



People come first

By Mark McCarthy

Mark McCarthy explains why finding and managing talented performers should be at the top of your strategic sales agenda.

A few months ago I met a client based in Boston, US, who was about to undergo an initial public offering (IPO). The business had grown to \$150m in about five years and had developed a real niche and competitive position, so it was time to get a return from that investment and raise more capital. I asked the chief operating officer (COO), who was responsible for sales too, what he would do next to drive sales forward. I had expected to get a complicated strategy-based reply, but instead he said, "Hire well and we will not have to waste time on support resources to compensate for sub-optimal salespeople."

In essence, what he had learned over his sales career, and what he had picked up from very successful business leaders, was that talent was the number one item on the strategic agenda. And there was no number two or three. He knew that if you hire optimally (the best available talent you can afford), why would you need sales training, assessments, development plans, sales methodologies or even technology? This is also a clear message in *First, Break All the Rules*, a powerful and compelling book by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman.

I think the COO I met is right. Let me explain further what I think he was saying. If you hire the most able person to do the job, then where is the issue? In the B2B context, selling is not complicated because buying is not complicated. What makes the process more

complicated is ineffective sales organisations.

You may think this an over-simplification, but essentially business results are a direct result of organisational behaviour – what people do or don't do. I would take this position a critical step further: it is the sales organisation that ultimately controls high performance. So a failure to meet the numbers you aimed for is down to salespeople's wrong behaviours and/or poor execution.

Furthermore, studies of high performance companies exhibit one fundamental feature that can be easily and clearly defined: they have a disproportionately high number of 'A Players' compared with the competition.

These A Players work out how to succeed for themselves, their colleagues and the company. They thrive in ambiguity, are highly resourceful, innovative and receptive to internal and external factors – they adapt. When they believe new skills or knowledge is needed they are self-motivated and directed in their learning. They don't wait to be taken off the road to undergo a generic training course from HR.

According to Dr Brad Smart (creator of Topgrading, a method of finding and hiring A Players), A Players will not work for B or C managers. Leaders and managers can't achieve high performance by themselves – they need others to do it, ideally A Players. And they need them in the sales organisation first and foremost.

To summarise the key aspects of the performance challenge:

- The sales organisation interfaces with prospects and clients in a white-hot competitive environment, and therefore dictates organisational performance
- Required results or outcomes come from the appropriate behaviours and actions of

individuals – especially salespeople.

- A Players work out what needs to be done, the appropriate attitude and necessary behaviours.

If you could have 75% of your sales organisation as A Players, what would be the impact on your business? A source of sustainable competitive advantage would be one. It is time for sales leaders to recalibrate their time and focus on achievement of high performance through improved talent management. Sales managers should become talent leaders. This should be their primary role.

Next month, I'll focus on the A Player talent strategy.

© Copyright, Mark McCarthy

About the Author

Mark McCarthy is a founding director of Meta-Lucid Ltd, a firm of performance practitioners specialising in 'transformational' based interventions around talent management programmes that enable people to "think and do" beyond their limits to achieve improved business outcomes and results. Mark has a demonstrable track record over the last 15 years which has involved senior sales management positions in the B2B market place with high profile organisations such as HP, Dell, and Morse Group, executing both direct and indirect sales strategies. He has developed a core expertise in business and sales management processes and organisational alignment models.

Co-ordinates

Mail: Meta-Lucid
Fountain Court
2 Victoria Square, Victoria Street
St Albans, Herts AL1 3TF, UK
Email: markmccarthy@meta-lucid.com
Web: www.meta-lucid.com

This article is about...
why getting top people is so important