

Creating A Stellar Sales Force

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ORGANIZATIONS INTUITIVELY KNOW that remarkable sales growth is due in part to a remarkable sales force. That perception is validated by Dechert-Hampe & Co's *Great Selling Organization Survey*, which revealed the top five characteristics of great selling organizations to be:

1. *Leadership*
2. *Ability to build customer relationships*
3. *Creativity and innovation*
4. *Effective account executives*
5. *Strong team management & teamwork*

Note that all but one of these five characteristics are directly linked to proficiency in personal or interpersonal skills. DHC's survey indicates that superior people and interpersonal skills are the key to success and winning with the customer.

What's New?

Rapid and significant changes in the competitive marketplace have caused a shift in the dynamics of the manufacturer-customer relationship. The new learning is that success with the customer demands significantly greater personal and interpersonal skill and that sales people must apply these in a broader context than ever before.

One of the most significant factors supporting a sound working relationship between a manufacturer and customer is alignment – the degree to which the two parties understand each other's business imperatives and capabilities and leverage these to mutual advantage. Alignment becomes more important and powerful the more strategic the interaction. For the sales force, this means they

must focus on strengthening the alignments and synergies rather than focusing on points of difference.

To outpace competitors, manufacturers must develop sales people with broader and deeper skills to:

- (a) Go beyond the traditional interactions so they can not only influence but also collaborate with their customers; and
- (b) Apply personal/interpersonal skills internally – within their own team and cross-functionally – to engage their organization in delivering against the customer's needs and expectations

Impact on Development Curriculum

Manufacturers have long offered development in customer-facing personal skills like communication, influencing and negotiating, but this has typically focused solely on aspects necessary to making a sale. A new twist to these traditional capabilities is required in today's marketplace. Sales people must now also be adept at building strong, long-term relationships.

Until recently, organizations offered training/development in these skills only as individual or stand-alone courses. Progressive organizations now offer a curriculum that pulls together the individual skills. Their sales people can see how they are inter-related and inter-dependent for developing more effective customer relationships. For example, consider how negotiating skills are linked to conflict management skills. Both are linked to an ability to adjust to different work styles. All of these are underpinned by good communication skills matched to the situation at hand.

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Recent Success DHC helped a pharmaceutical company with a program that integrates conflict resolution and influencing with decision making, styles analysis and communications strategies. These inter-related personal skills were coupled with traditional selling skills programs under the umbrella of developing high performance sales teams. Participants in this program can better see the relationship between these topics and the impact changes and best practices have on the outcome as a whole. They are then better equipped to practice what they encounter everyday – situations that require balancing all of these skills.

Additionally, not only must the relationship between skills be understood, but participants must now be able to apply these skills in a way that goes beyond traditional teaching. For example, sales communication training typically focuses on conveying “presentations” to customer decision makers and then to “handling objections” in order to learn to “sell to them.” But in today’s environment, customers demand significantly more two-way communication in order to “work with me so we both win.” Communication skills training has needed to progress into and incorporate a more sophisticated questioning and listening skill set than was required in the past.

Similarly, negotiation skills were once primarily directed at convincing the customer to agree to the manufacturer’s plans aimed at achieving their specified short-term sales objectives. Progressive organizations today go one step further and teach their sales force to also consider the negotiations’ impact on the long-term manufacturer-customer relationship, rather than solely the short-term sale.

Likewise, traditional influencing skills training was directed at teaching sales people the tactics that convince custom-

ers to take action. Today’s organizations realize that sales people must know not only these tactics, but also how to engage in difficult conversations. They know the relationship with the customer can be preserved and even strengthened by constructive conflict. They provide their sales force with techniques and skills to influence customers from a position of power and assertiveness rather than aggressiveness. They encourage their sales force to recognize and work in the customer’s preferred style and culture to create a positive experience the customer wishes to repeat.

Applying Interpersonal Skills Internally

The survey results also indicated that effective *teams* are incredibly important to “great” sales organizations. Sales people must acquire the ability to apply interpersonal skills within their own organization, in addition to their interactions with customers. The sales person skilled at influencing or convincing their organization to take action without direct authority to *require* action can better achieve objectives.

Sales people must understand how to work with others on their team, with other functions, with headquarters and with management to achieve results with the customer. To do so, they must create alignment with others in their organization who are charged with different goals and often allocate resources in ways that are unfavorable to the sales person’s needs.

For success, they must be able to openly discuss and resolve goal conflict and facilitate consensus. In addition, they must be skilled at negotiating and clarifying responsibilities and authority to ensure follow through and action.

The sales person’s ability to work cross-functionally within their own organization is critical to developing customized tactical solutions to support their strategic customer alignments.

In Conclusion

Interpersonal and personal skills required to develop solid, collaborative and cooperative relationship with customers has become vital for the sales force. The need for this is immediate as the customer will not wait for gradual change in the relationship with manufacturers – they wield too much influence over manufacturer success. In fact, customers have morphed from being a conduit to consumers to **allowing** manufacturers access to the retailer’s shoppers.

Sales training and development must focus on the breadth and depth of interpersonal skills. Organizations must develop these skills via planned, holistic training and development curriculums that clearly demonstrate the interdependency of these skills and capabilities. The result will be a sales force ready, willing and able to apply those skills both with the customer and within their organization. **V**

Recent Success DHC helped a Fortune 100 organization clarify the roles and responsibilities assigned to the Sales, Customer Development and Marketing departments. There had been gaps and overlapping role expectations, which resulted in inter-department resentments and misperceptions that hindered teamwork and ultimately, effectiveness at the customer. The resulting consensus on goals and roles gave clear direction for process and procedure owners and outcomes that supported a highly effective “one face to the customer” approach.