

Secrets of a high performance culture

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Everyone wants a sales team full of high-performance, hard-driving, revenue-producing professionals. However, few companies know how to achieve this. Take an honest look at your own sales department. Perhaps there are one or two high performers, a sizeable group of mediocre salespeople, and a scattering of space wasters. To you this seems about average. What you'd really like to do is move the "mediocres" up to the next level and pull the trigger on the poor performers. You're just not sure how to do the former, and—because you figure a warm body is better than no body at all—you're afraid to do the latter.

Poor sales performers do tremendous damage to your sales team. When you allow them to hang around without producing, you lose the respect of your entire team. The good people leave—generally when one person goes, two others follow—and with them go assets like institutional memory and sometimes, clients. What's left is a sizeable group of disillusioned employees who come to view your company as a place to work, not a place to grow.

Your problem lies not so much in the people you have working for you as in your culture. What you actually need to do is to create a high performance culture, one where success breeds success and where poor performers simply can't hide. Here are some tips on how:

- **Have standards, not wishes.** Of course you would like all of your salespeople to come to work every day all fired up, fill their calendar with productive meetings, and close at least one big sale every day. But telling them the outcome you'd "like" isn't going to feed the bulldog. You need measurable standards to separate the wheat (your top sellers) from the chaff (those low performers you're itching to fire). There are four standards of measurement:

Quantity standards: Anything that can be counted: number of sales calls, number of client lunches, number of phone calls, number of proposals written. These are the easiest standards to set but, as you will see, they're not often the best ones.

Quality standards: These are standards that include subjective criteria. For instance, a sales call that yielded data that can be used to write a proposal is clearly superior to one that yielded no new information.

Timeliness standards: Anything that can be measured by stopwatch, clock or calendar. For instance, the time between needs analysis and proposal, or the time between checking and returning email, voice mail and return call.

Cost standards: These involve being a good steward of the company's resources. Such standards can mean refusing to give away too much to get the order, getting a certain price, not taking smaller, less productive clients on golf outings.

The standards you choose to measure are up to you and your situation.

- **Make sure your standards lead to the results you really want.** When you measure the wrong things, you end up shooting yourself in the foot. I have an anecdote about a Texas radio station sales manager that illustrates this point: This new sales manager told his staff, "You must be out of the office by 9:00 each morning and you can't come back until 4:00 pm." So what did the salespeople do? They rented an efficiency apartment and put in three phone lines! So the sales manager was measuring a standard that led to a behavior he didn't want! He should have said, "You need to be in front of customers from 9 am until 4 pm." The standard he set had no basis in reality.

I had another customer who set a standard that his salespeople had to make 10 full-blown written proposals a week. When I asked him what this meant, he told me his salespeople would scan the client's logo on the cover, make sure it had 28 pages, and drop it off with the potential client. The problem was, they were 28 meaningless pages! You need to set meaningful measurements that teach people how to win—not just create activity for the sake of activity.

- **Define "hustle."** You need to clearly define what you want your sales team to do. Spell it out in no uncertain terms. I once did a seminar for a group of fast-food franchise managers, during which a woman asked, "How can I get a 16-year-old minimum-wage employee to hustle more?" I explained to her that "hustle" means different things to different people. It's subjective. If you can't put a problem in behavior terms then you don't have a problem, you're just complaining.

The manager said that the employee walked too slowly when she went to clean up empty tables. She added that she wished the girl would at least create a small breeze when she walked by customers! So I told her, "Okay, go back and get her to practice walking by a table fast enough to make a napkin move, or rustle someone's hair. Now your employee will know what hustle looks like! It will have a meaningful definition, instead of you just accusing her of being lazy."

- **Enforce standards early (or shovel the piles when they're small).** This speaks to the importance of setting limits and following through with consequences right away. Suppose I set a standard that by Friday every employee must have at least seven sales meetings booked for the next week? Well, if I come in on

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the first Friday and Joe only has five meetings booked, then I can have a meeting with him and say, "Look Joe, We have a gap of two meetings here. You need to fix that right away." This is a small pile to shovel. But what happens if I let it go for months and Joe has fallen into the habit of having only, say, two meetings booked for the next week? That's a much bigger pile to shovel. If I don't deal with it right away, when will I?

- **Create monitoring systems that encourage teams to reinforce themselves.** If you adopted a seven-sales-meeting standard like the one mentioned above, you must create a systemic way to make sure it is enforced. You might, for example, hold a progress meeting every Friday afternoon to make sure every salesperson has meetings lined up. If you're too busy to do so, how long do you think it will take before people start slacking off? But if you do this every Friday, it won't be long before your old pros are telling new hires that they must have seven meetings booked by the end of the week—because "that's the way we do it here." The team begins to enforce the standard because it's become part of your high-performance culture.

- **Think of discipline as teaching/coaching, not confrontation.** Most people dislike confrontation, which is one reason so many salespeople get away with poor performance. The manager simply avoids confronting the issue until it's way beyond critical mass. But when you have strictly enforced standards as part of your company policy, it's easier to discipline as a teacher or coach, rather than a tyrant. The standards allow you to approach the employee as "you and me looking at the problem" rather than "me vs. you." Instead of saying "Joe, you lazy bum, you've got to start working harder!" you're able to say, "Joe, you've only got five meetings set up for next week and our company standard is seven. You've got two weeks to catch up. What's your plan today? What are your next five calls going to be? Who in your Rolodex can you call?" See the difference? You're in teaching mode, not confrontation mode.

- **Create "success cycle" systems.** When you set high standards from day one, it ensures that even moderate salespeople will have early success experiences. These successes lead to increased confidence—and the self-imposed pressure to do it again—which in turn lead to more successes. Other people in the department see these successes and believe it can also happen to them. This is the success cycle, and it is a salesperson's best friend.

Of course, you as a manager should figure out

ways to get everyone into the success cycle right away. Not every salesperson is a strong speaker. That's why I created a nine-minute multimedia presentation that weaker speakers can use to ensure quick successes. This is just one example. I've seen people who couldn't perform at one company go on to be top performers in another company. When you implement a success cycle system, you can probably save at least half the people that would otherwise become poor performers

- **Developing a strong bench lets you get rid of poor performers.** Sometimes, of course, you will decide that salesperson is just not salvageable. When this happens you must get rid of him or her as quickly as possible. The problem for many companies is that the manager hasn't developed a strong bench and would rather keep a warm body (no matter how ineffectual) in a sales position than no one at all. The solution? Interview regularly. If you're interviewing two salespeople a month, you will always have a slate of potential employees to choose from if you have to let someone go. And just knowing that you're interviewing keeps your team on its toes.

- **Try this no-fail interview question.** When I interview salespeople I always ask them to tell me about their 10 biggest wins. Really successful people are driven to achieve again and again. They constantly "raise the bar" on themselves. So by asking this question, you quickly discern if someone is a winner—or not. If a candidate isn't on a roll with his answer within a minute, don't hire him. If he can't come up with a substantial number of "wins," he's probably not going to be a person who's driven to succeed. This one question can save you a lot of turnover down the road.

It goes without saying that your salespeople are your most valuable asset. But most managers don't know how to motivate them. If there is one tip I could offer that sums up all the others, I would say that managers must teach their salespeople how to win—and to do that you must teach them the game within the game.

About Chris Lytle

A leader in sales training, Lytle is also in demand as a speaker and consultant in advertising, marketing, sales, and sales management. The National Speaker's Association has recognized Chris with its highest designation. He has been a seminar leader and promoter since 1980. He's created 14 "road shows" and customized many more seminars for more than 112,000 sales managers, salespeople and their clients. His newest book is The Accidental Salesperson. To learn more about Lytle or APEX Performance Systems programs, call 800-255-9853 or e-mail info@apexperformancesystems.com.