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Beyond Passive Resistance: Motivating Salespeople To Adopt Change

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The market constantly changes, and any agile, growth-minded sales organization recognizes the necessity of changing along with it. However, no matter how innovative and effective the projected change may seem, individuals must implement it in order for the initiative to be successful.

Research conducted by both the Sales Benchmark Index and Gallup indicates that individuals fall into three distinct groups when it comes to their attitudes toward change:

- 20 percent of people are early adopters. These are the people who immediately embrace change.
- 60 percent of people are “fence-sitters,” as Greg Alexander, CEO of Sales Benchmark Index, puts it. These individuals resist change in a passive way, neither supporting the change initiative, nor directly acting against it.
- The remaining 20 percent are entrenched in their own methods and will not accept the change.

The reason that such a low percentage of salespeople are willing adopters of change, Alexander says, is that frontline management and executives have not provided a clear link between what the change means for the organization and what it means for the individual. In other words, salespeople wonder: What’s in it for me? And, will the change really stick this time?

Common Mistakes of Changing Sales Organizations

Alexander cites the eight mistakes that companies make when effecting change, as detailed in *Leading Change* by John Kotter :

1. Allowing too much complacency

Avoiding this mistake is crucial, if a sales organization wants to effect change. If an organization has had enough success in the past that it seems that change isn’t necessary the sales force may become complacent. A lack of outside feedback also contributes to this mistake. Benchmark the sales force against competitors instead of against internal history to find out how your organization is doing relative to the market.

“It’s an eye-opening experience to measure success and failure against your peers,” Alexander says. “It either shows that you really are doing well, which inspires confidence—or it demonstrates how much better you could be, which spurs the sales force to action.”

2. Failure to create a sufficiently powerful coalition

If the VP of sales has a vision, rolls it out and simply hopes that people are as passionate about the change initiative as he is, it won’t work. The frontline sales manager must drive change on a day-to-day basis.

The VP of sales should involve frontline managers in the change initiative by demonstrating to them that he’s trying to solve a problem or embrace an opportunity. Alexander recommends that sales leaders engage managers by asking, “If you were me, what would you do?”

3. Underestimating the power of vision

Use this rule of thumb: Whenever you can’t describe your vision in five minutes or less, you’re in for trouble. That means your process is too complex. If the sales force can’t grasp how the change will help them retain and acquire more customers, they’re unlikely to participate in the initiative.

4. Undercommunicating the vision by a factor of 10

Why would anyone change a process that seems to work? People won’t accept change unless they believe the change will truly make a difference. It’s important to explain to the sales force why the change is attainable and quantify for them what the benefit will be if they embrace the change.

5. Permitting obstacles to block the new vision

Alexander suggests that you prevent obstacles and passive resistance by communicating expectations around quantitative measurements that aren’t up for interpretation.

If, for instance, a sales organization were to implement an opportunity management system, sales leadership could use forecast accuracy percentages as a quantitative measurement. The VP of sales could quantify the objective by requiring forecast accuracy to be between plus or minus seven percent after the implementation (when forecast accuracy was between plus or minus 15 percent before the change).

That way, “It’s very clear. You’re either moving toward or away from that quantitative objective.”

6. Failing to create short-term wins

Change is difficult. It doesn't happen overnight, and it can seem to some that no progress is being made at all. "Sales leaders need to promote short-term victories. That allows momentum to build. When you highlight success, it raises the confidence level in the initiative, and those responsible for implementation realize it's attainable."

7. Declaring victory too soon

According to research conducted by Sales Benchmark Index, the average job tenure for a CSO is 19 months. Because they're not in secure positions, many CSOs will launch a change initiative, gather data to show it worked and explain how it's been successful—in an attempt to create job security.

But when that happens, errors and inconsistencies are overlooked. The sales force perceives that they need not adhere strictly to the change initiative and reverts to old habits quickly.

8. Neglecting to anchor changes firmly into culture

Sales Benchmark Index research shows that a change initiative isn't rooted into a company's culture until it has been reinforced, and performance numbers have been consistently delivered, over a period of six quarters.

Alexander recommends that sales leaders make a conscious attempt to show salespeople how specific behaviors and attitudes have improved performance. By making the change something that affects individuals, it becomes something that salespeople will do in their own self-interest. That's how a change initiative stops being something that people resist—and starts being the way things are done.

The Role of Leadership

"It is critically important that the entire C-suite is behind the change initiative," says Alexander, but he goes on to caution that the sales leader shouldn't engage the C-suite prematurely. Organizations that have made unsuccessful attempts to implement change in the past are often wary of new initiatives. Avoid associating a new drive for change with failed programs in the past by being prepared to show a game plan for execution.

The CSO sits in the middle. He has to communicate both downward and horizontally. Sometimes the C-suite is reluctant to get involved. The CSO needs to get his peers to participate by convincing them that the mission—

critical component of the company is the acquisition of customers—and that this change initiative will drive that result.

The CSO must also work to communicate his vision completely and concisely, and get frontline sales managers on board, since they are ultimately accountable for propelling the process. Work with sales managers to define success and the way it will be incrementally measured over time up front: "Those that are responsible for executing the change must have come up with that definition. That way, they'll have to look in the mirror instead of pointing fingers."

When individual salespeople see that leadership is behind this initiative—from the top of the totem pole down to their immediate manager—it can act as the impetus for passive resisters to adopt change.

Real Life: Embracing the Change

People move the process and people are ultimately responsible for the success of the process. A successful change initiative begins with people—and building a coalition of leaders to help move the process.

Technology can also play a role, as a tool to automate the process. "If the process is tough to do, it's tough to get it adopted," Alexander explains. When technology eases transition pains, it can act as a boon to process adoption.

But, even if organizations have followed all of the guidelines and enabled the sales team to embrace change, results often aren't seen immediately, which can cause frustration. That's where data and metrics come into play.

Determine the basis of your objectives as you create them. Augment marketing data with customer feedback from the sales department to come up with metrics that are grounded in reality. For example, if the marketing department needs to determine the right promotional plan for a new product, it should confer with sales to attain real-life reactions to past product promotions. That feedback, combined with measurements from past promotions, will help determine which method will be most successful.

Alexander says, "If you're effectively benchmarking yourself, you'll understand what your capabilities are. Analyze past product releases, for example, to set objectives and see if your change initiative is having a positive effect, however incremental, on your current product release."

The Good, the Bad and the In-between

Sales leaders can take another step to make sure everyone is on board by positively reinforcing the good eggs—those 20 percent who adopt the process early—and by removing those who have demonstrated they won't change.

Sales leaders need to work within the process to keep the good eggs in early-adoption mode—and prevent them from falling into the 60 percent who passively resist change. Rewarding early adopters defends against a future change-weary attitude. Passive resistance is often borne of failing to see the results of too many change initiatives.

As Alexander says, “Show the ‘fence-sitters’ that they should emulate the behavior of the early adopters by highlighting and rewarding them when they have a success as a result of the new process.

“And, if you ask the bottom 20 percent—people who won't change—to leave, the middle 60 percent will realize there's equal consequence for not getting behind the initiative.”

When sales leadership displays commitment and demonstrates to the sales team that change will positively affect them as individuals, it will make a difference. A successful change initiative avoids common pitfalls—particularly tolerating complacency and permitting obstacles—measures progress, creates accountability for individual salespeople as well as frontline management, and encourages executive sponsorship.

About Miller Heiman

Miller Heiman has been a thought leader and innovator in the sales arena for almost thirty years, helping clients worldwide win high-value complex deals, grow key accounts and build winning sales organizations.

The company is headquartered in Reno, Nevada and has offices around the world. More information can be obtained by visiting the company's website at: www.millerheiman.com.