

2020 Unlocking Sales Leadership

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Managing, leading and
living through complexity
and overwhelm.

*Companies need strategies for helping sales leaders excel over time. Solutions require improving sales leader selection, development, and performance management, while creating a company culture that encourages sales leadership success.*¹

¹ What Sales Leaders Need to Excel Over Time, Andris A. Zoltners, PK Sinha and Sally E. Lorimer, Harvard Business Review, January 2019

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Introduction

Sales Leadership, for those passionate about both solving customer requirements and leading a team, is an amazing role. Enjoying the competitive cut and thrust, evokes battle analogies and a winner takes all thrill.

Often working across geographical and or vertical market groups, it can be a fulfilling occupation and the product of years of hard graft and development. The scope for many sales leaders can grow over time, in fact, a Michael Page survey suggests that compared to 5 years ago, sales leader workload is 30% greater.

The function of sales is critical, organisations scale their businesses based on the revenue and the expected cost of sales in the future. Thus, the sales function is charged with ensuring the future. This is the case for both commercial and non-commercial organisations, whereby sales activity creates the necessary revenue for its existence and operation.

Sales leadership has never been easy, perhaps the battle analogies are perhaps not as valid as they once were, as organisations are increasingly complex to engage in commercial relationships. In addition, procurement functions becoming insight driven with the push for advantages through Artificial Intelligence, together with greater commoditisation in many B2B markets.

Sales leaders are required to have knowledge and skills in analytical, strategic and emotional domains. The challenges are increasing and with them, a greater sense of being overwhelmed can prevail. In this paper, we review the challenges and discuss a structure to understand and tackle them, ideally undertaken together with Executive Coaching.

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Four Categories of Failure

Failure is always a clear and present danger that Sales Leaders face on an ongoing basis, potentially being one of the most visible and measurable of leaders in an organisation.

Work by Andris, Zoltners, Sinha and Lorimer discuss the reasons that sales leaders fail, placing the types of failure in terms of four categories :

1

Direction

Poor understanding of the business, leading to errors in vision and strategy, indeed for most, poor execution.

2

Talent

Inability to pick and keep the right people for the team, an understanding of how work is done is important for any leader to be able to diagnose, mentor and indeed hire for. Retention of key sales talent can be impacted through these issues, exacerbating poor recruitment and performance management practices.

3

Execution

Poor processes create frustration through poor customer experience and frustrate those inside the business, often resulting in workarounds.

4

Culture

Inappropriate values of a leader drive away talented people and destroy the mission (purpose) of the organisation.

How do Sales Leaders show up?

We see a spectrum of the way sales leaders show up at work, those that have great awareness of themselves, their teams, peers and bosses. Those that understand and have ambition to demonstrate best practice each day to empower and enable their team members to make that next step, whilst ensuring accountability. Actively seeking for members to be reaching for their potential.

Aware

Deep understanding, coaching with humility and empathy, ensuring accountability, development focus.



Global Best Practice

Always On

Accountability overload, constant mentoring, getting involved all the time, at the risk of seeming overbearing.



Continuous improvement

Absolute

Directing regardless of style, the same way of doing things, regardless of individual circumstances and change.



BAU

Advocate

Always Positive, avoiding the Negative, not helping to confront issues, delaying diagnosis & confrontation.



Inefficient

Annoying

Confused, not sure how work is done, unable to diagnose accurately. Provides inconsistent instructions.



Inconsistent

Absent

Upwardly obsessed. Don't bother me, just sell more. Never recognising or encouraging.



Chaotic

1. Challenges of Self-Management

Self-Management is essential and can be very challenging for Sales Leaders, knowing how they show up at work and their impact on others. Behavioral issues are frequently discussed and coached.

The expectation of a sales leader needing to be an expert on all markets, all relevant technologies, strategy and latest trends. This is typically a fast track to disappointment. Thus, the concept of the **Incomplete Leader** is increasingly true, especially in knowledge work.

Where the expert is the individual contributor, who spends all day, every day, working in the area of specialisation. Sales leaders, however, are working across a broader remit, are no longer able to maintain the depth of understanding that a subject matter expert can.

Key sales support roles continue to disappear, EAs, PAs and Sales Coordinator roles especially have been under pressure. Business Analysts tend to be homed with the Finance function, when they could be most impactful working closely with sales leadership.

High distraction, through constant interruption, thus deep work, (popularised by the book), is extremely difficult to achieve.

Ambiguity, there is less certainty than ever, the environment less predictable, thus sales leaders are increasingly required to operate in uncharted territory more.

Too many objectives, too many goals, when the list of meaningful efforts go beyond single figures, it transcends the impossible for most.

Overwhelm can easily occur, especially with the multitude of approvals, emails and the need to meet with others. Sales Leaders can easily be blindsided, living hour to hour, day to day, attempting to meet the demands of their roles, becoming increasingly passive with their agenda.

The search for impact

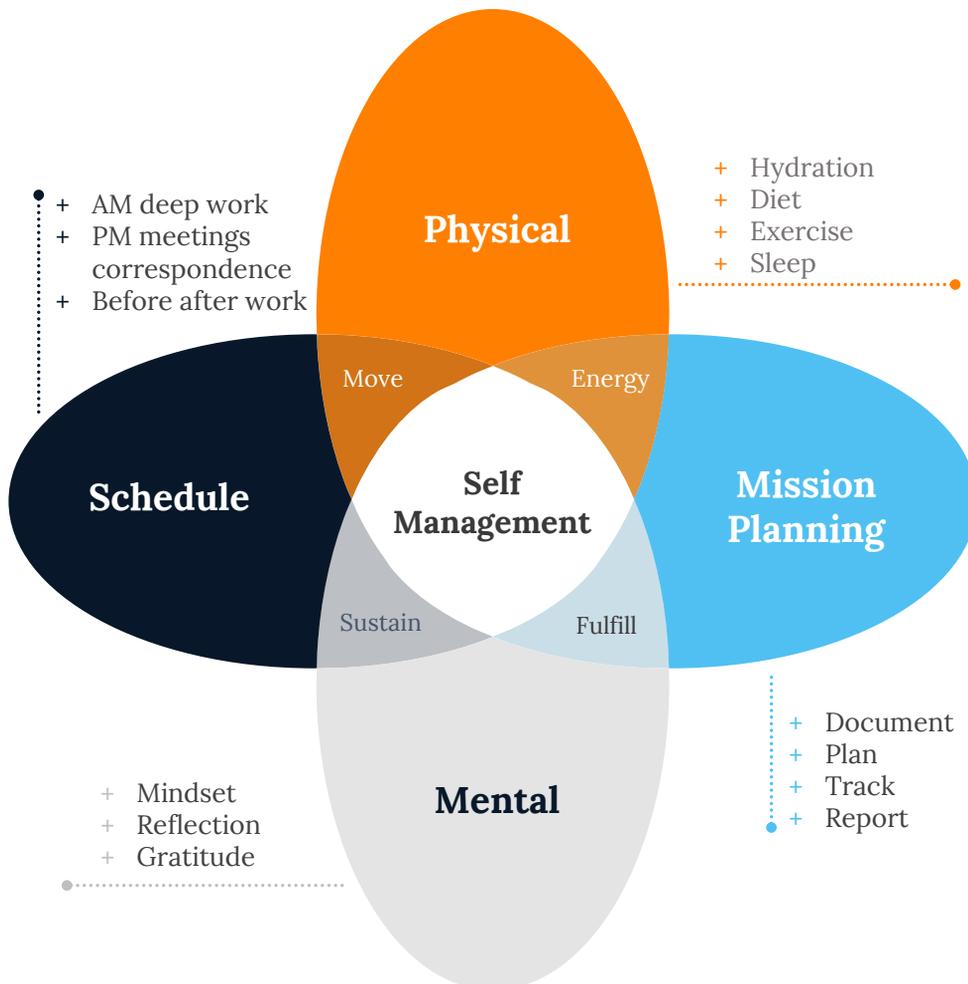
For many sales leaders, the increasing complexity and workload can be disempowering and demotivating. Unable to see how they are making a positive difference in their work and are just feeding the machine, like the mouse on the wheel.

Balance, many sales leaders struggle to be present and engaged with family, children, extended family and friends. Connection with the most important people in our lives, who give us candid feedback, keep us grounded and give us purpose.

Looking after health and wellbeing, we cannot expect our mental performance and health to be at our best, if we are not looking after ourselves physically, in addition to managing our mindset.

Time for hobbies and interests. When speaking to those buried in work, sometimes it is about the need to 'feel alive' through demanding lifestyles. To reconnect with their vitality, their passions and meaning through engaging in activities that are core to their being.

- ▶ Mission and Purpose, managing mindsets, keeping purpose in mind and how best.
- ▶ Scheduling and diary management, ensuring time for life outside of work.
- ▶ Physical management, ensuring an appropriate diet of protein, fruit and vegetables, maintaining excellent nutrition.
- ▶ Mental and Mindset management, using reflection, carefully considering the use of gratitude, being mindful of behaviours in efforts to be the best version of ourselves.



2. The need for Strategic Perspective

Recent EBIT growth in established organisations has typically been achieved through cost reductions, putting pressure on sales leaders to do more with less. This means that short term results are prioritised, at the expense of customer experience, research & development and resourcing longer term opportunities.

Keeping across broader spans that only get flatter in organisations, middle management continues to be removed, with the average number of direct reports said to be approximately nine.



Globalisation › Issues of commoditisation, margin compression, longer periods of time to win work, increasing cost to bid, spread of shorter time to respond and pivot. All of which requiring astute decisions about which opportunities to pursue, combining the use of insight selling together with robust analysis, in order to do so.



Technology shifts › risks and opportunities for those organisations making timely bets so far as resourcing and implementing newer technologies, both internally and in product/service offerings.



Complexity › a burgeoning issue, in recent surveys compliance and micromanagement, has made life challenging for leaders to leave their desks for an extended period due to the need for multiple approvals, as systems ratchet down on authorisation processes, especially in larger organisations, taking the post senior away from needed visibility.

Hyper competitive markets and the challenge to competitive advantage for organisations who may have previously enjoyed an advantage. Indeed, Michael Porter's model of Competition, the two main ways to compete were on the bases of lowest price (Commodity) or through differentiation. It is differentiation that has driven sales strategy through value creation and execution.

Commoditisation can frustrate the art of selling and make it less predictable.

Widely discussed generational change, with the perception of increasing expectations of the workforce seeking partnership in terms of coaching developmental plans and feedback. Indeed, the 'always-on manager' has been hyped as being the answer, providing constant feedback and sadly not advancing.

The reality is, most generations would like to have a voice, Millennials will rightly ask what is on everyone's mind ›

What is in it for me?

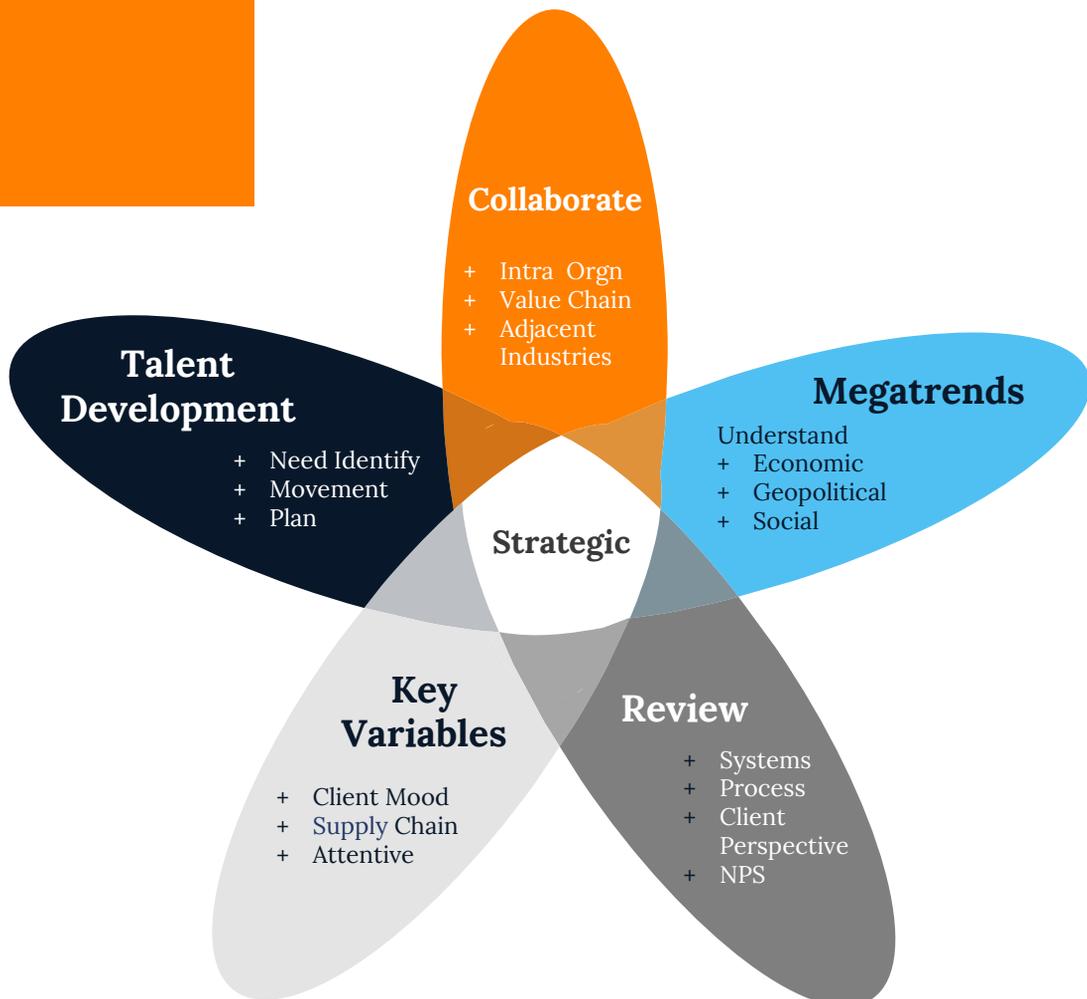
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Mega trends play out across many markets and businesses, these may be generational, like the aging population in developed economies. The use of key technologies can impact many sectors, an example is the impact of internet technologies.

Regular review of Systems and Processes, ensuring a user perspective, examining the potential for incremental or break through innovation.

Talent Mapping and management, the harnessing of ability and aspiration is important to ensure that the time spent in an organisation is impactful by those working in it, that it is a partnership where both the organisation and the individual gain from it. Key talents can be mapped and monitored, both inside and outside the organisation, people participating with such talents can be engaged with.

Key Variables of cause and effect relationships, the levers of the business, so as to be able to effectively manage business performance based in an understanding of the business aspirations and goals.



3. Collaboration – working with Others

Working across functions with a common vision to serve customers and stakeholders, sometimes reminiscent of forming a coalition with a hung parliament, the politics of influence is a skill.



Cultural Leadership is often sought of a sales leader, promoting and demonstrating values that may be a shift in the organisation.



Reporting and managing upward, micromanagement is often a manifestation of a leader's anxiety. Managing upwards is a key skill for a sales leader, understanding the rules of engagement, expectations and communication requirements. To get on common ground and remain there, is key, as is sidestepping personality issues.



Value Chain / Supply chain insight, with the complexity of many value chains, it becomes an area of considerable complexity and at times, considerable angst.



Team Dynamics † sales operations, require teamwork, partnerships, the lone wolf concept is really no longer applicable, a team effort in B2B markets and collaboration is required amongst members.

Spending the bulk of the time in the office, can mean Sales Leaders become disconnected and out of touch, from what is happening in the marketplace.

Mindset blind spots can develop over time, for example, always focusing on short term performance over time, therefore limiting the longer-term development of strategic plans to adapt to changing markets, technology and disruption.

Over time the development of knowledge and power can be an issue for Sales Leaders who then do not get challenged by their team, attracting like-minded people, limiting the ability to deal with challenges and opportunities.

Favoritism over time, through spending a disproportionate amount of time with preferred direct reports over others, in turn makes objective assessment more difficult and less trusted by others.

Collaboration can be viewed in terms of internal vs external, in terms of how Sales Leaders work with others and are wired into what is taking place in the business and industry sector.



The Cosy, with the sales leader seeking interaction mainly with those that they are close to, without collaborating widely.

Competent, collaborating across the business, internally, both functionally and geographically, collaborating with sales leaders, function heads and C level members.

Connected across the industry broadly, with value chain partners, peak bodies and clients, both present and prospective.

Comprehensive, combining collaboration across the industry and within the functions and geographies of the business in order to be able to share well considered and insightful views of the functioning of the industry.

4. Awareness of Key Metrics

Key Metrics are an essential part of Sales Leadership, they can be viewed across two spectrums – comprehensive and forward looking. Diverse sources, and large amounts of daily information that assist with forecasting, forming insights with credible support is the key to navigating impromptu or planned reviews.

Funnel management, using a Customer Relationship Management software package (CRM) is often bemoaned by sales members, however, there has been increasing focus on the integration of CRM with the organisations Enterprise Resource Planning software (ERP), together with the need for transparency of sales effort and results.

It is getting trickier perhaps, to keep those orders in the top draw for quiet months, sometimes known as ‘sandbagging’ especially when budgets are being determined for the next financial year.

The funnel is the tracking, likelihood and realisation of sales efforts and form important metrics for the sales professionals, sales leaders, the finance team, value chain and chief executives.

Daily reviews can assist in real time counter measures, and communication efforts to manage expectations and understanding.

Performance and Accountability

Sales leadership entails plenty of performance measurement and accountability. Sales is a high impact function of the organisation, determining its future size and success.

Tools - using a CRM and an opportunity funnel, order tracking, as a precursor to invoicing and revenue. Billing tracking, a precursor to revenue receipt based on the trading terms. Receivables, revenue forecast, received and outstanding.

Expense management, sales activity is typically a considerable investment by an organisation, summarised as Cost of Sales. Thus, sales leaders are charged with tracking and managing expenses and the cost to bid for work. There are occasions where the cost to bid, relative to the likelihood of the sales, whereby the bid is not commercially viable.



Model of Sales Leadership



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