



To prevent complacency within your sales force, manage reps to behaviours and reward for results

Kyle Williams, a highly talented salesperson, experienced the performance-killing results of complacency. Williams was a top-performing salesperson with a global services provider. In the first five months of his year he had achieved his annual sales quota and he was so far ahead of his peers that the next best rep was only 10 per cent above his year-to-date quota. The compensation plan was ideally suited for Williams at this point. His commission rate quadrupled to 16 per cent of revenue, and he had the potential to earn a huge annual income. Did Williams maintain focus and keep pushing at the same pace? Absolutely not. After hitting his targets he lost the competitive momentum to be number one and went into cruise mode for the rest of the year. In the end he came in second place, and lost the reward trip to the hard working rep that had been chasing him the whole year.

Complacency is a business challenge that almost every sales force faces. Often sellers assume their past successes will guarantee future performance, but that is never the case. Complacency is an intrinsic flaw that prevents people and organizations from pushing beyond the status quo to achieve really great successes.

The highs and lows of the annual sales funnel demonstrate the impact of complacency on a sales organization. Ironically a person's worst month or quarter often follows their best. Why? People who dramatically surpass their perceptions of top level performance will take their foot off the gas to enjoy the ride. It is a natural human response to ease up when things are going great, and push that much harder when things begin to slip. We have a

level of comfort that we fall into, and complacency is the break that brings us back to center.

How could Williams, a person with such obvious talent, get so complacent? His employer provided a well-equipped sales organization: compensation accelerators, a prize for being the top-performing salesperson, rewards for surpassing quota by 25 per cent, on-going recognition, product training, sales skills training, lead development and CRM software tools. The problem for Williams, and many people like him, was the package of motivators and sales support was still incomplete.

Many organizations fail to recognize that managing for results delivers the status quo. Sales managers can avoid complacency in their team by managing their sellers to behaviours and rewarding for results. Selling is activity-driven marketing. Once Williams reached his quota he had achieved his goal. His manager could not request more of him because he had achieved what everyone else was still struggling for. Yet if the rep was managed to activity levels, his manager could have helped him maintain his pace and avoid the trap of complacency.

Managing for behaviours is easier said than done. It requires an organization to have absolute clarity in their sales process with the measurements

of the key activities that drive the organization's sales funnel. For example, a call center tracks the number of calls a rep makes per hour and the amount of time the prospect is on the phone as direct measurements for the sales funnel. On the other hand, a software firm may track the number of product presentations to

Sources of Complacency

Exceeding quota

The drive to push ahead is reduced once salespeople reach their goals, whether it is income levels or quotas.

Weak teams

Management creates a culture of leniency by failing to purge the bottom performers and demonstrating that poor performance is acceptable.

Too much freedom

No one focuses the salespeople on their activities. They are given the freedom to find their own path.

Unachievable goals

Management provides quotas and stretch goals that are unrealistic and unachievable. These goals demoralize and deflate the emotions of the sales force rather than motivating them.

Changing market dynamics

The market moves away from or towards the sales force – either it gets too hard to sell or too easy. In each case the activity management systems are no longer relevant for delivering performance.


executive buyers per month as a clear indicator of the health of their sales funnel.

A customer's buying patterns provide the key indicators to measure sales activities. Purchasing patterns should be divided into four primary phases: interest creation, pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase. The interest creation phase is the top of the sales funnel; this is the universe of companies that can be targeted. Quite often interest creation is separated as a marketing function to develop corporate awareness and leads for the sales force. The pre-purchase phase is the traditional view of driving an opportunity through the sales funnel, and it is where the lion's share of management and sales activity is focused. The purchase phase is the step a customer takes to make their final decision: choose the solution, negotiate and complete the appropriate buying commitment. The post-purchase phase is the delivery and implementation of the solution. By defining the key activities that drive a customer through each phase, an organization can define the behaviours that are most relevant to managing sales performance.

For an activity management system to be truly effective the funnel should be reviewed weekly with each salesperson. This is a time-consuming task for a busy sales manager, but it is critical to connect purpose and accountability to the sales reps' activities. When Kyle Williams reached his annual quota he made the unconscious decision that he no longer needed to do the hard work of selling: cold calling, up-selling maintenance accounts and day-to-day grunt work. If his manager had worked with him every week on his funnel, and more importantly held him accountable to the lack of movement at

the top of his funnel, he could have avoided the complacency trap.

Activity management gets a bad wrap from both salespeople and sales managers, because it gets abused. Rather than using it as a tool for motivation and performance, some managers use it as a tool of fear and micro-management. When tracking activities works against the salespeople it will actually cause complacency. Reps will fight the system when it is used as a way to whip them into shape. Rather it must be used, positioned and understood as a tool that is designed for the benefits of the salespeople and that will deliver them results they can feel in their wallets.

Williams learned a hard lesson by losing the top salesperson of the year award, which was a first class trip to Hawaii. He failed himself and saw first hand how complacency devastated his sales performance. The key lesson he took away, which he has used as a motivator every year since, has been to focus on selling behaviours. Today, now in a management role, Williams keeps complacency at bay with each of his reps by focusing their attention on the activities that drive the funnel. Every week he works with each of his reps to focus them on their opportunities and teach them how the funnel is a motivator and a tool for driving performance. 

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