



Building a High-Performing Sales Culture

The 8 Characteristics of Sales Leaders That Make the Difference Between Success and Underperformance

By Michael Smith

The average tenure of a head of sales today is approximately 18 months, one of the shortest durations in history. In large part, this high turnover is driven by an aggressive search for top-line growth. When a sales leader isn't delivering acceptable growth, CEOs are quick to seek someone who looks better able to do so. Roughly a year and a half later they are searching again, leaving many frustrated CEOs grappling with this fundamental question: **How does a sales leader create a high-performing sales culture?**

Clearly, having hard analytical skills is critical. In today's world, you simply can't lead a sales organization well unless you bring to the table certain hard skills. Some of these include:

- Understanding the strategic dimensions of markets (profit pools, segmentation, premium pricing opportunities, etc.)
- High data-centricity and facility with analytics, knowing that sales leadership is more scientific and quantitative than "art"
- Operational skill, including in-depth knowledge of go-to-market models, organizational design, roles/responsibilities, effective establishment of quotas and comp plans, and so on

These are the kinds of traits CEOs should seek in a sales leader as they are essential to effective leadership of a sales organization. Essential—but not sufficient.

It takes a broader set of skills to create a high-performing sales team. The business world is full of companies whose sales leaders are masters of the hard skills, yet they don't have an effective team behind them because they've created an environment in which no one wants to work. So, while the hard skills are necessary, we have found that it is a **sales leader's ability to build a performance-driven sales culture that differentiates great leaders.**

Most sales leaders last less than two years not necessarily because they lack hard skills, but often because they struggle to build an effective and sustainable sales culture in which every

level of the organization is on board, bought in, and excited to be able to work in a challenging, tough, fair environment.

After nearly two decades working with over 500 companies, including hundreds of CEOs and sales leaders around the world, we have found there are eight traits that underlie culture-building and distinguish sales leadership excellence. These eight traits are the difference-makers. In companies where sales leaders possess all eight and drive them down through the sales organization, there is strong revenue growth. In the companies where some of the principles are missing, we see underachievement of growth potential. Here are the eight core principles of sales leadership that drive long-term growth and set superior sales leaders apart from the pack:

8 Traits that Distinguish Sales Leader Excellence



- Professional
- Ethical
- Passionate
- Celebrates Success
- Engaged
- Transparent
- Accountable
- "It's Okay."

1. Professional. Sales is an honorable profession and demands respect. The best leaders view it as such, recognizing career sales people as no different from doctors or lawyers who have built great expertise over the years and who provide an important and necessary skill to the people they serve. These leaders recognize the incredible complexity and nuance of the sales professional's job—and they accord the people in this role great respect, along with the education and support that the profession deserves. This trait is an attitude that starts at the top and should permeate the entire company. Sales leaders who possess it carry themselves as professionals, behave as professionals, treat others as professionals and with respect—and create a culture in which every seller does the same.

2. Ethical. An ethical character is the foundation of professional organizations and relationships, great leadership and outstanding sales cultures. The best leaders are highly ethical and demand the same of every person in their sales organization. They have a deeply ingrained moral compass that guides every interaction. They have a very clear understanding of right and wrong—and they create a sales culture in which the right, ethical choice is viewed as the only choice.

3. Passionate. Great sales leaders bring genuine passion to their organizations—passion for customers and passion for selling—and they instill those cultural pillars within the organization. They lead by example, spending significant time with sellers in front of customers and demonstrating the same excellence in customer service that they expect from the entire team. At the same time, they understand the reality of sales; they know firsthand that the sales profession extracts a huge amount of energy from sellers and they seek to counteract that energy drain by infusing their passion for selling down through the team. This isn't surface-level, rah-rah enthusiasm; it's a deep and authentic excitement to face the challenges of selling every day.

4. **Celebrates Success.** This is all about making the wins count. Everyone appreciates a pat on the back, so great leaders give it. It could be as simple as a hand-written note or a phone call. Or it could be stopping by a seller's desk to give them a literal pat on the back and say, "well done." Or it could be hosting an Oscar Night in which people dress up, bring their spouses and are feted for their wins. Or enthusiastically ringing a cowbell every time someone closes a sale above a certain amount. Great leaders know that the celebration of success breeds more success.
5. **Engaged.** Top sales leaders let their people know they truly care about them by getting to know sellers as individuals through frequent one-on-one interactions. They engage with people, communicating to them their role in advancing the mission of the organization so they feel valued and appreciated as individual contributors. Engagement doesn't stop at the door, either: one sales leader wrote a note to a seller's spouse to say what a good job the sales person was doing. This trait comes from a place of true caring for people and is tough to fabricate.
6. **Transparent.** Come Monday morning, everyone knows exactly how Tom Brady or Stephen Curry performed in the game over the weekend. In the same way, everyone on a sales team should know who is winning and losing in the sales game. Great sales leaders foster a culture of transparency that motivates sellers to succeed, putting pressure on those who aren't performing and recognizing those who are. One highly successful sales leader published individual rankings of sales performance every Sunday night. The list came to be known as the Wall of Shame as no one wanted to find themselves on the bottom. Many organizations find it hard to do this because of push-back from sellers who don't want their numbers visible. But the best sales leaders make a convincing case for transparency and establish a culture in which it is not only accepted but acknowledged as a key driver of performance.
7. **Accountable.** Great sales leaders drive accountability down through the sales organization, making it a core attribute of the sales team that starts at the top and permeates the entire culture. They set expectations, support their people in meeting those expectations and consistently hold people accountable for hitting the established performance targets. Leaders who get results know, as one standout sales leader once put it, that "people will do what you tolerate, not what you preach." Great leaders do not tolerate anything less than meeting expectations—and they do not hesitate to move out people who are unable or unwilling to meet them.
8. **"It's Okay."** The final characteristic of great leaders is one that recognizes that a performance-driven sales organization is challenging and acknowledges that not everyone will make the cut. Excellent leaders create an environment in which sellers know they will work hard and be rewarded for it. But they also know the job is not for everyone and that's okay. When someone isn't a good fit for a sales position, great leaders enable the person

to exit with grace, feeling they were on a great team where they were well supported and respected for their effort. There's a widespread understanding that failure to meet the expectations of a tough sales job doesn't mean someone is personally a failure; simply that the job wasn't a fit for their skill set. And that's okay.

These eight traits are tough to find and tough to measure but they are the whole key to building a high-performing team. Yes, the hard, analytical skills are critical; they are foundational in a sales leader. But they aren't enough to create a sales culture in which people are passionate about coming to work, exceeding goals and helping customers. This is what drives performance and long-term growth. And for that, you need a sales leader with the ability to build a performance-driven sales culture that thrives from top to bottom.

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