

Focus on what is working to drive sales results

by George Brewster, Founder of Gimbal Systems

Introduction

As I evaluate sales organizations what I most often see getting in their way is their unconscious competence. That is, they are unaware of what they already know how to do well. They don't truly realize or take the time to understand what makes them successful. They can usually identify the successful sales people in the organization, but that is typically because of the numbers those producers put on the board. Too often organizations have not objectively analyzed what their most productive salespeople do to succeed consistently. Even if they have tried, the top producers are usually

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operating "in the zone" and are unconscious of the little things they do to consistently produce. They have a hard time describing their own process, teaching it to others or owning just how hard they have worked to get where they are. The tendency in sales is to say, "It's working—that's enough." Why bother trying to understand what contributes to and drives success in order to replicate it for more predictable, measurable, repeatable and scalable revenue results? Instead of exploring what works to do it more often, most sales organizations spend time seeking to identify and fix what is broken in the hope things will change and results will improve.

In this article, I describe the six factors that prevent organizations from understanding what success looks like in their own organization. After describing these six factors, I introduce an alternative approach and discuss what is possible when you focus within for the sales success solution.

1. If it Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It

Most sales management operates from this famous belief: don't mess with something that's working. Sales managers are taught to focus on their middle performers more than their top or bottom performers to move the total production. The common belief is that the top performers should be left alone to do what they do best. The hope is that they will remain happy, continue to perform and ultimately stay with the organization if they are given the autonomy they have earned by their managers. The time spent with them is generally to make sure they know how appreciated they are by the organization, briefly discussing their success and motivations for best practice sharing or mentoring and finally explaining to them why their quota continues to increase. Anything more than that could be interpreted as micromanagement and is fraught with risk in the eyes of most sales managers who are trained to fix what is broken and leave the top producers alone.

2. The Squeaky Wheel

The bias to leave the top producers alone is exacerbated by the reality that most managers are just too busy to spend as much time as they would like with their best people. Their top salespeople are typically not the ones making the noise in the organization because they are too busy producing. Instead the sales managers are busy taking care of customer complaints, attending home office meetings or trying to develop their underperformers that are causing the sales managers numbers to drag. When it comes down to it, most sales managers just let the top people be as long as they continue to produce and keep quiet.

3. Be Careful of What You Might Find

The other risk to digging into what is working is that you may not like what you find. I have worked in organizations that are afraid that looking closely will reveal that they aren't actually achieving the kind of success they wanted. Or worse, that the success is coming through questionable practices (like discovering that your star athlete has been using steroids). The hard truth was that they were getting numbers for numbers' sake from their top producers. These aggressive sales behaviors resulted in unprofitable and unhappy clients as well as a lack of compliance. It is never any fun to find out your top producing salesperson is not who you thought they were or is achieving results without representing the company in the way you would like them to.

4. The Peter Principle

The Peter Principle has been defined as: anything that works will be used in progressively more challenging applications until it fails. In sales organizations the propensity is to promote their best producers to management. This rarely works out well because the successful sales people may not actually be cut out for management. The skill sets are unique. The new manager also tend to fall into the trap of focusing on the underperformers to try fixing them and then get frustrated when their employees won't or can't do what the new managers did to be successful individual contributors. The more time the managers spend coaching rather than selling the farther away they get from remembering what actually made them successful. Also if the manager's employees can't execute the best practices they used to be successful, the managers may begin to lose confidence in the sales behaviors that made them successful. Or worse yet, credibility in the field is lost as time goes by without improved results within their team. The Peter Principle results in the best practitioners moving away from what they were good at and potentially becoming part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

5. Flavor of the Month

A lot of organizations go outside to find the answer by hiring the best sales guru they can find. One option is to hire a motivational speaker who comes in and stirs everything up at the sales conference. Six months later no one can remember what the speaker said. The alternative is to retain a tried and true sales expert that has published books, has legions of trainers and materials which all add up to the safe bet sales training solution. These are the turn-key providers, the so called knights in shining armor that will come to the rescue and guarantee results.

The trouble with the outside expert strategy boils down to two undeniable facts. 1) Sales people are inherently skeptical; and 2) forcing people to do what the expert says has never worked well with adults. All you have to do is look at how kids react to being told what to do and then remember how you felt the last time someone came in and said to you, "I am expert at this and you just have to do it my way." The result is a collective "whatever" from the sales people who have to execute the change process.

Add to the equation that most sales processes are ultimately driven by legal and compliance policies and the sales expert strategy gets even trickier and costly. Most sales gurus have a product they want to sell you that has the basic framework and when you start to customize it to fit with your unique processes, customer needs or brand promise, the exchange becomes complicated. You end up pulling out the check book to customize the offering and forfeit the guarantee that came with the standard product.

This is an example of what Systems Theory calls parallel process. You have a sales guru trying to sell you something and you are now the customer that is trying to buy it but is struggling to get what you want. The potential is there for you to end up buying something you really didn't want or need, that you regret later, and that ends up sitting on a shelf in your office. I know that I have had this experience while buying expert sales services and receiving them as a salesperson. I would bet that I am not alone in this experience as well.

6. Change for Change's Sake

A lot of organizations fall into the need to change trap. New management comes in and wants to shake things up. Human resources want to change the organizational design or compensation structure. Product and marketing want to tweak the offerings. The business environment or customers needs change. Companies are afraid that they will “drink their own Kool-Aid” for too long and be surpassed by competitors. The list of reasons for change goes on and on, which makes it really hard not to buy into the need to make changes continually. The result is that there are times when too much change is happening at one time and therefore no way to know what is actually impacting the results. There is also the tendency to be impatient and to not give enough time for the change to take full effect. I do not doubt that business continues to evolve and companies have to be flexible and adaptable. The problem is usually that too much change is occurring simultaneously for any one initiative to succeed. So rather than making subtle shifts, like sending thank you notes to customers and monitoring the lift from that one new activity, entire new sales processes are designed that do not move the needle fast enough.

An Alternative Approach that Takes Courage

I propose an alternative approach, one that requires a deep look inside and a belief that the answer lies within your organization. The best solutions are built from within, by spending the time to identify what success really looks like for your organization. This is not easy for most organizations to do for all the reasons previously mentioned. It is also not very common to find consultants who think this way because most of them are in business to identify and solve problems with specific expertise they provide to their clients.

Consider this alternative approach:

1. Gain agreement on what to calibrate against. Do you have a clear definition of your ideal sales experience for your company and customers? Does the process tie into your company's brand promise so that your customer experiences the brand within the sales process? Does the ideal sales experience work within your existing operational and compliance processes? Does the process work for your customers and employees?
2. Determine whether you can identify the people in your organization who are creating and delivering the ideal experience consistently today. Have you spent the time necessary to understand the top producers' knowledge and behaviors in order to consciously define their competence? Have you built competency models and a sales

process that support the proven best practices to create a larger sales “sweet spot” for your organization? Have you looked to see what “blind spots” there might be in terms of supporting the ideal process to happen more consistently with all of your salespeople regardless of their styles?

3. Determine whether you can test the identified ideal sales process to ensure that it works in a variety of applications. How are you collecting feedback from the customers and sales people to ensure that the necessary refinements are made? Have you taken enough time to ensure the right changes occur and you experience lift?
4. Evaluate and develop the following reinforcement tools to help ensure that the new process is viable:
 - a. Training programs to develop the necessary skills
 - b. Performance, talent and change management programs to reinforce the right behaviors
 - c. Compensation that rewards the right behaviors and drive results
 - d. Employee lifecycle program to attract, retain and promote the right people

The questions above help highlight the challenge of this alternative approach and just how much it flies in the face of conventional wisdom. It opens a new paradigm in thinking; much like naturopathic medicine is trying to do in comparison to Western medicine. Rather than focusing on problems and imposing a quick fix from the outside, this approach assumes that health already exists within your organization, health that you can build upon and extend. The reason that the answer hasn't been found before is most people don't look internally hard or long enough. Most people focus all of their efforts on fixing the problems rather than identifying and leveraging the strengths that are in their organization.

The key to the alternative approach is finding a partner you trust. The ideal partner will help you through the process by providing a fresh perspective while genuinely desiring to guide you and your organization's own self discovery.

If you look toward the typical expert consultants you will be buying into all of the same patterns outlined earlier. A true process consultant is going to make sure you continually look within your organization to get the results you are ultimately after. The current struggle to achieve the desired results is because the organization, team or individual is stuck in a repetitive pattern and needs someone to help free them in order to identify and achieve their already existing best more consistently.

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The benefits to implementing this alternative approach with a partner you trust are:

1. Your hidden gems and most successful salespeople get recognized rather than just continuing to be the loaded mules who you hope never leave you.
2. You build a sales process and talent management strategy on the backs of the people in your organization who are making sales happen within your own legal, compliance and market confines.
3. You gain instant credibility within the rest of the organization that will help when it comes to implementing the desired change by leveraging internal advocates that have ownership in the finished product.
4. You foster a self-reliance that is part of all healthy living systems, organic and organizational.

5. You have developed and demonstrated the courage to look within to find the answers that have been there all along.

The end result is a sales organization that has actively shifted from being unconscious about its success to being consciously competent of its customized sales process. Such an organization will have a specific measure that they created to calibrate against if performance waivers again, versus a product they bought but never really needed because they had the answer all along.

About Gimbal Systems

Gimbal Systems guides sales organizations to improve performance by clarifying what successful sales are and identifying how to get them more consistently.

Our process of “calibrating for success” is highly customized for each client and is based upon the belief that the answer lies within the organization.

We work with you to design the right program for you. Our goal is to ensure that every sales encounter is the best possible experience for your customer and your organization.

We are a Seattle Management Consulting company that works with organizations and individuals. We specialize in customized sales success, decision quality, and individual effectiveness. For more information please visit www.gimbalsystems.com.

*This article was written by George Brewster, the Founder of Gimbal Systems.
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