

GETTING OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE



Pushing Past Your Self-Imposed Limits

Are you slaying dragons?

“We all know we’re not going to slay dragons if we’re sitting home answering e-mails and hitting the road only to see the same old “lunch” accounts” *Ben Dodge*

Insanity

The definition of insanity is: “doing the same thing the same way everyday, while each time expecting a different result “ *Einstein*

Are you insane?

Now before you answer that, let me ask you one more question: When was the last time you did something different with regard to how you sell?

Be honest. I’ve been in sales for 28 years, and can tell you that I’ve been in the trap of reverting to old behaviors before. Why? Because they are ingrained and they are easy. You just go on autopilot and don’t have to think.

Nobody likes to struggle with actions that they feel are difficult, uncomfortable, or maybe *new*. It’s human nature to take the path of least resistance.

Therefore if you’ve been in sales for a while, you will have developed *your style*. Maybe it’s good, maybe it’s not, but this is your *comfort zone*.

If you are not moving forward you are moving backward. There is no neutral. Status quo equals rolling backwards down a steep hill.

One of the reasons I love doing sales training is that it forces me to continually revisit my selling techniques, and re-hone the skills that I should be using, but may have let lapse because my old ways keep resurfacing.

Abe Lincoln was once asked: “ If you had 7 hours to chop down a tree, what would you do?” He replied: “ I’d spend 6 hours sharpening my axe!”

Honest Abe knew the value of sharpening his skills on a frequent basis, and based on the number of times he ran for office, and lost, he also never gave up from trying to achieve his goals.

Getting out of your comfort zone or sharpening your skills can be done in many ways. The obvious is attending a training program and learning something new. Another would be doing a personal evaluation and finding out whether you are working only in your *comfort zone*, or pushing yourself past your *self-imposed limits*.

I love my customers

Let's start with a review of your client base. When you make sales calls, do you only call on people you know, people you like or who you feel like you? How many *lunch accounts* do you have and what percentage of your overall time is spent at these accounts?

Yes, I know, relationships are important and spending time at your lunch accounts is critical to maintaining your current customer base. However, can those accounts keep your business growing, or are you starting on a path that will cause your business to eventually stagnate?

I hate to spend time with people I don't like, but sales isn't just personal, it's business. An old colleague of mine used to say "I have enough friends, I need more customers". So I would rather have a large customer who I don't like personally, than one who is my best friend and doesn't buy very much. I'll feel better when I visit the person I like, but I'll live better by spending more time with the one I don't.

Is the status quo good?

Now let's get back to those lunch accounts. Are you only *lunching* with the same people? Same discussions every time: family, sports...maybe a little work related stuff. Could you benefit from using that time differently? Maybe network to meet other people at various levels of the company? Let me give you an example of why that's important.

I managed a territory for several years and as I moved up within my previous company, I had the ability to continue to work with many of the same customers on a global basis. For one account in particular, this worked out extremely well because I had *friendships* with all the key buying influences that spanned over 15 years. I owned the account. Lunches were frequent, so were dinners. I couldn't lose because I had everything

covered with the top decision makers. Their business was growing and it all came my way.

Then one day the Director of Strategic Sourcing told me he was retiring. Then the Director of Quality moved to a different department and no longer had any influence. The Senior Commodity Manager who was my eyes and ears got “pushed aside” by the new regime, and the last person quit. Here I was with a huge account that now had a completely new regime and I was on the outside looking in. So when the hammer fell, and my business dropped 50%, I was in trouble.

They say hindsight is 20/20, and this business loss taught me a valuable lesson. Staying within my comfort zone was a mistake. I had limited my contact to the people *I liked* and missed an opportunity to leverage the friendships I had to broaden my relationships with the customer.

If I had taken the time to use all those lunches as opportunities to meet people across and up the client organization, when the personnel changes listed above happened, I would have been *steep and deep*. I would have had deep penetration of the account at all levels, and the loss of one or two key people would have been a minor issue.

Instead, in less than a 2 month period I became an outsider.

Compounding the fact that I hadn’t positioned myself well within the account, I had also spent too much time with them. This meant that I wasn’t spending adequate time on my business building activities like prospecting, so my pipeline was woefully inadequate to cover the large drop in business that just happened.

This example brings forward the two critical things about being stuck in your *comfort zone*: First, don’t sit back and be comfortable with the status quo. Expect change and plan for it. Never take a situation for granted and constantly leverage your strengths to become even stronger.

Second, never relax or sideline your business building activities - prospect constantly. Always have enough opportunities in your funnel for what you need to make your quota *and absorb a hole if one arises*, even if your crystal ball says that everything looks good for the foreseeable future.

Now I know business building efforts are time consuming and it can be hard to find the time to fit them into your busy day. There are only so many hours in a day, and they get used up very quickly.

Are you really using your time as effectively as possible?

Let's take a look at your work week. You wake up Monday morning and you start the day by addressing all the tasks that you have on your plate:

- checking your email
- following -up on what didn't get completed last week
- re-writing your list of "to-do's" for the week
- calling Marketing to get product information
- calling Customer Service to resolve delivery and pricing issues
- scheduling appointments...

The next thing you realize it's noon and half the day is gone. So you jump in the car to go visit one of your *lunch* accounts, this way at least you got out of the office and had some face-to-face time with a customer. This also allows you to tell your boss something other than you sat in the office all day clearing emails.

You have your visit and then spend some time talking with other people at the account. When you're done, it's late afternoon, and you head back to the office to finish up your uncompleted tasks.

Tuesday ends up going like Monday. So does Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. So you say to yourself, "Oh well, I'll get to prospecting and all those other business building activities I wanted to do next week." But, then next week goes the same way, and so on, and so on... Sound familiar.

Technology - a blessing or curse?

Technology is great. We have cell phones and Blackberry's or iPhones with email access 24/7. We spend so much time communicating, that our devices start managing us. And by managing us, they pull us into a routine. It's ends up being a difficult balance. On the one hand internal and external customers now expect responses to emails and texts within minutes. However, if we respond to each one, (and the dreaded "reply to all" sequences) it's like falling into quicksand. The more you wiggle (write) the deeper you sink.

Therefore, email communication needs to be actively managed. Only you can determine how much time should be spent each day on email, or when during your day

you should work on cleaning out your Inbox. This paper is not about time management, but if not being able to manage your time effectively is your comfort zone, then you need to address it as one of your *self-imposed limits*.

So how do I change?

In my training sessions people always ask “ how do I change, or push myself past my self-imposed limits?” It’s not easy, and first you need to identify there is a problem and then make a *decision* to take *action*.

A tool that I’ve used that has been successful for me and the people I have worked with starts with asking my favorite question - *why*?

- Why am I only calling on the same customers?
- Why am I only calling on the same accounts?
- Why did I do that in the sales call?
- Why didn’t I do something different?
- Why am I at my desk all day clearing emails?

We can go on indefinitely with *why* questions, but the purpose is to get you to analyze your behavior and then *think* about whether you are doing the *right activities* the *right way*.

I became a student of the technical aspects of selling over 20 years ago. One of the things I learned from this was to question everything I do, and every response I get from a customer.

To illustrate this point, I’ll reference a sales call I made in Europe many years ago. When working in the German speaking countries, Buyers will typically not meet with you unless you schedule the appointment well in advance - typically a month before. As one German client told me: “ if we are not important enough of a customer for you to schedule a meeting in advance, then you are not important enough of a supplier for us to meet with you.” So I always tried to schedule meetings in the German speaking countries under the auspices of this advice.

In this instance I had travel planned to Vienna, and my local rep was only able to arrange one customer meeting. To make the trip productive I wanted to arrange more meetings, so about 2 weeks before the trip, I sent an email with a meeting request to the senior strategic sourcing manager at a large potential customer. To my surprise, not only did he agree to the appointment, but also for the exact date and time I requested.

When we met, the customer gave us a powerpoint presentation on his company, what they do, what they buy, who they buy from with volumes... and at the end of the presentation said: "he wanted to buy everything from us." Fantastic. We're rolling now.

The sales rep, who was a 35 year veteran and I left the account high-fiving each other, and went to the biergarten to celebrate and plan next steps. About 20 minutes into our planning I felt a cold fear rip thru me when I asked myself the *why* questions. Why did that just happen? Why did the customer just hand us this opportunity?

Here we were with a large opportunity in front of us, but also one that was going to consume a lot of time and company resources to get the business rolling: spec reviews, samples, sample qualification, audits, confidentiality agreements, supply agreements. We were ready to commit to all of that without really knowing *why*.

So we stepped back, and four sales calls and three months later, we got the answers. Then we made a decision to move forward because we now knew the reasons *why* and could build from there.

As the sales process came to a close, pricing reared it's ugly head again, and we learned we were 20% higher than their current supplier on this "commodity" product. Because we understood why they wanted to buy from us, we reconfirmed our value proposition, and won the business even though we were more expensive.

In this case it would have been easy to just follow the customer's direction, and our excitement about the opportunity. The customer was making it easy for us, and it was very difficult to delay what appeared to be a quick slam dunk opportunity. However if we hadn't done something different we wouldn't have gotten the business.

So after every sales call, email, phone conversation...with a customer, I ask my favorite question *why*:

- Why did I get the desired result?
- Why didn't I get the desired result?
- Was it because my desired result wasn't achievable?
- Was it because I wasn't good enough or did something wrong in the meeting?
- What else could I have done?

Asking *why* makes me *think*. It keeps me sharp, it challenges my comfort zone and pushes me to explore and expand beyond my self-imposed limits.

One approach doesn't fit all

Now this works for me, however there are billions of people on the planet and it has been written that there are even more personality types on the planet than there are people. Yes, we all have more than one personality at times.

There is no recipe that will work for everyone, other than the *desire to succeed*. This requires *self-reflection* and *acknowledgment* that a problem exists and the *willingness* to make the necessary changes to improve. If you want to win badly enough, then these are minor obstacles. If you are content, then be ready to stand aside while everyone else eats your lunch, at your lunch accounts.

What else can I do?

Only you can identify if you are working within your comfort zone, or your self-imposed limits. The world is changing constantly, and our role as salespeople is changing quickly as Buyers evolve via their ability to access information online.

There are many areas where we can find ourselves being managed by our devices and daily tasks and it takes effort to break these habits. Learning new tools also takes up some of the limited time we have, in addition to being *uncomfortable* during the early stages of the learning process.

Research done with a sampling of the top sales people I've worked with over the years (the ones who continually exceed their goals, and have that innate drive for self-improvement) provided me some additional insight about alternate ways to help push ourselves past our comfort zone.

Take a retreat

Taking a retreat is like a *reboot* for your brain. I live near the ocean and love to be on or near the water. During the winter months, I'll leave my desk and go for a short walk along the shore. However in the summer, I'll step away from my desk and take a short boat ride. Because I do this often, people have tried to accuse me of just liking to play - I do like to play - but what I found is that this time provides me the ability to clear my thoughts and re-group. It's amazing how stepping away from my desk clears my head,

and allows me to generate more creative thoughts. I can't count the number of times I suffered from a brain cramp, only to resolve my questions while speeding across the ocean.

Connect with Leaders in your field

My former colleague Mark Driesner likes to connect with leaders in the field. Every C-Suite contact he has provides a different insight on what new things they are doing to motivate their companies and drive them to higher level of performance.

Not everything the C-Suite is doing with their companies may apply to you as an individual, but the concepts can be adapted to provide you new insight on what you can do to improve. Hence the idea for taking a retreat.

Schedule dedicated time every one to two weeks

Block off time in your calendar to work on specific tasks, and make these appointments non-cancelable. This can be as simple as putting a recurring event in your Outlook calendar that commits you to do this work. For example, when prospecting customers I generally find it easier to reach them on Thursdays than on Mondays. So I block out time in my calendar on Thursdays and dedicate that time for making prospecting calls.

Manage your territory - don't let your territory manage you

Don't let the tail wag the dog. You have the leash on your time so you need take charge. When I was a rookie sales rep, I worked *hard*, but didn't work *smart*. As time went by, I learned to delegate as well as how to do my work more efficiently. Part of this came from learning to say "no" to tasks that added minimal value and limited my ability to focus on my priorities. Do an evaluation on your overall business, make a plan and stick to your plan. Very simple to do, but I find that most people make the mistake of never making a plan, or filing it away and forgetting about it.

Document the good

Take a minute to send an email to your customer documenting the positive result you just helped deliver. Even better, ask them for a referral to someone they know at another company or for a recommendation on LinkedIn. What better time to ask than after a positive event. Yes, I know this takes time, but what could be a more valuable use of your time than building your personal brand.

Summary:

There are many ways to push ourselves past our self imposed limits. We touched on a few here as they relate to selling, but there are a plethora of books written by psychologists that are available on the subject.

Once thing they will all agree on is that doing the same things the same way every day isn't going to change your long term results. You need to make a conscious effort to improve and expand past your comfort zone or self-imposed limits.

By doing so, and being successful, you will create internal energy and drive that you didn't think existed. The result of which should be both personally and financially rewarding. Take a leap forward you'll find it can be very exhilarating, and most important of all, you'll find that your job will start to be FUN again.

* For those of you who were asking "who is Ben Dodge", Ben is a former colleague and one of the best sales reps I've had the privilege to work with. Ben provided the recommendation to write this paper, and his quote about slaying dragons...brought to light an issue that many sales reps are experiencing today.

