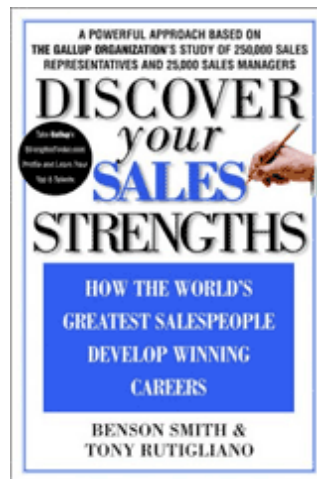


DISCOVER YOUR SALES STRENGTHS

How the World's Greatest Salespeople
Develop Winning Careers



By
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THE BIG IDEA

A huge number of books have been written about sales and finding one's road to success in achieving exceptional sales performance. Like fresh-off-the-press diet book bestsellers, they promise spectacular results, but lasting improvement in the end is still hard to find. This book identifies the many myths associated with exceptional sales and explains how believing them may negatively affect one's performance. It will also show how important it is to fit one's talents into the right job, whether it be as sales representative or sales manager.

THE GREAT SALES MYTHS

Doctors tell us that kidney stones are one of the most painful medical conditions human beings may suffer from. These small calcium fragments form in the kidney and eventually get stuck in the ureter, between the kidney and the bladder, causing tremendous pain. Fortunately, a treatment is available: ultrasonic-waves. However, people who have had one stone are very likely to have another. So for years, physicians placed such patients on low-calcium diets, thinking that since these stones are made of calcium, cutting down on calcium intake will do the trick. But soon, researchers studied the problem more and found that patients with low-calcium diets had 47% more stones than patients with normal calcium intake. The solution to the problem, appearing too simple and sensible, was in fact, totally wrong.

This illustrates – rather painfully – the problem with assuming that if something makes sense intuitively, it must be true. For years Gallup has conducted research to verify what salespeople think of as fingertip knowledge. Here are the “myths” produced by the research:

The Education Myth

Do you know what Bill Gates, Harry Truman and Dave Thomas all have in common? Other than being highly successful in their fields, few know that they did not finish college. At present, many professions have stringent educational prerequisites. You have every reason to expect your doctor to have a medical degree and your accountant to have been schooled in tax laws and regulations. The trend toward higher education has appeared in the selling profession as well. But then, even though more and more companies are demanding certain education levels before they hire, does that education have any bearing on sales success?

Curious to see if this is the right way to go about hiring, research has been conducted on existing sales force and outstanding performance. The results were interesting. It showed that most of the individuals in the top quartile of the top-performing rank did not have advanced degrees. In fact, most of the best performers had not achieved high grade point averages in college.

The Experience Myth

In some professions experience matters a great deal and has a huge relationship with success. It has been discovered, however, that sales is not an experience-sensitive profession in the same manner as for example, medicine. Many companies place great weight on experience and herein lies the trap. If you are performing at an average level, it could well be because your strengths are not the right “fit” for what you do every day. You might be thinking about a change. But when the headhunters call, the job they want to talk to you about is probably similar to the job you already have. Companies might want to hire you for experience, and in here, the myth is proven wrong.

The A-Good-Sales-Person-Can-Sell-Anything Myth

It has been proven repeatedly that salespeople who do the best in any company share a configuration of strengths that are well matched to their roles. Thus salespeople might do an exceptional job in one situation and a mediocre job in another. No number of pep talks will correct this situation. They might also feel disgruntled, not realizing that their discontent stems from not using their strengths.

The Right Sales Approach Myth

We are constantly surprised at the dissimilarities of the sales approaches of the best people we have studied. Within the same industry, and even with the same company, we find very different and yet equally successful approaches to the sales process. Yet companies assume that a certain style of selling is more conducive to their industries than other styles. But is there one right sales approach? Yes, but this approach is built around the sales person's strengths, not on the industry or the products or what someone else is doing. The best salespeople often have highly idiosyncratic methods, but these are the right methods for them.

The Training Myth

When we asked salespeople if they were taught to sell, they invariably answered, yes. However, when we asked people in the bottom ranks if they were taught to sell, they also answered yes. We don't want to imply that training cannot help. But training helps those with the inherent strengths and fit much more than it helps poor performers. Sadly, much of the training that companies provide is directed toward poor performers.

The Relationship Myth

The notion that relationships are critical to selling is so widely held that everyone assumes it must be true. And in part, it is. But we also see people with great relationship abilities who are not able to sell a thing. Why? Because relationship strengths themselves are not enough. Surprisingly, a good number of top salespeople have only average people skills. They have adopted a selling style

that works for them and have figured out how to make the most of the relationship ability they possess.

The Money Myth

True, money is important to everyone at some level, but no one reward is equally important to everyone in any profession. Not all actors are motivated by fame, not all doctors are motivated by patient care, not all salespeople are motivated by money. Even salespeople who have a strong desire to earn significant incomes are often motivated by other factors as well. Research shows that motivation is very different for different salespeople.

The Desire Myth

Our society sends the message that people can do anything they want as long as they are willing to work hard and make it happen. We hear this from elementary school on, but in the back of our minds, we know this just isn't true. Many people could never make it through medical school no matter how strongly they want to be doctors. So is the case in the sales profession.

STRENGTHS: A CAPACITY FOR NEAR-PERFECT PERFORMANCE

What makes up a strength? What gives a person a capacity for near-perfect performance on a consistent basis? Strengths are enhanced by our experiences, our skills, and our knowledge. But the most important underlying component is talent. Without the right talents, all the experience, training, and knowledge will never turn us into world-class performers. We cannot understand or develop our real strengths until we understand our underlying talents.

What is Talent?

Even though talent is all around us, most of us have a very unclear idea of what talent is and so we fail to see it in ourselves and others. We think of talent on a much too broad a level to define it properly. Defining sales talent turned out to be just as elusive. We finally came to the conclusion that there is no such thing as sales talent, or more correctly, no such single talent as sales talent. Each sales person has inherent characteristics that make up his ability to sell outstandingly well.

How our Talents Affect US?

Every day you respond to thousands of situations almost without thinking. How do you react to the people you meet in the street? Do you automatically smile in a friendly greeting? In many situations, if not all, your pronounced talents are hard at work. These talents filter the information your brain receives and influence the response you make. If you walk into a crowded room, you may be excited and try to meet as many people as possible. But someone else's

response could be quite different. He may scan the room for a familiar face and look for a comfortable spot to spend the evening talking with close friends.

Even though several people might be exposed to the same situation, such as walking into a room, they all have a somewhat different reaction. Our pronounced talents guide those reactions.

Strengths Finder

It seems as though our Signature Themes – our underlying talents – should be obvious to us. At the very least, shouldn't we be able to read down a list of strength descriptions and pick those themes that seem to be most like us? In truth, it's a bit more complicated than that. It is not surprising that most of us are unaware of what our own strengths are. They have been so much part of our lives that they have become invisible. The more pronounced a particular theme is in us, the more it seems normal to us to be that way. And we rarely think of being normal as a talent.

Life's Clues

Even though discovering your signature themes can be challenging, life occasionally offers some clues in the form of yearnings. Yearnings are those inklings of thought we have that make us believe we might be good at something, or that we might like to try something or even be something. Yearnings can come at any age. Most of the salespeople we talked to had no thought of sales as a career while they were growing up. Yearnings also come in other forms. Do you think about living in a big house, or earning a spectacular income?

If that is, so, should we say that the desire to live in a big house is an indicator of talent? The answer is: Yes. Wanting recognition, whether it is in the form of respect, or a big mansion, is associated with the significance theme. When this theme is very pronounced in people, it propels them to get things done. Hence, these desires – these talents within the significance theme – are really patterns of thought that have a productive application. They drive you to accomplish tasks in order to gain the recognition you want. Yearnings such as these can be an indication of talent.

Mentors and Coaches

Some people have an almost uncanny ability to see talent in other people. People with a strong Individualization thread instinctively observe other people's styles, their motivation, how they think, and how they build relationships. They naturally see what makes others unique. Unfortunately, as you have probably found out on your own, such people are not always around. You may well meet only a handful of such individuals in your lifetime. Nevertheless, this mentoring relationship can have a profound impact on your career.

Activity Analysis

Can't we just identify those parts of the job we do well to figure out what our underlying talents are? The answer is yes, but the information we glean from this process is often not specific enough to be broadly helpful. While people's performances in this activity are related to their underlying talents, no single theme is responsible. So while knowing that you are good in a particular area of your job is helpful, it is much more instructive to understand the underlying talents that influence your success overall.

FROM STRENGTHS TO FIT

Read the following statement and ask yourself how strongly you agree with it: "At work I get to do what I do best every day."

To what extent are you able to answer with an emphatic yes?

Gallup researchers have asked hundreds of thousands of questions over the years in an effort to understand what drives exceptional performance. They have found that the response to the previous statement is one of the singly most important questions they have ever posed. What did they find? People's responses to that question link directly to their productivity, profitability, and customer loyalty measures. The more people agree with the statement, the better their performance. Just doing more of what you do best can dramatically improve your performance. That's the simple part. The more complex part is finding out how to do that in your present role, or finding another role that allows you to do that.

Understanding your talents

Improving "fit" – or the degree to which your talents fit your tasks – starts with a deep understanding of your signature themes and the talents you possess in them. The first step is claiming those talents. As you become more familiar with your strengths and talents you will start to notice their influences in your work and daily life.

Finding Fit

How can you tell if a job is a good fit with your talents? Reduce your list of activities to only those elements that you associate most directly with influencing your sales results.

The Five Dimensions of Fit

We know from our research that sales success stems from patterns of thought, feeling and behavior that explain the following:

- our motivation
- the way we build relationships

- the way we gain commitments
- the structure we need to get our work done, and
- our ability to understand and solve customer needs

Motivation

The best salespeople are simply much more motivated than most of the population. And while simply being highly motivated isn't enough to be a good salesperson, it is absolutely important to have enough motivation. Your motivation may come from one strength theme or several. Studies suggest that 40% of salespeople's success stems directly from being in a situation in which their motivational needs are a good match. That's roughly twice as important as any of the other dimensions of fit.

Building Relationships and Gaining Commitments

The second and third areas to think about regarding fit have to do with people. "People skills" is an irksome term. The assumption behind the phrase is that we can simply learn how to deal with others effectively. Data point in a different direction. Although skills and knowledge are crucial to strengths building, you must first possess the natural talent for the ability. You cannot take enough courses on body language, smiling, or asking probing questions to override your inherent patterns when it comes to reacting to human beings. Since a good part of your success in sales is rests on the productive relationships you can create, understanding your talents in this area is critical.

Structure

The next dimension of fit involves structure. Talents related to structure help us get our work done. Think back to when you were in school. You may recall different study habits people had in order to do their homework. Some students found it beneficial to study in the library. Others found the library much too distracting because they were easily diverted from their books by what was going on around them. Indeed, we don't work equally well in the same structure.

Solving Customer Problems

The last dimension of fit involves recognizing and solving customer problems. These talents can be enormously helpful when customers have complicated problems that need to be addressed. Most sales roles do not have these requirements to a great degree.

THE MANAGER EFFECT

Do you have the manager you deserve? For far too many of the world's best salespeople, the answer is a definite no. Previously, we discussed myths that misguide companies as they make critical decisions about who will represent their products and services. However, the most harmful of these myths are: a) anyone can manage; b) our best salespeople are likely to be our most effective sales managers.

The acceptance of these assumptions does a lot of damage. Certainly, while there can be an overlap between those talents that lead to sales success and management success, that correlation is more rare than common.

Great managers make a big difference and are the third common denominator, along with strengths and fit, we find when we study the world's best salespeople. Yet the role managers play is frequently overlooked and unappreciated. This is because of two prevalent, but largely erroneous, ideas about the way salespeople work:

The Lone Wolf

Sales representatives often work alone. They may go days or even weeks without checking into an office. As such, your manager can and does make a big difference – positive or negative – in how well you perform. We have followed countless individual sales representatives over the course of many years, during which time most had several changes in their immediate supervisors. When they were working with outstanding sales managers, their sales shot up. The right manager can turn talented people into fully engaged employees who are much more likely to generate increased productivity.

The Preference Myth

When we talk to salespeople about their managers, one word in particular almost invariably creeps into the conversation. The word is “like.” While liking a person is an important factor when dealing with them in a work situation, it is still important to realize that the best manager might not necessarily be someone you will like the most as a person outside work.

Liking your manager is not a bad thing, but it won't improve your productivity. Some of the best managers we have encountered were not all that likeable. Some were gruff. Others seemed aloof. Still others certainly could be considered demanding. Yet these managers produced outstanding results and were able to retain their star producers year after year. (Not to say that the opposite – being gruff or demanding – necessarily leads to being a great manager.)

Q12

After years of research and asking employees hundreds of questions in order to determine and evaluate productivity, profitability, customer loyalty, etc., twelve questions proved all-important in realizing what influence performance. These questions now comprise what is known as Q12:

1. I know what is expected of me at work
2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right
3. At work I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day
4. In the last seven days I have received recognition or praise for doing good work

5. My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development
7. At work my opinions seem to count
8. The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel that my job is important
9. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work
10. I have a best friend at work
11. In the last six months someone at work has talked to me about my progress
12. This last year I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow

These Q12 items really describe the environment in which you work. Your direct supervisors or managers have the biggest influence over that environment. The best managers almost invariably understand their role in creating a culture in which these twelve conditions are effectively addressed. Further, the best companies assist their managers in creating and maintaining such environments.

Building Customer Trust

How many customers are satisfied with you and your company? How many of these customers are engaged?

Even if you could honestly say that all of your customers are extremely satisfied, you might not be doing a good enough job. Gallup's research demonstrates that customer satisfaction is merely the foundation for a continuing relationship with customers. As a result, "satisfaction" is an unreliable standard for gauging the strength of your relationships with customers. Customer satisfaction is merely the entry point for achieving a deeper foundation that rests on total customer engagement.

Customer Engagement

What leads to customer engagement? Is it products, marketing, service, follow-up? Well, yes, all of those. But what most contributes to customer engagement is how customers feel about their interaction with you and the other people in your organization. These interactions should result in customers becoming more confident, gaining a greater sense of you and your company's integrity, developing pride in doing business with you, and, if you really do your job well, developing a passion for your products and brand.

The Four Dimensions of Customer Engagement

The role of the salesperson becomes clear as we examine each of the four dimensions of customer engagement:

1. Confidence – Customers feel that the brand or company is trustworthy and that it keeps its promises
2. Integrity – Customers feel that the company treats them fairly
3. Pride – Customers feel good about the product or service and also feel that using the product reflects well on them

4. Passion – Getting a strong relationship that exists between company and a client when the latter views the former as irreplaceable

So, You Want to be a Sales Manager

For some salespeople, there comes a time when selling is just not enough. They want the increased status, and sometimes higher salary, that comes with a promotion to sales management. Most companies select managers from their very best salespeople. Nonetheless, the move, while being a great boost for some, may be a land mine for others.

Why Manage?

A critical question to ask yourself is, Why become a sales manager in the first place? Bear in mind that, for many managers, the daily activities of their jobs become a pain in the neck. This is because they became sales managers for the wrong reasons.

What are your reasons for wanting to become a manager? Here are some of the more common reasons we have been given by salespeople who want to move into management:

- I want more control and autonomy
- I deserve the promotion
- My company wants me to take the job
- I am bored in my current job
- I want to get promoted before they find out I really can't sell
- "Manager" will look prestigious in my business card
- I have been a sales rep for ten years; it's about time I did something else
- I want to earn more money and this is the only way
- I am tired of all the pressure to perform
- I want people to respect me
- Managers get nicer company cars
- I want to spend more time in the office
- I only went into sales so I could get into management

These expectations frequently lead to disappointment and an unhappy career change. Why? Because they are not usually fulfilled by a career move into management.

Advice for the World's Best Sales Managers

So, you have decided to take the plunge into sales management after all. Don't panic if at first you feel as though you're in over your head. The change from salesperson to sales manager is often quite overwhelming. Overnight, you are faced with a mountain of paperwork, people calling and asking you to do things

for them, and a thousand details that demand immediate attention. In order to face these challenges, here are some suggestion and tips to help you along the way:

Rehire Your Best

This suggestion is at the top of the list with good reason: This is your most important concern, so it should be top priority. Your best people represent your biggest threat and your biggest opportunity. Great managers aren't afraid to become close with their best people, understanding that such a relationship enhances productivity.

Appreciate Uniqueness

Excellence as a manager will not come from getting others to be like you; it will come from getting others to be more like themselves. Discovering each person's strengths and getting all their people to use those strengths every day is a secret shared by great managers. As one sales manager puts it: "You have to know them to grow them."

Lots to Do

We have met few managers who are not hard workers, and most have incredible stamina. While hard work alone will not make you great, it is tough to achieve great results without a lot of sweat. Still, you must carefully pick and choose how you spend your time.