



Raising the Bar on Sales Training: Changing a Salesperson's Default Mode

We've all been there. You go to a great training program. You laugh, you learn, you get some great ideas. You may even make commitments on how you will apply what you have learned. You complete a stellar evaluation form – "Great Program!" Then, it's back to the real world: The same desk, the same "to do list", the same challenges and the same manager.

We know from the research (Xerox, ASTD, HR Chal-ly) that if you are like most people, even with the best intentions, you will actually only retain about 13% of what you learned three weeks out. Thirteen Percent! That is thirteen cents on the training dollar: that is about 8 minutes of each hour that you invested to be there!

If you happen to be successful, well educated and well compensated, it is likely to be even worse. Why? Because you have been successful doing it your way. When the stakes are high, and you're face to face with the client – do you really want to risk something new? And...what was it they said to do anyway?

While traditional classroom sales training can be very beneficial for new salespeople selling products, its long-term impact on experienced people selling complex services is very limited.

A few years back, I delivered a traditional sales training seminar to a group of successful, well-educated and well-compensated Investment Bankers. They loved it! They were like sponges. They listened attentively, took notes, asked questions and then applied what they learned in role-plays. The evaluations were off the charts. After the program, the senior manager asked if I could come back to work with a group that was preparing for a finals presentation on a huge, upcoming deal. I was happy to oblige and ten days later was face-to-face with 12 of the 22 people in the training program. They were generous with compliments about the program, and I was thrilled to be working with them again.

After obtaining background information on the client to whom they were presenting, they showed me their "deck". The first five pages were all about them: their company's credentials, awards, how long they had been in the business, client accolades, etc. Of course the training program's recurring theme was always begin with client needs. So the first thing I said was: "I am curious why you starting with these pages... remember all of the work and practice we did in the program around beginning the presentation with the client's needs?"

The response came from the forty-something, gray-haired, Ivy League graduate, Relationship Manager. "But this is the way we've always done our presentations". Wow! The true challenge of behavior change tumbled down on me like a ton of bricks. This was a smart guy, surrounded by smart people who all had intellectually bought-in to, and practiced what we had taught in the training program, yet they all looked at me with a collective expression of defiance. Fifteen minutes later, after reviewing with them the benefits of the approach and the research that backs it up, they finally agreed to begin with a review of the client's needs.

After reviewing the rest of the materials, we talked about the agenda (who would say what, when etc.). I asked them how they intended to conduct introductions. They said the Salesperson would introduce them all. I reminded them that in the program we suggested that each person on the cli-



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ent side is asked to introduce themselves and state specifically what they would like to get out of the presentation. Again, the Relationship Manager responded. "Yes, but we only have 90 minutes for this presentation. While I can see how that would be a good thing to do in some situations, we just don't have time for it here."

The ton of bricks fell once again, followed by the collective defiant look. This time, however, it took longer (and an intervention from the senior manager who happened to enter the room during the discussion) to convince them. They finally agreed to try it.

The day after the finals presentation, we conducted a debrief (not knowing at this time that they had won the business). To my delight, I was told that if they win the deal; they will credit the win to how they handled the introductions. Apparently, during the client introductions they found out that a consultant present had had a bad experience with their company in the past. With this information, they changed the order of the presentation to address the specific area to which the consultant had referred. They felt strongly that, had the consultant not been asked in the introductions what he would like to get from the presentation, his concern would not have been voiced with them in the room, and they would never have had the opportunity to address it.

When we completed the debrief, I hung up the phone and thought to myself: I am absolutely certain, that these twelve people will, for as long as they are doing sales presentations, always conduct introductions this way. Why am I so certain? Because they actually experienced the success - not just practiced and mastered a skill, but actually had the evidence of it working for them in a real situation.

So, what does this mean for the "great" training program? It means that it is far from enough. It means that even if participants buy-in to a new skill or behavior intellectually, and even if they master it in the classroom, the odds are against them actually modifying their behavior back in the real world. Like the computer on which I am typing, salespeople are programmed to certain behaviors and habits, and under pressure they automatically default to these behaviors - regardless of any "great" training program they just attended.

So the question becomes, if salespeople need to experience success to change their default mode, how do we force application of a new skill or behavior? Here are a few ideas:

1. Integrate into classroom training real application on real clients. For example, if your training includes strategic questioning, provide classroom time to have participants actually write-out a real set of questions that they will use for their next client visit. Hold them accountable for using the questions, and formalize a follow-up (did they use them, if not, why not? If so, what worked, what didn't and what will you do next time?) These follow-ups can be done by the sales manager or by a coach/trainer. They can be done individually or in small groups.
2. Since too many changes at one time are unrealistic, provide the sales manager one skill or behavior to work on with each salesperson after the training. Have the Sales Manager hold the individual responsible for applying the new application in real client situations. Have them follow-up to review the new skill and make any adjustments. Formalize the process: be specific and create deadlines.
3. Consider shifting the emphasis from classroom to coaching and application. Not long ago a couple of days of classroom sales training was thought to be enough. More recently it has become clear that reinforcement is critical to ensure the highest return on the training dollar. The problem with this is that the majority of the time and dollar investment goes to the classroom event, and the reinforcement and application is an afterthought. The application gets left to the discretion of the participants. What if it were the other way around? Put the training program through a sieve: What are the key elements absolutely necessary to achieving the objectives? Consider just focusing on one skill at a time. Shorten the traditional training time, and spend the majority of the time and the investment on the application and refinement of the skill in real sales situations.