

# The Real DIFFERENCE Between “A’s” and “B’s”

BY TOM WENTZ

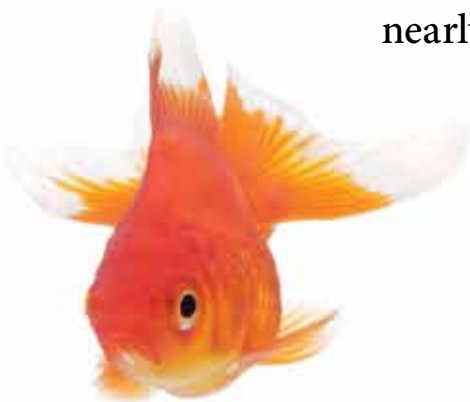
The keynote topic was *Solutions for the New Economy*. The speech ran a little longer than anticipated so it was nearly 9 p.m. before we reconvened.

“How was the keynote speech?”

Phil volunteered, “It was a good presentation about how to do things ‘better’ and ‘more’ and ‘improve.’ The speaker was rather dogmatic. It is amazing how sensitive I am now to the word ‘solutions.’ I was asking myself the whole time, do I sound that dogmatic when I talk to my salespeople? Why do people think that the new economy can be solved into existence? It’s their *muscle memory* — right?”

Before I could answer Phil’s question, two of their team members walked into the room. To my amazement, one was Ariel, the Orange Ball player from the Golf Simulation. I had not seen her since that fateful day when she and Ron had the battle on the ninth hole. As we embraced, we were both in tears and she asked, “How’s Bill?” I whispered in her ear that he was great and he’d be thrilled to know you asked about him.

I did not recognize the second person. He reached out his hand and simply said, “Wally — remember me?”



# “A concern for doing the *right thing* for the future of the customers business. People never doubted the motives of the ‘A’s.’”

“Wally!” — I was speechless. Wally was the IT guy who had the total group game figured out on the first tee. Because no one would believe him, he intentionally hit his Orange Ball in the weeds on the ninth hole to get the attention of his group. On that day Wally was totally disrespected as being the IT guy who constantly complained.

Wally took a deep breath and said, “That Orange Ball experience changed my life. You can’t believe what changed for me after that experience — and I’ve never been able to thank you and Bill — thank you!”

Seeing Ariel and Wally made it very difficult for me to refocus on the agenda of the “A’s,” “B’s” and “C’s” but Steve quickly brought focus to the meeting. “We all have flights out early tomorrow morning and I won’t go home without understanding the significance of your comments about the ‘A’s.’”

We refocused and I explained, “To understand the *truth* about how salespeople are perceived, we’ve conducted hundreds of interviews with people who buy things and asked them to profile salespeople as ‘A’s,’ ‘B’s’ and ‘C’s.’” The question was open ended so they could accurately describe their experience with salespeople of all kinds. We only suggest that there are “A’s,” “B’s” and “C’s.”

## **Identifying the Differences**

“After a little contemplation, they quickly tell us that the ‘A’s’ are different. They are unique people and there aren’t many of them. You’ll instantly know them when you meet them. There is something about their presence and approach to selling. They do sell stuff to make a living. They aren’t consultative like so many people think. People admitted that they see many who claim to be consultative as merely good ‘B’s.’

“There is always a calm presence about them. They are never in a hurry. Their main concern is about how what they sell, even though it may be a small component, impacts the buyer’s business or personal effectiveness — a concern for doing the *right thing* for the future of the customers business. People never doubted the motives of the ‘A’s.’”

I paused and everyone was still focused, “One custom-

er said it best, *‘They make a living selling us stuff, but they make a difference by being a part of our team.’*”

Mark interrupted, “We’ve told our guys that *people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care*. That’s been our motto for a long time.”

“Mark, that is a great statement and one that has been a selling mantra for many years —and it is very true — but no one used the word ‘caring’ or that phrase to describe the ‘A’s.’ They said the ‘A’s’ were about focus and discipline and most important, integrity. The ‘A’s’ seemed to manifest caring through those behaviors.”

Alex quickly said, “I have an ‘A.’ Customers always ask me, where did I get Julie? She’s a graduate of the Air Force Academy and she has the attributes you mention. She doesn’t have the experience of our senior sales engineers, but she’s really smart and her work ethic is beyond belief. People love to buy from Julie.

“When we asked if the ‘A’s’ were merely more experienced than the ‘B’s,’ the answer was always ‘No.’ They said the ‘B’s’ were often the most experienced — that the ‘A’s’ were *savvy* — and it had little to do with their products, rather the impact their products could have on their business.”

Ariel had been quiet until now and volunteered, “Awareness of impact is the key on the inside. I call it anticipation of the consequences of our actions. If we don’t take time to really understand the root cause of the customer’s problem and suggest alternatives that are radically different, the customer is just going to have the same problem at a later time.”

Steve asked, “How did you do that?”

Ariel simply said, “We learned by *driving* ‘3.’”

*Driving* “3” was a principle from the Golf Simulation and it was apparent that Ariel had mastered the process. We had to stay focused or we would be there all night, so I continued, “The interviews confirmed that in the past the offering of the ‘A’ was called ‘value-added’ service, but today it is referred to as innovative approaches, experience engineering, intellectual capital — and the amazing description was ‘budget technician.’

Mark interrupted and asked, “What does that mean?”

“It was all about understanding the relationships

between departments within an account. When some sales are made across many boundaries and to buying influences like owners who are in different locations, the 'A's' took time to understand how decisions were made and what was necessary to get money in the budget to buy his products. Most customers were not willing to share that information with the 'B's.' The 'A's' had 'studied buying' and had a lot of 'political savvy' about how buying happens."

The thought about buying activated Phil and he wanted to add something. "Phil, if it is okay, hold your thought and let me finish the profile so everyone can see the big picture. Then, I'll invite questions and comments." He agreed.

"The 'B's' were described as friendly and caring but sometimes they were perceived as a bit phony — they tried to be too buddy-buddy in order to be liked. Universally, they spent too much time talking about sports and non-business things. They didn't have the focus of the 'A's.'"

### Finding Common Ground

Mark quickly volunteered that one sales training workshop had emphasized how to find that common ground in order to build rapport. "Mark, that is an important human interaction in casual and social settings, but it is often not appropriate in business situations."

Mark said, "We give away a lot of tickets and customers love the games."

"Most people said that the 'B's' were the guys with the tickets. But, when the focus was on business, the really good 'B's' were what one buyer called 'F&B's' — feature-benefit guys. They were basically selling the facts about the form-fit-function of their products. They were described as experienced, knowledgeable, application-specific, easy to buy from, cooperative, the excellent reps, good products, good prices and readily available."

Mark said, "That's *my* guys!"

There was a little confrontation in the tone of his comment about *his* guys as if the F&B classification implied that there was something wrong with the "B's." It was reported that the "B's" sell lots of stuff, but their sales approach was mostly about the functionality of the product when many customers were emphatic that that is all they wanted from a salesperson.

Mark once again added that it totally depends on the type of product being sold. "We're asked to quote stuff all the time and customers don't want to be bothered with lengthy sales calls."

"Mark, as I said, there is nothing wrong with being a 'B.' The really good 'B's' sell lots of stuff, make their quota and if they are reps, they handle lots of lines and cover a

lot of territory. 'B's' make a very good living. The difference between the 'A's' and the 'B's' is not a right way and wrong way issue. They are fundamentally just different.

"The interesting thing that almost all customers said was that many 'B's' are trending backward toward how they described the 'C's.' The 'A's' were always steady and improving. Many buyers accurately said that some 'B's' have become technologically obsolete."

Steve quickly asked what people said about the "C's." "There were many derogatory ways that people described the 'C's' — whiners — funnel fillers. Some 'B's' became 'C's' when they were known as the donut guy. There was always an impersonal quality about the 'C's.' People didn't know their full names. They sometimes didn't even know what company they represented — they just carried a lot of lines. Most feasibility buyers admitted that they would seldom see a 'C.' They had their traffic cop called Purchasing keep them out."

Ariel quickly volunteered, "The 'C's' are speeders — they don't know how to *drive* '3.'"

I thought to myself, "Wow, *she* has really changed." Respectfully, there was a role for some "C's." They were a legitimate source if they represented an "A" Company. That wasn't often the case as the "A" Companies seldom had "C" salespeople.

From the interviews, we were trying to understand how products were sold, but it also gave us great insight into how account relationships were developed and sus-



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tained. The dominant issue for many businesses today is new account development. It was very clear that the “C’s” could not open any new accounts and the “B’s” really struggled when they were up against an “A.” The “A” combined with the products and capability of the “A” Company was an almost impregnable fortress of sustainable account relationship. The “A’s” had what every buyer called a partnership in their business.

Mark said in a rather concerned way, “My guys are not good at developing new accounts. That’s why one of our major goals in 2012 is for an increase in market penetration.”

Alex was cynical when he said, “We’ve been asked to be ‘partners’ by almost every customer. We’ve tried almost everything and they still aren’t satisfied. Partnering is impossible!”

Mark quickly added, “Partnering is a lie. Many buyers use that term to get my guys to lower their prices.”

Phil suggested, “That’s because you both have the wrong selling technology. We had to stop the funnel filling approach to selling. We could not sell innovative products with that mind-set.”

“You’re both right, but true partnering today is a very different relationship. It is an *invested* relationship and one that is essential for companies that must execute a real-time business model. Real time businesses cannot tolerate the discontinuity of ‘B’ type relationships. They need the continuity and integrity of the ‘A.’

“Very few people actually know the *truth* about a partnership. The term has been widely used to manipulate vendors into believing that a relationship can be established with inanimate objects.”

Ariel quickly said, “Never get married for the money.”

I laughed and offered that the “A” Companies know the truth about partnerships.

Alex asked, “What is the truth?”

“There are many truths about partnerships but the one that is at the structural level is that *slow controls fast*.” I paused as Ariel and Wally knew that concept from the Golf Simulation. They were silent so I offered the truth about golf. “In golf, the big slow muscles must control the fast hands.”

Wally smiled and said, “My fast hands hit the orange ball in the weeds.” Ariel added, “And in the water.”

We laughed recalling the ninth hole, but I returned the conversation to the relevance of our meeting. “In business, the slow buying process always controls the partnership. The reason is that partners are invested together and companies always take time to carefully evaluate investments before they are made.”

“The most important investment is the integration of new intellectual capital and that slows down the buying

## “Creating the future with a customer who needs intellectual capital long before any purchase orders are signed takes great patience.”

process as almost everything today has some level of customization. The ‘A’ salesperson will only go as fast as the buyer is able to buy. That is a partnership.”

Steve was curious about that thought. “Is able to buy? What does that mean?”

“That’s where the ‘A’ salesperson shines. We could talk all night about the ‘A’s’ ability to help the customer sort through all the options and customize the innovative approach and define the long-term owning experience, make sure their intellectual capital is properly integrated and get the money in the budget to buy — that’s how everyone described the ‘A.’ They’ve learned to *drive* ‘3’ when they are with customers.”

Mark said, “That’s not my guys.”

I wasn’t sure whether his comment justified that his guys were “B’s” or that he was finally realizing that his guys needed to be “A’s.” I paused to let his complete thought come out. He continued, “If this profile is true, we would never get invited to the big dance — to the C-Level — into owners and national accounts — is that right?”

“That’s probably true. During our interviews, the C-Level executives were very clear that they seldom had any interest in form-fit and functional issues. That was all delegated to feasibility people. They had no reason to go to a game with a ‘B.’”

Mark put down his note pad and said, “Now that I think about it, C-Level executives very seldom come to the games. That’s interesting.” I could see that he wanted to make another point, so I waited. “This is what many of my reps have been complaining about. They are connected to the C-Level executives in some of their accounts. They tell me that my regional managers are ‘B’s’ — I get it. Two of my best reps will never let their regional go on sales calls with them. They say they don’t listen and always want to spew F&B’s on the customer — I get it. ‘A’s’ and ‘B’s’ don’t mix — do they?”

It became very clear how Mark was perceived as being argumentative by the chairman. His learning style was based on arguments of polarized debates but it is merely his way of integrating information. He can get it when someone confronts his arguments. It is very common for

the solution salesperson to argue in order to persuade people to accept their point of view, but it doesn’t work when all he has is influence over the opposing party.

“Mark, ‘A’s’ and ‘B’s’ are as different as the capital and expense budgets in any account. Creating the future with a customer who needs intellectual capital long before any purchase orders are signed takes great patience — it is often justified at the C-Level because capital budgets are involved — and it is simply not the way ‘B’s’ have been trained to sell. Think about it this way — to the customer the ‘B’s’ are an expense — the ‘A’s’ are an investment.”

I could tell by his demeanor that this was the issue that might be limiting his career.

### Changing Times

Phil had waited patiently and now raised his hand and motioned to everyone. When he had their attention, he said directly to them, “*This is serious*. I now understand why the chairman wanted us to meet with Tom.” He paused and looked at everyone. “I’ve been profiling my sales team as Tom has been speaking and I have a lot of very good ‘B’s,’ but they’ve all hit the wall this year. Many of them are about to lose major accounts who are turning to ‘A’s’ within our competitors for new ideas. I can see it happening.”

Mark was about to say something but Steve motioned for him to wait. “Hear me out, *this is serious*. I went on a sales call two weeks ago to one of our biggest accounts and they told me that our competitor had an innovative approach that was being looked at by their engineers and my sales guy was not even aware that it was happening. The ‘A’ has defeated my ‘B.’ If we are going to meet all those lofty projections for market share increase and keep our jobs, we’d better figure out how to make the ‘B’s’ into ‘A’s.’”

He then turned to me and said, “*This is serious — how do we make ‘A’s’ out of ‘B’s’?* We’re selling some very new and innovative products and we can’t get the ‘B’s’ to stop the F&B parade. Innovation is not about F&B’s — is it?” Before I could answer, he looked at Mark and said “This should be your *serious concern* also.”

“Phil, first of all, let’s be clear — the ‘A’s’ don’t defeat



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‘B’s.’ They *wage peace* with their customers. The ‘B’s’ are casualties of their own lack of awareness.” I paused to invite him to digest that thought. He was with me, “Next, yes, it is very serious in the sense that this has never been a requirement in the past. *How a company sells* is now the single most strategic issue in today’s very different business environment. Budgets have been cut and there is no time for donuts — there are many people who are not allowed to accept tickets to games — and idle banter about sports is a waste of time. Businesses today are very focused and the acquisition of new intellectual capital is the life blood of every organization — and it must come from innovative new products and salespeople who are ‘A’s.’”

Alex’s adrenaline was now flowing, “One of my guys has just landed a new account because we got our engineers involved in looking at the customer’s process six months ago and we helped them totally redesign the way they were marketing and packaging their products. Their existing supplier had been in there for 10 years and didn’t even know the process was being redesigned. We got the go-ahead last week, and you’re right — it was a capital investment issue. I didn’t think about it this way, but I guess we *waged peace* — is that right?”

Wally jumped in and said, “A partnership is always a total group game. When your engineers got involved, the customer could see that you had intellectual capital that was way beyond the salesperson acting alone. That’s what changed my life — when our salespeople could see that I had something to contribute to their customers. In my old muscle memory, I was the ‘C’ IT guy — who Tom called the whiner — but today, I’m an ‘A.’ IT integration with our customers is serious work.”

I tried to regain control or the stories would keep us there all night, but Ariel was determined to make a point. “It’s not only serious work, it *isn’t optional*. There’s more to intellectual capital integration with customers than what is imbedded in our products. Wally just made the point that IT needs to get connected with our customers. I told you earlier that we developed an anticipation

of consequence orientation with my inside sales department. My people very quickly started bringing things to me saying, “This customer has a very serious problem” — and Mark — most of the problems start because *your guys* are ‘B’s.’”

Ariel’s tone was very sarcastic toward Mark. She and Ron had locked horns on the golf course and she was obviously having a similar problem now with Mark.

Not wanting a war to break out, I raised my hand and said, “Ariel’s right. In the ‘A’ Companies, everyone has a role in selling. Everyone is a part of the ‘intellectual capital’ that supports every customer interaction.”

“Gentlemen, — sorry Ariel — I don’t know of any company that is not faced with very serious challenges in today’s business environment. Any business can be out of business the next day if they aren’t integrating the best thinking from every direction. But, please don’t misinterpret what I’m saying. There are times when customers have problems and simply need a solution. A very significant part of your business will always be selling solutions. ‘A’s’ sell solutions when there is a problem to solve. That’s a big part of their income. Unfortunately there are still a lot of price buyers out there. The key point is that the ‘A’ understands buying and can help people buy at all levels.”

Steve switched the conversation back to the demands of the chairman when he said, “Now I think we understand what the chairman meant by *waging peace*. He said it was about conscious choice. I had no clue what he meant. When he asked us to *drive ‘3’* — frankly — I thought he’d lost his marbles. Now, I’m beginning to get it.”

I paused as we were at that moment of awareness when simplicity dawns. “*Transforming a ‘B’ into an ‘A’ is not linear*. We have to *consciously choose* to be an ‘A.’ It is not a natural progression from ‘B’ to ‘A’ — you can’t work a faulty golf swing harder and expect it to become a professional golf swing.”

The room was quiet. It was now nearly midnight and I tried to conclude by saying, “*It is a potential that we all have, but we must allow it to emerge.*”

Steve interrupted and said with some emphasis,

“We need to know how to make ‘B’s’ into ‘A’s.’”

“That can be the topic if we meet again. If we start that conversation now, we’d be here all night. If you have a sense of what waging peace is all about and how the ‘A’s’ facilitate that process, let’s call it a day.”

Alex broke the seriousness of the situation by saying, “I still don’t understand why liquid engineering is not a solution.”

Ariel was just shaking her head. “*Drive ‘3’* and think about your oil rather than your market share — you’ll get it — and that’s waging peace advice. Good night everyone.”

Mark was standing near the door. He shook my hand and said, “That may have ignited my career. Seriously, can a ‘B’ sales manager lead ‘A’s’?”

“The proper leadership is the first requirement in transforming ‘B’s’ into ‘A’s.’ You have enormous potential. *Drive ‘3’* next week and let your ‘A’ emerge.” ☞