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# Inspirational Sales Leadership

*A Systematic Approach  
to Motivating the  
Sales Force*



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# Inspirational Sales Leadership

## A Systematic Approach to Motivating the Sales Force

Sales productivity is one of the most studied areas of business. Much has been written on how sales leaders can drive value through tried-and-true methods such as clearly articulated targets, a thoughtful use of variable compensation and incentive rewards, transparent metrics, a focus on the individual, and robust support systems. These classic, formal sales management tactics work supremely well for simple, transactional sales: when individual deals are small, are closed in large numbers, and the product or service offerings are relatively contained and independent.

The sales leadership questions that are most critical to driving value in today's business-to-business sales environment, however, are generally more complex and require a deep understanding not only of the company's products and services offerings, but also of how the customer's own business functions and creates value. Deals that bring to bear the best of the enterprise to a complex customer need require the salesperson to tie together many internal as well as external capabilities. They typically have a long time horizon, and have a high potential value and a corresponding high level of risk. Outcomes on these types of very large deals are much less predictable, and significantly affect overall company results. Successfully reading the signals of when a large, complex deal is moving forward or getting stalled requires a sophisticated understanding that can't be captured in pipeline tracking systems. The sales leader needs to be in intense dialogue with his or her sales representatives to help recognize these signals, motivate the right responses, and move the process along at different stages of the sales cycle.

In an environment of many different ways to sell, how do leaders focus their sales force sufficiently on these more uncertain, less controllable, but an order of magnitude higher value opportunities? And how do they do this without sacrificing predictable quarterly results? How do they manage the tension between needing a steady flow of top line results, but also capturing the greater long-term growth offered by pursuing the most complex deals? And finally, how do the best leaders use non-monetary motivation to keep the individual sales representatives excited and inspired, during complex sales cycles that don't move fast enough to provide motivation solely from results and commissions, and that don't provide easy-to-interpret "proof points" of success very often?

By marrying critical formal and classic elements of sales strategy with "informal" and "inspirational" sales leadership, Katzenbach Partners has developed a new approach to sales excellence. Inspirational Sales Leadership helps our clients get the most from their people by identifying the leadership behaviors that motivate the right mix of results, and then systematically applying those behaviors to help their teams reach new levels. Inspirational sales leaders are able to create a sense of purpose, pride, and commitment, which translates into improved performance across every part of a sales team.

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“What have you done to my leader? Suddenly he is coaching me to prepare for important meetings, rather than taking over the close himself, and he is so much more decisive! This is exciting, my job is a lot more interesting now.”  
*(Sales representative—mid-size software firm)*

**The Difference Between “Good” and “Inspirational” Sales Leadership**

	A “Good” Sales Leader will...	An “Inspirational” Sales Leader will...
Targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set clear, stretch but realistic performance targets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistently coach representatives on finding the balance between number of deals in the pipeline, and depth of relationship per deal</li> <li>• Occasionally set “impossible” goals to inspire quantum leap improvements</li> </ul>
Metrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide rationale for the metrics imposed from “above” and help representatives accomplish them</li> <li>• Manage the scorecard to drive as many “greens” as possible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select and focus on a few metrics most relevant to the BU’s current strategy, and connect them to individual definitions of success in a way that drives the other metrics up as well</li> </ul>
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coach representatives and teams using a comprehensive model for sales performance; coach low performers to improve their results</li> <li>• Use the same consistent motivational approach with everyone on the team to ensure fairness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coach a few, specific behaviors that are directly connected to performance drivers—know the “DNA” of your sales force</li> <li>• Spend time to create high impact opportunities for high performers, and build skills with middle performers; pay minimal attention to or counsel out low performers</li> </ul>
Teaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage teaming, and include shared/team incentives in the mix</li> <li>• Create meetings and formal processes to enhance cross-functional collaboration</li> <li>• Step in to help hands-on with high impact deals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consciously and consistently build the right informal networks inside and outside the company to enhance collaboration within the team, across functions and BUs, and with clients and suppliers</li> <li>• Coach representatives/teams to close high impact deals, rather than coming in to close them yourself</li> </ul>
Rewards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reward top performers, e.g., “100% club”, and help middle performers anticipate and strive for success</li> <li>• Recognize not just results (lagging indicators), but also effort and skill (leading indicators)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage client recognition (being a valued thought partner to the client) as the main source of motivation</li> <li>• Recognize and reward the emotional side as well—e.g., the courage to have the right dialogues, willingness and ability to bring together the right people/strengths to go after distinctive, high value opportunities, willingness to take risk</li> </ul>

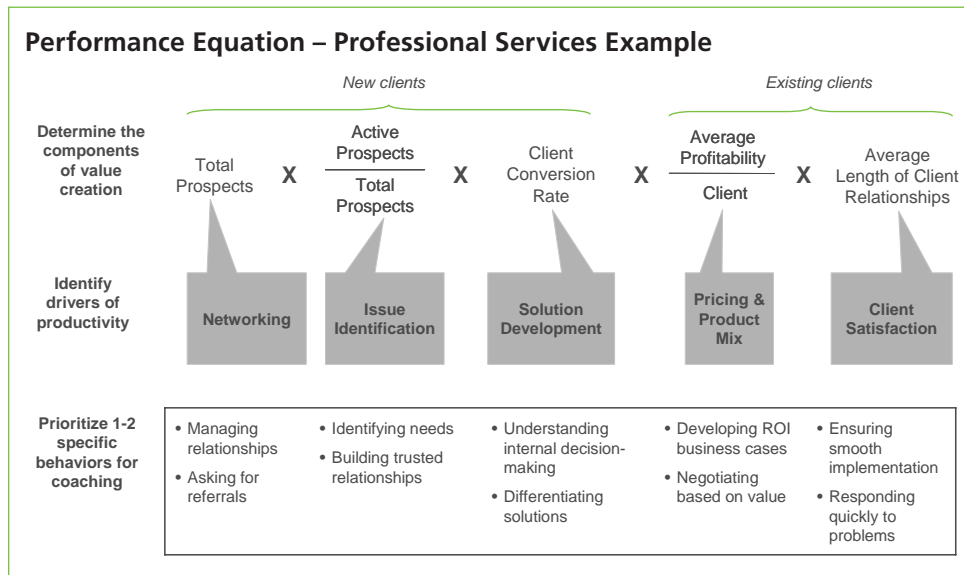
## A Flexible Approach to Change

For companies adept at putting in place the formal structures and processes they need to operate, harnessing the power of the “informal” can be a very powerful addition. While each company’s approach will vary, the best change programs leverage a deep understanding of current sales force performance to systematically identify the leadership behaviors that actually drive results, and then provide the right tools for change.

### A. Understand the opportunity.

Achieving inspirational sales leadership starts with an understanding of how individual and team actions influence the top line as well as the bottom line. A detailed map of sales representative performance will highlight specific disciplines and behaviors that make a difference for that particular company’s sales success. We help our clients develop a company-specific Performance Equation that provides leaders with a detailed breakdown of the behaviors that

actually drive differences in sales performance, and then estimate the potential impact of change. Creating a Performance Equation and identifying winning behaviors is relatively straightforward for the simple, transactional sale; bringing the same level of rigor and discipline to identifying and driving effective sales behaviors in large, complex, long-term deals is less common and more difficult, but has high pay-off compared to “steering on intuition”.



“Your performance equation clearly showed that those reps who focused on fewer, more promising prospects and leveraged the technical staff more, consistently outperformed those with big pipelines. Our systems and our leaders had been stimulating the wrong behaviors.”  
(*Business Unit Lead, Information Publisher*)

## B. Catalogue the specific individual and leadership behaviors that drive sales performance.

Inspirational sales leadership requires an understanding of the “right” (value-creating) behaviors of salespeople as well as sales leaders. By identifying and studying exemplar managers and their teams, organizations can begin to build a blueprint of the leadership actions that salespeople individually and departments collectively find to be inspirational.

Instilling pride in others is an underutilized, but learnable, leadership capability. Different companies’ corporate cultures, sales environments and even individual leaders’ personalities dictate how to motivate employees. However, the most powerful sales leaders everywhere tend to focus on a select few actions that drive performance, such as:

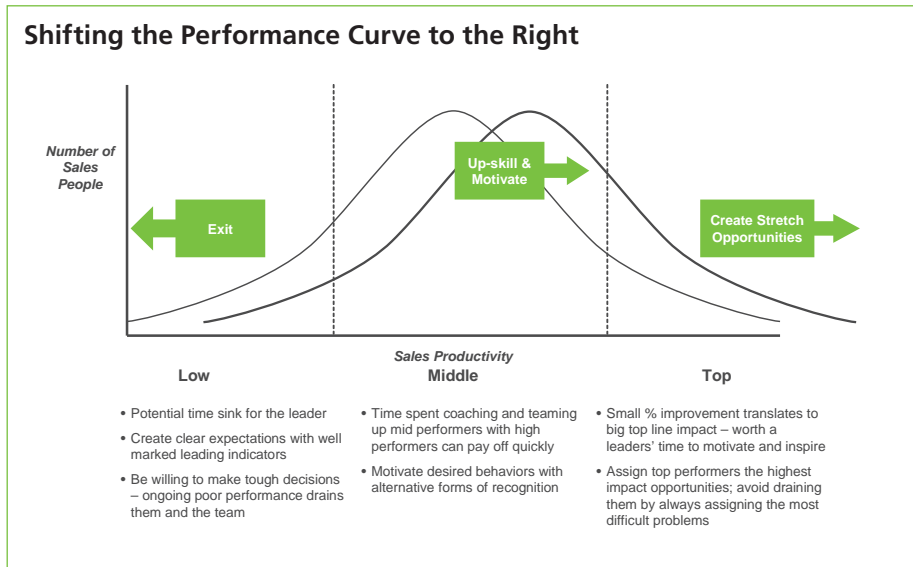
- Effectively translating senior leadership messages and decisions.** The best sales leaders are typically described as a “buffer”, clarifying local constraints and circumstances upwards to leadership while effectively translating company objectives and goals into a compelling vision for their teams. They apply an effective filter and translation, rather than just “passing along the message”. They don’t just explain corporate metrics, but adapt and select what they find drives performance against particular goals for each team member, thus creating more motivation and avoiding “gaming the system”. Finally, they ruthlessly prioritize among different requests and opportunities to keep their sales forces focused on the mix of activities that will most reliably lead to both short-term results and long-term growth. In short, they play a true leadership role, rather than just a management role “in the middle”.

“I am stunned by the level of collaboration you have created within our sales leadership. I will spend the rest of my career in search of a similar experience.”  
(*Head of U.S. Sales, Software Company*)

**“I have never seen inspirational and collaborative leadership behavior like this anywhere in our company. You have created a sub-culture.”**  
*(VP of Operations after a visit to a Sales Leaders meeting, Hi Tech firm)*

- **Adapting leadership and coaching to individual sales representatives’ styles, needs, and preferences.** Inspirational sales leaders are well aware that different individuals have different motivations and needs, and they vary their own style accordingly. An especially effective leader we have worked with consciously assesses each sales representative’s “ideal level of energy”, and creates productive “stretch” for each person according to the level of tension at which each performs at his or her personal best. He inspires some representatives mostly through positive reinforcement—“you can do it, you’re the best”—and others mostly through constructive criticism, each according to their individual profile and preference.
- **Focusing on team behaviors that lead to business results.** In complex sales situations, the best sales leaders find ways to build pride in the behaviors that have the highest long-term impact for both the individual and the organization. For example, while incentive compensation will build pride as a token of recognition for achievement of short-term results, more sustainable and valuable motivation for a salesperson can be derived from becoming a valued long-term thought partner to the customers. Outstanding sales leaders coach their representatives on the behaviors that will earn their customers’ trust and appreciation, and relentlessly point out to them the importance and value of that trust, both to the company and to the representative. Another example: in situations where teaming is required, stimulating pride in the extended sales team and its performance may lead to better collective results than focusing on the pride derived from outperforming peers—even though sales people often thrive on competition. The more successful sales team leaders identify these sources of motivation and find ways to encourage, recognize, and celebrate the related behaviors.
- **Creating different ways of “winning”.** Because winning is important to most sales professionals, but not always possible (especially when the ideal mix contains longer term, more complex deals), the best sales leaders are creative in finding ways for their teams to experience tangible success. Inspirational sales leaders may consider intermediate milestones, collaboration awards, and client impact recognition in addition to simple revenue targets. These milestones need to be based on proven predictors of business results, such as generating a specifically desired type of customer prospect dialogue, and cannot be attained merely by “showing up”, if they are to have true motivation impact.
- **Building collaboration across functional groups.** Exemplar sales leaders behave as “hubs” in informal networks of specialist, functional, and other resources. They drive pride in collaborating to bring all perspectives to bear on a customer’s need. They are very deliberate about the networks they build (and encourage their sales teams to build), and value quality over quantity. For example, they seek out knowledge from people and groups with different perspectives. Rather than staying within a more comfortable and familiar range of experts similar to themselves, they reach out far across established boundaries to learn as much about their top priority customers, their needs, and related service offerings as possible. In addition to their “knowledge networks”, they also build conscious “trust networks” of those who can help influence positive outcomes within and outside the organization. Particularly in the context of complex sales with multiple customer stakeholders and multiple offerings that must be integrated into a major deal, an individualistic look at the sales organization misses a significant part of how value is created. The best sales leaders incent and reward targeted collaboration within and across functional borders, not just individual results.

- **Displaying unwavering energy and enthusiasm.** Pride-building leaders focus on the positive behaviors and results of the people they lead, using their people skills to create a connection with each representative. In our experience, pride-building leaders set very high standards and are demanding leaders when it comes to performance results. But because they are fair, understanding, caring and approachable, their reports are intrinsically motivated to never want to disappoint them.



*“We couldn’t invest in more variable comp—nor would higher pay have had as much impact on our sales force’s motivation as the few leadership changes we made.” (Line Manager, Publishing Company)*

### C. Provide the right tools to help leaders “shift the curve”.

Once inspirational sales leadership behaviors have been identified, companies must help their leaders begin to “move the needle” on sales performance. After analyzing performance maps to identify where sales representatives are currently performing, leaders can then begin to apply their newly-identified inspirational behaviors to their teams.

While it is tempting to aim for an across-the-board improvement, companies seeking a step-change in performance should target improvement to the highest impact areas. For leaders, this means making tough decisions about low performers, investing time coaching and developing middle performers, and creating the right opportunities for top performers to shine. In this new model, instead of assigning the highest-performing sales professionals to the most challenging accounts, sales leaders place them in the areas where they can have the greatest positive impact, remain most motivated and create the best returns. And instead of investing disproportionate amounts of time to improve low performers’ results, sales leaders routinely move them out.

### D. Ensure company processes, systems and incentives are aligned with desired behaviors—not just outcomes.

With a new “informal” motivation system in place, companies must again ensure alignment with the formal. At a minimum, inspirational sales leadership requires endorsement and adoption from executives, and in most cases, it must also be supported by a re-alignment of company processes to match new objectives and behaviors. For example: at a technology company, an overload of metrics had long obscured a more valuable focus on business results. Even worse, representatives had learned how to “game the system” and make

the metrics look good without impact on the company's actual results. By refocusing sales teams on just a few key metrics, the company motivated the representatives to do the "right thing", and was able to improve results on all metrics, while providing a deeper sense of pride in each individual's contribution to business accomplishments.

## Getting Started

A diagnostic and identification of internal best practices is often a good first step for sales organizations focused on creating a culture of inspirational sales leadership. Katzenbach Partners can help in a number of ways. Some possible starting points include:

- Performance equation design and "shifting the curve" – a disciplined and rigorous review of the true drivers of success for complex, enterprise-wide sales as well as "bread and butter" smaller deals, comparisons of the differences, and selection of the right portfolio of opportunities and behaviors to motivate sales professionals
- Best practice observations – "a day in the life" of the top performing sales leaders compared to good sales leaders. This can reveal the often unconscious practices that work best in the specific corporate environment, and set top performers apart from their peers. For example, best practice observation in a mid-size software firm recently revealed that the top performing sales teams created significantly more and higher value-added leverage from the technical team, which resulted in longer term, more profitable customer relationships. Their interactions with the technical team were not especially difficult to document and replicate across other sales teams, which led to steep revenue growth within the first year.
- Organizational network analysis – a focused review that pinpoints the nature and structure of the most effective sales performance networks. What types of connections are essential for successful sales leaders to foster for themselves and their sales teams, and where do typical pitfalls and breakdowns occur? For example, a recent analysis for one of our large clients of the value that Managing Directors were creating by going to market with their peers showed that two thirds of the top overall value creators (considering their individual as well as their collaborative contributions) did not show up as top performers on a ranking of individual contributions alone. As a result of the network analysis, the company adapted incentives to be commensurate with these top performers' contribution, and was able to tap into a source of latent capability in terms of determining how best to launch new offerings, break through barriers to commercial success, and change the mindset and behaviors of other Managing Directors.
- Customer impact case review – analysis of the decisions and connections that led to winning a deal of exceptional value, with an eye to replicating the underlying behaviors. For example, a customer impact case at a recent Katzenbach client showed that one of the formal scorecard metrics in place encouraged a lower number of customer touch points than was optimal for sales success, and thus was in direct conflict with the desired sales team behaviors; only those teams that decided to ignore this part of the scorecard were successful in securing large, complex deals.





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