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From The Field Of

Healthy sales culture gives team a lift in good and bad times

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BILL SUTTON

As a consultant, I am often called in to assess the performance of a ticket sales staff and to help develop a plan to improve productivity that relates to strengthening the sales culture.

I define sales culture as the climate in which the department functions within itself and through its interaction with other departments in the organization.

Here are three ways to affect the sales culture of an organization that will enhance productivity.

■ Fun is good

I'm stealing the title of Mike Veeck's book here. Creating an atmosphere where fun is integrated into the workday is essential. Making anywhere from 75 to 100 daily telephone calls is a difficult task. Nevertheless, it is the standard expectation in any telemarketing operation.

Fun can come in the form of short-term contests, goals and rewards with personal meaning, incentives, outings, group lunches, and so forth. The idea is to make fresh what is perceived to be routine.

The Orlando Magic have an excellent contest called "Win Bob's Money." It is named for team President Bob Vander Weide, who sometimes personally delivers the payments and has made videos to help set the mood for the contest. "Win Bob's Money" can involve personnel from other Magic departments providing leads to the sales staff and functioning as part of a team competing against other internal company teams to win a vacation or cash prizes that are awarded at a large organizational assembly at the end of a workday.



KRISTIN DUBINSKI

Contests like this one, with the Orlando Magic sales staff enjoying a season-ticket sales victory over the Utah Jazz sales staff, help inject a bit of fun into the workplace.

How does this affect sales culture? It turns the entire organization into a sales department, breaking down barriers and perceptions through interaction and cooperation. And it illustrates the benefits of producing revenue.

■ Recruiting is ongoing

It has been said that the most expensive seat in the house on game night is an empty seat because the opportunity to sell that seat has been lost.

Similarly vacancies in the sales department are costly. Every day those vacancies exist there is lost revenue because calls and appointments are not being made.

Sales managers must schedule time every week for interviewing and recruiting new potential sales personnel. They are thus creating a database of qualified candidates who can be brought in quickly when there has been turnover.

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The NBA sponsors an annual jobs fair that recruits and identifies top candidates for entry-level sales positions with teams in NBA, WNBA and the NBA D-League. This is only one step in an ongoing plan.

Sales managers of respective teams should work with their human resources department to set up recruiting visits to local colleges. They should also travel to schools with recognized sales courses or majors, such as those offered by Baylor, UMass, Mount Union, Memphis, Ohio, Robert Morris and Central Florida.

Finally, teams should be encouraged to have their own career fairs or job fairs to attract applicants from their respective localities. The key is to establish a pipeline, interview every week, and minimize the time that a "sales seat" is empty and not producing revenue.

■ Training happens every day

One of the biggest changes I have seen over the past five years is the approach to sales training.

Most professional sports teams employ a sales trainer to work with new sales employees for at least one week per year. Some professional sports teams also include the veterans in the sales training to keep them fresh or to refocus them.

While this sales training is important, it is also essential that we acknowledge that learning needs to be ongoing and must be viewed developmentally and customized for each staff member to have the maximum effect on employee productivity.

I have observed a number of sales managers who excel in what they do: Chad Estis of the Dallas Cowboys, Murray Cohn of the Orlando Magic, Drew Cloud and Jeff Ianello of the Phoenix Suns, Mike Tomon of the Charlotte Bobcats, Joe Andrade of the Los Angeles Clippers, Brendan Donohue of the Atlanta Hawks, Mike Ondrejko of the Cleveland Cavaliers, Jerry Murphy of the NBA, and at the collegiate level, Matt DiFebo at Central Florida and Mike Boswell at Arizona State.

A majority of these sales leaders are products of Palace Sports & Entertainment, one of the best sales cultures in all of professional sports. All of them have one thing in common: the daily interaction and recap of the day with selected sales staff in one-on-one discussions. These discussions are often followed up with observations by their supervisors and in some cases by call monitoring and joint calling that involves the salespeople and their supervisors.

These three steps are the basis for creating and maintaining a sales culture. A sales culture is a constant flow of interaction among peers (other sales staff) and the sales management team.

Sales culture includes contests, role-playing, training and development, experimentation, practicing the basics, and an appreciation that sales is like alchemy: a blend of art (skills) and science (technology).

Creating and maintaining an effective sales culture is essential to establishing a sales department that will generate revenue consistently rather than merely in good times, thus minimizing the peaks and valleys associated with winning and losing teams.

Building a strong sales culture is essential regardless of team performance so that when the franchise gets a lift in the marketplace from a draft pick, trade, free agent signing or a playoff appearance, that lift can be capitalized upon quickly and efficiently by a sales engine that has been built to last.

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