

Old dogs can learn new tricks

Salespeople first must discard their bad habits

Question:

I have a young sales team, and they are being out-negotiated at the bargaining table.

How do I select a negotiations training program that will do more than just fill them with information?

Response:

On a recent plane trip from Boston, the passenger next to me, a CEO of a large distribution facility, was lamenting the same cry. He explained to me that he had sent three salespeople to a week-long negotiations training program. Their week was very full and exciting. They heard lots of war stories, participated in a few negotiation simulations and shared anecdotes with other participants.

However, when those salespeople returned to work, they all reverted back to their former negotiation styles. The CEO inquired, "How could they have immersed themselves so intensely and not have changed behaviors?"

Many people read books, newsletters, and attend training programs designed to impart negotiations knowledge. However, rarely do these affect people's actual negotiation behaviors.

Why is this?

Because knowledge is maintained at an intellectual level whereas behavior is maintained at an emotional level. In fact, for knowledge to be transformed into capability,

people must recognize their current habits, have a desire to change these habits and then be committed to replace the current behavior with a new pattern. Most traditional training programs fall short of engaging people at this level.

To make an informed decision, consider the following:

Trainer truth

When selecting a training program, don't just buy a company name; buy the training curriculum and trainer. Take time to learn about the trainer's background and personality. You want someone who has had success in dealing with similar types of negotiations and who will draw from these experiences to enrich the training experience. When your sales team understands that the information presented relates to their real-world experiences, it is more likely they will make the behavioral change needed when they return to their territories.

Lecture limitations

Lectures are great for transmitting knowledge. I have attended many great lectures on topics such as, The Great Palaces of Russia, How to Self-Publish and How to Market in Your Own Backyard, and have received some helpful information. I have also attended lectures in which negotiating experts talked about how they achieve negotiating success. And while I can recall their stories, I can honestly say that when I left the lecture, I did not make a behavioral shift in my negotiating style.

Psychologist Kurt Lewin argued that for people to permanently change their behaviors, individuals must go through a three-step process: (1) "unfreeze" past processes, (2) understand and value of the content necessary for change, (3) "refreeze" new processes. Only through these stages can old strategies be replaced with new more effective strategies.

Lewin's model targets exactly why lectures fail to create lasting change; their

purpose is to transmit information. This keeps us at an intellectual level. Only when we move to an emotional level and feel uncomfortable with some aspect of our current behavior will we "unfreeze" past behavior.

War story restrictions

Stories can be an effective tool when they are used to breathe life into a training program. The trainer must contextualize participants' understanding of the strategy by telling stories that relate to the participants' real-world experiences.

However, don't confuse story-telling with skill-building. Stories don't "unfreeze" behaviors and change deeply ingrained behaviors. Rather, they focus on surface-level characteristics to help the learner identify characteristics of the strategy. It is not a how-to replacement. Knowing how to employ the strategy is a higher, more complicated learning approach.

Practice makes perfect

To help the learner understand how to apply the principles, strategies and skills presented, they must practice using the new technique at least twice before taking it 'live.' In doing so, they become conscious of their latent habits and practice overriding them with newfound learning. In essence, they work through the "unfreezing," changing and "refreezing" process without the risk of sabotaging a real-life business relationship.

Although some simulations may be perceived as being contrived, they provide a safe environment for making mistakes. The unlearn/relearn process is often a journey of courage. From my perspective, your sales team is far better off taking a hit to their self-esteem in a controlled environment than risking being humiliated in front of a million dollar customer.

Sensible slip-ups

Simulations are a great tool for developing new patterns of behavior. When conducted in a safe environment, participants try

new strategies with the support of their peers. This can be both a benefit and detriment depending upon their personal sense of humor and commitment to the learning process. For some participants, this experience is a journey of courage and vulnerability as they come to realize that they've been making decisions based on a faulty intuition. A skilled trainer will help the group realize that in this moment of awareness, they have the opportunity to take their power back and that biases are not a result of bad negotiating, but rather are just a part of the human experience.

Fusing learning with practice

Developing new habits takes practice, and the “refreezing” process is not complete when the workshop ends. Each person must take responsibility for making the commitment to on-going developmental change. Newly learned strategies are not ingrained and therefore, when faced with an emotionally charged situation, people often default to their old behaviors. To resist this temptation, ask the trainer to distribute a simple “How to Prepare for a Negotiation” checklist so each salesperson can objectively assess each area they need to consider before entering into a negotiation.

This will help mold their thinking and eventually become more self-sufficient.

Benjamin Bloom and his associates at the University of Chicago conducted a study of world class performers. They proved that natural talents are not sufficient. Extraordinary accomplishments require an intensive process of encouragement, education and practice.

For your sales team to excel, do your part by fostering a learning culture. Make negotiations a hot topic by including it as an agenda topic at each of your sales meetings.

Encourage your team to work together to brainstorm ideas and solutions. Be available to help your team members think through these different situations. Remember, your role is not to have all the answers but to help facilitate their thinking about different situations.

Simply said, you want to be the one who helps them “refreeze” their good negotiation habits.



Christine McMahon is the owner of Christine McMahon & Associates, a training and coaching firm in Milwaukee. She can be reached at (414) 290-3330.