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Even the best salespeople, like athletes, require coaching

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Imagine a star athlete refusing to take coaching advice or performance feedback. What do you think would happen if that player no-showed at the team's review of game films?

Two likely consequences would be less-than-optimum performance and expulsion from the team.

Top sales performers embrace coaching feedback and advice, knowing this will further strengthen selling skills. They do more than follow direction, however. They process the externally generated input in tandem with improvement-oriented introspection, seeking ways to improve.

Combining external advice and internal evaluation is critical to sports superstardom -- and sales superstardom. Yet many salespeople don't want to participate. The prevailing attitude seems to be, "I know how to sell, leave me alone."

Think about the old adage that "insanity is doing the same thing the same way and hoping for a different result." Unwillingness to achieve professional betterment is just that -- insane.

One of the greatest salespeople in history, Winston Churchill (who had to sell to the English people both the need to fight and the need to persevere through many hardships), summed up the challenge facing today's sales force: "Personally, I'm always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught."

Churchill understood the importance of getting good advice, even when it was a bitter pill to swallow, and knew how to chew upon that advice as enthusiastically and methodically as he did on his cigars.

Those willing to learn and grow can go far; the rest of the sales force will risk withering on the vine. This is especially true given today's buying public, which is much more sophisticated and less tolerant of old-line sales tactics than their predecessors.

Sales feedback is ideally more focused on common-sense reviews of what's working and what's not working than developing grandiose growth strategies.

Let's use the example of Sally and Bob, who both make 25 contacts in a month. Both close two sales that month. They're achieving the same results, and are meeting their company's success threshold, so they just need to make more contacts monthly to close more business, right?

Not exactly. A look inside the process of both people yields valuable insights that may help drive up their sales numbers with the same number of calls.

From those 25 contacts, Sally obtains 12 initial appointments and Bob obtains eight. Presuming a sales cycle of two calls, Sally gets eight second appointments and Bob gets three.

What can be gleaned so far? Either Sally is doing a better job of getting through the gatekeepers and generating interest on her first call, or Bob is doing a better job of qualifying based on the first appointment.

On second calls, it again appears that Sally does a better job generating interest and need, but seems to be a weak closer -- getting only one in four qualified prospects.

Sally could be coached on better qualifying her prospects and conducting more dynamic closing techniques. Bob could be coached on more effective ways to get past gatekeepers and asking more engaging questions during the initial call.

By developing ways to be more successful with a set number of contacts, salespeople can become much more productive and efficient. This is much more preferable to just doubling the number of contacts -- and the number of mistakes right along with it.

After receiving some coaching and feedback, Sally and Bob need to track their own success and failure patterns. This will help them identify skill sets they need to refine or expand. Tracking activity will help document what works and what doesn't.

This is infinitely preferable to the common (and insane) practice of continuing to conduct initial meetings the same way, though they are bearing little or no fruit. For example, an improved approach can determine a better follow-up process with decision-makers who say they want to proceed but are continually sidetracked by more pressing issues.

Tracking and coaching also can improve qualifying, in lieu of spending valuable time chasing "uncatchable" prospects.

Every sales call should end with a decision to buy, move to the next clearly defined step, a "no," a referral or a lesson. Lessons come from good and weak calls, but most of us learn the most from mistakes and calls that don't end in our favor.

Here's the ultimate selling irony: Optimism is a requirement to endure the ups and downs of the selling profession. Yet it often stands in the way of critically dissecting mistakes, then learning and growing from them.

Those willing to endure this tough process can help build a better mousetrap for themselves and the rest of the team.

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