



Improving Performance for the Lab Salesperson: Is It Possible?

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Charles Darwin once noted that it is not the strong that survive but those who are most adaptive to change. The irony exists — everyone *wants* progress, but nobody seems to want to change behavior! Change remains hard for both individuals *and* organizations. This paper examines the truths behind making lifelong improvements in sales performance for field personnel.

Human nature endures in a rather peculiar fashion. The public knows that to get into shape and lead a healthy life, you need to eat the right foods in the correct proportions and exercise vigorously every day. However, so few people abide by it. Why *wouldn't* we all want to follow this simple precept? Herein lies the answer: it resides in the fact that people do not express the will to put in the requisite work! It takes practice, time and personal *will* to do the right thing day after day.

Trying to improve sales performance usually will fail if it relies on the simple transfer of knowledge. Sitting in a classroom for a couple of days or more may feel “educational”, but it takes far more to create permanent behavior changes. Let us look at four fundamental truisms about change.

I. People do not change easily

Simply talk to an exercise coach, a prison reformer, a psychotherapist, or a nutritionist about behavior modification. Each one will tell you that human nature makes acquiring new habits a difficult challenge. There rests two basic reasons the general population does not embrace change easily.

1. The *law of first knowledge* dictates and prevents most people from adapting new ideas or concepts. *First knowledge* equates to the most powerful combatant of change. People assume that what they initially learned equals the best, equals truth – and equals the right way to do something. To change requires hard, diligent work — and most of us survive in a fundamentally lazy state.
2. The majority of individuals do not want to sweat for excellence. Most people rest comfortably with the status quo and being “average.” Successful people continually seek improvement and spend their time “sweating.” They

do not mind leaving their comfort zone and modifying their routine. It does not happen that we try things and they *don't* work; it happens that we don't try them because they're *hard*.

II. Adults learn in context

People must contextualize a new subject within their own framework in order to internalize it. For those learning sales in the lab industry, this reasoning describes why sales training by a "generic" sales trainer tends to make learning more challenging—and less effective. The audience forces itself to draw their own conclusions, "translate" into their respective business and work hard at contextualizing the taught concepts. If a trainer understands lab acronyms, billing, test names, methods, compliance, and creates real-life experiences within the sales methods, the attendees can follow and appreciate the training far more efficiently — and, thus, become more productive.

It remains important—critically important—that salespeople seeking improvement create a clear vision between taught skills and the relevancy of those skills to their day-to-day job. Sales reps should provide feedback in a classroom setting and work out potential (or historical) examples of introductions, excuses, questioning techniques, presentations, closing and so forth. You need hands-on experience in order to see why it matters that you learn the new behaviors taught in class. The classroom resides as a "safe" environment. Putting learned concepts into context prevails best in the classroom as opposed to fumbling in front of clients.

III. To progress means practicing and receiving feedback

One cannot find a substitute for practice, repetition and reinforcement. Period. Ed Macauley, the famed NBA Hall of Famer, once said, "When you do not practice, someone, somewhere, practices; and when you meet him, he will win." This clearly transcribes into *practice equals the root of gain*. Oh, sure, one can say that some people have innate abilities and raw talent. For example, athletes like Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretsky and Willie Mays did not reach their pinnacle status by loafing around, simply depending on their "natural talent." Regardless of the biology, nobody can improve in his/her chosen field without practice.

OK, so we know that practice remains important. However, practice does not transpose into excellence *unless* you receive feedback. If you hit golf balls for several hours there rests a strong likelihood you could perform something a little better with your swing, despite the time you put into whacking the ball. Perhaps your backswing, follow through, grip or stance needs adjustment. Everyone, including Tiger Woods, requires coaching. We simply cannot see ourselves in action. Having an experienced manager embodies an excellent solution. If the situation calls for no internal resource, hiring an outside expert can provide invaluable feedback and potential improvement. Unfortunately, those independent labs and hospital outreach programs devoid of experienced sales managerial oversight continue with the status quo, and upper management hopes, wishes and expects their field staff to improve on their own. The definition of strategy does not contain the word *hope!*

Bottom line: salespeople need to practice things such as what questions to ask, what are good problem questions, how to ask implication questions, examples of solution-based questions, how to recognize an excuse, objection or condition, and how to

categorize benefits into political, financial, strategic and operational buckets. Practicing on your own and then trying it with a coach provides the fundamental component to gain progress. It takes more than one time. It calls for repetition, with feedback.

IV. Change does not occur immediately

You need some form of metrics to see how far you have come within a certain timeline. Progress equates to incremental steps — you have to be patient. People who attend weight-loss clinic programs know this component of change very well. They have a built-in system of rewards and consequences. If you lose weight, everyone claps and cheers; if you gain weight, everyone knows you cheated and you become embarrassed. This explains why these centers endure so successfully — because peer-pressure provides the feedback and the motivation to modify behavior. The subject of sales acts similarly, albeit coming from a different angle. As the manager posts the sales numbers each month, people see if you “gain”, stay the same or “lose” according to the sales budget. Employees/managers congratulate you if you gain, but may remain taciturn or even admonish if you maintain or lose sales vis a vis your budget.

Measurement prevails as king. Keep track of things like:

1. How many sales calls did you make this week?
2. Did you close any new business?
3. How many problem questions did you ask your prospects today?
4. How many implication questions did you ask today?
5. How many solution-based questions did you ask today?
6. How many objections (or excuses or conditions) did you receive this week?
7. What was the ratio of continuations to advances this week?

If some of these metrics seem foreign to you, create your own. The point remains, tabulating your improvement over time sits atop the mountain if you want to see evidence of successful behavior.

Summary

Improving performance on a permanent basis demands more than the simple transfer of knowledge. It depends upon willpower to conquer the natural tendencies of psychological biases. It involves dedication and perseverance. It commands practice, feedback and — most importantly — measurement. If you persist, you will enter the gates of effectiveness and, eventually, see positive results.

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