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## DO SALESPEOPLE HAVE TIME TO LEARN?



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# Addressing underperformance

✎ Bob Apollo

*Underperformance is not just about the individual; it can be a structural issue too.*



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When it comes to sales roles, attitude (and “sales DNA”) is a far more powerful and accurate predictor of future success than experience.

It would be an exceptionally lucky or gifted sales manager who has never had to address the issue of underperformance at some stage in their management career. Sometimes the causes appear to be external – changes in the market environment over which we have little influence or control – but which may nevertheless require us to rethink our focus, priorities, strategies, and tactics.

More often, the causes of underperformance are closer to home, and reflect weaknesses at either the individual or organisational level, and it's these factors that I want to focus on in this article. I plan to start by focusing on underperforming salespeople, but we need to acknowledge that what might at first appear to be a reflection on an individual may in fact be the result of deficiencies in the organisation's systems, structures, and processes.

## Recruiting the right people in the first place

Sometimes, poor individual performance is caused by bad recruitment practice: in hindsight, we should never have hired the individual in the first place, because they were never likely to be a “good fit” for either the role or for our organisational culture. This is a particular risk when organisations are trying to grow rapidly and drop their standards in the process, but it's not restricted to those environments.

It's simply not worth allowing standards to slip – the consequences are too painful – but that implies that we need to have set appropriately high standards in the first place. A key element of setting such high standards is being very clear about the requirements and expectations of the role, and clearly a flowery job description designed to “sell the role” to candidates isn't enough.

Particularly when it comes to sales roles, attitude (and “sales DNA”) is a far more powerful and accurate predictor of future success than experience. That's not to say that relevant experience isn't valuable, but experience without the appropriate attitudes will – sooner or later – manifest itself in performance issues.

Regrettably, CVs and résumés often paper over the cracks. Apparent past successes are no guarantee of future success, particularly in a rapidly changing world, and some salespeople (unfortunately for their future employer) have learned how to perform better at interview than they ever do in front of a prospective customer. There is, in my view, no excuse for not using a sales-specific candidate assessment – such as the ones provided by Objective Management Group – to filter out candidates who lack the required attitudes, behaviours and competencies.

## Addressing individual underperformance

One initial consideration is whether an apparently underperforming (but with otherwise good cultural fit) salesperson has performed at an acceptable level in the past (in which case, what has changed?) or has never been seen as a strong performer. If the former, we need to understand whether this is a reflection on some recent (hopefully temporary) changes in circumstances – in which case, what can we do to help them through it? If the latter, there are likely to be some deeper-seated and possibly more intractable issues.

Systemic individual underperformance (when the majority of their colleagues have been doing well) is often a function of attitude, behaviour, or competence. Or it can at least in part be a management issue: for example, a function of ineffective

territory allocation or unrealistic quota expectations. We need to eliminate the possibility that management decisions may have played their part before we focus on the individual.

Of the three potential individual causes of systemic underperformance, competence or skills shortfalls often turn out to be the easiest to address. Product, industry, and market knowledge, together with core sales skills, can be addressed through appropriate training, which can often also include the organisation's defined sales processes – particularly in the areas of opportunity qualification, pipeline management and forecasting.

As long as they display the desired attitudes and behaviours, managers should also consider whether an otherwise promising individual is in the right role, and whether their talents would be better applied in a different position within the organisation.

## Attitude

But if the underperformance is primarily related to attitude or behavioural issues, training or reassignment rarely offers a resolution. Simply put, the experience of most managers is that inappropriate attitudes or behaviours are far more difficult to address and can only be resolved if the individual acknowledges the issues, recognises the need for change, and is willing to do so.

Imposing a “personal improvement plan” on an underperforming salesperson (often, unfortunately, largely based on increasing the quantity of their activities without also addressing the quality of their actions) is a common, simple, and yet often ineffective response. Unless they have been terminally lazy (which is an attitude problem by itself), just getting them to do more of what wasn't working before isn't going to turn things around.

Successful transformation requires that the individual is prepared to play an active part in the process, which will invariably involve elements of their own personal self-development as well as a programme of coaching and mentoring from their manager. If they are not, then it is probably best to conclude that they will never succeed, and to professionally orchestrate their departure from the organisation.

## Addressing structural underperformance

Underperformance can, obviously, also be structural: related not to any individuals but to the organisation as a whole. Of course, structural issues can also cause salespeople, who might otherwise be able to perform at an acceptable level, to fall below it. Removing these individuals without removing the structural issues simply perpetuates the problem.

A great deal of sales underperformance can be attributed to structural issues. Perhaps the most common are “sales processes” that are either too rigid and inflexible to allow salespeople to apply their initiative or (at the other end of the scale) so loosely defined that they offer no useful guidance at all. Of course, top sales performers get away with not following inappropriate processes because they manage to deliver the results regardless. It's the middle-of-the-roaders that get sucked into following ineffective processes because they don't know any better.

Clear, appropriate, and relevant processes that embed best practice and act as a supporting skeleton rather than a restrictive cage in guiding salespeople provide an essential foundation for consistent performance. Other structural issues – closely related to effective processes – revolve around measuring the wrong things. These ineffective metrics, like a poorly designed performance improvement plan, tend to measure quantity rather than quality. Establishing relevant,

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leading-indicator metrics are another key foundation upon which consistent performance can be built.

Failing to react decisively enough to evolving market trends is another cause of structural underperformance. There is no guarantee that some of the things that worked in the past will continue to work in the future (or even the present, for that matter). Sales organisations (and salespeople) need to continuously reinvent themselves or they will fall behind.

And let's not shy away from another reason for structural underperformance: inadequate sales management. Too many salespeople end up getting promoted to management positions because their figures suggested that they were the top performers, without enough attention being focused on their competencies as a manager or being given appropriate training for the role.

Inadequate management amplifies inadequate processes and denies average salespeople their chance to improve.



## About the author

Bob Apollo is the founder of UK-based Inflexion-Point Strategy Partners, the B2B sales effectiveness experts. Following a successful career spanning start-ups, scale-ups and corporates, Bob now spends his time as a coach and advisor to growth-phase technology-based businesses, equipping them to adopt the principles of Outcome-Centric Selling.