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Partnership for success

One of the enduring ideas in American culture is the lone hero: Jimmy Stewart standing up for his principles against corrupt politicians in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, Rambo singlehandedly overcoming entire armies, and, of course, John Wayne kicking the butts of any one that gets in his way. This “one against many” concept makes great entertainment and feeds our image of ourselves as Americans. The only problem is that it is a bald faced lie. In the real world, the most successful people partner with others to spread the load and access their creativity, knowledge and experience. John Wayne was one of the most popular actors of all times. Much of the “Duke’s” success was the product of his long working relationship with director John Ford. If you watch several John Wayne movies from the 40’s, 50’s and 60’s, you’ll see a number of familiar faces. Wayne assembled a regular cast of actors that knew his acting style and Ford’s formula. They formed a team that turned out hit after hit for decades.

Sales people are great believers in the great American myth of the lone hero. Many people are attracted to sales by the opportunity to spend their workdays without a supervisor staring over their shoulder. The ability to work independently is a key component of success in sales but taken to extreme, it can be a limiting factor preventing reps from reaching their full potential. Salespeople who draw on the strengths of those around them will always out produce those who insist on ignoring this help. The second most important partnership is the relationship between sales people and their sales managers. This relationship is only surpassed in importance to our success to the relationships we have with our customers. A rep/manager partnership is symbiotic; each needs the other to exist. Ken Blanchard’s well known quote, “None of us is as smart as all of us,” applies here. In a challenging sales environment, we need all the “smarts” we can get. Below are some thoughts on getting the maximum benefit from your relationship with your manager or your sales reps.

A Win/Win Relationship

The foundation of any good relationship is communication and an empathetic understanding of each other’s needs. Sales reps need to understand what their managers want from them. They need to remember that their boss has a boss as well. The worst

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thing that can happen to a sales manager is to be caught off guard when they are asked about what is happening in their zone. This is why sales people should always keep their manager informed about everything, good or bad, that will affect their territory's sales. As a sales manager I stole an idea from Hal Geneen's book Managing and put a sign on my desk that read, "No Surprises." I wanted my reps to know that there would be no repercussions if a problem arose and they informed me as soon as possible. I needed this information to adjust my forecast, and also I could work with the rep to turn the situation around. Reps must remember that their manager has several reps and can't have the intimate knowledge of the individual territories. The rep must be the manager's "eyes and ears" in the field.

On the flipside, the manager needs to keep their reps informed of what is going on in the market and in the company. Reps should know what is expected of them. They also need to know how they rank against the other reps in the company and where they are excelling and where they fall short. This information should be shared in real time. Waiting to discuss these matters during an annual review allows bad habits to form and costs both the rep and the company money.

To facilitate the flow of information with my reps, I started the day with a five or ten minute meeting with each rep. I preferred face to face meetings, but would talk to reps over the phone if our schedules required using that format. To make the most of this small block of time we used a standard three part format. In the first portion of the meeting we would recap what had occurred the previous day. The second portion concerned the rep's intentions for the day, who they planned to see and what they hoped to accomplish. We would wrap up the meeting with a free form discussion.

This format allowed the rep to ask any questions they had for the manager and to talk about anything that was concerning them. The manager could use this as a mini-coaching session nipping any bad behaviors in the bud or praising the reps good behaviors. I made a form to document these meetings and kept them in a binder for each of my reps. These binders became a diary of the rep's activities that I could use to help the reps. For example, by comparing the results of the day with the sales rep's original plan for that day reveals how effective they are at planning. This daily practice kept me informed about all of my reps and provided them with an opportunity to brag about their successes and to voice their concerns. The standardized format allowed

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us to share a lot of information in a few minutes. On a separate sheet, I noted the successes of my people so I could recognize them at our weekly sales meeting. I also used this information to look for patterns in the challenges reported by my team. If a problem seemed to recur, I would address it through training or by modifying our products or pricing.

Taking it to the streets

Field rides are one of the best tools a sales manager has. When done well, they are also immensely valuable to a rep. Many managers only do “911” calls where an account is in jeopardy or a prospect is seen as having great potential. It is important for a manager to be involved in these calls as it leverages the manager’s experience and shows the rep that you support them. I feel it is also important to spend time with their reps on more typical days. The manager should observe their reps on cold calls, follow-up calls and service calls. The manager should refrain from taking over the call so that they can observe the rep in action. The manager and the rep should discuss the rep’s plan for the call before the meeting and the results after. The manager should be objective and tell the rep what they did right as well as coaching them on where they could have done better. I suggest spending the bulk of the day with the rep, as this gives the manager time to observe a greater number of calls in a variety of situations. The manager should take the rep to lunch. This provides an informal relaxed format that facilitates open communication. I’ve found that discussing the rep’s performance over a burger makes them more receptive to coaching. This also tears down the “wall” between the manager and the rep, which often leads the rep to share information they would be unlikely to share in an office setting.

Public Opportunity #1

Each of my reps was asked to review their territory and identify their “Public Opportunity #1,” a play on the FBI’s “Public Enemy #1.” These were either prospects which had the potential to become a large account or a current advertiser who has potential for significant growth. The rep and I would work together to develop a plan to approach and sell the account. Working with the rep on this project not only helped them win some large accounts, but also helped to build up my relationship with them. This also presented a great opportunity to coach and train the rep.

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By investing time with the rep, a manager can demonstrate their interest in helping the rep to be successful. Once the “#1” was sold or we had exhausted our efforts, we would identify a new prospect and begin the process again.

A Winning Team

I recently read an analysis of the top players in the NHL. The top players, such as Wayne Gretzky or Mario Lemieux, not only scored the most goals, but also led their teams in assists. This not only helped their teams outscore the competition, but built team morale. By assisting their teammates to improve their scoring records they also won their gratitude and respect. The same can be true on a sales team. Studies of employee turnover found that people often leave a job because they feel that their supervisors did not listen to them and did not provide the support they needed. People want to be respected as an individual and have a voice in the organization. By partnering with your sales people and building a collegial relationship, you will reduce turnover and build sales results. I'll close with this quote from Dwight D. Eisenhower, “It is better to have one person working with you than to have three people working for you.”

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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