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What Makes a Good Salesman

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More than 35 years ago, the insurance industry embarked on an intensive program to solve the problem of costly, wasteful turnover among its agents. Estimates at that time indicated that there was a turnover of better than 50% within the first year and almost 80% within the first three years. After the expenditure of millions of dollars and 35 years of research, the turnover in the insurance industry remains approximately 50% within the first year and 80% within the first three years.

What is the cost of this turnover? Nearly incalculable. Consider:

- the substantial sums paid new salesmen as salary, draw on commission, expense accounts, and so on, which are wasted when those salesmen fail to sell;
- the staggering company costs, in time, money, and energy, of recruiting, selecting, training, and supervising men who inherently do not have the ability to succeed; and
- the vast costs caused by lost sales, drop-outs, reduced company reputation, poor morale, permanently burned territory, and the like.

What accounts for this expensive inefficiency? Basically this: Companies have simply not known what makes one man able to sell and another not. As Robert N. McMurry has observed:

A very high proportion of those engaged in selling cannot sell....If American sales efficiency is to be maximized and the appalling waste of money and manpower which exists today is to be minimized, a constructive analysis must be made of what selling really is and how its effectiveness can be enhanced....We must look a good deal further—into the mysteries of personality and psychology—if we want real answers.¹

It was the obvious need for a better method of sales selection that led us to embark on seven years of field research in this area. The article that follows is based on the insights we gained as to the basic characteristics necessary for a salesman to be able to sell successfully. Confirming the fact that we are on the right track is the predictive power of the selection instrument (battery of tests) that we developed

out of the same research; see the exhibit “How Well an Instrument Measuring Empathy and Ego Drive Predicted Sales Success.”

Two Essentials

Our basic theory is that a good salesman must have at least two basic qualities: empathy and ego drive.

Ability to feel. *Empathy*, the important central ability to feel as the other fellow does in order to be able to sell him a product or service, must be possessed in large measure. Having empathy does not necessarily mean being sympathetic. One can know what the other fellow feels without agreeing with that feeling. But a salesman simply cannot sell well without the invaluable and irreplaceable ability to get a powerful feedback from the client through empathy.

A parallel might be drawn in this connection between the old antiaircraft weapons and the new heat-attracted missiles. With the old type of ballistic weapon, the gunner would take aim at an airplane, correcting as best he could for windage and driftage, and then fire. If the shell missed by just a few inches because of a slight error in calculation or because the plane took evasive action, the miss might just as well have been by hundreds of yards for all the good it did.

This is the salesman with poor empathy. He aims at the target as best he can and proceeds along his sales track; but if his target—the customer—fails to perform as predicted, the sale is missed.

On the other hand, the new missiles, if they are anywhere near the target, become attracted to the heat of the target’s engine, and regardless of its evasive action, they finally home in and hit their mark.

This is the salesman with good empathy. He senses the reactions of the customer and is able to adjust to these reactions. He is not simply bound by a prepared sales track, but he functions in terms of the real interaction between himself and the customer. Sensing what the customer is feeling, he is able to change pace, double back on his track, and make whatever creative modifications might be necessary to home in on the target and close the sale.

Need to conquer. The second of the basic qualities absolutely needed by a good salesman is a particular kind of *ego drive* that makes him want and need to make the sale in

a personal or ego way, not merely for the money to be gained. His feeling must be that he *has* to make the sale; the customer is there to help him fulfill his personal need. In effect, to the top salesman, the sale—the conquest—provides a powerful means of enhancing his ego. His self-picture improves dramatically by virtue of conquest and diminishes with failure.

Because of the nature of all selling, the salesman will fail to sell more often than he will succeed. Thus, since failure tends to diminish his self-picture, his ego cannot be so weak that the poor self-picture continues for too long a time. Rather, the failure must act as a trigger—as a motivation toward greater efforts—that with success will bring the ego enhancement he seeks. A subtle balance must be found between (a) an ego partially weakened in precisely the right way to need a great deal of enhancement (the sale) and (b) an ego sufficiently strong to be motivated by failure but not to be shattered by it.

The salesman’s empathy, coupled with his intense ego drive, enables him to home in on the target effectively and make the sale. He has the drive, the need to make the sale, and his empathy gives him the connecting tool with which to do it.

Synergistic Effects

In this discussion of the relationship of empathy and ego drive to successful selling, we will treat these dynamic factors as separate characteristics. Indeed, they are separate in that someone can have a great deal of empathy and any level of ego drive—extremely strong to extremely weak. Someone with poor empathy can also have any level of ego drive. Yet, as determinants of sales ability, empathy and ego drive act on and, in fact, reinforce each other.

The person with strong ego drive has maximum motivation to fully utilize whatever empathy he possesses. Needing the sale, he is not likely to let his empathy spill over and become sympathy. His ego need for the conquest is not likely to allow him to side with the customer; instead, it spurs him on to use his knowledge of the customer fully to make the sale.

On the other hand, the person with little or no ego drive is hardly likely to use his empathy in a persuasive manner. He understands people and may know perfectly well what things he might say to close the sale effectively, but his understanding is apt to become sympathy.

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If he does not need the conquest, his very knowledge of the real needs of the potential customer may tell him that the customer in fact should not buy. Since he does not need the sale in an inner personal sense, he then may not persuade the customer to buy. So we frequently say in our evaluations of potential

salesmen, “This man has fine empathy, but he is not likely to use it persuasively—he will not use it to close.”

Thus, there is a dynamic relationship between empathy and ego drive. It takes a combination of the two, each working to reinforce the other—each enabling the other to be fully

How Well an Instrument Measuring Empathy and Ego Drive Predicted Sales Success

Number of men predicted for each group*		Data at end of (months)	Actual sales performance (number of men who reached each quarter of sales force)				Quit or fired
			Top half		Bottom half		
			Top/quarter	2nd/quarter	3rd/quarter	Bottom/quarter	
IN THE RETAIL AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY							
A	34	6 mos.	17	13	1	0	3
		18	19	9	0	0	6
B	49	6	9	23	8	2	7
		18	10	19	8	0	12
C	60	6	0	9	20	14	17
		18	0	2	21	8	29
D	52	6	0	0	10	18	24
		18	0	0	9	7	36
IN THE INSURANCE INDUSTRY							
A	22	6 mos.	13	4	1	0	4
		14	13	4	0	0	5
B	55	6	7	23	11	2	12
		14	11	20	7	1	16
C	56	6	1	5	19	12	19
		14	1	4	11	5	35
D	48	6	0	0	4	10	34
		14	0	0	3	4	41
IN THE MUTUAL FUNDS INDUSTRY							
A	11	6 mos.	5	4	1	0	1
B	20	6	4	9	3	0	4
C	49	6	0	4	15	12	18
D	34	6	0	1	7	10	16

* Predictions made on basis of test, without seeing men or any records:

A means outstanding, top potential as a salesman, almost certain to succeed with high productivity.

B means recommended, good productivity, and can sometimes be designated as developable into an A.

C means not recommended, even though a C can under the right circumstances edge into becoming a low B.

D means absolutely not recommended; the applicant concerned has virtually no possibility of success.

utilized—to make the successful salesman.

Need for balance. It calls for a very special, balanced ego to need the sale intensely and yet allow the salesman to look closely at the customer and fully benefit from an empathic perception of the customer's reactions and needs.

Thus, there are a number of possible permutations of empathy and drive. A man may have a high degree of both empathy and drive (*ED*), or little of either (*ed*), or two kinds of combinations in between (*Ed* and *eD*). For example:

ED—A salesman who has a great deal of both empathy and strong inner sales drive will be at or near the top of the sales force.

Ed—A salesman with fine empathy but too little drive may be a splendid person but will be unable to close his deals effectively. This is the “nice guy.” Everyone likes him, and from all appearances he should turn out to be one of the best men on the force. He somehow “doesn’t make it.” People end up liking him but buying from the company down the street. He is often hired because he does have such fine personal qualities. Yet his closing ability is weak. He will get along with the customer, understand him, and bring him near the close; but he does not have that inner hunger to move the customer that final one foot to the actual sale. It is this last element of the sale—the close—that empathy alone cannot achieve and where the assertive quality of ego drive becomes the all-important essential.

eD—A salesman with much drive but too little empathy will bulldoze his way through to some sales, but he will miss a great many and will hurt his employer through his lack of understanding of people.

ed—A salesman without much empathy or drive should not actually be a salesman, although a great many present salesmen fall into this group. An employer would avoid much grief by finding this out in advance, before so much effort is spent in trying to hire, train, and spoon-feed a man who does not have within him the basic dynamics to be successful.

Failure of Tests

Since the selection of top salesmen is potentially of such enormous value, why, it might be asked, has there been so little success to date in developing methods to preselect effectively?

For at least 50 years, psychologists have been working very hard in the area of test-

ing. Almost every aspect of human personality, behavior, attitude, and ability has at one time or another come under the scrutiny of the tester. There have been some notable successes in testing, most especially perhaps in the IQ and mechanical-ability areas. Of late, personality testing, especially with the increasing use of projective techniques, has gained a certain level of sophistication. The area which has been to date most barren of real scientific success has been aptitude testing, where the aptitude consists of personality dynamics rather than simple mechanical abilities.

Four reasons. The ability to sell, an exceedingly human and totally nonmechanical aptitude, has resisted attempts to measure it effectively. The reasons for this failure up until now are many, but there appear to be four basic causes for sales aptitude test failure.

1. *Tests have been looking for interest, not ability.* The concept that a man's interest is equatable to his ability is perhaps the single largest cause of test failure. Thus, tests have been developed through asking questions of successful salesmen or successful people in other fields, with the assumption that if an applicant expresses the same kind of interest pattern as an established salesman, he too will be a successful salesman.

This assumption is wrong on its face. Psychologically, interest does not equal aptitude. Even if someone is interested in exactly the same specific things as Mickey Mantle or Willie Mays, this of course does not in any way indicate the possession of a similar baseball skill. Equally, the fact that an individual might have the same interest pattern as a successful salesman does not mean that he can sell. Even if he wants to sell, it does not mean that he *can* sell.

2. *Tests have been eminently “fakable.”* When an individual is applying for a job, he obviously will attempt to tell the potential employer whatever he thinks the employer wants to hear. Given a certain amount of intelligence, the applicant will know that he should say he would “rather be a salesman than a librarian,” regardless of his real preference. He knows that he should say he would “rather be with people than at home reading a good book,” that he “prefers talking to a PTA group to listening to good music,” or that he would “rather lead a group discussion than be a forest ranger.”

Many psychological tests screen out the really top producers because of their creativity, impulsiveness, or originality—characteristics that most tests downgrade as strangeness or weakness.

There are manuals on the market on how to beat sales aptitude tests, but, even without such a manual, the average intelligent person can quickly see what is sought and then give the tester what the tester wants. Thus, the tests may simply succeed in negatively screening those who are so unintelligent that they are unable to see the particular response pattern sought. In other words, since they are too dull to fake, they may be screened out. The perceptive interviewer, however, is likely to notice this kind of stupidity even more quickly than the tests do, and he can probably do a better job of this negative screening than the average fakable test.

3. *Tests have favored group conformity, not individual creativity.* Recent critics of psychological testing decry the testers who are seeking conformity and the standardized ways in which they judge applicants for sales and other occupations. This criticism is all too valid. The creative thinker, the impulsive free spirit, the original, imaginative, hard-driving individual is often screened out by tests that demand rigid adherence to convention—an adherence, in fact, that borders on a passive acceptance of authority, a fear of anything that might in any way upset the applecart of bureaucratic order. Paradoxically, this fearful, cautious, authoritarian conformist, although he might make a good civil servant, or even a fair controller or paperwork administrative executive, would never make a successful salesman.

Many of these tests not only fail to select good salesmen, but they may actually screen out the really top producers because of their creativity, impulsiveness, or originality—characteristics that most tests downgrade as strangeness or weakness. We discovered a situation of this type recently in working with a client: A company in the Southwest embarked on an intensive recruiting effort for salesmen. We began receiving the tests of a number of applicants. These tests all appeared to follow a certain pattern. The men were not quite recommendable, and all for about the same reason—a definite lack of ego drive. For the most part, they had some empathy, and without exception they had good verbal ability, but none had the intense inner need for the sale that we look for in a productive salesman.

After about 20 such tests came through our office, we questioned the sales manager as to

what criteria he was using for screening the men who took the test. We found that before he gave the applicants our test, he had them take the sales aptitude test that had been developed by his company some years before. Those men who scored high on that test were given our test.

We had previously analyzed that company's test and found it to be a fairly good verbal abilities measure, and to some extent a measure of intelligence and insight. Men with strong ego drive could not as a rule score near the top of that test. And so the very men with the quality we were seeking—strong ego drive—were actually screened out. We then asked the sales manager not to use that test but to screen only for credit reference and general appearance, and to give our test to those who passed this simple screening. After that we began seeing the expected number of "A" and "B" recommendable applicants—about one man in every five.

4. *Tests have tried to isolate fractional traits rather than to reveal the whole dynamics of the man.* Most personality and aptitude tests are totally traitological in their construction and approach. They see personality as a series or "bundle" of piecemeal traits. Thus, someone may be high in "sociability" while being low in "self-sufficiency" and "dominance." Someone else may be high in "personal relations" but low in "cooperativeness." Somehow, the whole (or the gestalt) gets lost. The dynamic interaction that is personality, as viewed by most modern-day psychologists, is buried in a series of fractionalized, mathematically separable traits.

Thus, it is said that the salesman, somewhat like the Boy Scout, should be very "sociable," "dominant," "friendly," "responsible," "honest," and "loyal." The totality—the dynamics within the person that will permit him to sell successfully—is really lost sight of. Clearly, someone may be "sociable," "responsible," and so on, but still be a very poor salesman.

In our research we attempted to bypass traits and to go directly to the central dynamics that we believed were basic to sales ability: empathy and ego drive. By seeking these deeper, more central, characteristics, we immediately reduced the possibility of faking, since the respondent would find it extremely difficult to determine what *in fact* was being sought. Needless to say, the importance of in-

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terest as a variable has been reduced sharply, and the conformity factor has been completely subordinated to the basic central characteristics being measured. Thus, rather than starting with the question, “How do salesmen collectively answer certain items?” we began with the question, “What makes a really fine salesman?” and then, “How do you discover these human characteristics?”

This use of central dynamics rather than traits, with its corollary implications, has produced what we believe to be a positive method of predicting sales success that is advanced beyond what has been done to date.

Fallacy of Experience

Many sales executives feel that the type of selling in their industry (and even in their particular company) is somehow completely special and unique. This is true to an extent. There is no question that a data-processing equipment salesman needs somewhat different training and background than does an automobile salesman. Differences in requirements are obvious, and whether or not the applicant meets the special qualifications for a particular job can easily be seen in the applicant’s biography or readily measured. What is not so easily seen, however, are the basic sales dynamics we have been discussing, which permit an individual to sell successfully, almost regardless of what he is selling.

To date, we have gained experience with more than 7,000 salesmen of tangibles as well as intangibles, in wholesale as well as retail selling, big-ticket and little-ticket items. And the dynamics of success remain approximately the same in all cases. Sales ability is fundamental, more so than the product being sold. Long before he comes to know the product, mostly during his childhood and growing-up experience, the future successful salesman is developing the human qualities essential for selling. Thus, when emphasis is placed on experience, and experience counts more than such essentials as empathy and drive, what is accomplished can only be called the *inbreeding of mediocrity*.

We have found that the experienced person who is pirated from a competitor is most often piratable simply because he is not succeeding well with that competitor. He feels that somehow he can magically do better with the new company. This is rarely true. He

remains what he is, mediocre, or worse. What companies need is a greater willingness to seek individuals with basic sales potential in the general marketplace. Experience is more or less easily gained, but real sales ability is not at all so easily gained.

Among butchers, coal miners, steelworkers, and even the unemployed there are many—perhaps *one in ten*—who, whether they themselves know it or not, possess the ability to be an A, top-producing salesman; and at least one in five would be on a B or better level for most types of selling. Many of these are potentially far better salesmen than some who have accumulated many years of experience. The case of “Big Jim,” as we shall call him, is a good example: All we knew about Jim at first was that he had walked into the showroom of one of our automobile clients in response to its ad and had taken our test. We reported that he was the only A in the group, and strongly recommended that he be hired. There was shocked silence at the other end of the telephone. We were then told that his test had been included as a joke.

As it was described to us, he had ambled into the showroom one morning wearing dungarees, an old polo shirt, and sneakers. He had then gone on to proclaim, “I sure do hanker to sell them there cars.” The dealer had included his test just to get a laugh, or perhaps to see if we were sufficiently alert to weed him out. The man had never sold a car or anything else in his life and had neither the appearance nor the background that would indicate that he ever could sell anything.

Today he is one of the dealer’s best salesmen. Soon after he started working, he “hankered to see that there Seattle World’s Fair” and sold enough cars in the first week of the month to give him money to get there and spend two weeks. On his return he made enough money in the last week of the month to equal the staff’s monthly average.

Obviously, most men down from the hills wearing dungarees and sneakers are not going to be top salesmen. Some, however, may be, and their lack of experience in no way reduces the possibility that they have the inner dynamics of which fine top producers are made. It is equally obvious that a great many men who present a fine appearance, a “good front,” do not turn out to be top salesmen. The real question—and always the first

question—is, “Does this man have the basic inner dynamics to sell successfully?”

Background blindness. Putting emphasis on experience often works in another way to reduce sales effectiveness. A company grows used to seeing its men in various job “slots,” in certain departments, limited to special kinds of experience. Such men may be doing a satisfactory job where they are. But it frequently happens that the blind habit of “special experience” has kept the company from using the man in a more effective and appropriate way. For instance: A western company in the leasing business wanted us to evaluate a branch employing 42 men to determine why there had been a mediocre level of sales activity, why there had been some difficulties among the men, and whether some of the 42 should possibly be let go. After looking at the test of each person, we did an “X-ray” of the branch; that is, following the table of organization, we evaluated the staff, department by department, especially in terms of who was working with, over, and under whom, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of each department.

Virtually all the men on the staff were found to be worth keeping on, but a good third were suggested for job shifts to other departments. Thus, the person with greatest sales ability, together with a great deal of managerial ability (by no means the same thing), was found in the accounting department. But that job did not completely satisfy him. He has since become the new branch sales manager, a more appropriate use of his considerable abilities.

One of the older men, though rated an adequate B salesman, was evaluated as an A office manager. He had good empathy, but not the strongest ego drive, which was why he was a B rather than an A salesman. But on the managerial side, he had the ability to handle details, relatively rare for a salesperson; he was able to delegate authority and make decisions fairly rapidly and well. These qualities, plus his good empathy, gave him excellent potential as a manager, but not as sales manager, for his only moderate drive would have hurt him in the latter position. As office administrative manager, the position he was moved up into, he has performed solidly.

The former office administrative manager, a man well able to handle details reliably and

responsibly, but with little empathy (and thus unable to deal understandingly with his office staff), was moved laterally into the accounting department, an area in which he had had some previous experience, and where he could carefully deal with and manage details rather than people.

Thus, what counts more than experience is the man’s basic inner abilities. Each present employee, as well as each new applicant, should be placed in the area where he can be most creative and productive.

Role of Training

The steelworker, the coal miner, the displaced textile worker, or for that matter even “Big Jim,” regardless of how much real sales ability each possesses, cannot suddenly start selling insurance, mutual funds, electronics equipment, or automobiles. Each one will need training. Companies have spent very large sums of money in developing effective training programs. When they are working with a man with potential, these training programs can and do bring out this potential and develop an excellent salesman. Without sound training, even A-level salesmen are seriously limited.

Yet how often have men gone through long and expensive training programs only to fail totally when put out into the field? When this happens, the trainer, and perhaps the training program itself, is blamed and sometimes even discarded. But most often it is neither the trainer nor the training program that is at fault; rather, it is the fact that they were given the impossible task of turning a sow’s ear into a silk purse. The most skilled diamond polisher, given a piece of coal, can only succeed in creating a highly polished piece of coal; but given the roughest type of uncut diamond, he can indeed turn it into the most precious stone. Here is a case in point: About three years ago, a company in the Northeast installed an especially fine training program, in which a great deal of money was invested. At the end of two years, the results of this program were appraised. It was found that sales had not increased beyond what might normally be expected in that industry during that period of time. The investment in the training program seemed to have been a total waste. The entire training program was therefore dropped. Six months later, we were asked by

management to test and evaluate the present sales force and to try to determine why the training program, so highly recommended, had failed so badly.

The reason was immediately apparent. Out of a sales force of 18 men, there was only one rating A, and his sales actually had improved after the training program. Two others were B-level salesmen, and they too had improved to some extent with training. The remaining 15 men were “C” and “D” salesmen who should not have been selling in the first place. They simply did not have the potential of good salespeople. They were rigid, opinionated, and for the most part seriously lacking in empathy. This type of man rarely responds to training, no matter how thoroughgoing the program. This was an obvious case of trying to make silk purses out of 15 assorted sow’s ears.

The role of training is clear. It is vital. In today’s highly competitive market it is most important to bring every employee up to his maximum potential of productivity. Efficiency in training, using the best of modern methods, is necessary to do this. But training can succeed only if selection succeeds. Good raw silk must be provided first, before the training department can be expected to produce the silk purses. Just as few manufacturers would allow their products to be produced on the basis of rough estimates of size and weight, but would demand scientific control of these basic characteristics, so too must the process of selection be made more scientific and accurate.

The role of the salesman is so vital to the success of a company that it is amazing to these writers how little stress industry has placed on selecting the best raw material. To sell effectively in the U.S. market of today, a

salesman needs to have empathy. To sell effectively in the foreign market, crossing cultural lines, requires even more empathy. And marketing goods and services anywhere calls for a great deal of ego drive. The U.S. Department of Commerce recently stated that American industry has no problem with its production. Its main problem is distribution. Effective salesmen are the key to distribution, and proper selection is the key to finding, using, and profiting from salesmen of good quality.

• • •

Industry must improve its ability to select top salesmen. Failure to date has stemmed from such errors as the belief that interest equals aptitude; the fakability of aptitude tests; the crippling emphasis on conformity rather than creativity; and the subdivision of a man into piecemeal traits, rather than understanding him as a whole person. Experience appears to be less important than a man’s possession of the two central characteristics of empathy and ego drive, which he must have to permit him to sell successfully. Training can only succeed when the raw material is present.

Selecting men with empathy and ego drive should contribute in some degree to helping industry meet one of its most pressing problems: reducing the high cost of turnover and selecting genuinely better salesmen.

1. Robert N. McMurry, “The Mystique of Super-Salesmanship,” HBR March–April 1961.

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