

# No, You Don't Have a Sales Culture

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“We have a sales culture.” This is one of those things that CEOs say that is not always true. Not that they are lying, mind you, but they often confuse *sales training* with having *successful sales training*. The CEO funded a sales training program and concludes that now the company has a sales culture.

The sales training process often fails, resulting in a great discrepancy between executive hopes and company reality. I knew this was common but didn't understand why until I heard a story from my associate who concentrates on sales issues, Kathy Maixner.



Kathy's client was a financial services company. Before she was brought in, the tellers had been through sales training. The reality was that sales were no better after the training than before. Kathy was the next consultant brought in, but this time the results were far better. Two elements of her process led to that success.

Front-line transaction processors do not want to be sales people. They do not view the job as a stepping stone to a sales career. They see themselves as helpful people with a penchant for orderliness. They would rather take care of a customer than sell the customer a product. A typical sales training effort fights the personality of the tellers, trying to make them into people that they don't want to be.

Kathy picked up on the nurturing personality of the tellers and developed a way to help them be helpful to customers. “You are helping a customer if you help her get a better interest rate on a car loan than she would get at the dealership,” she explained. “You are helping a customer if he gets the certificate of deposit that lets him sleep well at night.” Was this sales training? You bet it was. Did it feel like sales training? Not at all. It began with their the employees' self-image and then used that self-image to meet the company's goals.

The second key to success is repetition. Telling a person to make a change has a very short success period. We quickly forget and revert to our old ways. Kathy developed a program to reinforce initial training. She also trained the management team on how to reinforce the training that Kathy had earlier provided.

The result is that this firm has one of the best sales cultures in the business—but the tellers don't think they are selling. They think they are just being helpful.

The specific personality evaluation of this project is not the right approach for all situations, of course. It would not work for engineers who go out on sales calls. They would need a training approach that fits their own self-image and values.

The repetition, however, is the right approach all the time. Too often a company wants a training program (whether sales or customer service or teamwork) that occurs once and then works for all time. That is unrealistic. Instead, a structured program of repetition and management reinforcement is needed for any successful change.

Kathy's insight carries over to our other work. When I help a company with strategic planning, it's valuable for me to keep checking in on the leadership's action steps, or the benefits of the plan are lost. We don't want to move into a client's offices, but we want the client to be successful, which requires . . . may I repeat myself? . . . repetition.

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