



# The Emergence of “A”

BY TOM WENTZ

Before the chairman left on an international trip, he sent an e-mail asking me to meet with four sales managers from four of his companies. They were going to be at a sales conference in Chicago.

His final comment in the e-mail was, “They’ll test you; they take ‘gimme’s.’”

Steve was from Michigan and seemed to be the coordinator for the group. He confirmed that they had a two-hour break in the afternoon of the second day and because it was a command performance by the chairman, they agreed to meet with me for an hour.

The tension at the beginning of the meeting was rather guarded. They were all very successful sales leaders and did not have much reason to meet with someone who suggested that they *drive* 3.

The chairman had told them about waging war and waging peace and he wanted them to understand the dif-

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ference as it pertains to their salespeople and how it might be relevant to achieving their plans in 2012. Confidentially, the chairman had told me that if something didn't change dramatically, two of them would be replaced.

After 10 minutes of introductions and a brief confrontation by Steve about my favorite football team, we began to focus on their common stated goal of increasing market share and motivating their sales force to do things differently in 2012.

All four initially were confident that they could elevate their business to the next level in 2012. They all suggested that they'd had a good year in 2011, but I knew from my conversations with the chairman that 2011 had been mediocre by his standards.

### Forecasting and Market Analysis

They had recently been through a rigorous forecasting and market analysis process and they were not in a mood to talk about the plans that they had already submitted. They were exhausted thinking about 2012.

Mark was from North Carolina and was rather direct when he asked, “Why can't we sell solutions?” I could see that the other three were in total agreement with Mark's question. The chairman was right, this was what they had decided would be their initial test.

Since I could tell it was a test question, I decided to test them in return. “Because, there is no such thing as a solution.” I paused as this statement always elicits a rather defensive response, and it came quickly.

Mark countered, “The chairman told us about the *gimme* putt and that you might be a little confrontational. Your perspective about selling is totally opposite to what we've been told for years. We've been very successful selling solutions. Now, you're telling us that's wrong!”

Alex was from Texas and confidently suggested, “Oil solves a whole lot of problems for people every day, and I don't see why it's wrong to call it a solution.

“Alex, you're right, oil does solve problems but one company calls it ‘liquid engineering.’ That sounds like creating, not solving to me.” I paused for a moment to allow his argument to continue. He was a little stumped by that statement. I could see him trying to resolve the difference between solving and creating in his mind.

Not waiting for Alex, Mark continued the inquisi-

tion about solutions. “We've spent a fortune training our salespeople to sell the benefits of the product, not the product — you know, the sizzle, not the steak! And, the benefit of the products that my guys sell is that they solve problems — we sell solutions.”

I could tell that Mark wanted this meeting to be over as quickly as possible. His argumentative eyes were staring a hole through me. I thought to myself, “*He's very good at waging war. If I'm not careful, this meeting could be over very quickly.*” I recalled my counselor skills: “*When you are in a war and want to wage peace, surrender with empathy. Make them right in how they feel — their belief may be all wrong.*”

“You're right — many of the *creations* on the planet are used to solve problems, but the *truth* is, solving problems is only half of the market potential available to your guys. If you can see the potential of your creations to create something different, you might be able to take your business to the next level in 2012.”

Mark's eyes were now staring at me in a totally different way. The anger about wasting his time had shifted to a question about what I meant by that statement. So, I gave him an answer that he did not expect. “I'm sure your parents used you to solve problems around the house when you were growing up, but I hope that you were more of a benefit to them than just a solution to their housekeeping problems — that they somehow helped you achieve your *potential* that is sitting here with me today.”

The personal reference stunned him into thinking in a very different way, but I could tell that he was still very confrontational. “Gentlemen, I told the chairman that peace is a condition that exists when truth prevails and the truth about everything you make and sell is that they are creations. Yes, the benefit of many of your products is that they are sometimes used to solve problems, but as sales managers who want to take your business to the next level and motivate *your guys* to do that, it can't be done by merely solving problems. That will only give you access to half of the market.”

That silenced Mark's argument for a moment. The use of “your guys” to describe Mark's salespeople seemed to quiet his confrontational mode and he asked in a more civil tone, “What's the other half? We'll never get 100 percent market share.”

## Getting Customer Share

“Mark, that’s very true, but you can get 100 percent customer share.” I paused to see if he had heard the change in adjective. “I know many salespeople who are partners with their customers and get 100 percent of their customers’ business. Customer share might be a totally different way for the chairman to measure the success of your team.” Mark was silent and I could tell that he was internalizing this conversation at a personal level.

They were all silent, so I continued, “The most important work of next level salespeople today is creating something new and different. *Different* always defines the next level of existence in any situation. If you want to go to the next level, you should start at the next level and pull your customers up with you — not push them from behind. *Solving* is pushing — *creating* is pulling — they are two totally different energy fields.”

They were now totally confused. Mark, now in a curious way asked, “Don’t solutions do that? I’ve sold a lot of solutions that have help customers dramatically improve their businesses?”

“No — the next level can’t be improved into existence. All the Six Sigma improvements from the past did not prevent this economic decline. The computer was not developed by improving the typewriter. Solving and improving will not reveal the next level.”

“Then you’re telling me our sales training has been all wrong.”

“No — it’s the right training for selling solutions that improve the current level. It won’t take you to the next level. You must add *creating new and different approaches* as an additional benefit of your offering. That’s the other half — maybe two-thirds of the market potential today — and that’s the *truth!*”

The possibility that I was telling the *truth* had their attention. “The purpose of our meeting today is to talk about waging peace. As the chairman told you, I can be a

little —maybe a lot — confrontational when people need help getting to the next level. Their barrier is the muscle memory of their old game that has worked well for them for many years, but the next level in any game or in business is not a linear extension of the old game.”

Alex suggested that the chairman had talked about muscle memory many times, but he did not clearly explain what it meant.

“The chairman was very instinctive in taking gimme putts, but that was against the rules of the next level professional game. If the next level of your business is to play like the real pros in your industry, you’ll need to create a new muscle memory. It will be awkward at first, like writing your name with your opposite hand.”

## Facing Major Changes

Steve volunteered, “There aren’t any pros in our industry. Our competitors are all struggling right now. We just hired the top salesman from our biggest competitor and he tells us that there are major changes coming in that company.”

“You’re probably right; very few companies have the muscle memory of the new game. Major next-level changes are ahead for all companies and they can’t get there by waging war with people who can help them. Your customers will sort out and find the intellectual capital that they really need — and hopefully it can come from you. That is what waging peace is all about.”

I paused to see if their at war orientation had any further justification for existence. I could tell that the framework for peace was now present, so I transitioned to the important agenda for our meeting.

“Gentlemen, our time is limited and we could spend all day talking about how to wage war but that is not the agenda for our meeting. When you are clear about the truth, you are waging peace and yes, as you’ve seen so far, it can appear to be very confrontational to the at war mind.”

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Mark's orientation had totally changed. He was now trying to *understand* what I was saying rather than argue with me. "Then what you are telling us is that selling solutions isn't wrong, but it is an old game muscle memory that will hold us back from achieving our potential — and — accepting that truth, will somehow save our jobs?"

That statement confirmed that Mark knew that his job was on the line. "Mark, you're right, but before we go on, let's be really clear what I just did with you. The chairman wants you to understand how to wage peace with customers, not win the war against the competition. The competition is irrelevant when you are at peace with customers. The first step is to understand waging peace and that is what I've been doing with you for the past 45 minutes. It is a very difficult and potentially confrontational process when people do not have a vision of *different* — nor know how to *create*. We only have 15 minutes before you need to go back into that conference and ...."

Steve interrupted and said, "I really don't care about the conference. All we are going to hear about are solutions to our CRM problems." He laughed and said, "We already have a good CRM system and it can't be solved to meet our future needs. We need a different CRM system." He paused and confidently said, "How's that for getting what you've been telling us? I'd rather know how to add to our benefits and get our people on board. That's my biggest agenda."

I chuckled to myself and thought, "*Waging peace is really fun when people get it.*"

They all agreed and after a quick break to tell the rest of their team that they were going to skip the afternoon session, we reconvened. The atmosphere was now more relaxed and they were far more attentive.

"I hope you can feel that we are now at peace and that's because I confronted your old game using the truth — that different has arrived — and that it isn't optional that

you begin to create toward it. As you know, I confronted the chairman about the gimme putt using the irrefutable truth of the USGA rules. He could not continue to play by amateur rules and expect his people to play by professional rules. Please be clear that waging peace starts by playing by the rules of the next level game and that means that you might need to learn new selling skills."

Phil shook his head and said, "My salespeople have heard the chairman tell the gimme putt story a hundred times. All he says is that we need to stop the gimme putting. Everyone feels blamed when he tells it over and over again."

"That is because he can only communicate about his experience within his own at war mind set. The chairman is not yet clear himself about waging peace. He admits that he has been a warrior all his life. Waging peace is not about *stopping* anything — it's about *starting* to do things *differently*."

"Before the break, I waged peace with you by telling you the truth. I did not command you to stop confronting me. The truth was not my opinion. The truth is that the world has changed and customers need help creating new and different approaches to doing business. If the businesses of the past can't deliver it, they'll find it — and it is not a solution to the old game. Their old game — just like yours — will not get them to the next level."

Steve was really tracking and asked in a rhetorical way, "Waging peace is simple — isn't it?" He had another thought, so I waited. "What if the customer is really invested in their old game? What if they won't listen to the truth? What if they are determined — as you say — to work the old game harder and faster — that's insanity, right?"

"Waging peace is simple — but it is not easy. The selling skills of waging peace are designed to help the customer discover the truth. If you tell them the truth, and

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try to sell them the truth, they'll doubt you — but if you help them discover it, they may believe it. If they continue to confront you — just like you did me — with an at war orientation, you'll need the selling skills of the 'A' salesperson — and they are not easy to master.”

They were listening so I continued, “The truth about some things is often counter to the conventional wisdom that has been the way it's always been done. Waging peace is not about being a nice guy and allowing people to trample you with their old at war ways of doing business. The chairman thought it sounded like “Turn the other cheek.” It is not about being passive or aggressive. We can talk about all the selling skills at a later time, but for now, you must be clear that you can't drag the war and arrive at the next level. You must wage peace in order to get there.”

Mark said, “Then selling solutions won't work?”

“Mark, I'm glad you're beginning to see that there is a potential in selling that is beyond selling solutions. It is this macro view that differentiates the 'As' from the 'Bs.’”

Alex was still thinking about what I said about oil. “Your comment about what I said about oil initially made me mad, but then it caused me to think about what's the difference between solving and creating. Are you suggesting that changing the game is about creating?”

“Alex, that's a perfect way to describe the difference between waging war and waging peace. It is the same in real life and in world affairs — the business of waging peace can not begin until the combatants want to create something different.”

I picked up his iPhone and said, “There was no market for a solution called an iPhone five years ago. The market was created, not penetrated. In today's business environment, if you wait to penetrate a market, you'll be way behind. My future and the future of your companies and the future of your customers' companies is not a problem to solve, rather a *future worth creating*. Helping the customer *create the future* is well over fifty percent of the opportunities today and that is the most important work of the 'A' salesperson.”

Steve said, “That's the third time you've mentioned an 'A' — what's an 'A'?”

The afternoon conference was over and their team

walked into the room and prevented me from answering his question.

They invited me to go to dinner, but I refused as it was a part of the conference and I was not interested in listening to the dinner speech: *Solutions for the New Economy*.

Steve volunteered that he was not willing to go to bed without understanding the 'A.' The others agreed and we scheduled to reconvene after dinner in the same room.

After everyone left, Mark remained behind. He wanted to apologize for his initial confrontation about solutions. I assured him that there was no apology necessary, but he was concerned that I would tell the chairman that he was argumentative. It was that behavior that was preventing him from advancing to a vice president position.

I assured him that any personal feedback to the chairman would only be positive. He was going to be late for the dinner, so I concluded by saying, “Mark, you have enormous potential and it has a lot to do with releasing your guys from the bondage of B-Ville. That is like doing housekeeping chores for your parents. When you develop the ability and skill to transform 'Bs' into 'As, your own potential will emerge.”

Mark was anxious for our meeting after the dinner. I hope you'll join Mark to hear about the 'As,' 'Bs' and 'Cs.'

