

There Are No Short Cuts



When It Comes To **CHANGING** The Sales Organization

BY TOM WENTZ

“Our chairman wants to meet you.
He has a very difficult issue to discuss with you.”



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I had met the chairman 10 years ago. As a part of our simulation process, he was confronted with a four-inch putt, and he nonchalantly knocked it off the green declaring it a “gimme.” If you’ve played golf, you’ve taken a “gimme.” As life in golf goes on, the “gimmes” get longer and longer and sooner or later your opponent doesn’t “gimme” you that two-footer and the club championship is lost. *It’s like selling. Sooner or later that long-standing customer doesn’t “gimme” you the business, and the account is lost.*

The amazing reality of the “gimme” putting phenomenon is that we stop practicing the “gimme” length putts on the practice green. It becomes very instinctive to just take those “inside the leather” putts. It is the friendly game of “that’s good.”

Anyway, the chairman wanted to see me again, and I was anxious to understand his issue.

After a short recap of the past 10 years, we got down to business. He started by saying, “We now own 14 companies. All 14 are by almost every measure successful. We manufacture some of the world’s finest products

and offer services that are second to none. We sell through direct and indirect sales channels that are very talented and technically competent. Our salespeople are telling us that our customers want something “different” from us today — something that we can’t provide and something that we don’t understand.

“When we listen to our customers, we hear the story about “different.” But, there is a gap between what our salespeople tell us and what we hear from the customers. The salespeople say it is something about our products and services. The customers tell us it is about relationships. They want us to help them go to the next level and it is not about product features. It is about how we do business with them.

“We’ve responded to both sides of the story. We’ve activated hundreds of change initiatives in almost every aspect of our business and the customers are still not satisfied.”

Avoid the Short Cuts

There was silence. He was very reflective. I could tell this was a big issue for him. He continued: “I owe

much of our success to that ‘gimme’ putt experience. When I came back from that leadership experience, I realized that I was instinctively taking the short putts. I realized that it was not about the length of the putt rather how I as a leader might be perceived as condoning cheating. On that day we were supposed to play by USGA Rules, and as you so rudely reminded me, I was cheating. Fortunately, he laughed and said, “That experience taught me that our people could be doing the same thing, taking short cuts when our customers might see it as cheating.

“It was true. We instituted a fierce attention-to-detail initiative and we uncovered a lot of little things that were beginning to really aggravate our customers.

He paused and went silent again. “Paying attention to detail in our Six Sigma process really helped streamline many things, yet the uneasiness within our customers continued.

“I then realized that I had people in leadership and sales positions who had not had the ‘gimme’ putt experience. You remember Ron, our sales guy who tried to kill you on the



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ninth hole? (I risk my life many times in the simulation) “Yes.” “Well he was a changed man after the simulation for about three months. Then he reverted back to his old behavior and eventually he quit.”

Ron was a two handicap player and admitted he didn’t want to be at the simulation. He knew how to play golf and was bored with the thought of playing with beginners. He was determined to prove to everyone how good a golfer he was. In the end his skills didn’t matter as the success of the total group in the simulation came down to the ability of the least skilled players. He was furious when I told him his score didn’t matter.

“Everyone has heard my speech about the ‘gimme’ putt many times. People think I’m accusing them of cheating. All of our attention-to-detail work has been beneficial, but it has not taken us to the next level.”

He paused with an exhausted sigh. We talked for another half-hour about the situation. He was very concerned about the customer feedback he was getting and didn’t know what it really meant to be “different.”

“Things can’t remain the same. We aren’t getting better. On a scale of 1–10 our customer satisfaction ratings have been a ‘7’ for a long time. I can’t give the ‘gimme’ putt speech again. They flinch every time I give it.”

He paused. The silence was very meaningful so I waited.

Waging Peace

“John, my manufacturing manager, who you know, suggested that I

read the three articles you’ve written in *Agency Sales* magazine. In your last article you talked about another simulation — a way of being “different” again. You suggest that we *stop the war and wage peace*. We are ‘at war’ with the competition every day. I don’t know what it means to ‘wage peace.’ Every day our purchasing people tell me about the battles with our vendors.”

He stopped and just shook his head as if nothing painted a picture of peace for him. There was silence. He then said, “Your turn.”

The chairman is experiencing the exhaustion of the oscillating game of “either-or.” We hear it on television every night from the right and the left. Politicians promise, if elected to go to Washington and fight for their constituents. It never resolves to anything “different.”

I suggested, “Your sales guy, Ron, was a warrior. He was in a battle with Ariel, his customer service manager, every day. It came to a head on the ninth hole that day at the simulation.

“When people and companies who are at war lose their enemy, they don’t know what to do. Many people live their entire life in an at-war state. They don’t know how to have a relationship with another person that is not based on conflict. They manipulate the conflict every day in order to control the other person. This is likely what your purchasing people are doing with your vendors.

“This is the biggest issue in new account development. Salespeople will go see an existing customer

where they know there are problems to solve rather than call on a new customer who is happy with their current supplier. They don’t know what to say or do when there are no problems to solve. They also know that it’s no fun going to see a new purchasing guy.

“The dreadful mistake is when a customer denies having problems, many sales approaches suggest that the salesperson ‘elevate pain’ in order to cause the customer to want to buy.”

He quickly interrupted, asking, “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. It isn’t wrong, but to the customer the salesperson becomes the cause of the problem and that puts the salesperson and the customer at war. This is likely the source of some relationship tension with your customers. It is very invisible as problem solvers mean well, but they are always against something. They can get very defensive if customers will not acknowledge the pain.”

Salespeople as Problem Solvers

I paused to let that thought sink in. I could see it rambling around in his mind. He then said, “Our reps are great problem solvers. Our direct sales offices are great problem solvers. We’ve conducted extensive sales training in selling solutions. Do you mean this is wrong?”

“No. The emergency ward at the hospital is open every night and the people are very well trained. But it is likely this at-war orientation that is holding you back. People are never completely satisfied at the emergency

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ward. It is keeping you chained to the 7-level of customer satisfaction. You’ll never get to the next level with a problem solving orientation. The next level is ‘at peace.’”

He looked at me with that “I-don’t-get-it” type of stare. “You’re telling me we’d need to wage peace to get to the next level?”

I am always respectful of the awareness (not intelligence) of my audience, and in this case it was obvious that he had been very contemplative of the situation that confronted his organization. I asked if I could be fairly direct and not be perceived as confronting his intelligence. I reminded him of our confrontation about the “gimme” putt. He laughed and relaxed.

I told him, “First of all, your ‘gimme’ putt speeches don’t work because adults who are at war don’t stop fighting by being told to stop. They probably think that you are accusing them of cheating. Fighting can’t be stopped with speeches against fighting.

“Next, many of your customers today are executing a real-time business model, and they can’t afford to have problems. They can’t afford the conflict that comes from the salespeople who are out selling solutions to problems that they can’t afford to have. Customers don’t have time to hear about nor do they care about how your solutions are better than the competition’s. They need relationships with people who are focused on creating peace. Wellness is peaceful. Real-time systems can’t be allowed to get sick.

“Finally, as my first article in *Agency Sales* suggested, the Industrial Age business model is burned-out. Since the recession hit, our entire economy has been walking backward into the future dragging the solutions from the Industrial Age business model that produced our success for 100 years believing that we will arrive at a future time when the solutions will work again. I suspect that many of your customers are getting tired of dragging the baggage, and they don’t want to hear how the problems can be solved. We must understand that nothing fails like success, and it has finally happened.”

He interrupted, saying, “We’ve tried to be innovative in everything we do. Our products contain the latest technology. Our processes are streamlined and lean. Maybe we’ve missed the business model innovation issue?”

He had to go, and I had another appointment. He concluded our meeting by asking, “What is your other simulation about?”

“It’s about business model innovation. You’ll want to kill me again if you get the salesperson role. I’ll let you be the ‘cutter.’ There is no pressure on the cutter.”

He asked, “What does the salesperson do?”

“They take orders and argue with the factories when they can’t deliver what they sold.”

“Sounds too real-life to me. I’ll do the cutter thing.”

It is incredible to work with a person like the chairman. The quest for “different” is real in his mind. For all MANA members “different” is about how you sell not what you sell. If you’ve been successful with how you sell in the past, you must be aware that *nothing fails like success*. We’ll talk more about this important assignment in our next article.

John called the next week. The chairman has a new speech. It’s all about learning to wage peace. He said he doesn’t know how to do that, but we’re going to learn it. 