

Team-Based Training in Sales Organizations

■ People in sales (and sales management) are realizing that teamwork is far more important in today's world than in the past. Cultural and economic realities as well as the globalization of the marketplace are increasing the pressure to perform.

Research has shown that a lack of team continuity is one of the leading causes for sales failure, whether with new business or when selling into an existing account. This lack of continuity results in multiple members of the company delivering different messages to the same customer or contradicting one another, leading customers to conclude that one hand doesn't know what the other hand is doing. Though everyone in a customer-facing position needs to improve consistency in dealing with customers, the sales team's interaction with the customer is the pivotal point where consistency must be maintained.

Some executives naively believe that because they hire experienced people for the sales force, they don't need to train them in either skills or process. Some believe that if they can be educated quickly in product knowledge, they will start producing quickly. While that might happen occasionally, it is not wise to expect it on a regular basis. It is precisely because of their experience that you need to train them. When you hire them, they are experienced in some other company's methods, processes, and way of doing business. They are experienced working with some other company's

products, services, and people. Until they understand the processes and methodologies you've adopted for your sales team, they will be less effective than they need to be.

While this article is written in the context of sales teams, the concepts are true in any number of situations. As an example, the team members of the emergency room at your local hospital are all highly skilled professionals. Whether they are nurses, technicians, or physicians, they've all received extensive training and certification in their own disciplines. However, hospitals regularly train their ER staff on how to handle disasters or emergency situations. Every member of the team must understand what is expected not only of themselves, but also of every member of the team. They develop a common way of interacting and conducting procedures so that lives can be saved. And though a lack of team preparedness in a sales situation will not cost lives, it can and often does cost the loss of revenue, the lifeblood of any company.

Team-based training is a time-tested foundation for optimum performance and the development of good team habits, especially where each member of the team has differing responsibilities to execute in achieving the goal. If the team

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has never trained together, why would you expect it to act as a cohesive unit when it's facing the competition or the customer?

Donald Krause, in his business-based interpretation of the Sun Tsu classic, *The Art of War*, says, "All competitive advantage is based on the effective execution of plans. Poor execution ruins superior plans; superior execution saves mediocre plans." This means that the way in which the team executes on its strategy is the most important aspect of its interaction with the customer. Superior team-based execution does not occur naturally. It will require training.

Obstacles to Team-Based Training

Most organizations train their people to some degree. But few embrace team-based training to the extent that will yield the optimum results—a highly functioning team that performs. Other than the excuse of hiring people who already have great experience, managers and executives give a wide range of reasons for not bringing their people together to be trained as a team. Some of the reasons listed below are hard facts, while others are merely excuses or objections:

1. Different members of the team have different responsibilities and can attend only role-specific training.

As a fundamental concept of team, there will always be different people with differing skills and levels of responsibility. It is because of these differing responsibilities that teamwork becomes more important. The nature of these differ-

ences requires each team member to know about the others' responsibilities.

As an example, consider the case of the manager who sends only the account executives to opportunity management methodology training and only pre-sales professionals



to the training on how to prepare for and deliver the solution presentation. If only the account executive understands the opportunity management process, it's unlikely that pre-sales will be able to appropriately or adequately support the process. Similarly, if the account executive doesn't understand the procedures necessary to prepare and deliver the solution presentation or demonstration, there's not a very good chance he'll negotiate for the necessary steps or access or be likely to manage the customer's expectations accordingly. The net result of this is frustration among team members and customers alike.

2. Training the team takes too much time out of the field. This can be a legitimate issue for many companies, especially when some of the team members may be billable for their services. The opportunity cost can have a real impact on the business. However, for most sales teams, where the team members are not typically billable, the opportunity cost must be measured in what they would be doing otherwise. Obviously, you wouldn't want to schedule a team-training event during the time of the month or quarter when they're trying to get contracts signed. But there are plenty of opportunities to make the necessary time to learn or hone the skills they'll need to keep generating revenue.

Another consideration is the medium used for delivering a particular subject to each member of the team. Several varieties of e-learning and computer-based self-study programs represent valuable, time-saving ways to educate. On the other hand, skills-based training, where the individual and the team need to be assessed on their grasp of the behavior or process, is best suited to instructor-led training events. For example, most anyone can learn to use

a CRM application through e-learning. Presentation skills, however, are more difficult to learn or assess in an electronic medium.

3. Staff is shrinking and workload is increasing. Again, this is a potentially legitimate concern, especially during a market downturn or slowdown. However, with a shrinking staff or market opportunity, the team must achieve success in every sales opportunity possible, making team interaction and support even more critical. When times are good, companies often can get by with less-than-stellar sales teams. When times are tough, there's no margin for error.

The Value of Cross-Training

Above and beyond the reasoning just discussed, there are several elements of value that are generated by team training. Among them is increased productivity achieved by an improvement in empathy and communication among the team members. When one person has a detailed understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and challenges of others on the team, that person generally will become more inclusive and supportive to other team members and will work with others more effectively. When team members communicate using a common nomenclature, they work more quickly and accurately as well.

Not all the value comes in the form of internal productivity within the team. When team members act in concert with each other in front of the customer, the level of uncertainty is reduced dramatically. Trust is established by consistency and assuredness. The way a team interacts with the customer has a direct impact on the trust levels that are established by the customer with respect to the sales team.

When it comes to training a sales

team to work together more effectively, most organizations are looking for one or more of the following results:

1. Strategic Results. When sales teams work well together, they help you:

- Retain or grow your market share by more effectively persuading the customer to buy from you.
- Reduce the time and effort necessary to sell by increasing the relationship level with the customer.
- Increase competitive strength through delivery of concise and consistent competitive messages.

2. Financial Results. A top-functioning sales team delivers the following financial benefits to your company:

- Increased top-line performance, both in total and individual deal size. A team that sells together can expand the size of each deal and sell more deals.
- Reduced selling expense. When a team does not perform well, sales cycles are extended and multiple calls are required to convince the customer of your solution's superiority. When the team works well together, through both planning and execution of the process, they'll shorten the sales cycle considerably.
- Lower recruiting and training costs. Teams that work well together have lower turnover. This results in reduced costs associated with recruiting, hiring, and training new team members.
- Increased profitability. If you're able to sell more with fewer costs associated with the sales effort, your margin increases.

3. Internal Results. Benefits to the culture or internal operations of the business derived from team training include:

- Easier adaptability to change. Team members that work well together will help each other adjust to and leverage change either inside the organization

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or in the marketplace as a whole.

- **Less downtime.** Dysfunctional teams spend a lot of time churning over issues, both internal and customer-centric. This churning not only results in employee turnover, but it also slows down the entire sales process and can lead to less-than-cordial team interactions.
- **Improved morale.** When a person feels like he has made a valuable contribution to the opportunity, the team, and the company, his morale remains high, making him less susceptible to being wooed away by your competition.

Achieving Outstanding Results

There are three actions that top-performing organizations take in order to leverage team-based training to achieve these results.

First, if your organization uses competency maps or other documentation outlining the responsibilities associated with each role on the team, make sure that everyone is made aware of everyone else's responsibilities. Charge and empower all team members to become accountable for their own responsibilities and to raise their hand when they need management's assistance in accomplishing objectives.

Second, unless the skill being developed is unquestionably focused solely on a specific team member, send the entire team to the training program. Whether it's opportunity management, presentation skills, developing the solution and value proposition, demonstration skills, or some other function, the entire team should attend. After all, every member of the team has some role to play in ensuring that each step of the overall selling process occurs.

Third, do not accept an individual's (or their manager's) assertion that they don't have time to attend training. No

one is so highly skilled that they cannot benefit from some training. When it matters most in the sales process, each person will perform as well or as poorly as they trained for the event. When someone says he's forgotten more than he could learn during training, remind him that that might be the problem... he's forgotten it!

Summary

There are many reasons that team-based training doesn't happen in organizations. Unfortunately, most of the reasons given for not training as teams are the exact reasons that team-based training should be implemented. People in sales (and sales management) are realizing that teamwork is far more important in today's world than in the past. Cultural and economic realities as well as the globalization of the marketplace are increasing the pressure to perform.

When people are forced to adapt to these changes by themselves, they get frustrated and become less productive. When they realize that they're doing it as part of a team, they achieve a synergy and increased productivity.

As economist Lester Thurow has stated, it's the skills of your workforce that will be the greatest competitive weapon. Make sure your sales team has every skill needed to succeed. If they sell as a team, they must train as a team. ♦

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ference, Web-based meeting) is risky if there is a likelihood that users will not know how to troubleshoot problems in locations where there is no technical backup.

- **Training:** Can we train people to use the technology and the process? If possible, consider setting up training programs that will allow team members time to practice using the collaborative technology and process when there is nothing at stake.
- **Cost:** Is the cost appropriate to the business problem being addressed? Don't be penny-wise and pound-foolish. If the business problem is significant, pay the money to collocate employees to work on it. If not, don't spend money needlessly on videoconferencing or Web meetings when a simple telephone call will work just as well.

Summary

As we move ahead in the Information Age, we can expect our communications to be rife with possibility and fraught with challenges. Virtual work will serve us well in an age where agility is required to master the ever-shifting art of collaboration. There is little doubt that companies and individuals proficient in the art of meeting virtually, who can tap the power of virtual teams, will have the competitive advantage in the marketplace. ♦

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