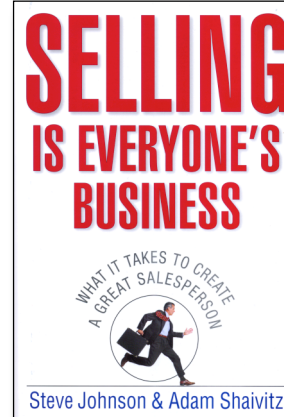


For Immediate Release

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**Breaking the Weak Link:****Nine Steps for Moving Bad Salespeople up . . . or Out**

You know low performers hurt your sales organization, but you're not sure how to deal with them. Steve Johnson, co-author of a best-selling new book for sales coaches, offers some practical (and proven) insights.

Hoboken, NJ (May 2006)—Every sales organization has at least one. A salesperson who consistently fails to meet his numbers, or goofs off on the Net when he's supposed to be calling, or makes lots of appointments but can't seem to close anything. *Low performers*. If you're a sales manager, these "weak links" are no doubt making you (and everyone else) miserable. There's always one who seems to keep you wringing your hands—but for a variety of reasons you keep giving him one more chance.

It's time to crack down on your low performer *du jour*, says Steve Johnson, co-author of *Selling Is Everyone's Business: What It Takes to Create a Great Salesperson* (Wiley, 2006, ISBN: 0-471-77673-4, \$24.95). Dealing with him or her may not be pleasant, but it's far better than the alternative.

"First of all, low performers drive away high performers," points out Johnson. "Great salespeople don't want to work in an environment where mediocrity is allowed to exist. Second, they eat away at your coaching time. Third, they infect everyone else's attitude and mental capacity. Low performers pollute the sales culture and can actually bring down overall performance."

Of course, we all know *in theory* that it's not a good idea to let untalented and/or unmotivated people slide. But when theory meets reality, we balk. We don't know what to say, when to say it, or how to follow up . . . so too often we do nothing.

Fortunately, Johnson has created a step-by-step system for dealing with low performers, based on his experience working with thousands of sales teams and coaches:

- **Make sure you have a strong bench at all times.** Obviously, this part of the system is ongoing. If you have, say, five strong candidates in the pipeline, you don't have to endure a low performer. If you have no bench, you will probably feel that it's better to keep a warm body around, even if that body hasn't sold anything in weeks. "It's all about leverage," says Johnson. "Never lose sight of The ABR Principle—Always Be Recruiting."

- **Prepare for the worst. Decide ahead of time when you're going to cut bait.** Understand up front: turnover is not necessarily bad. There *will* be some low performers and you don't want to keep them around any longer than 60 to 90 days. Besides, says Johnson, firing weak links is akin to the old canary in the mineshaft technique. Their demise warns others that they're in a dangerous situation, thus staving off complacency. Bottom line? If you don't know the procedure already, check with HR to see what you need to do to start documenting and forging your paper trail.

- **Go into your first "low performer" meeting armed with concrete data.** Naturally, this step presupposes that you're doing your homework all along. You need to know exactly where the low performer stands in terms of sales numbers. If she's bringing in 30 percent less revenue than the next-lowest-performing colleague, you need to have that statistic pinned down ahead of time. Incidentally, *Selling Is Everyone's Business* prescribes regular use of a public scoreboard. Not only does it spark healthy competition, it lets people know where they stand at all times. "Ideally, her bottom-of-the-totem-pole status should come as no surprise to your low performer," notes Johnson.

- **In the initial meeting, ask some basic open-ended questions.** *I see that your numbers are _____: why do you think your performance is so low? Where have your challenges been lately? What made you come to work here? What has changed since then? What are your personal goals?* "From his answers to these questions, you should be able to determine whether the person simply isn't good at the job or whether he is good at the job and just isn't doing enough," says Johnson. "You should be able to tell whether the problem is SKILL or WILL. And that will determine your next step."

- **If it's a SKILL issue, set up practice situations.** Let the salesperson spend time working with top performers. Schedule a one-on-one training session with her or do some "coaching in the crunch." Send her to a training event. (The book provides plenty of details about the training process and the various forms it can take.) You might find that a little coaching goes a long way and that your low performer rises to the occasion. If not, at least you gave her a chance.

• **If it's a WILL issue, work with the low performer to set up a plan.** It may be that your low performer has a closing ratio of 50 percent—which is actually very good—but is making an abysmally low number of appointments. Perhaps he's sleeping until 10:00 every day or running a lot of personal errands during work hours. Be direct with the salesperson that his laziness or lack of focus will not be tolerated. Work with him to create a “shape up” plan . . . making it clear that if he doesn't, he'll soon be “shipping out.”

• **Either way, use hard numbers. Collaborate with the salesperson to set specific goals she must meet.** Whether your low performer is dropping the ball due to SKILL issues or WILL issues, she must have a concrete goal to work toward. Focus on things the person can control: say, 50 cold calls by Wednesday of next week. Make sure she feels confident that she can meet the goal (though be sure it's not too easy for her; you want her to feel a bit challenged). Finally, put the action plan in writing and both of you—coach *and* salesperson—sign the document. (The book has a template you can use.) “The signatures serve as an extra layer of accountability for both of you,” notes Johnson.

• **Hold regular GSMs with the low performer.** GSM stands for “Goal-Setting Meeting,” and it's a consistent, scheduled one-on-one meeting between salesperson and coach in which the duo reviews performance from the previous period and creates and commits to a game plan and short-term action steps for the upcoming period. (Ideally, you should be holding GSMs with all your salespeople, but they are especially critical for low performers.) As with the initial meeting, have the low performer sign off on the agreed-upon goals. Between meetings, check in constantly, making liberal use of what Johnson calls *the three magic words*: “How's it going?” “GSMs combined with constant follow-up is some very, very close management and it will drive a low performer either up or out,” he promises.

• **If you must fire the low performer, here's what to say.** When you have determined that it's time for your low performer to go—after giving him a chance and holding numerous, well-documented GSMs—it's time to bite the bullet. Confront the situation head on and tell the low performer the truth. You might say something like: *We're trying to build a culture of high performance here and you aren't living up to our standards. You have consistently failed to hit your goals. I believe you can be very successful doing something else, but this company is not the right fit for you.*

Finally, be aware that you need to get comfortable with confronting people on poor performance. You cannot be a sales coach *and* a conflict avoider. Besides, Johnson points out, you need to realize that when someone truly is failing at selling you're not doing him a favor by letting him coast along.

“The fact that someone isn't suited for your company doesn't mean he's a bad person,” he points out. “I mean, just because someone can't play golf doesn't mean he can't be a brilliant concert pianist. By not freeing him to move on to his next stage, you're hurting him as well as yourself. You really can help people out by helping them *out*—so don't put it off any longer.”

About Steve Johnson:

Steve Johnson is one of the most dynamic leaders in the sales and service arena. He is co-author of the 15 times *Los Angeles Times* and Amazon.com bestseller *If You're Not Out Selling, You're Being Out Sold*.

Steve has been working with clients to increase their sales and service efforts for over 19 years as a salesman, sales manager, sales coach, and sales trainer. In his first 10 years in sales, Steve was a top award winner for one of the largest sales training companies in the world. He was recognized as being in the top 1 percent of a worldwide 1,000-person sales force. Steve has been on over 5,000 face-to-face sales calls and has dialed the phone over 150,000 times to schedule appointments, follow-up, and close sales. He is a top achieving expert in the trenches and knows how to coach others to become top achievers.

Steve has developed and implemented hundreds of selling programs for clients such as Morgan Stanley, Countrywide Financial, UBS Financial Services, A.G. Edwards & Sons, Inc., RBC Dain Rauscher, Piper Jaffray, and Enterprise Rent-A-Car. Over 50,000 sales people have gone through many of the different workshops that Steve has created for clients.

Steve lives in Manhattan Beach, California, with his wife, Elisa, and two children, Matthew and Anna.

About the Book:

Selling Is Everyone's Business: What It Takes to Create a Great Salesperson (Wiley, 2006, ISBN: 0-471-77673-4, \$24.95) is available at bookstores nationwide, major online booksellers, or direct from the publisher by calling 800-225-5945. In Canada, call 800-567-4797.

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