



Cracking the Code: 5 Steps to a High-Performance Sales Culture

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For as long as we've been studying how to create a high-performance sales culture, our goal has been to work out the formula that would enable companies to avoid many common missteps. The fact that there's a good deal of avoidable error in this space reminds us of a news story we ran across recently about some kids who were preparing for a science fair, and who obtained a canister of rocket fuel. In and of itself, the fuel was potentially useful, except the kids put it in the fireplace — and lit the fire.

When it comes to sales improvement initiatives, companies put rocket fuel in the fireplace all the time. They do things that blow out all the windows, and they say, "How did that happen?," when the right knowledge would yield a much more positive result.

That's why the focus of our work for the past 10 years has been to crack the code on creating a high-performance sales culture with predictable outcomes. We can now say that it's possible to lay out the formula or the "physics" of success, and to demonstrate that it's not a mystical or elusive process, but one that can be reliably expected to deliver if done correctly. It's not that companies don't know some—or even many—of these elements. Sometimes they simply don't practice what they know. Sometimes they do things in the wrong order, or are missing one or more of the steps.

To compare it to a chemical formula, you can have all of the right elements, but if you don't combine them at the right time, in the right sequence, and at the right temperature, you end up with very different stuff than you intended.

Reviewing these steps gives you an opportunity to assess yourself up front. Do you see your organization *doing* these things?

The Formula for Sales Performance Transformation

1. Choose Your Audience

Normally when companies try to address a sales capability gap, they focus on salespeople to the exclusion of everyone else. In reality, the salesforce is only one subset of your audience. The first element of the formula, then, is to select your audience *vertically*: Include not only the salespeople, but also those whom they report to, and the people they in turn report to. It sounds obvious, but 99 times out of 100, companies miss this.

2. Define Your Target

Don't try to take on 50 things at once. If you could hit one or two targets, which ones would really make a difference? Again, this may sound obvious, but if you go into any company and ask what they're trying to get out of a current sales improvement program, you're likely to get as many different answers as the number of people you talk to. We've found that when the effort has a clear and memorable theme, it takes on a driving force: "We will land a man on the moon and return him safely to earth by the end of the decade." We like to see targets expressed as "X to Y by when." Notice that President Kennedy expressed the goal in this form. When you give the effort a clear context — "increase gross margin from 33% to 35% by December 31st" — you have a common rallying cry that inspires each individual's effort.

3. Design the Training

Imagine if an admissions nurse, an operating room nurse, and a surgeon were all sent to the same training. It would make no sense, because they all have different jobs. While they share some knowledge in common, they each need specific information to play their role. In the same way, because Audience Selection gives you at least two (or more) different audiences, your training design must be reflective of each audience and each role. We've found that training is most effective when it simplifies what people are asked to learn to achieve the target. The principal is to teach no more than needed, but leave out nothing that matters. It's also critical to focus on the leaders — not the individual contributors — because it is the leaders who are the advocates and keepers of the sales culture. Companies frequently miss this point. Often, front line managers aren't even alerted to the training and have no idea that their people are involved. You can get all of the other elements right, but without engaging your sales leaders, the formula will fail.

4. Engaged Execution

You can't train for a marathon in a weekend, and you can't learn a musical instrument in a single lesson. Getting good at anything is a journey. That's why the execution phase is critical. With sales managers continually overstretched, the execution must be expertly designed so that it's easy for them to do, and spaced over time. This is the step where the leaders really take charge and drive the process. When sales leaders become convinced that life will be better using the new way of engaging, and there is a system designed for use by their team, that's when they say, "*This is my program.*" And that's when they get engaged and the seas part. We have found that the best way to accelerate this process is to design simple coaching exercises intended to get the targeted results. This way sales managers are doing what they value — advancing sales opportunities. Nothing drives execution more than people doing what they value.



5. Measure Results, Rinse and Repeat

Step 5 is where the systems calibration takes place: Did you achieve the target you set in Step 2? “We intended to get around the track in less than four minutes. Well, it took us four and a half.” But as important as it is to measure progress, if you’re not going to use what you’ve learned to refine and reengage, then there’s no point. What needs to happen in order to carve off that half of a minute? That kind of critical information can result from the process. That’s why this step requires what we call “Rinse and Repeat” — refining and reengaging in the process. And that’s the fundamental paradigm shift that today’s sales organizations need to make.

The Power of a Paradigm Shift

In our experience, sales leaders tend to think about maintaining the culture of their sales organization in the same way that the Mississippi River floods the delta: Every 20 years, it comes along and destroys everything in its wake, replenishes the soil, and then the nourishment depletes itself over time until the flood comes back again.

Others see the process as more like a tetanus shot: “We do this once and every few years to get a booster and that’s it.” Neither one of these approaches is ever going to create a sustainable, best-in-class sales culture and sales capability. Imagine if a software developer said, “Once our people learn a certain way to code, we’re never going to give them any more information.” How long would it be until they were irrelevant in the computing space and their people unemployable? A year? Maybe three? They’d be out of business. And yet companies routinely treat their sales people this way.



The truth is that instead of spending like the 20-year flood, the whole process can actually be better served by smoothing out the economic curve. For example, rather than invest a million dollars in sales performance improvement followed by nothing for many years, the organization could spend \$250,000 every year to engage in a powerful, renewable cycle: define and focus on a target, measure so that you can tune, and start over again.

You don't need to do a hundred things well in a sales organization, you need to do a few things well. Adopting the paradigm that includes Measure, Rinse, and Repeat enables continuous improvement.

Of course, continuous improvement almost always trumps one-time effort, but unlike an individual who decides to go on a diet and has full control over the process, an organization has people coming and going, changing everything from the power dynamics to the investment priorities.

That's why engaging leadership in the process is critical to embedding the commitment and building a competitively differentiated sales culture and capability.

This isn't a diet for individuals, it's a way of life for a community. There are leaders in industries who see the value of this approach and have the courage to stand up for it: "This is how we're going to run. This is what it means to be part of this community." And that's how this particular formula produces gold.



Common Myths about Building a Best-in-Class Sales Culture

When a sales organization realizes “we need to change,” it’s a golden opportunity to adopt the mindset and habits that truly support a high-performance sales culture. But there are a number of common beliefs that can actually thwart an organization’s ability to succeed. Here are some misconceptions that should set off the alarm bells:

“Our people are experienced. They don’t need training.”

Unfortunately, experienced workers often simply have more practice at doing things poorly. People typically learn their job in the first 1-2 years, so 20 years of experience is just as likely to mean two years of experience repeated 10 times.

“Investing in the sales organization to improve our sales capability won’t make an impact in this year’s revenue line.”

Oh yes it can. To use a sports metaphor, in most sales situations you’re not competing against Tiger Woods, you’re competing against your next-door neighbor Joe, who’s using his dad’s golf clubs. Your people aren’t up against your competitors’ top 1% or even top 5%, but against your competitors’ 95%. If your sales people can do a few things really well that distinguish them in the customer’s eyes, you can win — and make a huge difference very quickly.

“Selling can’t be taught. Either you can sell or you can’t.”

When someone claims that sales performance improvement training is a waste of time — or a leader talks of having made failed investments in sales training — it often turns out that previous efforts resulted in many individual success stories. The problem was that the organization didn’t apply the follow-through to translate individual successes into an enterprise-wide success.

“We have a whole HR organization. They’re experts in this space.”

Expecting HR to transform your sales organization is like asking your neighbor to raise your children. Sales leaders often miss that if they build a great sales organization—one that outsells the competition—the numbers will follow. This is the job of sales leadership.

“It’s too hard and it costs too much.”

The truth is, building a high-performance sales culture and capability doesn’t have to be hard, and it only costs too much if you try to do too much. By slowing down, selecting your target, and periodically measuring and refreshing your efforts, you can actually avoid going through a hard and expensive process.

Meet the authors

When it comes to sales, **Randy Illig** is one of *the* go-to professionals. An idea guy with a point of view who has an uncanny ability to also be a great listener, Randy is the global leader of Franklin Covey's Sales Performance Practice, which helps to train, consult and coach clients on how to win more profitable business. He's co-authored a book (*Let's Get Real or Let's Not Play—Transforming the Buyer/Seller Relationship*) and is an avid reader in the sales space, constantly challenging his own ideas and those of others. He consults from experience, having successfully founded, built and sold two successful companies and winning awards along the way, including Ernst & Young's Top CEO under 40, CEO of one of Inc. 500's fastest-growing companies, and the Arthur Andersen Strategic Leadership award. Most importantly, Randy is known for his sense of humor and storytelling—just ask him about fishing, hunting, golfing, and his wonderful wife and daughter.

A committed long distance runner and father of six, **Craig Christensen** knows all about endurance. Since earning his MBA at Harvard, Craig's career has included previous responsibilities as a Wall Street banker, commercial developer and leading organizational consultant. Those early experiences have shaped Craig's current work as a pre-eminent sales trainer and coach, influencing more than 550,000 professionals around the globe. Serving with Randy Illig as global leader of Franklin Covey's Sales Performance Practice, Craig helps clients succeed by combining the best of leadership development, behavior change and sales management into smart, simple and sustainable solutions.

For more information about Franklin Covey's sales training solutions, call us at 1-800-707-5191. You can also visit www.franklincovey.com/salesperformance.



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