

Why Certification Matters

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We have noticed an increase in the number of organizations that are turning to certification programs for their professional sales and marketing teams. Why is this?

Let me back into a response to this question, because it is important.



Most organizations, especially those among the enterprise ranks, have developed a sales culture based on one or more sales methodologies: TAS/TAM, SPIN, Miller-Heiman, Solution-based Selling, etc. Within that framework they also develop a balance between account planning (proactive, strategic behavior) and account management (reactive, tactical behavior). Over time, most organizations begin a slow, inexorable migration toward account management, a practice that becomes embedded in the sales culture of the company.

But what do we mean by 'Sales Culture?' Let's begin with culture, which stems from the same root as the word 'cult.' Culture is defined as a

set of beliefs, values and behaviors that bind a group of people together under a common behavioral banner. The word also shares roots with the word 'cultivate,' which we all know defines the practice of growing and nurturing something – usually something agricultural but we also cultivate relationships, knowledge, artistic skill, and so on.

Culture becomes a tremendously powerful force in organizations, so powerful, in fact, that it can become destructive, especially if it falls out of favor, becomes outmoded, or goes down a behavioral rathole, as happened to any number of companies during the meteoric decline of the telecom bubble in 2001 (think Worldcom, Enron, Andersen Consulting, etc.). And sometimes it becomes to enlightened leaders that cultural shift must take place to change the direction, behavior or priority set of a company. But here's the rub: culture in an organization only changes when the reward structure that supports the corporate culture changes first. Failure to change the reward structure reinforces support for the existing culture, and no change takes place. The organization backslides, and forward motion is halted.

Consider the diagram on the prior page. In the technology world, the strategic sales hierarchy around which we build stories is a four-level hierarchy. At the bottom is technology, which will vary depending on the industry but might include such things as biotech, telecom, IT, multimedia, aerospace, and so on. These are the fundamental technological building blocks upon which the industry is built. In telecom, for example, these technologies might include protocol models, broadband access technologies like DSL, wireless technologies like 3G, CDMA, GSM and LTE, etc. IT companies would see security, cloud, computer architectures, and so on at this level.

Products and Services, the second layer, are made up of the underlying technologies and are the *things* that companies sell. The Whizbang 5000 router, the Double Propeller-head switch, the Blaze-o-Rama 5 Mbps Broadband Extravaganza, Abounding Clouds and so on are (fictional) examples of products and services that a company might sell.

When qualified sales professionals start to do their thing, focus shifts from Products and Services to Solutions. Why? Because a focus on solution selling demonstrates an awareness of the customer's business and the challenges they face and results in strong differentiation for the organization. The word 'solution' implies that a problem has been found and resolved – that's what a solution is. It's an effective response to an identified problem.

At the top of our hierarchy we find the customer's industry, which implies that the sales person has a broad, deep and nuanced understanding of the environment in which the customer operates.

Each of these four areas is directly related to the layers above and below them. Many companies – indeed, in some cases, entire industries – find themselves mired in the second layer, focusing exclusively on the products and services that they aggressively sell, not because it's the best thing for the customer but because it's the best thing for them and their commission. This, of course, represents an internal focus on the sales person, not an external focus on the customer. Over time it becomes institutionalized; in other words, it becomes part of the organizational sales culture. This one little thing can be deadly, and is the basis for a culture shift in many companies.

But here's the problem: Unless there is a compelling reason for the change of focus to take place, it simply won't happen. After all, sales people are compensated on the basis of what they sell: they are hunters by nature; tracking down and subduing sales opportunities is their game.

Yet we know that a focus on solutions is far more strategic, far more of a differentiating behavior than product-flogging. So how would we create the change required to bring about what is obviously a major shift in culture? What would it take to shift the thinking of a

professional sales person from a focus on *return on product sales* to *return on solution effectiveness*? Furthermore, does this mean that we have to change the entire financial compensation plan?

The answer is – not really. What it means is that we have to provide a reason for the sales professional to accept a cultural shift that focuses on the customer’s assessment of the effectiveness of the sales encounter. We still pay people for what they sell, but we *compensate* them on the basis of the degree to which they demonstrate support for the new culture.

One way to do that is to put into place a certification program that all sales people must go through. The program must be relevant, rigorous, effective, and valuable. It must also be difficult and broad enough in scope that it is not seen as a “slam dunk.” In other words, if participants don’t take it seriously, if they just go through the motions without really putting in the effort required to succeed, *they will fail*.

So what does a certification program look like? Generally it’s a multi-stage process that is punctuated by qualification levels that indicate successful achievement of a certain skill or set of skills. These levels might be called Apprentice, Practitioner, Mastery, and Mentor. Each level connotes a certain degree of capability, and while some participants will find themselves already at a particular level, others will not. Public recognition of level achievement combined with some kind of financial incentive and shift in professional responsibility can cause a shift in cultural focus. For example, Mastery might connote the ability to supervise and develop younger, less experienced sales professionals that are just entering the field. A person at this level might have as part of their job responsibility involvement with the training and professional development organization to help ensure that the educational content is on the mark. Meanwhile, a person who is at the mentor level might be part of a “senior sales council” with the responsibility to help set the strategic direction of the organization.

Ultimately this kind of practice leads to behavioral change and desirable cultural shifts that are good for the organization. This is not a management effort; it is a leadership effort, and it is centrally important to a growing, thriving, adapting sales organization.

Thanks for reading.