

» PARTNERING: ALL TALK – FEW WALK

The desire to drive collaboration among partners in an organization is by no means a cutting-edge concept. The business case surrounding customer growth and retention (selling more products to customers, making leaving difficult) is the lifeblood of any successful sales organization. For years organizations have struggled to execute a collaborative strategy. False starts, wasted efforts, and failed progress are everywhere. Why?

Adjusting office structure and modifying compensation are common tactics associated with partnering strategies. Once in place, individuals are expected to work together for the good of the customer and the organization. Salespeople are paid more for placing their partner's products or involving partners in the customer relationship. While the logic behind these approaches appears sound, disconnect exists with the human element. Unfortunate as it may be, people do not naturally work together for each other's best interests. Salespeople avoid the perceived risk of losing control of the customer relationship in a partnering situation - even when the possibility of increased compensation is the reward.

This phenomenon exists within any situation where people are to partner or team for the collective good. You can look at "teams" in such divergent places as sports, politics, families, or work environments. Whichever your team, the four fundamentals below must be implemented for individuals to experience quality partnering - and walk the talk.

Fundamental One: Understand, align with, and commit to the activities which must be done well at the customer interface and with the internal partner's salespeople. People cannot begin to execute what they do not know or understand - nor can a manager coach activities they are unaware exist or need execution. It's amazing how many times an organization lacks clarity. Comments such as "share customers" or "work together" are miles away from providing clear direction and clear expectations.

Fundamental Two: Understand, align with, and commit to the activities management must do with their peers in the partner organization. In a collaborative strategy, each level needs to model partnering. If any one level of management, in words or body language, decides not to work closely with his/her peers, the next level quickly figures out they probably don't need to collaborate either. Often times when managers discuss partnering, the discussion usually ends up revolving around how the other has not met expectations, kept commitments, or missed goals. Avoiding this inevitable event before it starts is critical.

The ability to form a productive, trustworthy partnership requires accountability to three critical success factors. If you miss any of these three, partnerships suffer:

- Set and gain alignment to mutual goals versus dictating to each other the goals they want the other to meet.
- Maintain quality communication such as:
 - Updates on results.
 - Updates on individual salespeople.
 - Discussions about what's working and what needs to change.

- o Discussions about what each commits to doing given his/her management role.
- Determine how to resolve problems which arise.

The absence of this type of one-on-one collaboration often results in excuses and finger pointing. When failure is the result - which it usually is - it can lead to a lack of trust, diminished credibility, and disrespect among partners.

Fundamental Three: Coach each level to execute the agreed upon partnering sales activities. While the coaching activities a manager must do remain constant when partnering is the goal, the content changes completely. Sounds simple enough, but this can prove difficult. Here's why:

- Consider the challenge of setting expectations of working with others who may or may not execute well, lack mutual respect and trust, and display no knowledge of the value each other brings to the customer.
- Ponder the hurdle of gaining buy-in to partnering activities which may or may not generate short or long-term success for the customer or the salesperson, depending on how the partner responds.
- Change the way managers inspect the sales activities by identifying collaborative activities and analyzing what is being done well or needs improvement.
- Understand feedback can no longer focus on how interactions go with customers/prospects over needs the salesperson can address. The feedback now must encompass:
 - o Identification of needs for partner products.
 - o Positioning of value to the customer/prospect to meet a partner.
 - o Transitioning the customer/prospect to the partner.
 - o Ensuring the partner productively meets the expectations set with the customer.
 - o Successfully works with the customer so a successful customer/prospect experience occurs with all winning.

Most managers fail to take the time to determine what needs to change in their coaching. They continue coaching as they did in the past, expecting a different outcome - one that never materializes.

Fundamental Four: Surround the organization with the right people, people who are team oriented in nature. This is a long-term critical success factor. Although many people can learn how to become more cooperative and open to the idea of sharing customers, others can not. It is vitally important to hire people with a team mindset for the entire organization to perform at a higher level of execution.

Make no mistake about it, adopting a partnering strategy is challenging to implement and difficult to sustain. All levels of management need to be intimately involved in modeling and executing collaborative behaviors. Rest assured the payoff is lucrative. With the four fundamentals of successful partnering in place, you can be confident you are outperforming the competition, building a high-performing team, and achieving breakthrough sales results.