

Driving Business Results Through Sales Excellence

by Greg Long & Butler Newman

Organizations can “shift the performance curve” of their sales teams. Gerhard Gschwandtner, in his article *Winning Formula* published in *Selling Power*, October 2007, makes three key points using research from the Sales Executive Council. He describes the topic as “a decidedly new lens” for focusing our time and investment to improve sales results. This article outlines a structured approach to implementing this new lens.

The SEC advocates a core approach of determining what top performers do that make them the best. What exportable actions do they take that the rest of the sales force can replicate?

Gschwandtner makes three key points about this:

Modeling high performer behavior as a blueprint for improving the core proves challenging for three reasons. First, top performers are often unaware of the behaviors that lead to their success. . . . Second, it is a difficult and time-consuming task to isolate true success drivers. . . . Finally, even if the disciplines identified are correct, transferring them meaningfully requires a very different take on improving skills and sales process than exists in most companies.

Sales leaders all know that a significant difference exists between the top and the average sales performers. In our experience, that difference can be as much as tenfold! That effectively means that the top performing salespeople are carrying most of the responsibility for the results of the entire organization. In fact, this performance distribution has been around for so long that most people just accept it as the way it always is. But there is no reason for sales leaders to accept this situation as normal. As long as some people are performing at high levels, it is possible to close the gap between top and average performers. In fact, it's not only possible, but it's easy to do if organizations follow a structured approach.

Modeling high performance by top sales performers is a three-step process. Following these three steps will ensure that you successfully address the key points made by Gschwandtner.

Step 1: Interviews and observations to understand top performers

In his book “*Blink*,” Malcolm Gladwell argues persuasively that top performers look at a situation holistically and make judgment calls to skip steps and more quickly arrive at the correct response to the situation. But as Gschwandtner has correctly identified, top performers are often unaware of what makes them top performers. So simply surveying them or conducting interviews will likely not result in sufficient data to understand what sets them apart. But the approaches and the thought processes followed by top performers as they select that correct response can be understood through a combination of interviews and observations. Watching top performers is always very revealing since doing so captures what they do in the context of various situations. For example, under what circumstances do

they follow an approved sales process and when do they skip steps? Or how do they respond to objections raised during a sales call? Do they adhere to a preapproved script or do they adjust their responses based on the particular situations?

Step 2: Analyze the data to develop a model of top performance

Typically, performance can be mapped into a set of five to seven outcomes produced by top performers. Outcomes are tangible and have value to the organization. Some examples of sales outcomes might include

- Valued relationships with key members of customer organizations.*
- An up-to-date planning and forecasting spreadsheet.*
- A current mental model of the customer's competitive situation.*

The outcomes produced by top performers tend to be leading indicators of success rather than lagging indicators of what has already happened. A quota report detailing how each salesperson performed against quota in the previous quarter would be an example of a lagging indicator. It's lagging because it trails the actual performance. The significant factor is that even top performers can't do anything to impact lagging indicators—these factors are already past. Leading indicators can still impact results. So doing well on leading indicators will eventually show up in the lagging indicators.

Once the key outcomes of top performers are understood and documented, the tasks used to produce each of those outcomes can be described. The combination of a list of the clearly defined outcomes along with the accompanying tasks on how to replicate each outcome provides the foundation for truly understanding top performance. This addresses Gschwandtner's second key point about the difficulty associated with isolating success factors. The key is to first understand the outcomes produced by top performers.

Step 3: Develop a structured program to improve the performance of the rest of the sales force

In his third challenge, Gschwandtner notes some of the problems with implementing training to transfer skills from the star performers to the rest of the sales force. He is right; it is very difficult. Unfortunately, it's made all the more difficult because too many organizations attempt to overcome the challenge through training-only approaches that have proven inadequate to meet today's demanding sales environments.

In far too many cases, sales training programs are reduced to teaching skills that are somehow determined to be deficient. The problem with these programs is that performers don't have a clear picture of how those skills should be put to use to improve their performance. When a person has acquired improved communications skills, for example, how and in what circumstances should he or she apply those skills to improve his or her sales results? Merely having improved communications skills may not help produce better results. Instead, performers need to know how and when to use those skills to produce specific outcomes. A specific performance chain leads to improved performance, and that performance chain works like this:

- Success is achieved by producing the right key outcomes.***
- The key outcomes are produced by executing the right tasks at the right time.***
- The right tasks are executed by having and applying the right skills and knowledge.***
- The right skills and knowledge are acquired through a structured program of training, coaching and reinforcement.***

So a performance map detailing the key outcomes and tasks provides the starting point for addressing Gschwandtner's third key point. The right skill development programs cannot be developed until the right skills are identified through a thorough understanding of the entire performance chain. The design of a successful training program always starts with a concise list of specific outcomes that form the basis of top performance and provides a model of how to put skills into practice in a practical way.

The burden of implementing this three-step approach falls on the shoulders of sales leaders. Instead of merely trying to improve performance through sheer willpower and increased motivation, they should acknowledge that both top and average performers want to do well and help their organizations succeed. Leaders should focus on mapping each step of the performance chain in sequence. Then, and only then, should they work with each performer to address specific skill development needs with the confidence that they will contribute directly to improving sales results for the organization.

The bottom line

The key to achieving significant performance improvement of an entire work group is to first identify those critical factors most responsible for exceptional performance and to then design and implement appropriate skill development programs to help close the performance gap between top performers and the rest of the sales force. Identifying those critical factors is enabled by applying a three-step approach centered on the key outcomes produced by top performers.

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