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Now hear this... Help your sales team be better listeners and you'll help them be more successful

Question:

I am a sales manager. I have worked with my sales team to become more disciplined in preparing for a negotiation, mapping out concession strategies and determining options. What else can I do to help them be more successful?

Answer:

Help them become great listeners. Real listening is not just hearing the words: rather, it's listening for the intent behind the message. How effectively is your sales team picking up on the nuances of the other party's communication?

Good listeners hear more than the surface communication; they hear the message behind the communication. When negotiating, a good listener can distinguish between what is wanted and what is needed. This gives that person negotiating power to assist the other party in expanding the possibility of options that can be pursued.

Following is a simple strategy you can follow when negotiating face-to-face.

Focus your attention on the other party. Eliminate internal chatter (your own thoughts, concerns, fears) and ignore outside distractions (telephone, a passerby, chatter from other offices).

Show interest by sitting forward in your chair. Look the other party in the eyes. Be confidently relaxed. Breathe regularly; holding your breath communicates stress.

Eliminate physical ticks that cause the other party to become distracted. Don't tap a pen, wiggle your foot or play with a

watch or ring. Also, when you agree with what's being said, restrain from nodding your head up and down like the dog in the back of a car window. Constant nodding signals that you know where the other party is going and you want that person to conclude the point. That makes the other party feel discounted. A simple head nod or two is sufficient.

Ask questions. Effective negotiators learn as much as possible before making a strategic move. They effectively use the power of questions to gather additional information or confirm their understanding of the other party's position.

Successful negotiators are skilled at crafting the right question to advance the negotiation toward a positive outcome.

To assist your sales team, help them craft questions that are both strategic and insightful. Guide them to restrain from "why" questions that evoke defensiveness on behalf of the other party.

Instead, help your sales team develop "how", "what" or "have you considered" questions. Such questions are softer and cause the other party to be reflective while maintaining rapport.

To improve the sales team's listening effectiveness:

Observe them in action: Assess how effective they are when interacting with others in general.

Do they demonstrate good listening skills when interacting with you?

Attend sales calls, but be sure your roles are defined upfront so the sales person's authority is not undermined. Remember, never take over the call even if it's going downhill. Listen, learn and debrief following the call.

Role-play: As much as people dislike

the idea of role-playing, it is an effective tool for enhancing skill development. Consider dedicating a part of your monthly sales meeting to a different aspect of the sales/negotiating process. You might want to begin with prospecting, qualifying or listening skills.

Make each person responsible for preparing information on the subject to be addressed. That achieves two objectives: 1) it eliminates your need to prepare the whole meeting, so your time is freed up to work on other projects and, 2) it supports knowledge sharing among team members. Gaining insights from other sales people is a great motivator.

Following the meeting, schedule dedicated time with each sales professional working on that month's topic. It is often helpful to take a current situation the sales person is managing with one of his/her customers. Role-play the issue so the strategy, scripts and next steps become clear. Be sure to switch roles so both of you play the sales professional. Often it's easier to absorb what to do when you are not in the hot seat.

Effective listening skills can often be the differentiator between a great outcome and a poor one when negotiating. It takes emotional discipline and commitment. However the benefits are yours simply for the listening.



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