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Is Top Performance Effort or Skill?

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"The harder I work, the luckier I get." — Golfer Gary Player

Recently, a sales executive was excited about a just-released white paper on a new sales model for sales representatives. As he walked me through the model, I thought about all that has been written about sales technique or different models/approaches to selling products/services over the years.

Having been in the sales enablement business for more than 25 years, I know there is no shortage of approaches and methodologies. I also strongly believe it is critical to provide a road map or guidance to salespeople and help them understand "what good looks like" when it comes to sales effectiveness.

That said, why do so many of these "approaches" fail to improve results in the people who need it most? I believe it comes down to the old saying "No plan will work unless you do."

As a manager, wouldn't you prefer to have someone who actually is engaged and will do the difficult things the job requires? Sure, it would be ideal if your team members followed the process/methodology, but I can't tell you the number of times I have seen the less skilled outperform the highly skilled based on effort.

That is why for years we have taken a holistic approach to developing sales teams, looking both at the skills and attributes of top performers. We also are quick to point out that everyone has his or her own success formula with a combination of skill, attitude, motivation, and accountability.

Whereas it is good to understand if you have a "challenger," "customer advocate," or "business resource" type seller, it is also important to understand the level that they will get dirty and put an effort forward to secure business and make their quota.

This blog is not scientifically driven but more my thought process. Having spent a majority of my life in Minnesota (I happily reside now in Dallas), I wanted to use hockey as a vehicle to get my point across.

There are basic fundamentals to hockey: skating, stick handling, passing, and shooting. These are the minimum barriers to entry for any hockey player. Just like in selling, some players do it better than others, based on talent and effort (practice time). Each team has its own system on how it runs its offense and defense similar to selling methodology (SPIN, Miller Heiman, Solution Selling, TAS, The Challenger, etc.).

Although they all have the same "system," some hockey teams execute better based on talent, effort, and coaching. It's the same in sales. For the sake of this blog, let's only focus on effort.

Each level of performance (top, consistent, moderate, and bottom) will have different levels of effort provided by the player or salesperson. Some may argue this is style, but I prefer to look at it as effort. Let's look at a few selling types using the language of hockey.

The Grinder: Regardless of top, consistent, moderate, or bottom performance, this is the equivalent of the hockey player who goes and digs the puck out of the corner. Every shift they work hard and grind the opponent down. They may not be the most skilled, but they are worker bees. If they have a lower skill set, they may not ever hit their numbers, but you love the effort. They are engaged.

The Finesse Player: They make things look easy and are admired for their skill. They don't have to work as hard as the Grinder to get good results. However, those who don't put the effort in are always anomalies for their managers—sales managers just can't figure out why they underperform. They seem to have all the skills but never quite get it done. They don't enjoy getting into the corner and digging the puck out; instead, they prefer scoring without doing the dirty work to get the deal.

Steady Eddy: They are neither overly skilled nor overly committed. They get the job done, nothing more and nothing less. They are contributors to the team, and they understand their role. They show up every day and put the effort in but do not strive to get significantly better as they are happy with their role.

Maintainers: They have worked hard to make the team. That was their goal, and now it is to maintain status quo and comfort level. They could be so much more, but that is not in their DNA. They show up, get their paycheck, and do enough to stay on the team. For some coaches, the known (Maintainer) is better than the unknown (giving another player a shot to make the team) so these Maintainers stay employed.

Lastly, "I Could Have Been Somebody"/Quitters: When the going gets tough, they look for new opportunities. Their résumé shows a plethora of experiences. They complain about markets, pricing, products, management, customer service, training—and it is never their fault. They don't demonstrate commitment to the team goals and always tell you why it is not their effort but the system that is the problem.

Effort plays an important role in success, and sometimes the player needs to be reminded regardless of skill that his or her effort must be improved.

Question: As a sales manager, would you prefer someone with high skills or high effort?

Side Note: Usually those with high effort will get the skills they need to be successful!

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