

5 Soft Skills Every Salesperson Needs to Get Ahead

It's easy to see whether a salesperson is succeeding: Just look at their numbers. Identifying why they're succeeding, on the other hand, is much trickier. It usually comes down to factors that are hard to measure, like a rep's ability to empathize with their prospect. You can't quantify empathy, but if a salesperson can't relate to their prospect's challenges, they probably won't close the deal.

With this relationship between success and "soft skills" in mind, let's look at the five soft skills every rep needs to get ahead -- and more importantly, how to develop them.

1) Growth-Minded

Let's say that you're fantastic at building rapport. Do you believe rapport-building is one of your innate skills -- or do you think you developed it through hard work, practice, and external feedback?

If you chose the second answer, you possess a growth mindset. People with growth mindsets believe they can strengthen their natural talents and develop new abilities over time. People with fixed mindsets, on the other hand, view their skills as fixed. You have the hand you're dealt, and that's that.

Scientists have discovered being growth-minded dramatically improves your life-long chances of success.

How to get it:

To go from a fixed mindset to a growth one, change your view of failure. Don't think of failing as embarrassing or shameful -- see it as a learning experience. When you're not afraid to screw up, you'll push yourself more.

Even better, you'll gain something new from every challenge you tackle. (Of course, that doesn't mean you should be complacent about failure. If you're making the same mistake three-plus times, take a cold, hard look at why you're not improving.)

You should also try using "yet" to describe things you haven't mastered. Psychologist Carol Dweck -- who invented the growth-minded concept -- says this word has the power to dramatically boost confidence. For instance, rather than thinking, "I haven't been able to meet 120% of my quota in a month," you'd think, "I haven't met 120% of my quota in a month... yet."

2) Coachability

When a salesperson is good at listening to and implementing feedback, their name typically skyrockets to the top of the leaderboard -- and stays there. After all, you're combining the strengths of a great rep with the insights, wisdom, and experience of their manager. That's a winning combo.

Plus, sales is constantly evolving. Buyers are much more sophisticated than they used to be -- and what worked in 1996 definitely won't fly in 2016. To keep your process and strategies up-to-date, you'll need to be coachable.

How to get it:

Step one is simple: Take five minutes every day to reflect on what went well and where you could improve.

According to Mark Roberge, senior lecturer at Harvard Business School, highly coachable reps are always analyzing their performance and looking for weak areas.

Of course, the most important factor of Coachability is how you respond to feedback from your manager, trainer, or mentor. Remember to stay open-minded and follow through on their comments and suggestions even if you don't like them. If their advice works, you're in better shape than before. If it doesn't, you can stop using it. It's a good outcome either way.

Finally, communicate with your manager. It'll be much easier for them to gauge your progress and give you valuable information if they're always in the loop.

3) Empathetic

The ability to imagine themselves in their prospect's situation can turn an average sales rep into a star performer. When you've got a good idea of what your prospect is thinking and feeling, you can target your messaging to their specific pain and motivations. You'll also know exactly when to push and when to hold back.

Plus, showing the buyer you're on their side helps you overcome the stereotype of the sleazy, aggressive rep who's only interested in their quota.

How to get it:

Bizarrely, research proves that literally imagining yourself in someone's shoes makes you more empathetic. So next time you start working with a prospect, take two seconds to mentally put on their footwear.

Other scientifically-backed ways to boost your empathy include going out into nature, meditating <http://blog.hubspot.com/sales/meditation-benefits-sales>, and watching or reading inspiring stories (fill up that Netflix queue with some great documentaries).

And to make it clear to prospects you've got their back, use phrases like "I hear you" and "That sounds really challenging." (Here are three more options.)

4) Effective Communication

Between talking on the phone, sending emails, giving demos, and speaking in meetings, most sales reps spend at least 90% of their day communicating. Having solid communication skills is essential. You must be able to clearly and persuasively get your ideas across -- without going off on tangents or using buzzwords and meaningless phrases.

You should also keep your audience in mind at all times. If you speak the same way to your sales manager as to your prospects, something's wrong: After all, they have vastly different goals, desires, and background information.

How to get it:

Watch or listen to recordings of yourself. You'll inevitably notice verbal tics or confusing statements that you completely missed during the actual interaction. Every time you do, make a quick note of the issue so you can avoid it in the future.

Reviewing your conversations also gives you the chance to analyze your prospects' reactions. For example, maybe your method of handling objections seems to work in the moment -- but you realize those same objections came up again during the next call. Clearly, what you thought was a clever counterpoint didn't translate. Once you've found the weak spots in your communication methods, you can adjust accordingly.

5) Humility

Finish this sentence: "Bread" is to "butter" as "humility" is to _____.

Okay, "sales" probably wasn't your first answer. But reps who can identify the right time and place for humility consistently knock their deals out of the park.

When you're humble enough to reveal a vulnerability, or admit you don't know something, your prospects will immediately trust and respect you more. As a result, they'll view you as a trusted advisor, or even a partner in their success (this is ideal).

How to get it:

When most people realize they don't know something, their gut instinct is to hide their ignorance or change the subject. Instead of doing either, simply say, "I don't know."

Worried the prospect will lose faith in you? Add “But I’ll find out,” or “I’ll look into that right away.” (And then make sure to follow up.)

Humility also hinges on owning your mistakes. When something goes wrong, don’t use language that shifts the blame to other people or external factors. For instance, rather than saying, “We must’ve gotten our wires crossed,” you’d say, “I forgot to clarify when we’d meet -- that’s on me.”

Ultimately, you can’t have hard skills without soft skills. So if you’re looking to take your game to the next level, focusing on these capabilities is your best bet.