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Leveraging Sales Talent

A Successful Model for Identifying, Developing, and Retaining Top Sales Performers

ARTICLE

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This article is based on a executive-level presentation presented by Al Rainaldi, executive vice president of Profiles International, to an audience of Miller Heiman clients during the 2005 Miller Heiman User Conference, held October 12-14 at Lake Tahoe, USA. Miller Heiman and Profiles International have partnered to develop a series of benchmarking and assessment tools designed specifically for sales organizations. These tools, when used collectively with Miller Heiman sales processes, help develop and support enterprise-wide sales systems for consistently finding, winning, and keeping profitable business.

Consider the role talent plays within a sales force: the hard-wired skills, the soft-wired skills. How do you know if you have the right people in your sales force? How do you know they're doing the right things? How do you leverage the performance and the potential of your top performers?

As a sales leader, you want to bring on more talent, but in reality, you have to maximize what you have today. Ask yourself these questions:

- Top performers - why are they performing the way they perform?
- Average performers - what is creating this bland performance? This mediocrity?
- Bottom performers - what do you do with them? Can they be saved? Should you be investing training dollars in that group?

To get the best ROI for your investment in all types of performers, you must begin with having the right people in the right positions.

In sales, if you can get the right people in the right positions, develop the talent, and get them in the best possible position to generate revenue, you have a better opportunity to retain them.

Most organizations today focus on turnover. I hear it all the time, "Al, turnover is killing my organization, it's costing me a fortune." But, "Is all turnover bad?" No, of course not. Often, I'll ask prospects a very important question, "Do you have turnover in your sales department?" My next question is always, "Would you like some?" Then the wheel starts turning.

We want to retain productive people. But, if you can't identify them, and you can't develop them, you can't retain them, and you obviously can't leverage them. But leveraging is

"PEOPLE ARE HAPPIEST AND MOST PRODUCTIVE WHEN THEY ARE FULLY ENGAGED IN WINNING."

not just getting top performers to do more. We think that leveraging means, "How can I get more from the people who are producing today?" That is not what we are going to talk about. We are going to talk about building the correct model so leveraging becomes automatic, and the model that you create for top performers automatically leverages new people that join your organization.

Looking at the comic to the right, is it possible that some of these guys, these little skinny guys, are better rowers than the big guys? In the redeployment process, who would you move? It wouldn't work to just move one big guy to one small guy, and visa-versa. How could you determine who to move? In rowing, there is skill. It wouldn't matter how strong, and how much stamina those big guys have if their oars aren't in the water. Is it possible that the small guys have more stamina or more strength? All these things are possible.

"I've got it, too, Omar ... a strange feeling like we've just been going in circles."

Many sales organizations make these same kinds of decisions, on observable things, which are highly subjective. And, it doesn't always work.

What are things that determine a salesperson's potential? There's stamina, aspiration, confidence, desire, and experience; There are just dozens of things that affect a person's potential. When you look at the potential of top performers, it has to be based on criteria. For instance, do they meet their quota or exceed their quota? If you have people who are constantly 110, 120, 150% ahead of quota, that could tell you a number of things. (Besides "raise their quota.")

1. Gary Larson, The Far Side.
The Far Side® is a registered trademark of FarWorks, Inc.

You've got to have the potential to make changes, at the speed of change so to speak. Make sure you are looking at top performers' criteria. Always remember, the criteria should be measurable:

- Productivity
- Sales volume
- Meets/exceeds quotas
- Tenure
- Securing new clients
- Account development
- Account management

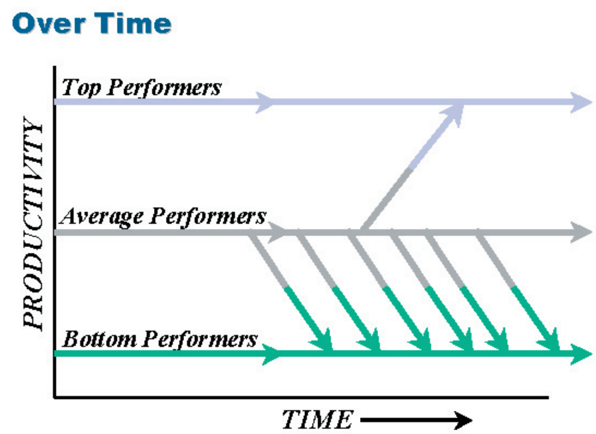
If you have individuals who aren't top performers, or are not performing at a rate you think is acceptable, the first thing you should do is check their attitude. Is their head in the game? To answer this question takes good management skills and good communications skills. You have to be able to understand your ability to listen and track if they are consistent with their answers.

The next thing you would check is their activity. Are they making calls? Are they actually engaged? Are they seeing prospects? Are they seeing clients? If those two were in line, I would say, "Great attitude, their head's in the game, and they're making more than enough presentations. They're doing the things that we have trained them to do, but the numbers aren't there." We need to check their skills.

You know they're making lots of presentations. What are they saying? What aren't they saying? What are they doing? What aren't they doing? What are the things you need to observe to see why they're not getting the job done? They have the attitude and activity, and they're as highly skilled as you can find in the marketplace today, and they're still not performing the way they should be.

They could be in the wrong position.

When you're dealing with individuals, just because they say they can do something, it doesn't mean they will do it.



Productivity changes in salespeople over time.

The bottom line on the chart is a time line, and the top line is productivity. What normally happens if you don't pay attention, and just continue to do the things you're doing, is occasionally an average performer will pop up and start performing like a top performer. You don't know how it happened, but you'll take it.

You can see there is one arrow going up to the top performer level to indicate an average performer rising to the top performer category, but what normally happens is that most average producers will start performing less. They will start looking like the bottom performers. It becomes acceptable. People get very comfortable. They find their comfort zone where they're afraid to reach out and do things they know they need to do to be successful. If they do that, the comfort zone will grow for them. But they're not doing it.

"IF YOUR CHOSEN MAXIMUM IS THE REQUIRED MINIMUM, THE SUM TOTAL OF YOUR LIFE WILL BE MEDIOCRITY."

If your chosen maximum is the required minimum, the sum total of your life will be mediocrity. I learned that lesson when I was 6 years old. My father had a grocery store, and I had a job. I did some work for him one day and then I ran outside to play. He came and brought me back in and said, "What kind of job do you call this?" I said, "Average." And he grabbed me and said, "Let me tell you something young man, there is no such thing as average. You either operate above the line or below it. What's nice about America is that every day you get to make that decision, you get to choose." And he left me standing there.

I had to grow into what he was trying to tell me. But, the end result was I re-did the job and I did it correctly. He could have allowed me to be comfortable there, but he did not, and we shouldn't either.

Do you know that the compensation plans in most organizations have the average performers and bottom performers and their earnings more closely aligned than the average to the top performers? Average performers don't get to play in the bonus area. They don't get to participate in the trips and in the advanced commissions and so-forth. So average performers start looking at the productivity of the bottom group and see they're doing less and making about the same amount of money. So the activity level drops. Now you have started to create not just mediocrity, but now you have more bottom performers.

You need to throw the net out and catch them before they fall, but the only way you can to that is to be able to identify whether or not they have the potential to produce like the top performers.

You constantly have to keep raising the bar. You have to keep adding to it. You need to have more information and more knowledge about the performance of the people in your organization to understand whether of not what you're about to do is going to advance them toward doing more for the organization. The best in field is not where you should be aspiring to be, you should be constantly elevating and raising the bar, creating the new benchmark, creating the new line, to be followed by the industry.

This article is supported by Miller Heiman management tools for benchmarking and assessing the skills of your sales force.

These tools help determine if you have the right people on your team, if they are in the right positions, and if they are doing the activities required to produce the greatest results.

To learn how Miller Heiman's *Predictive Sales Performance*SM and *Sales Excellence Assessment*SM can help identify, develop, and retain a top performing sales force, call Miller Heiman at 1-877-902-1385 or visit www.millerheiman.com.

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