

Increasing Engagement

Go beyond motivational tricks; incentivize excellence

by: Dale Stein, Technology Assurance Group (TAG)

After founding a handful of companies, scaling one of those organizations from nothing to \$30 million in only six years and taking responsibility for nearly every sales department I have been a part of, the most popular question I have been asked over the past 40 years is this: “How do I keep my sales team engaged?”

In this article, I will summarize what I have learned over 40 years of sales management, including what it takes to manage, motivate and harness excellence from three different generations (baby boomers, millennials and Generation Z) in the workplace.

The Dakota People Figured This Out Long Ago

There is a popular saying that supposedly originates from the Dakota Native American tribe that says: “When you discover you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount.” However, when we consider our own salespeople, we tend to forget this.

There is no shortage of managerial advice for how to remedy the “dead horse” problem in your organization while overlooking the core issue. For example, you can find dozens of articles, coaches and consultants who will urge you to try tactics and strategies like these:

- Buy a stronger whip to motivate the dead horse.
- Threaten the dead horse with termination.
- Lower your standards so all dead horses can be included.
- Hire outside contractors to ride the dead horse.
- Harness several dead horses together to increase the overall speed.

As business owners, we often overestimate our abilities and assume that if we only supply the right sales training, the right sales process, the right coaching, the right products and the right leads, anyone can be successful within our organizations.

And while those things are still very important, useful and recommended, the core thing to get right is you must hire highly intelligent people from the outset. Without the right people, there is no point.



Where Are All of the Highly Intelligent Salespeople?

As someone who has worked with highly intelligent individuals from three different generations, I have learned one universal truth: You cannot manage highly intelligent individuals. You must mentor them.

Ultimately, the sales manager’s role is to guide, mentor and allow intelligent people the autonomy to do what they already know

they need to do. Additionally, they must have sincere concern for their salespeople’s personal success in all aspects of their lives. (Please note: Their personal success extends beyond their work performance.) This is what separates inspirational mentors from annoying managers.

Forgetting this universal truth, many managers resort to micromanagement tactics like “positive peer pressure” in daily “huddles,” overtracking key performance metrics (e.g., number of calls, number of followers, hours worked, etc.) or even doing something as insulting as assigning sales quotas. Intelligent people do not need arbitrarily assigned quotas that are handed down to them without any relevance to their personal goals.

Highly intelligent people already have their own goals and, correspondingly, their own personal quotas (which they are intrinsically motivated to achieve because they are directly connected to their goals) and it is your job to respectfully support them in achieving their goals.

You do not enforce a quota because you need the salesperson to hit a number. You support him (or her) in surpassing his own quotas because you want so badly to see him succeed in purchasing his second home or because you want to make sure he can afford the engagement ring he has picked out for his partner. The quotas matter because you are invested in his personal success.

You do not assign company goals. You ask what his personal goals are and then align them with company objectives so it is truly a “win-win.”

Not all personal goals require tons of money. What would you do if you found out that one of your salespeople dreamed

of learning how to play the guitar and you just so happened to have an old, dusty guitar in your garage that was waiting for an enthusiastic student to give it new life? Do you even know your salespeople well enough to know there is an opportunity for you to capitalize on? Motivation is not a tactic; it is a “mentor mindset.”

Three Things Salesforces Need to Stay Motivated

Once you have the right people on your sales team and you are operating with the right “mentor mindset” you can introduce tactics and strategies. There are three main strategies to implement:

(1) Your salespeople need a predictable, proven sales process. While every product/service is unique, every single salesperson must have a proven sales process he can reliably follow to generate sales. This is a leader’s job to provide, but a collaborative effort to optimize.

At Technology Assurance Group (TAG), we have developed a 12-Step Sales Process that, when followed, generates an 85% close ratio. Typically, we reserve this for our private membership, but if you are reading this article you may request a complimentary step-by-step PDF of our proprietary sales process by emailing me at dales@tagnational.com.

While there are many proven sales processes in the world, each and every one needs clearly defined touchpoints that achieve certain psychological shifts in the prospect’s mind. Our goal is to gradually guide our prospect along a linear path that ultimately leads toward a sales transaction where a sale is simply the logical next step.

In any case, one key component of any proven sales process is that it must allow the prospect to progress through a sequence of communications that enable him to like, trust and respect the salesperson. Our sales process is geared around these three attributes. It is an earned privilege to be liked, trusted and respected.

For example, salespeople at our member companies must master rapport skills that extend far beyond “schmoozing” by learning the four different communication personality styles (per the DiSC assessment) so they can adapt their communication to fit their target prospect’s natural tendencies.

For example, a high “D”-type personality will respond to facts, options, speed and the bottom line, whereas emotional appeals and attempts to connect on a personal level will fall flat. Worse would be if your salesperson tried to earnestly explain the details of your methodology to a personality type that is wired to “avoid details at all costs.”

However, a high “C”-type personality will yearn for as many details as possible. He will typically ask questions like,

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“Where exactly did you get that information?” and will need to see your claims backed up with detailed analytics, plenty of data, explanations of methodologies and case studies in order to feel comfortable making a purchasing decision.

As sales managers, we must educate our employees on these nuances and have a specific process that quickly elicits these differences so salespeople can increase their likelihood of success to

the point where it is predictable. Even if most of your sales conversations happen over email, these communication styles need to be considered.

Average salespeople will succeed by default when selling to prospects who share the same communication personality style as them, however exceptional salespeople need to learn how to sell to prospects who communicate in a wildly different manner than what comes naturally to them.

This is one step in our 12-Step Sales Process. All organizations need to map out a repeatable sales process that salespeople can follow, amend and fine-tune so they do not waste time reinventing the wheel on every single transaction.

The best part about developing your own sales process when combining it with truly intelligent salespeople is that not only will they utilize this process, but they will improve it over time — if you are wise enough to ask for their suggestions.

(2) Your salespeople must be compensated handsomely (only if they perform). A lot of business owners cringe at the idea of their salespeople being paid handsomely for their performance. Sometimes it is due to ego battles between sales departments and leadership (“Why should they make so much when I take all the risk?”) and other times it is because they do not want their salespeople to make “too much” money, for fear they might get complacent or leave. However, this scarcity mindset is a bright red flag for highly intelligent individuals.

Imagine if some day in the future, you needed to work as an employee. Would you work for an employer that tried to discreetly cap your earnings? How would you feel if your boss wanted you to be moderately successful, but not wildly successful? How much would you invest in that relationship?

On the flipside, if you delivered massive sales results for an employer who refused to micromanage you at all, respected you with full autonomy, facilitated opportunities for your success so you could pursue the fulfillment of even your wildest dreams, and he had no qualms about you becoming very, very wealthy while achieving whatever mattered most to you, would you ever leave that company?

Good salespeople have plenty of options and they follow the money. If you are willing to be generous (as long as there is sufficient performance), you can separate yourself from

80% of other employers out there and immediately attract the top 20% of performers to your organization.

In the same way that your business changed for the better once you started working exclusively with the top 20% of your prospects, your organization will change for the better when you are surrounded with highly intelligent, intrinsically motivated salespeople. This means that in order to attract top talent,

you need to accept that your salespeople will be rewarded generously for their contributions, because sales affords you the budget to fix all of the other problems that crop up while running a business. Top salespeople are compensated exponentially well because they provide exponential contributions to the rest of the company.

If you have an all-star sales team but still cannot figure out why it is underperforming, another place to look is your compensation plan. Any initiatives you try to launch that are not grounded in each salesperson's individual compensation plan are predestined to fail. The compensation plan will dictate which products/services will get sold. Do not fool yourself with wishful thinking and remember that personal financial incentives must match the company's broader financial incentives. Make sure each employee's individual financial incentives outlined in the compensation plan also match the company's broader strategic goals. Once again, do not rely on clumsy enforcement, but instead rely on alignment.

(3) You must understand what the individual is trying to accomplish through his work. The last thing most CEOs get wrong is they assume they can impose goals, quotas or objectives on others. When you try to use an external mechanism (e.g., metrics, team huddles, quotas, etc.) to create accountability, your employees will only work hard enough to get the external mechanism off their backs. Leaders only rely on shaming tactics when they do not know what else to do.

Remember, you want to connect their personal goals to their professional goals. Once there is a direct association, highly intelligent salespeople will push themselves far harder than you ever could. It is your job to excavate their goals, and you accomplish this by asking everyone to create a "life business plan." This is how you make motivation obsolete.

In other words, when your salespeople realize there is a pathway for them to achieve what they want through activities they do for your business, that is when your employees will astonish you with their drive. It all starts with what they want. Your job is not to impose, but to respectfully ask and then directly connect their wants to the company's objectives.

Ask all employees to create personal business plans that delineate all of the goals they have in their lives. Then your

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job as their mentor (not manager) is to assist them to the best of your ability. To become a mentor, you should offer them mentoring time, inquiry, introductions and whatever you can to assist their professional development.

For example, let's say your salesperson has the personal goal of owning his own business. While many business owners would be afraid of that goal, we take the opposite approach. Instead of

balking, what if you helped him flesh out that goal?

You could say, "If you want to become a business owner one day, what skills do you think you will need to become really good at in order for your business to succeed?"

"Well, first I'll probably need to master sales," he might reply. "That's why I'm working for you. Then I'll need to understand how to build and scale systems. Then I'll need to understand how to manage cash flow. I'll also need to learn how to lead and influence a team."

"You might need some seed capital, too?" you might ask.

He might say, "Yeah, I expect to need \$200,000 to launch."

Then you guide him by saying, "OK. Let's have you work in the sales department first. That way you can master communication skills and learn how to influence others because that will help you in every other area of business. Not to mention, if you overperform in sales, you will be rewarded with bonuses and commissions you can use as seed capital to launch your business. If you ever want me to review any of your sales calls and offer pointers, just ask.

"After that we can start including you in management meetings where you'll learn how we make financial decisions," you might add. "That way you can see what it takes to maintain cash flow before you have employees expecting you to never make a mistake when payroll comes due. Once you get the hang of that, you can help us create innovative systems in the company and learn firsthand what it takes to scale a system. This will also help you learn how we come up with ideas for new products/services to add to our portfolio. You can develop all of the skills you need before you risk your life savings for a company you want to launch. Not to mention, you'll basically get to practice being an entrepreneur without the direct risk."

The unsophisticated business owner might fear investing so much into someone who will eventually leave. That is just scarcity mindset rearing its ugly head again.

Reflect on your journey for a moment and recall a handful of the mentors who helped catalyze your successes in life. Even if you outgrew a direct working relationship, would you be willing to refer customers, potential employees and opportunities to him in appreciation for the contributions he made to your life?

Stepping into the salesperson's shoes, can you see how this type of mentorship would be priceless to him? If you fully adopt this "mentor mindset" it is more than just a motivational tactic — it is a new way of life. If you were him, how would you feel if you did not have to hide your deepest aspirations from your boss but, instead, you felt like he was more interested in helping you develop as much as possible so you could achieve your dream?

Would you trust that person more? Would you be more dedicated? Would you try as hard as possible to learn everything you can, try to improve and give every interaction your all when you realize his business is the best vehicle for your professional development?

From this perspective, do you see how silly, if not outright insulting, quotas look to a highly intelligent individual?

The Three Types of Personal Goals

When each employee at our member companies crafts his life business plan, we ask him for goals in three categories:

(1) Money goals: Savings accounts, investment accounts, college accounts, etc.

(2) Passion goals: Travel abroad, learn to play drums, learn to become a great speaker, learn to speak a foreign language, etc.

(3) Thing goals: Own a home, have a large social media following, buy an investment property, buy a new car, etc.

For example, let's say one of your salespeople is asked to give a toast at his friend's wedding and is nervous about it. You might suggest he learns how to become a better public speaker so he can give a great toast. Then you can pay his hourly rate while he attends public speaking/communication workshops (like Toastmasters). Not only will he feel invested in your company, but you will indirectly benefit from his improved communication skills when he interacts with your customers, employees, leads, etc.

Say one of your salespeople wants to learn how to gain a ton of social media followers. Pay for him to go to social media trainings, and ask him to experiment and come up with new ideas for the company's social media accounts. Encourage him to use the tips and tricks he learns from his personal social media accounts and ask him what is working well. Even if only two out of every 10 ideas are good, you will still increase his engagement, make him feel like his creative contribution is actually valued and, once again, he will feel like the more you invest in him, the more he will want to generate some form of ROI for you.

By consistently investing in your employees, they will find ways to reciprocate and start helping your business in ways

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that 95% of today's employees do not. Ultimately, it all boils down to this: If you want them to do more than just collect paychecks, you must do more than just assign tasks.

Not everything will directly translate to company goals, but the company culture you will create by adopting this mentality is electrifying. This is when your employees start bragging to their friends about how innovative your com-

pany is to work for. And guess what that attracts? More top performers who want to be part of something special.

Decide to Be Extraordinary

If you want extraordinary results, you must be different. This type of leadership will not only change your employees' drive, but it will also improve your life. Servant leadership works because it is personally fulfilling, too.

Imagine how you would feel if when you showed up to your business and were focused on lighting up every employee, sharing in their successes (both personal and work) and you knew you were making such a strong impact on them as human beings that they would still value your mentorship for decades to come. Would that be better than constantly feeling exhausted from the ceaseless fires you need to put out while you try to motivate salespeople who drag their feet while you are pulling your hair out wondering why nobody else works as hard as you do?

At its best, your business can be the place where your people will discover their greatest selves. The divine irony is when you make this a priority for real (and not just in fluffy mission statements), you will be the one who will feel more meaning, purpose, excitement and success every single day.

Success is not a secret formula. It is a choice (albeit a bold one). Good luck. ■

Dale Stein is co-founder of Technology Assurance Group (TAG), an organization of managed technology service providers (MTSPs). Collectively, TAG's members do \$800 million per year in IT, cybersecurity, telecommunications and video surveillance. They are located in 148 cities across the United States and Canada, and are presently serving more than 780,000 SMBs. He is responsible for developing TAG's strategic planning and guiding its business development.

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