
Accepting Responsibility For Your Sales Success

by DAVE KAHLE

The fact that we live in a time of relentless and pervasive change is no longer news to anyone. There is one important implication of this situation that continues to be a challenge: Our employees need to continually change their behavior to adapt to the world around them.

I've learned through my work that helping companies develop more effective sales organizations always involves making changes in the company. And sooner or later, that means that some employees must make significant changes in the way they think about, and do, their jobs.

This is particularly true of sales professionals, who must decide to change their behavior and implement the best practices I teach. Beyond that, ultimately, helping people change should be the work of every executive, manager, consultant or trainer.

Which brings us to the heart of this article — what is it that empowers some people to change smoothly and effortlessly, while getting others to modify their behavior seems like moving a mountain? What is the fundamental building block for individuals that more than anything else equips them to successfully implement change?

It's something that's becoming increasingly rare — a motivating sense of personal responsibility. That is, a deep belief that each person is responsible for their own behavior, as well as the consequences of that behavior.

That seems so basic — like common sense — yet I am constantly amazed by how few people actually exhibit it. Often, in my work with developing salespeople and their managers, I'm struck by how many people fail to accept responsibility for their own success, or lack of it.

Too Many Victims

It's far more popular to be a victim. We've all shook our heads sadly when hearing a news story about somebody who acts irresponsibly, and then successfully sues someone else. In our litigious world, being a victim often pays. That is an unfortunate consequence of an unhealthy belief.

As long as we view ourselves as victims, we're unable to change ourselves, or our circumstances to achieve better results. It is not our fault that we're not doing better, we tell ourselves. Someone else caused it. And because it's someone else's doing, the power to fix it and make it better is with someone else — we're powerless to fix it.

While few people admit it, or even realize it consciously, this "victim attitude," the direct opposite of personal responsibility, is very common, and embraced to some degree by most of us. This is especially true of salespeople, who could always do better if only something were different — something that someone else controls. If only we had lower prices; our quality was better; the boss was more understanding; customer service was more responsive — you know the litany because you've chanted it.

My wife is a crisis counselor, and one of the biggest eye-openers for her occurred when she realized that she was counseling the same people over and over again. You'd think, as she did, that a crisis would be an iso-

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lated event. Not so. Many of her clients find themselves lurching from one crisis to another. Why? Because they don't make the changes in their behavior and character that got them into the crises in the first place. At some deep level, they see themselves as vic-

tims, not personally responsible for their own character, their own behavior, and the consequences that behavior brings. Where there is no sense of personal responsibility, there is little hope for positive change.

I had a personal experience that brought this lesson home to me in a way that I will never forget. I had been the number-one salesperson in the nation for a company — my first full-time professional sales job. I had it made it — adequate salary, good benefits, company car, bonus potential, and the respect of my employer and colleagues. But the long-term opportunities were limited, and I decided to move onto a job that was 180 degrees different. I took a position selling surgical staplers to hospitals. It was a leap from the secure job I had to one that paid straight commission, required you to buy your own samples and literature from the company, and provided only six months of a draw to begin with.

But I was cocky, filled with the success of my previous job, and sure that I could make this work also. It wasn't hasty. I looked at the amount of existing business in the territory I was slated to get, and determined that if I could double the business within six months — a doable task — I was assured I'd be back making about what I was used to. Then, as I increased the business, my income and lifestyle would evidence the difference.

The Grass Isn't Always Greener On the Other Side

It all sounded good, so I left my old job and arrived in New York City for six weeks of intensive training on the new one. During the time I was there, my district manager moved on and was replaced. When I arrived home after the training, he was anxious to meet with me. In our first meeting, before I had a chance to begin working, he informed me that he had revised the sales territories. The territory I thought I had — the one I was hired for — was not the one I was going to get. Instead, I was going to receive just a fraction of that.

The new territory only contained about 1/3 of the existing business of the previous one. This change meant my plans for making a living were shot. It now became an impossible task.

I was upset and angry. How could they do that to me? I immediately began to look for another job, determined to quickly leave this unethical, uncaring company.

Things got worse. As I interviewed several companies, I discovered that they saw me as the problem. Instead of understanding what the company had done to me, they thought I was an opportunist who was looking for an easy way out. It became clear that no one else was going to hire me!

I grew more and more angry and bitter. In addition, I had little success selling the staplers. After six months, my temporary draw came to an end and I owed the company \$10,000, was making almost nothing, and had no prospects for another job. I felt squeezed between the proverbial rock and hard place. I was a victim of a dirty deal.

Then, out of the blue one day, I had an inspiration. It was me! The problem was me! Yes, the company had treated me poorly. Yes, they had been unethical and uncaring. But, the product was still exciting, and the opportunity still great. The real problem was my attitude — my bitterness and anger were getting in the way of everything.

The Reality of the Situation

I was responsible for my own behavior, my own thoughts *and* my own attitude. When I had the realization that it was me, I felt like a thousand pounds had been lifted from my shoulders. If the problem was me, then I could change! If the problem was somebody else, then I was a victim, and powerless to do anything about it. What a motivational and exhilarating realization.

I began to work on my attitude and take control of my thoughts. Slowly, I began to do away with my bitter attitude, and replace it with hope and expectation.

My results began to change also. Things began to

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go better. Six months later, I had paid off the debt to the company, and was making more money than I had thought possible. The job became more fun, more financially rewarding and more fulfilling than anything I had ever expected.

The turning point for me occurred at the moment I accepted personal responsibility for my circumstances.

Once again, the lesson is clear: When there is no acceptance of personal responsibility, there is little hope for positive change. However, when there is personal responsibility, the future holds unlimited potential.

Your struggle to bring about significant change in your organization will depend on the depth to which your employees embrace their responsibility to make personal changes. Your efforts to improve the productivity of your sales force will ultimately depend on the degree to which your sales force accepts personal responsibility to make the changes in behavior that will improve their results.

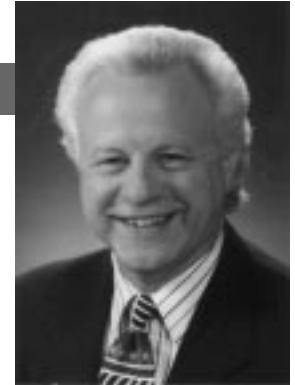
Can you instill a sense of personal responsibility if it is lacking?

This is one of those aspects of character that is always easier to hire than to instill. In other words, if you hire people who already have a sense of personal responsibility, your job will be much easier.

However, if some of your current employees lack this characteristic in sufficient quantity, it is not hopeless. By understanding the importance of this quality

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of character, and regularly making it a part of your conversations, you can raise the awareness of this fundamental building block for implementing change. Talk about it, write about it, and preach it in company meetings in the hope that many of your employees will see the light, in the same way that I did.

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