

HOW TO BUILD A SALES CULTURE IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

By Troy Harrison

In my years of experience in working with (and for) companies large and small, I have discovered that there is a common element to the most successful businesses. The most successful companies have a *sales culture*. A “sales culture” is a philosophy that permeates the company, from the corner office to the loading dock, that says, essentially, “We are a sales organization, and everything else we are able to do is a product of our ability to sell our products or services to our customers.”

This flows from the top because it **must**. Despite the protestations of those who advocate bottom-up leadership, the reality is that any corporate culture is set not by the employees at ground and field level, but by **the overriding philosophy of management**. That’s you, by the way. So, let’s assume for the moment that you have decided that your company needs to accept and embrace a sales culture. How do we go about that?

Set the mission: First of all, whatever your mission statement, throw it away. I know, it’s something that you’ve put a lot of thought into and probably has some great phrasing. It’s probably also something that your employees couldn’t remember if a gun were put to their heads. Let’s replace it with something simple like this: “We are a sales organization, and we grow profitably by Acquiring new customers, Developing current customers to greater profitability, and Retaining profitable business.” Use this as the mantra that guides your company’s decision making.

Communicate: All good things in sales (and business) come from good communication, and most bad things happen because of insufficient communication. Knowing this, the next step is to communicate the message to your people, and to do so consistently. This is where a lot of companies fail, because the communication happens like this: The Big Guy at the Top will have a staff meeting where he/she communicates the ‘new mission’ forcefully to his key managers, and then expects the managers to communicate it downstream. They do, but with varying degrees of emphasis and enthusiasm. The Sales Manager obviously embraces the mission, while the Production Manager may be less enthusiastic, and so forth. If you really want to effect change, it has to be up to you.

Have all-company meetings, or all-department meetings, or all-branch meetings; however you need to do it in order to have the opportunity to have every employee hear the message directly from your lips. If your people know the goals, they will act in accordance with them – if they believe that the goal is real and permanent.

Align Goals: To accomplish your goal of profitable growth through acquiring, developing, and retaining customers, you must align all your departments and goals. For instance, instead of budgeting in dollar terms, budget in *percentages* from the top line. This way, when departments need more resources for equipment and personnel, they know how to get it – help grow the company. Even with the best goal setting, however, you’re going to see some internal conflict.

Remove Internal Conflict: Good sales forces, by their nature, create internal conflict. This isn't because salespeople are bad people, obnoxious, or difficult to work with (although that is a separate issue), but because good salespeople push the frontiers. Because sales is all about growth, good sales forces are always creating extra work and pressure for the other departments which must then function at a higher level to support the sales growth created. This creates conflict and push-back.

It's your job to mediate and handle these conflicts and push-backs. It's a delicate issue because no department, or department manager, wants to feel subordinate or less important than sales. The reality is that, if you're truly embracing a sales culture, the other departments are exactly that – subordinate to sales. When conflicts arise, you should go back to your mission statement; what helps your company grow profitably through acquiring, developing, and retaining customers?

Have a High Performance Sales Force: Now it's time to turn up the heat on the people who are doing the selling. You have the right to demand excellence from your salespeople once you have molded the culture of the company around them.

You need a strong sales manager who actively works to strengthen and enhance the abilities of his/her salespeople. Your sales manager must be a good coach and developer of people. He should be willing to advocate for the needs of the sales force while simultaneously demanding the highest effort and achievement from them. He must be capable of surrounding himself with top talent and then making that talent even better.

The sales manager must understand the basic equation of sales achievement: **Quantity of activity x Quality of activity = Results.** To this end, the sales manager should have performance metrics in place to assess both quantity and quality of sales activity, and be equipped to hold salespeople accountable for those metrics and for the results. Struggling personnel must be either coached or changed; top performers should be rewarded and coached to even higher levels.

Reinforce the culture: As you've probably guessed, it's not enough to have some meetings, say "we are a sales organization," and call it good. Cultures happen because they are reinforced, directly or indirectly. For this to work, key decisions must be made based on the new mission statement: "Does this decision help us to acquire, develop, or retain customers?" That doesn't mean that non-sales departments starve; that new machine for the plant may be completely justified by its benefits in product quality. The raises for the production staff may be appropriate to reward them for their part in acquiring, developing, and retaining customers. It does mean that your company has *one universal criteria* for spending, personnel allocations, and any other key decision making.

The Benefits: There are numerous benefits to aligning your company around a sales culture. The biggest is this: **Sales focused companies tend to produce excellence in every department.** The reason is simple: Companies with a strong sales department cannot stay bad or mediocre in other areas; if they do, those sales gains will quickly be lost through customer dissatisfaction and attrition. As noted earlier, good sales departments tend to lift other departments through necessity. On the whole, organizations that center their culture around the process of profitable growth tend to achieve that growth, year after year. It's not easy, but the results are worth it.

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