thousands of top salespeople to help corporate clients form and develop their own sales teams. Its findings suggest that the top four qualities of top-tier producers are: 1) solid persuasion and closing skills; 2) self-motivation; 3) strong work ethic and 4) excellent people and relationship skills.

Why do I highlight these findings? It is likely that as a sales manager, you already look for these skills when you hire someone anyway. But how do you enhance these essential sales characteristics after your recruits are on board so that your team can become even better? My hope is that by giving you four key concentration areas, you can streamline your efforts into getting the greatest results with the most focused effort. When you are trying to draw out any one of these characteristics, or *any* characteristic for that matter, it is helpful to assess the kind of personalities you're dealing with. For some, a strong drive to close a sale exists just because they possess a need to "win." Whether that "win" translates into financial rewards, recognition, the glory of being at the top or whatever, some individuals just have an almost instinctive need to win. This need is compelling enough that they are not deterred by long hours, rejection or time away from their family.

For others, it is not just about winning in and of itself. Beyond that, some individuals have a competitive edge that relishes the defeat of others—even their own colleagues. Half of the victory for these types of people is seeing others left in the dust. I believe that some competition can be a good thing, but you've got to be on your toes to buffer this type of personality. If you think pitting your team members against each other might actually create unhealthy rivalries and negative feelings, then you've got to have a way to counteract those negative effects.

Next, there are those personalities who are very ego-driven. They aren't motivated by a need to conquer others. Rather, they want success solely for their own personal satisfaction. This is the type of person who is constantly out to beat her/his own previous records. In other words, these types of individuals compete with themselves. Moreover, they are very focused on being experts. While this competitive orientation has significant strong points, its main downside is that it is too self-focused—even in a well-intended way—and not conscious enough of the team element. The self-motivated person is the one you want to be sure you can draw into the team so you have the best that both approaches have to offer.

Then you have those individuals who seem to get the most satisfaction out of seeing their customers happy. They don't really have the burning desire to win or compete, but they are very much into relationship building. These people are naturally gifted at being empathetic, caring and good listeners. They are the ones who are much more inclined to stay in touch with clients after the sale has come and gone.

As you step back and evaluate what kind of team member mix you have, realize that no one is purely one temperament or another. We tend to be a combination of at least two of these different types of producers. However, we are usually dominated much more by one area than the others. Your job is to get a grip on what you have to work with and figure out how to make all the pieces of the puzzle fit together so your team solidly represents all of the best qualities of top sales producers.

In closing this section, I wanted to touch on the topic of working with a rep who has hit a plateau. Why? Because it's a very real obstacle that sometimes happens even to the very best. The most typical cause for a plateau is simply feeling burned out. In this case, a very obvious solution would be to lighten the stalled rep's responsibilities or even give her/him some time off. On the other hand, it may be that the rep is burned out with doing the "same old thing." If that's the case, simply changing her/his responsibilities would provide the necessary stimulation to get her/him moving again. New responsibilities could be things like training, forecasting or recruiting. Even performing the same tasks with new prospects or in a different community may alleviate boredom and present exciting, new challenges.

Sometimes it works to have reps come up with their own solutions. They may be more apt to pursue something they feel they've come up with on their own than something that is imposed. Furthermore, this way they really know what's at the heart of the issue and would, therefore, likely know the best remedy better than anyone else. Lastly, review the possibility of how bonuses and other forms of recognition might spur renewed motivation. This approach is especially effective when your team members' financial needs are already being met and they're looking for reward and acknowledgment in other forms. In the next section, we'll discuss what kinds of rewards and incentives work the best.