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Do You Really Understand Your Sales Team? And why your bottom line depends on it...

After spending the last 25 years selling, managing, leading, and building sales organizations, I guarantee you've experienced scenarios similar to these if you've managed salespeople for any length of time:

1. One of your top producers just blew up on operations once again. She's the best at bringing in the numbers, but you spend a fair share of your time cleaning up her messes. Seems like she's either sky-high or down in the dumps. When she's down, she's out of her selling zone, and productivity comes to a standstill. But when she's up, look out world!
2. Another one of your top producers is very consistent, a total team player, even tempered, patient, and consistently bringing in the numbers. He too is one of the best on the team, but he seems to be missing some opportunities that would catapult him to super stardom if he would only make some slight changes to his selling game. Instead, he sticks to his time-honored conservative approach.
3. Then you have some that are simply stuck in their lackluster comfort zones -- giving you a solid month about every third month, or giving you about seventy percent of what they have all the time. They have the potential, but they're consistently mediocre. You just can't get them to do the difficult things that it takes to produce at top levels with any regularity. Worse yet, they're passive-aggressive. You say to yourself, "If I could only wake them up, they'd be right up there with the best."
4. Finally, you like me have undoubtedly made some bad hiring decisions over the years and have ended up with a few sales reps that just don't belong in sales. They perceived a sales career to be easy and they were wrong. Producing top sales is hard work. These misfits are consumed with fear, and if truth be told, they honestly hate sales. They have no real intention of making the necessary changes to be successful. You'd like to help them find more fulfilling careers.

Have you ever closely examined why some people are wildly successful at selling, meeting and exceeding every goal placed in front of them, while others lack either the self motivation or certain key skill sets to get them to their next level of growth and performance? After all, they all have the same product, the same tools, and the same compensation structure. They've all been through the same training program. In my experience of leading and managing thousands of salespeople both in the Bay area as well as internationally, **the answer has to do with the fact that virtually all sales' organizations are comprised of four different kinds of salespeople:** two are top producers, one is stuck in a comfort zone, and one simply doesn't belong in sales.

Recently, I was giving a speech on "Four People, Four Paths" to a leading company in California's real estate industry and was emphasizing the importance of knowing exactly who you are. I was quoting from my book (["The Four Kinds of Sales People – Your Personal Path to Breakthrough Achievement,"](#) Elite Books, June, \$15.95) as I explained in detail the struggles and breakthrough opportunities for each of the four kinds of sales people: two top producers (The Performer and The Professional), one that is stuck in a major comfort zone (The Caretaker), and one that belongs in another career (The Searcher). At one point, a woman yelled out, "Oh my God, I'm a Caretaker!" The crowd laughed and I congratulated her on her honesty and pointed out to her (and others who were not so forthright) the tremendous opportunity that existed if she made the conscious decision to change and begin doing the difficult things that it takes to produce top results on a consistent basis. I went on to give all of them the tools to design their own customized path for getting to their next level.

While conducting one of the "Breakthrough exercises" during the session later, I asked for a show of hands in the group from those who worked out regularly. Then I asked for a show of hands from those who had a gym membership. The number of people that had a gym membership was far greater than those that actually worked out. I asked the gym members who weren't exercising regularly why they weren't taking advantage of their membership? The reasons were the obvious ones: "I just don't have the time, I got out of my routine and haven't been back, I didn't like my trainer, I joined at the beginning of the year but only worked out for a couple of months before I quit" and on and on.

I've often asked myself why people begin with the best of intentions, like setting a New Year's resolution to improve their health, fork out money to join a club, only to last a few months and by March are never to be seen again. After all, the fitness world is often dependent on this type of behavior: wait for the holiday indulgences to predictably show up on their waistlines in January, get them in, get them enrolled, get their money, get them started, and by March all will be calm again with only a few that really stick to their regime. Personally, I find it a fascinating example of human behavior and see many similarities between this scenario and many people operating in the sales arena.

Getting to the next level, or breaking through, in sales is not easy. No matter where you are on the food chain – top producer, consistently average producer, or struggler – getting to that next level requires a certain amount of pain. Just like getting into physical shape does. Here's what I've found to be true. Human beings, for the most part, will do anything to avoid pain. It's our nature. Therefore, to get and stay in shape you must make sure your gym bag is packed, make sure you have the right pre and post workout nutrition, carve out the time to work out consistently, drive to and from the gym, train intelligently and hard enough to get results, increase your resistance as you improve, and stick to your commitment to get and stay healthy. If you view all of that as extremely painful and the pleasure you get from the results does not outweigh the pain, you won't do it for very long. Again, it's just human nature. We don't do what we view as painful for any length of time. The predictable result of this cycle: very few newcomers in the gym by March.

Similarly, to get to the next level in sales requires changing and going to the uncomfortable places, known as your weaknesses, building a plan, and then committing to and practicing regularly so as to implement the necessary changes to take your selling game to the next level. In reality, it's a very difficult thing for salespeople to do, especially when they are stuck in some sort of comfort zone. Commonplace is the salesperson who "talks" about getting better yet doesn't actually undertake the tangible, difficult changes necessary to really move them successfully to the next level. Commonplace is the salesperson who goes through the training program (pick a program, any program) yet once they leave the classroom, does not actively incorporate any of these newly-learned methodologies.

If this well-intentioned sales person similarly wants to "turn over their new leaf" in January for example, like their paunchy friend with the new gym membership who makes an early exit from his fitness strategy – the sales person will similarly be showing weak sales by March.

On the other hand, committed salespeople like the gym attendee with a good dose of stick-to-it-iveness, who ultimately view self-improvement as pleasurable, not only understand the pain that it takes to get there, but appreciate it as a necessary indication that they are in fact doing the right things to improve. The reason: they are converting their difficulties, their struggles, their pain, into the self-motivation that they need to fuel them to their next level. For them, the pleasure of getting better is effectively outweighing the pain of getting there. They

know that the difficulty -- as long as they are improving along the way -- is an indication that they are knocking on the door of future success. It is incredible to be a part of a selling environment that is filled with this sort of growth-oriented reaching by its people.

Here's an example of what I'm talking about. A few years ago, I was an executive in charge of a large sales organization in the mortgage industry that specialized in refinance. As rates were increasing, the market began rapidly changing and began to dry up for borrowers with high fixed rate loans that you could easily convert into a similar loan at a lower rate. Successful loan officers were the ones on our team who became experts in alternative loan programs that met the borrower's goals of lowering their debt while still giving them a fixed rate for a certain period of time, just not for the customary 30 years. We spent a large sum of money on training and promotion to get our sales team aligned with the changing market conditions. It wasn't an easy transition for many to make who had been so successful at picking the low-hanging fruit during the greatest refi boom in history.

I watched as our trainers did an excellent job of combining product knowledge, selling skills, internal processes, and a healthy dose of fun, into a one week push to realign and expand the thinking of our already successful sales force. The results were positive and noteworthy and the company made an upwardly positive transition as a whole. However, a number of the salespeople (top producers included) were resistant to the needed changes, choosing to stubbornly (and ill-advisedly) stick instead to their current methods and turn their backs on these new programs the company was introducing for their benefit.

Although there was a whole group of "resisters," I particularly remember one individual, Mark, who had been the rookie of the year and top producer in the company the last two years running. However, Mark was so stuck in his ways that he was soon stranded as the market began to harden very rapidly. The other top producers who made the necessary transition soared to new heights, because, they were after all, the very best. Mark's refusal to change took a further psychological blow when he watched many of the newcomers soar to top producing numbers because they were prepared with the right programs for the morphed market. Of course, after that, Mark, like many of the other holdouts, embraced the new programs having seen firsthand the success of his more open-minded colleagues.

Then there was Laura, who joined the company at the beginning of the boom and had no history of working in a tough market. When things began to change, Laura chose to leave the industry completely while citing that "It's a bad time to be in the mortgage business." Some of her peers chose to go with her. Another individual, Donny, who had always been a mediocre producer during any market condition, left to join another company, certain that the answers to his sales problem was external versus internal. Donny took some of his friends with him. By now, I would imagine that many of them are in completely different industries but still practicing their same self-limiting behaviors.

So what really happened? Those that migrated early, the "early adapters" if you will, knew that they had tremendous opportunity. They didn't see pain as much as they saw opportunity. Those that converted later, like Mark, felt the pain of not having kept up. They had wanted to circumvent that pain. They now viewed the pain of migrating to be little in comparison to the pain they were experiencing watching others soar right by them. And they transitioned accordingly. Those that moved to another company, like Donny and his friends, were stuck in their own thinking, refusing to do the difficult things to get better, and therefore choosing to jump ship. Finally, those like Laura that left the industry completely probably should have never been in sales in the first place. They were fooled by a white hot market into thinking their order taking was "selling." Instead, once the easy sales were gone, so were they.

Those who stay in the gym view the hard work of getting and staying in shape as necessary and pleasurable versus those who leave the gym because it's just too painful and/or their perceived progress is sometimes slow. Similarly, those who achieve and stay at the top of their sales game, view the hard work and constant change as challenging and pleasurable, versus those who refuse to make changes, adapt, and improve because they are either comfortable or view the process of adapting and challenging themselves professionally as too painful.

Regardless of the varied makeup of sales forces, *there are always only four fundamental kinds of sales people.* Management's goal is to help the best to keep getting better while building a team with as many top producers as possible. That means management must influence those that are "stuck" in their comfort zone to break through to the next level. That means management must perform the unenviable task of helping those that don't belong to

find other career paths. In my experience, management gets too preoccupied with these two challenges and neglects the opportunity to get their top producers to reach for their next level of achievement. *They have more in them. That's why they're the best. And they can be even better.*

Depending on your industry, you may now be faced with increasing challenges just to keep hitting the numbers you've had over the last couple of years as the economy has enjoyed some reasonable expansion. But now, with an uncertain Fed monetary policy squeezing Wall Street, Mideast uncertainties continuing to feed the spike in oil and thereby impacting the cost basis for the entire spectrum of goods domestically, along with a dicey picture in the housing market – what you do next will affect your bottom line going into the second half of this year and well into 2007 and beyond. So, how do you plan to jumpstart your people? And *keep* them performing at their highest level in the face of these new realities? For much of American business the current crossroad is downright palpable right now.

In the face of these impending nationwide changes, some companies will stick with a business-as-usual attitude – only to be surprised later when their quarterly reports show significant slippage in sales and revenue. Some companies will half-heartedly add a new trick or two to the mix and cross their corporate fingers, while a few companies will adopt a bold attitude coupled with a renewed commitment to excellence and move on to their next level of performance – collectively deciding to embrace the new challenges of our shifting economy and marketplace. These will be the folks grinning with satisfaction when the new sales numbers roll in for review.

Regardless of the methods you choose – whether utilizing coaches, consultants, speakers, workshops, or wisdom gleaned from business books or articles; if you want sales to improve, particularly in highly competitive sales environments, then leaders must create a growth-oriented atmosphere that thrives on constant improvement, regardless of market conditions. By the way, that means leaders and managers must *also* be striving to break through to *their* next level too. After all, selling is about creating and sustaining momentum, and then creating even more of it. **Consistently.**

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About the Author:

Chuck Mache, President of Chuck Mache Communications (Santa Rosa, California) has more than 25 years experience in selling, managing, building and leading sales organizations regionally in the greater Bay area as well as internationally.