THE ROLE OF OPTIMISM TOWARD BUILDING A STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE IN A SALES FORCE

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Understanding optimism and how to recruit and develop a sales force that has a high degree of it can be a decisive strategic advantage that every organization should strive to build. This paper defines optimism and explicates its components. We describe why optimism is desirable to individuals, organizations and the sales force, and finally explain how a sales manager can foster greater optimism among existing members of the sales force.

INTRODUCTION

What determines success, and how can a sales manager build and develop a sales team that succeeds? With the prospect of failure overshadowing success many times over, sales is not an occupation for the ill-prepared, weak-willed or downtrodden. Telephone hang-ups and doors slamming in one's face are not easy things to overcome when one earns a living by selling. Working in this daunting landscape, certain people excel in sales while others fail miserably.

Answers to these concerns lie in research conducted within the realm of basic human psychology. As postulated by Seligman, the three most basic determinants of success are *aptitude, motivation and optimism* (Seligman 1991). In brief terms, aptitude is the ability and knowledge needed to perform the task at hand, motivation is the desire to perform the task, and optimism is the belief that the task will be performed successfully. Intuitively, all three must be present for a high degree of success to exist.

The first two of these components have generated mountains of research and applications over the decades, which have lead to a greater understanding of how to attract and develop people with greater aptitude and motivation. However, doing the same for optimism is a relatively new concept that has begun to migrate to the business world.

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Understanding optimism and how to recruit and develop a sales force that has a high degree of it can be a decisive strategic advantage that every organization should strive to build. The goal of this paper is to define optimism and explicate its components, show why optimism is desirable to individuals, organizations and the sales force, and explain how a sales manager can foster greater optimism among existing members of the sales force.

Optimism Defined

Optimism is the result of a strong mixture of affective, emotional and cognitive processes that leads to an individual's outlook about the future. These processes develop under the influence of genetic and environmental factors. In its most basic essence, optimism can be defined as an individual's belief that the future will have more favorable than unfavorable aspects, while pessimism expects more unfavorable occurrences.

Philosophers and academicians going back to ancient Greece have examined the concept of optimism. Interestingly enough, it was once cast in a negative light as having characteristics similar to delusions and even obsessions. In more recent times, however, optimism has been explored for its beneficial influences on individuals' behaviors (Peterson 2000). Cognitive psychology has explored optimism extensively and views it as the thought processes individuals have when evaluating their prospects for success. From a social learning theory perspective, optimism can be seen in the same light as self-efficacy. That is to say that an individual will view his or her abilities in three dimensions: magnitude, strength and generality. Magnitude applies to how great of a difficulty that person can overcome, strength refers to how long one continues to think positively about oneself during a difficult challenge, and generality is the degree to which that person applies that perception of self-efficacy to other areas (Bandura 1977; Rich 1999).

Charles Carver and Michael Scheier introduced the concept of dispositional optimism, which they view as a personality variable affecting how individuals pursue goals. In their view, everything can be seen in terms of how goals regulate actions. If an individual believes the obstacles standing before his or her goal are surmountable, that person is an optimist. Conversely, if that person views the obstacles as insurmountable, that person is a pessimist. Therefore, optimism will lead to individuals continuing their efforts to achieve the goal and pessimism will lead to them ceasing their efforts (Carver and Scheier 1999; Peterson 2000).

On the tails of this perspective, Seligman and a number of collaborating researchers introduced the concept of *explanatory style*. This perspective of optimism focuses on the internal thought processes an individual uses to explain the causes of good and bad events (Seligman 1991; Peterson 2000). Seligman originated this perspective through his work on learned helplessness, which is the condition of people believing they have no control over their environment. Therefore they stop trying to achieve objectives. Wanting to understand why about 1/3 of test subjects continued to try achieving their objective in spite of evidence showing they had no control, Seligman (1991) launched into a study of optimism.

According to the explanatory style, the three dimensions of optimism are permanence, pervasiveness and personalization:1) Permanence refers to how a person views the duration of the causes of events. An optimist would view the cause of a good event as permanent and a bad event as temporary, while the pessimist would view it vice versa. 2) Pervasiveness focuses on how far reaching the cause of an event is in terms of other aspects of that individual's life. An optimist would view the cause of a good event as being universal and a bad event as specific to that situation, while the pessimist would view it vice versa. 3) Finally, personalization deals with the degree to which an individual attributes the cause of an event to themselves or to the external environment. An optimist would view his or her influence on good events as high and bad events as low, while a pessimist would view it vice versa (Seligman 1991).

As this theory has been challenged and explored, permanence and pervasisveness have stood their ground while the personalization component has become less of an interest to researchers. This is because this dimension is less correlated, less reliable and theoretical grounds exist for questioning its impact on expectations (Peterson 2000). Nevertheless, the explanatory style remains a central theory to optimism.

Measuring Optimism

In addition to their models of optimism, Carver and Scheier (1999) and Seligman (1991) have produced instruments to measure optimism. Carver and Scheier created the Life Orientation Test (LOT), which measures optimism versus pessimism through a brief self-report questionnaire. The questions contained in the test have the respondent agree or disagree with statements regarding how that person expects different general situations to turn out (Peterson 2000).

Seligman and his colleagues have created two related tests to measure optimism from the explanatory style perspective. The first is called the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ) and also uses a self-report method. It presents respondents with hypothetical events involving that individual and asks that person to choose the singular main cause of each event if it were to happen. The respondents than are instructed to rate the provided causes in terms of permanence, pervasiveness and personalization (Seligman 1991).

The second method, Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations (CAVE), was developed to measure optimism in individuals who are unable to take the ASQ, namely historical figures, and for other after-the-fact situations. The CAVE method examines written and spoken material to determine that individual's casual explanations. Researchers extract statements, usually through blind techniques, that are relevant, and score them according to permanence, pervasiveness and personalization (Seligman 1991; Peterson 2000).

The Benefits of Optimism

In the face of adversity, optimism becomes the wellspring of success. Research shows that optimism leads to the desirable characteristics of happiness, perseverance, achievement and health. In spite of obstacles placed between an individual and the desired outcome, optimism gives that person the determination to continue to use their aptitude and motivation in pursuit of the ultimate objective. That determination and perseverance leads to optimism becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy for success.

Studies conducted throughout the world over the past two decades have shown that optimism leads to increased motivation, greater achievement in many different settings, and elevated mood and well-being (Schulman 1999). These studies showed that optimists contract fewer infectious illnesses than pessimists, are more likely to overcome depression, make fewer visits to the doctor and are less likely to die from coronary heart disease. Looking specifically at patients recovering from heart bypass surgery, one study showed that those patients who were more optimistic secreted more of the beneficial enzyme AST during surgery and had higher recovery rates - using data recording speed of regaining the ability to sit up in bed and to walk around the room (Schulman 1999).

Outside the realm of health, optimism has been consistently shown to be a determinant for success in many types of situations. Optimism can predict performance of nationally ranked college swimmers, college grades and dropping out of political elections between candidates exhibiting different levels of optimism (Seligman 1991; Schulman 1999). There are numerous other examples.

Flexible Optimism

Before pessimism is sacrificed on the altar of optimism, one must realize that optimism is not a panacea. Rather, going back to the three determinants of success, it is only one component. One must also realize that pessimism does have its place in the world, since those measured to be more pessimistic do have a better assessment of reality. Studies have shown that pessimists accurately measured their control over lighting a light regardless of how much control they actually had. Optimists, on the other hand, tended to overrate their influence when their actual control was little or non-existent (Seligman 1991). Therefore, one could surmise that when optimism is tempered by an appropriate degree of pessimism, an individual can achieve greater objectives that are more realistic and less foolhardy. This is exactly what Seligman recommends when he advocates the benefits of *flexible optimism*, which is the application of optimism relative to the situation (1991).

Studies have shown optimists regularly formulate expectations that are pragmatic, not reckless. One such study showed that smokers who had high degrees of optimism viewed their health in the future as less promising than non-smokers. However, they did view their future health as more promising than fellow smokers. In addition, the study showed that optimists who indulged in activities that are associated with acquiring AIDS understood they were more likely to acquire AIDS than those who did not take such actions. These same optimists, as could be predicted, believed they were less likely to acquire AIDS than those who participated in the same risky behaviors (Armor and Taylor 1998).

What this study and related studies illustrate is that optimism is applied in reasonable and realistic terms allowing the optimist to reap the benefits of his or her bright expectations for the future. While some may view optimism as dangerously close to pollyannaism, the research shows that optimists do ground themselves in realistic expectations leading to greater success without endangering themselves with impossible assumptions (Armor and Taylor 1998).

The Benefits of Optimism in the Sales Force

While the aforementioned studies are interesting academic findings, a wide body of related research about optimism's role in sales drives home its importance within sales management. When Seligman began to apply his research on optimism to the business world, he discovered a strong relationship between optimism and sales success.

In their landmark study involving Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, Seligman found that optimistic salespeople sold 35 percent more insurance over a two-year period than did pessimists. Additionally, the pessimists were twice as likely to quit their jobs than the optimists at the end of their first year of employment (Seligman 1991). Subsequent studies have shown that this relationship exists for salespeople in a wide variety of industries, including telecommunications, real estate, office products, auto sales, and banking. Overall, optimists outsold pessimists by twenty to forty percent (Schulman 1999). As Schulman stated, "Optimism has an impact on sales productivity regardless of the industry, whenever persistence is required to overcome adversity. The ability to bounce back from frequent failure appears to be the exception rather than the rule, which is one of the reasons why the best twenty percent of a sales force typically brings in about eighty percent of a company's revenue. Salespeople have higher optimism (on average) than any other group we have tested - higher than managers and higher even than world class athletes. Optimistic expectations appear to be an important part of what it takes to succeed in high stress positions like sales (1999, 34)."

Optimistic salespeople have been shown to add great value to the culture and working relationships within their organizations. Beyond the success they achieve in their in-role responsibilities, optimists perform important extra-role responsibilities that are essential to the success of sales organizations. These extra-role actions, termed Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs), are those that are not directly related to an individual's job description, but nonetheless strengthen the organization's performance. These OCBs include altruism, courtesy, sportsmanship, conscientiousness and civic virtue (Organ 1988; Rich 1999). The importance of OCBs in the sales environment was shown by Podsakoff and MacKenzie in their study that found the sales volume productivity of that group rose as a sales group generated more OCBs (1994; Rich 1999).

In a subsequent study, Rich focused on two OCBs, helping (altruism and courtesy combined) and sportsmanship. He defined helping as "discretionary behaviors that have the effect of helping a specific other person with an organizationally relevant task, and/or that are aimed at preventing work-related problems with others from occurring" (Rich 1999, 56), and sportsmanship as "willingness of the employee to tolerate less than ideal circumstances without ...complaining, ...railing against real or imagined slights, and making federal cases out of small potatoes (Organ 1988, 4)" (Rich 1999, 56). These behaviors are desirable to a sales organization, because an individual exhibiting helping behaviors could assist a new employee learn about important aspects of the job so that he or she may perform at a better level in a quicker time period. And an individual with higher sportsmanship could tolerate trivial matters and not divert his or her sales manager's energies away from more productive matters in order to resolve these minor problems (Rich 1999).

Along with OCBs, optimists have also been found to exhibit different, more effective coping strategies as compared to pessimists. Coping strategies are those actions taken by an individual to deal with stressful situations. With the high stress environment of sales, which is caused by high role ambiguity and time spent as boundary spanners, sales people are continually faced with decisions regarding coping strategies. Two general coping strategies exist: problem-based and emotion-focused. The former is driven by the goal of removing or circumventing stress sources, while the latter focuses on attempting to reduce or eliminate the emotional distress associated with the stressful situation. While both strategies may occur at the same time, generally they are exclusive of each other (Strutton and Lumpkin 1993).

In examining the coping strategies chosen by salespeople who were measured for optimism, Strutton and Lumpkin (1993) found that, "When facing their particular sales stressors, optimists were observed to be more likely to engage in careful, experiential based analysis and to strengthen their efforts aimed at removing the stressor (the use of directed problem solving). Optimistic salespeople were also more likely to attempt to readjust and reshape themselves for the better as a consequence of their stressful encounters (the use of positive interpretation). Optimists were less likely to engage in reckless or risky coping tactics (the use of confrontive coping), while being more likely to act with restraint (using self-control)."

By contrast, pessimistic salespeople demonstrated a greater tendency to excessively attend to their own emotional woes. Pessimistic salesperson were more likely to pull back from the stressful situation, and to do so in a manner that would probably prove harmful to their performance or to their position within the organization (using self-indulgent escapism and negative avoidance) (Strutton and Lumpkin 1993, 85). In further support of this finding, another study found that optimists were more likely to use positive reinterpretation when confronted by a negative outcome. That is to say that they attempt to learn from the experience and grow as a person because of it (Sujan 1999).

Through an extension of this research, it has been postulated that optimistic salespeople are also more adaptable to their customers, supervisors and support staff because of their use of learning and performance goals. One study found that learning and performance goals lead to greater adaptability when accompanied by self-efficacy. Since optimism is a generalized form of self-efficacy, the postulate surmises that optimism will lead to greater adability for salespeople (Sujan 1999).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SALES MANAGERS

With the strong evidence linking optimism to greater success for individuals and, therefore, for their sales organizations, what are the implications for sales managers? The obvious answer is that sales managers should strive to raise the optimism amongst their salespeople. This can be accomplished through two avenues: hiring strong optimists and developing optimism in existing salespeople.

Hiring or selecting the most optimistic candidates can be easily accomplished through the use of the previously mentioned measuring instruments, like the LOT or ASQ. Used in conjunction with other hiring processes, these measurement tests will sift the optimists from the pessimists so that the organization will hire those people more capable of producing greater sales and more likely to stay with the company. After convincing Metropolitan Life Insurance Company to use the ASQ in place of the accepted industry salesperson exam for a segment of their new hires, Seligman showed that the salespeople who scored as high optimists and tested below the traditional cut-off point on the industry test outperformed those salespeople who scored very well on the industry test yet tested as pessimists on the ASQ. Shortly after that demonstration, Met Life enacted a two-pronged hiring strategy to expand its sales force to help reclaim revenue it had lost. First, they hired those who scored as very high optimists yet failed the industry test and second, did not hire those who scored as pessimists even if they passed the industry test. Through this strategy, Met Life greatly expanded its sales force using more optimists and subsequently reasserted its sales dominance by achieving a market share greater than 50 percent (Seligman 1991).

While it has been proven that hiring optimists is an effective strategy for sales managers, can a sales manager actually alter the optimistic or pessimistic tendencies of those salespeople already on staff? With the highly complex mixture of genetic, emotional and cognitive influences leading to an individual's outlook, one may conclude that optimism is an innate trait that cannot be altered. However, research has consistently shown that optimism is an ability that can be learned. To understand the process of increasing an individual's optimism, one must first understand the theoretical constructs involving emotional contagion and cognitive therapy.

Emotional Contagion

Scientists observing human behavior have long noticed that people have the "tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person's and, consequently, to converge emotionally" (Hatfield et al. 1994). Looking at optimism from the perspective that it is at least partially an emotional disposition, one could extend this theory to surmise that an individual would be susceptible to contracting optimism by being exposed to individuals who are optimistic.

At first, researchers theorized that conscious reasoning, analysis, and imagination were the causes that lead people to share emotions with the people surrounding them. However, researchers generally agree now that emotional contagion is "far too subtle, automatic, quick, and ubiquitous to be accounted for by such process" and therefore resides at a primal part of the mind (Doherty et al. 1995, 355). The theory of emotional contagion states that (a) people tend to automatically and continuously mimic and synchronize their movements with facial expressions, voices, postures, movements, and instrumental behaviors of others; (b) subjective emotional experiences are being affected, moment to moment, by the activation and/or feedback from such mimicry; and (c) consequently, people tend to 'catch' others' emotions, moment to moment" (Doherty et al. 1995, 356).

Emotional contagion has been shown to exist within the parent-child, patient-client, colleague-colleague, husband-wife, person-person relationships throughout different time periods and cultures (Hatfield et al. 1994). Through their research, Doherty and his colleagues found that emotional contagion is influenced by gender and occupational differences. Their findings stated that women tended to have more susceptibility than men and that newcomers to a profession were more susceptible than established workers (Doherty et al. 1995).

Emotional Contagion within the Business World

Fortunately, emotional contagion is a topic that has been researched from different angles, including in the contexts of business and sales. With the high interpersonal interaction of the sales environment, researchers have explored how emotional contagion affects salespeople. Scientific inquiry has lead to the proof of what common knowledge has professed for a long time: sales performance rises when an individual as the ability to infect others with his or her emotions and to be sensitive to the other's emotions. However, this combination walks a fine line between high performance and burnout if the salespeople are exposed to high degrees of negative environments and customers (Verbeke 1997; McBane 1995). McBane (1995) found that these at-risk salespeople could overcome this challenge by employing a combination of empathy toward the other person and controlling behaviors to steer the others toward positive actions and thoughts. That is to say, salespeople need to understand the other's emotions, such as a customer's anger caused by an order not being met, while still exercising control over the interpersonal interactions, like suggesting alternatives to alleviate the problem instead of dwelling on the emotions.

A more direct question of how emotional contagion is related to this academic exploration would be: can optimism be contracted as an emotional contagion? While intuitively one could surmise that the emotional theory contagion would support the notion, a search of the academic journals could not find any research studies that explored this question in depth. One study did, however, broach the topic, albeit from a sample of leader-member relationships that had existed only for a three month period. The researchers involved surmised that while the data did not show a strong correlation on a leader's optimism, there did exist a high enough level of correlation to suggest that given a longer period of interaction, optimism could be shown to be contagious in the leader-member relationship (Wunderley et al. 1998).

Learned Optimism

While optimism appears to hold promise as an emotional contagion, one could not realistically expect to convince skeptics to throw an entire business model into that promise. However, when added to the solid research within cognitive psychology, namely Seligman and his associates who have shown that optimism is a learned trait, a competent observer would conclude that optimism can be developed within a person, and therefore in the sales force.

In the clinical environment, cognitive therapy/training, which is teaching individuals new ways of thinking, has proved effective in changing pessimism and helping individuals overcome self-defeating beliefs. In addition, since even optimists have moments of pessimism, cognitive therapy/training can be very helpful for those possessing a high degree of optimism (Schulman 1999).

The whole concept of cognitive therapy/training is predicated on trying to change the automatic internal voice in the individual's mind. Unconsciously throughout every waking moment, this internal voice is assessing the possibilities of the future and reasons for past events. It is either saying good things will happen or bad things will. It also is analyzing the causes of good and bad events.

As Schulman summarized, the whole approach of cognitive therapy/training uses three general steps: identifying self-defeating beliefs, gathering evidence to debunk these beliefs, and replacing them with more constructive and accurate beliefs (Schulman 1999). In a more specific application of this concept, Seligman (1991) took the ABC (adversity faced, beliefs about the adversity and consequences perceived) model developed by Ellis (1973) and extended it to include two more steps. Seligman (1991) added "D" for disputing and de-catastrophizing, i.e., conclusively demonstrating that the task at hand is not impossible (others have done it) and explaining that, at minimum, inability in one arena does not translate into inability in all. Schulman recommends to focus on these fundamental questions: 1) What is the evidence that supports this explanation? Most events have more than one cause, so what are the alternative explanations that could fit the evidence? It is more useful to focus on the causes that can be controlled rather than wasting energy on the causes that cannot be controlled. 2) Even if the pessimistic explanation is correct, what are the implications of this? That is, what is the worst case scenario of the explanation? 3) What is the best or most likely consequence? 4) If the evidence is unclear, what is a more constructive way to explain this event? 5) Whether or not the belief is accurate, how useful is it to dwell on this belief right now? (Schulman 1999, 35)

Once these beliefs are reconstructed into an optimistic fashion, it is important for the individual to begin to plan and execute actions needed to overcome the adversity. This conclusion comes from Seligman's research into learned helplessness and depression, which observed that pessimistic people tend to ruminate at a higher frequency while optimistic people choose to focus on planning and executing the actions they view as necessary to succeed (Seligman 1991). By adding this to the ABCD model, those employing the model could enhance their efforts to foster optimism.

Placing this technique into the sales organization, let us say that the adversity facing a salesperson is that he has been unsuccessful at cold calls for an entire week. His belief may be that colds calls are impossible and that he is a complete failure at sales. The potential consequences of these beliefs are that he becomes discouraged, loses motivation, quits trying cold calls and eventually stops producing at an acceptable level of sales (Schulman 1999). Those are not exactly the results any sales manager would like to see.

Using what has been discussed earlier, these results can be avoided and better results can actually be achieved. A sales manager could work one-on-one with the salesperson to examine his sitution. The sales manager could point out that cold calls are one of the toughest tasks to accomplish in sales. Making fifty calls usually nets five people interested out of which only one is likely to agree to the sales terms. Plus, succeeding with cold calls takes much practice and perseverance. By arranging for this sales person to observe top producers during their cold calls, attend sales seminars and continue to engage in cold calls with coaching from the sales manager, the sales manager could help the individual to see that cold calls are not impossible. As for the second belief, the sales manager could point out the sales success the salesperson has had in other areas of sales. Seeing that he has landed some great clients and closed significant deals, the salesperson might be able to shift his pervasive, permanent belief that he is a complete failure into the belief that he is a successful salesperson that is merely more challenged by cold calls (Schulman 1999).

To de-catastrophize the situation, the sales manager could show the salesperson that even if he is not the best salesperson, that does not mean he cannot excel at sales in different terms. And even if, in the worst case scenario, he is not good enough at sales to earn a decent living, the sales manager can help him understand that he has enough talents and abilities to be near the top of other, equally rewarding professions (Schulman 1999). As a side note, one should notice how planning and executing actions have been woven into the solution for the scenario. Instead of ruminating about the causes for too long, the sales manager encouraged a new perspective that utilized the constructive actions prescribed by Seligman.

In numerous studies involving people from various segments of the population, including "business people, athletes, divorced individuals, people suffering from depression or anxiety, elementary and middle school children, and college students. . . (cognitive therapy/training) has shown positive results in improving motivation, psychological well-being, physical health and performance" (Schulman 1999, 34). With the theoretical constructs of fostering optimism in place and documented success of the techniques shown, how can a sales manager build the competitive advantage of optimism without alienating his or her salespeople by coming across as if he or she is using armchair psychotherapy?

Benefits of Optimism amongst Leadership

As with any organizational issue, effective leadership plays an important role in fostering optimism. Using what Covey advocates in his book, *The 7 Habits for Highly Effective People*, the sales manager must first focus on his internal realm before moving on to alter the external environment (Covey 1989). Simply put, he must enact personal change in himself before trying to enact change in his salespeople. A search of the research literature found documented benefits for leaders possessing high levels of optimism.

One study examined the relationship between leaders' scores on the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) and their scores on an optimism test. The LPI measures an individual's performance in five categories: Challenging the Process; Inspiring a Shared Vision, Enabling Others to Act, Modeling the Way, and Encouraging the Heart. This study found that leaders exhibiting a strong LPI performance had average optimism scores, but lower than average pessimism indicators, which gave them greater overall optimism scores. Additionally, the study found that two of the five LPI categories were predicted by a leader possessing high optimism. These were Inspiring a Shared Vision and Encouraging the Heart, which are intuitively natural areas for optimists to excel (Wunderley et al. 1998).

This same study also examined the connection between the Kirton Adaptation-Innovation (KAI) Inventory and optimism. The KAI Inventory was created to measure an individual's preferred strategies for creativity, problem solving and decision making (Wunderley et al. 1998). Wunderley and colleagues found that only pessimism could predict KAI scores, "which have more to do with a leader's preference for innovation over adaptation than with their impact with others. Again, intuitively it seems that one cannot be innovative and risk-taking in the context of a highly pessimistic outlook, while even optimists may choose to play it safe in coping with difficult business decisions" (1998, 758).

In another study, researchers examined how a leader's optimism and self-efficacy; member's optimism and self-efficacy; and gender of the leader influenced the quality of leader-member exchange (LMX). The conclusions drawn from this study were interesting. Those leaders with high levels of optimism and self-efficacy were rated by their subordinates as providing a high level of LMX. Further, those subordinates who entered the study with low self-efficacy and experienced a high level of LMX showed significant improvement in self-efficacy. As for leaders' rating of their subordinates, those leaders with high self-efficacy and optimism measurements gave higher ratings when compared to supervisors with lower self-efficacy and optimism levels (Murphy and Ensher 1999).

One unexpected finding of this study, which should draw special attention from female supervisors, was that those female supervisors with high self-efficacy and optimism levels were rated better for LMX quality than females with lower scores. The researchers theorized that the subordinates viewed the higher optimism as more appealing and that it gave these female supervisors the persistence to overcome the typical stereotypes placed against female leaders (Murphy and Ensher 1999).

The implications of these two studies and how they show the benefits of optimism to leadership should provide enough reasoning for sales managers to foster their own optimism. However, one additional reason, which is more germane to the day-to-day challenges faced by managers, should be discussed. This reason being that optimists tend to believe another person's outlook is alterable, while pessimists see them as unalterable (Dweck et al. 1993; Sujan 1999). If a sales manager is pessimistic and does not believe he or she can change the perspectives and beliefs of his or her subordinates, then the results will most likely be a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. Conversely, a strong personal belief that he or she can reduce pessimism and increase optimism will be an important cornerstone for the sales manager's efforts to foster optimism in his or her sales force.

Starting at the Top

To successfully navigate these waters, the sales manager will benefit greatly by understanding how s/he measures up, selecting optimistic individuals with whom to surround her/himself, and employing the cognitive training ABCD model either on her/his own or with assistance.

Self-measurement. By measuring his/her own optimistic/pessimistic tendencies using the LOT or ASQ instruments, he/she can find out where he/she lies on the optimistic scale and identify the components of optimism he must strive to improve. In line with the concepts put forth by the recent research into emotional intelligence, an individual can begin to master a more optimistic outlook by consciously focusing on his or her cognitions and emotions (Goleman 1995).

Surrounded by Greatness. Using what is known about emotional contagion and the basic theory of modeling behaviors, the sales manager can then begin to identify those people, from every part of his/her life, who exhibit strong optimistic tendencies and start to observe their behaviors. The sales manager can extend beyond observation and visit directly with these people to learn more about the thought processes and perceptions they employ throughout their lives. By immersing him/herself in these mindsets, the sales manager can begin to select more effective cognitive processes and outlooks. The value of mentors is well documented in the areas of personal and leadership development and bringing mentor relationships into efforts to develop optimism is a natural extension of the concept.

Employing the ABCD Model and Other Options. Depending upon his/her comfort level, the sales manager can choose to utilize the ABCD model on his/her own or with the assistance of a mentor. In addition to the model presented, the application of optimism research has now begun to extend into the for-profit world. Using the body of research generated by Seligman, Foresight, Inc. {www.foresightonline.com} was created for the purpose of human resources consulting. This company, along with other consulting and leadership development organizations, have translated learned optimism into training programs and seminars designed for business people. If s/he finds the task too challenging to tackle on his/her own, the sales manager or his/her company can choose to hire one of these companies to provide the training.

Coaching the Team. Once the sales manager has strengthened her/his own optimism, then s/he is prepared to begin to focus on fostering the optimism within her/his sales team. By applying the concepts s/he has learned through her/his own process, the sales manager can focus her/his energies on two general areas: one-to-one mentoring and establishing organizational mechanisms.

One-to-One Mentoring. The value of LMX and mentoring cannot be overemphasized and this remains just as important for the sales manager when he begins to work with each individual team member. Just as when the sales manager went through his personal development, each salesperson should be tested for their optimism and evaluated for what components he or she needs to improve. Once the baseline is set, the sales manager can start to plan the most effective strategy. Using the situational leadership principles espoused by Hersey and Blanchard, the sales manager will need to assess how much of involvement he will need with the individual depending upon that person's maturity in the company and strength of abilities (1982). No matter the specific approach, the sales manager will need to spend time teaching each salesperson the concept of optimism and its specific benefits to the sales environment. As the concepts are explored, the sales manager can begin to work with these individuals on listening to their automatic internal voices and then shaping these voices into more optimistic influences. Possible techniques include: *Regular Individual Meetings.* By making him/herself more accessible to his/her direct reports and spending the time to develop, the sales manager can invest the time needed to help with the personal development process. These meetings can be formal, informal or a mixture of both. During these meetings, the sales manager should concentrate on discussing difficult sales situations and rejections which the individual has encountered and his or her perceptions of them. These situations would serve as an excellent opportunity to use the ABCD cognitive training model.

Sales Journals. Having each individual keep a record of the thoughts they have during the sales process, especially following rejection, can create an invaluable data set from which to work. Since individuals may be intimidated or hesitant to keep a journal for their boss to read, the sales manager may choose to have that individual review the journal on his or her own and look for self-defeating thought patterns. Either individually or with the help of the sales manager, each individual should be encouraged to examine these situations and analyze them using the ABCD model.

Organizational Structures. Realizing that one person cannot change the world alone, the sales manager will strengthen his/her efforts by using the help of others within the sales team. These types of efforts will increase optimism within the informal organizational culture through the creation of formal structures using new and existing resources.

Seminars and Training Programs. Formal educational programs facilitated by vendors similar to those discussed earlier are solid options for the sales manager to choose. With the obvious expertise and proven teaching techniques, outside vendors with strong experience in teaching optimism would be good accompaniments to the one-to-one mentoring.

Peer Mentoring. Using the optimism test results, the sales manager can identify those salespeople who have high levels of optimism and match them with their colleagues who are on the lower end of the team's spectrum. Not wanting the two to average out, the sales manager will need to make it clear to each pair involved the individuals' optimism ratings and who should serve as the mentor and the protégé. Periodic visits with the pairs will allow the sales manager to assess their progress and determine if pairs are progressing or need to be rearranged. Peer mentoring relationships matching newcomers with veterans having high optimism are especially important in the training and acculturation process. Knowing that newcomers are more susceptible to emotional contagion, these newcomer-veteran mentor relationships will serve as important buttresses to the sales manager's efforts to innoculate the newcomers with optimism on the front end.

Stacking the Deck. If the organization follows the suggestions made earlier in the discussion about recruiting for optimism, the sales manager should be pleased with the existing levels of optimism within his sales force. By stacking the deck in favor of hiring those exhibiting optimism, the sales manager will have a team that will naturally contain a strong culture of optimism. The recruiting structure will allow the organization to continually replenish or expand its sales force with individuals having an existing high degree of optimism. Using what is known about emotional contagion, the strong culture of optimism should continue to perpetuate itself and permeate into the individual actions of newcomers.

CONCLUSION

Optimism is a powerful strategic advantage when it is combined with aptitude and motivation on which any sales organization can capitalize. In spite of the complex influences and processes that shape an individual's outlook, research and experience have shown that optimism is a learned trait. Numerous studies have shown the tremendous benefits optimism brings to individuals and organizations. Better personal health, better performance, greater sales, healthier organizational behaviors and stronger leadership are just a few benefits that optimism produces.

Optimism can be broken down into three components: permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization. How an individual views the cause of an event in these terms determines the level of optimism that person possesses. Influencing these internal perceptions is the key to any attempts to foster greater optimism, along with surrounding this person with others possessing high levels of optimism. The cognitive training model provides an proven method to accomplish just that.

Understanding optimism and how to foster it will allow the sales manager to harness this advantage for the benefit of the sales organization. Developing greater optimism in herself by measuring her optimism, observing and interacting with strong optimists and using cognitive training techniques, will lay a solid foundation for the sales manager's efforts to increase the optimism of those people working for her. Using one-to-one mentoring and creating organizational structures, such as peer mentoring and training seminars, to augment her efforts, the sales manager will witness a growth of optimism and, therefore, success in her sales force.

In sum, fostering optimism is a realistic goal to achieve, which will provide any sales organization with a formidable strategic advantage.

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