

INFLUENCING MECHANISMS – PERSUASION, ASSERTION AND BRIDGING – KEY SKILLS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SALES MANAGER

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Abstract: In any relationship, both parties have power which will ebb and flow over time. The manager needs to understand the types of power they have, the power available to his organizational network and the power available to his clients.

The manager will not necessarily have line control over the internal – organizational – resources and therefore will need to influence individuals and departments to support their external main clients.

Before exploring the different types of influence it is important to define what is meant by influence, power and authority.

Influence is the *process* of affecting what another person or group does and/or thinks.

Power is the *ability* of a person or a group to influence other people or groups.

Authority is the *right* to exercise power.

It is now generally recognized that in business, a key skill which needs to be developed is the ability to influence effectively. This is because the old lines of authority and position no longer exist, and there is now a greater requirement for most employees to be responsible for many tasks and many outcomes, most of which cannot be controlled or managed by the individual alone. It is also evident that everyone in a chain have different priorities and most people have to influence those priorities to get their own desired outcome.

KEY WORDS: PERSUASION, ASSERTION, BRIDGING

CHAPTER 1. INFLUENCING

Who do we need to influence? In any role in the company, opportunities for selling or promoting the organization's services and products appear all the time, and for any service or product to be appreciated by the customer, delivery of that service needs to be prompt, efficient and professional. Therefore we often have to be able to influence our colleagues to make sure that their contribution is equally professional. Whilst most employees recognize the need to convert sales opportunities when they arise, quite often they will, at a given time and place, have different priorities, and may not see your need as one they should bring forward. We need to influence:

- ❖ Colleagues of our organization – those colleagues who are critical to our success and that of our company need to be segmented in a similar way in order to identify the ones that really

matter and not just those who our consider to be nice people or personal friends.

- ❖ Customers – we must know about them what are their circumstances, what sort of customer have they been, when is anything coming up for renewal or potential renewal and should we put something in our diary to remind yourself to contact them in plenty of time.
- ❖ Referrals – most new sales are likely to come from referrals: existing customers referring friends and family, professionals referring customers, retailers introducing their customers and so on.
- ❖ Delivering
- ❖ Personal impact – the concepts of influencing are relatively easy to understand, but difficult to put into practice for many of us. One of the key mechanisms is our ability to make an impact on the person we want to influence and this is mainly through our ability to communicate effectively.
- ❖ Natural influences – for hundreds of thousands of years man has needed to influence others in order to survive.
- ❖ Knowing and Liking – we are more likely to approach and interact with people we know than people we do not. Simple – if we know them, we are more likely to trust them, unless we have information to the contrary of course. However in the selling business we need to influence people that we have not met before perhaps. To be effective at influencing therefore we need to introduce ourselves to those people often some time before we want to sell to them. They will then recognize you and more likely to deal with you. Whenever possible it is important to attend any function where you are likely to meet potential customers or introducers.
- ❖ Consistency - people are creatures of habit. We all tend to follow the same routine day in, day out. So it is with our customers, who chose us – they made a commitment at the time, and if they have no cause for complaint they will be more reluctant to change. That is why it is important to nurture existing customers than to strive for new connections. By finding out their habits, we can sometimes arrange to be at the branch at the same time either to introduce our self or reacquaint our self with them.
- ❖ Social proof – people will follow others more readily than striking out their own. There has been a great deal of research which shows that people assume that others will take action on issues and as a consequence no action is taken. Customers will be more influenced by a particular product or service if other people have taken up that service. That is why reference stories are so powerful in influencing positive outcomes in sales.
- ❖ Track record – to be really effective in influencing both internally and externally, a sales manager has to develop a positive reputation for “knowing what they are talking about” and delivering in an efficient, professional and courteous manner. What the sales manager is doing here is developing a track record. This is not going to happen overnight and if you are new to the role, will take time. Many sales manager become so concerned about sales targets that they forget that to achieve good sales takes some investment in establishing credibility. A clear plan of how to establish this positive reputation should run in parallel with other plans of course and includes a number of issues including personal impact, communications skills, delivering on promises, networking and so on. It is unlikely that all your sales are going to come to you. Effective sales people are proactive in contacting prospects, getting themselves known in the community and being professional.

Our main objectives are:

1. Identify different methods of influencing
2. Recognize which mechanism might be most appropriate to use in given circumstances.

It is generally recognized that there are three main styles of influencing through communication – *Persuasion*, *Assertion* and *Bridging*.

The first two – Persuasion and Assertion – are known as *Push Techniques* and Bridging as a *Pull Technique*.

Whilst we all have a preference towards one of these mechanisms, it is self evident that having a preference, by definition, reduces our chances of being successful if we do not have the flexibility to use other styles depending on the situations we find ourselves in. If we make a huge assumption that the opportunities for using these techniques are equally distributed, then we are only giving ourselves a third of a chance to be effective, and that only if we are skilled at our preferred technique. There is plenty of evidence that people are not that skillful.

Generally if we use Push Techniques too often then the other party is likely to push back, and we will get into a spiral of argument.

Bridging, a Pull Technique, a mechanism of asking questions and listening – if over-used with a customer, can lead to a slight mistrust, doubt or worries about *hidden agendas*.

Clearly there is room for all these techniques, but it is useful to understand how and when.

CHAPTER 2. INFLUENCING MECHANISMS

2.1.Persuasion.

One of the most used mechanisms, as it relies on reason and logic – rational thought. Unfortunately, logic is not always absolute when it comes to human beings. People look at their world through their own eyes which is often different of our own. For example it may make absolute sense for a customer to change their home John to one from another company because it may be significantly cheaper than the one they have with another bank. However, that customer may have a long term connection with their bank and may still decide to stay put.

When using persuasion as a technique we often try to identify as many reasons as possible to support our argument – this is the right product because of this ..., and that, and that – and so on. Clearly the further we move from the core reason, the less convincing it becomes, and if our customer is looking at the issue from a different perspective to ourselves then we might just give them a lot of ammunition to say NO.

In the bestseller *YES! 50 secrets from the science of persuasion*, that is an entertaining guide that tried and tested methods of persuasion, we can find all good stuff and very well presented how can we develop the technique of persuasion. Here are some of the exciting questions that the authors of the book try to answer:

1. How can you increase your persuasiveness by inconveniencing your audience?
2. When persuasion might backfire, how do you avoid the “magnetic middle”? - *Beware the “magnetic middle”: when reporting on average behavior, be aware that above-average people may take it as an excuse to lower their performance.*
3. What kind of smile can make the world smile back? - *People respond more positively to a genuine smile than a fake smile. If you can cultivate positivity towards someone, they will pick up on it and respond more positively to you.*
4. What can chess teach us about making persuasive moves?
5. What persuasion tip can you borrow from Benjamin Franklin? - *Benjamin Franklin’s technique: get someone to do you a small favour which is specific to them, and they like you*

more.

6. What can batting practice tell us about persuasive?
7. What can a box of crayons teach us about persuasion? - *People respond positively to products that have an unusual, unexpected name as it encourages people to think about the product's attributes*
8. How can emotion put persuasion in motion? - *When dealing with emotionally charged issues, people are blind to quantities. They might offer the same amount of money for 50 or 100 of a good.*
9. What can make people believe everything they read? - *Sleep deprivation, fatigue and distraction heighten gullibility. E.g. door-to-door salesman states the price of his wares in pennies and immediately says "It's a bargain!" People are more receptive to the "bargain" claim after the unexpected, distracting statement.*
10. When is your name your game? - *People are drawn to things (locations, professions) that are similar to their own name. So do not give your product an ugly, unpronounceable name.*

Persuasion will work mainly if the core argument makes sense to the other party, and so a good technique is to limit our argument to one key reason, and then to "SHUT UP" and listen to their response. If they are interested they will ask for more information, or ask questions about your proposition. If they disagree, it is then wise to remember the techniques of managing objections described earlier.

In the first instance do not try to overwhelm them with our arguments – try to elicit all of their objections first and decide whether our counters will be effective in converting them, or whether there are powerful rational or emotional reasons why you might be wasting your time. In sales there are no prizes for winning an argument – particularly if the customer walks as a consequence.

2.2.Assertion

This is a powerful technique when used properly and a terrible technique if used badly. It is suggested that this technique may be effective internally, though we have already met the term in the context of negotiation – where assertiveness is very powerful. However at the early stage of a sale it is probably less effective.

As for persuasion there are some simple rules for assertion.

To be assertive we must know exactly what you want – and be able to articulate that want.

"I want you to do something about that mess" is not assertive, "I want you to clear that mess into the trash-can within an hour" is assertive.

We can really only be assertive with someone who has the authority to action that request – make sure that they can deliver.

Make sure that what you are asking for is reasonable – it may require someone to do a bit extra, but not outrageously so.

It would be unreasonable to suggest to a restaurant that they fed your family free of charge for the next five years because your food arrived lukewarm, but it would be reasonable to ask (in a polite but assertive way), for them to reheat your dish.

When being assertive, you may have to give something in return for the action. If a colleague is going the extra mile process an order through quickly, you might offer to help prepare the paperwork.

This last rule is of course the basis of negotiation.

2.3.Bridging

This technique has been discussed at length as it is the basis of Consultative Selling – questioning, listening, summarizing. In bridging we are trying to establish some common ground, to establish the need and to explore options.

It is a very powerful technique and as mentioned earlier probably under – utilized as a technique for influencing outcomes. This technique is often spoken of as a method of getting the other party to think it was their idea to begin with. This is not entirely true but it allows the other party to use their own intelligence to identify a valid course of action.

Where this technique falls down is in the natural human trait of coming up with answers too readily, of not listening properly and not summarizing to seek clarity and common understanding. In addition to start questioning without positioning the reason, or asking permission, to ask questions. Therefore the good influencer will try to remove any concerns or doubts or hints of hidden agendas by stating at the outset, why they are asking the question.

“I have been looking at the file and wonder if it might be an idea to think about changing your system. To make sure that I have up to date information I would like to ask you some questions, if that is ok with you?”

“ I was very grateful for you referring Mr. John to us with regard to the server, and I think there might be more opportunities for us to work more closely in the future. I wonder if I could ask you some questions in the first instance to see what your thoughts might be?”

In both these examples the salesperson has clearly and unambiguously stated the reason for asking questions. There can be no doubt in the other party’s mind what the intention is.

CHAPTER 3. USING INFLUENCING MECHANISMS

Which technique to use? It is not always apparent when each technique is more appropriate than the other, but there are some simple guidelines which can be adopted for most situations.

Use Push – Persuasion & Assertion techniques when:

- ❖ The opposite to the above apply
- ❖ When you have a lot of personal credibility
- ❖ Customers might like to be told what to do by someone they trust
- ❖ When the decision is relatively simple
- ❖ The other party has already accepted the proposal in their own minds
- ❖ When there is little resistance
- ❖ There would be no point in creating barriers where they do not exist – it is almost a done deal.
- ❖ When you want to conclude the deal
- ❖ Be assertive – get them to sign!

Use Pull – Bridging technique when:

- ❖ The personal credibility is relatively low. This is nothing to do with our skill or capability – but does the other party know us, or know of us positively. What is our reputation in our eyes. Do they see us as the “ new kid on the block” or do we have positive history with them. Have we proved our self?
- ❖ There is some complexity in what we want the other party to do or buy. Complexity is relative – it may be easy to us, but rocket science to the person we are trying to influence. Equally do not underestimate the complexity for the other party – we might be asking a secretary to re-format a document, a task we think is relatively easy, though not one you could do our self. Such tasks can be quite complex and time consuming. When there is a possibility of resistance to our proposal.
- ❖ This technique is a more effective tool if our proposal might cause some pain to the other side. If our proposal might mean changing provider etc., our customer might be reluctant to do so. So getting them to identify the wisdom themselves would be more powerful.
- ❖ We are looking for some commitment to proceed or move to the next step

Bridging is often the best techniques to get beyond the first hurdle, particularly if there is complexity and a deal more work has to be carried out.

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSIONS

- ❖ The influencing techniques represent a very important tools set for each sales manager in the fights to win the negotiations into the market.
- ❖ For easy use of these techniques more exercises are necessary, in order to be able to master their natural usage during negotiations.
- ❖ These techniques are necessary to managers in negotiations with both internal and external clients.
- ❖ Learning to benefit from these techniques is the key to improve our results.
- ❖ One thing should be spelled out: we must, with every negotiation, always improve the quality of these techniques, if we want to survive in this market as a sales manager.

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