

WHAT IF SELLERS BEHAVED AS LEADERS?

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WHEN SELLERS ARE AT THEIR BEST

AMY SPELLMAN MADE A MID-LIFE CAREER CHANGE. She became an insurance agent because she wanted to help people. Amy was excited about the fresh start, income potential, and opportunity to make a difference in people's lives.

Six months later, Amy left sales. For her, the role was unfulfilling despite the higher income. Following up company-generated leads and making cold calls felt like dialing-for-dollars, and calling people multiple times felt like an imposition. Selling in a high-pressure environment meant spending less time helping people in the way she'd envisioned. Instead of feeling supportive, she felt pushy. Instead of enjoying connections with clients, she felt inauthentic, rushed, and slightly manipulative when using sales tactics she had observed and learned from others.¹

Perhaps you've felt the same way at some time in your sales role. Maybe you've sensed that buyers seem suspicious and guarded when you contact them. Or possibly your friends and family are cynical and question your character and integrity because you are in sales.

REDEFINING THE B2B BUYER EXPERIENCE

The pervasive, negative stereotypes about sellers affect how people initially react to you, even, on occasion, family and friends who know you well. The *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Wolf of Wall Street* movie personas of sellers are reinforced in real life often enough to put buyers on the defensive. As Amy said, “It didn’t feel like I could win. The people I called assumed I was going to take advantage of them. They didn’t even give me a chance to show how I would be different.” What’s a seller to do?

More of the Same Behaviors Results in More of the Same Reactions

Too many sellers simply shrug their shoulders and adopt these stereotypical behaviors. Others defuse buyers’ negative perceptions by operating with integrity, the more challenging path to be sure.

For buyers, the challenge is to separate the wheat from the chaff, determining which sellers are trustworthy. An overwhelming refrain from buyers in our study was, as one person said, “All sellers seem to be saying and doing the same things.”² Sellers, despite their intentions, are failing to behaviorally differentiate themselves.

As buyers become increasingly self-sufficient and more resistant to advances, sellers scramble to find more leads, make more calls, and get in front of more buyers. Engaging in more of the same old sales behaviors exacerbates the problem. All sellers seem the same, because they’re all behaving the same way.

Something Different, but What?

There must be another option. Retail researchers Robin Lewis and Michael Dart concluded that winning people’s wallets requires

delivering “such an awesome connecting experience that they will go out of their way to come to you.”³ “An awesome connecting experience”? Now that’s something different in selling! It’s a phrase that’s more likely to be associated with leadership. Let’s break it down.

✓ **Awesome.**

When we’re using the slang definition of *awesome*, it means the sales call is going to be “very impressive.” Jaded buyers won’t rate even the best selling behaviors as “very impressive.” Quality is a weak differentiator that may go completely unnoticed. The dictionary meaning of *awesome* is more applicable: “causing an overwhelming feeling of admiration or respect.” Now that’s something that would certainly capture a buyer’s attention and clearly be differentiating.

Anthony Iannarino, the founder of The Sales Blog, says such a response only comes with genuine caring for your buyer.⁴ He believes the power of caring is unmatched and that those who care deeply about their buyers “will stand out from the crowd and be welcomed as trusted, valued partners.” Empathy, intimacy, and presence, he asserts, create the caring experience that keep buyers coming back for more.

✓ **Connecting.**

Connecting, too, aims for differentiation. *Connecting* means joining or linking. To be clear, connecting means much more than a social media link. It involves more than the initial rapport-building you do with prospects. A connection isn’t just a name in your CRM. Connections aren’t sufficiently made by automation and artificial intelligence (AI). In human interactions, there’s a need for *emotional* connection.

Jeb Blount, CEO of Sales Gravy, says the point of connecting in sales is to “win other people over by making them feel that they are the center of your attention, to make them feel significant or important,” and then to “nurture a deep emotional connection [because] people buy from people they like, trust, and believe will solve their problems.”⁵ Buyers want authentic connections, not superficial ones that evaporate when the sale is closed.

Sellers must reach buyers by creating genuine and authentic experiences.

✓ **Experience.**

In ancient times, people traded commodities to survive. As manufacturing expanded, sellers offered variety and quality to distinguish their goods. In time, service became the differentiation between one manufacturer's goods and another's. Today, service is no longer enough. Buyers demand more.

Linda Richardson, who teaches sales and management courses at the Wharton School, asserts that “a huge part of buying for almost all buyers is the experience.” She says that “when clients feel you are there for them, they will go out of their way to be there for you.” Linda concludes that it's important to be human-focused in creating an experience that creates intimacy with your buyer.⁶

Creating an “awesome connecting experience” is also essential in leadership. After all, where would leaders be without followers; and where would sellers be without buyers? Leadership research and theories have evolved over the years, from a transactional to a transformational perspective, from simply seeing leadership as an exchange between leaders and constituents to thinking about it as a way to foster positive changes for those who follow. Nearly two decades ago, sales and marketing scholars followed suit and began articulating that *experience* is the missing link between sellers and buyers.⁷ Sellers must reach buyers by creating genuine and authentic experiences.⁸ Experiences aren't manufactured or engineered by sellers or their companies. Rather, a buyer derives personal meaning because of his or her imprint on the interactive experience. The seller's role is to facilitate a highly personalized interaction.

An “awesome connecting experience” is an incredibly high standard. Most B2B sellers focus on goods and services. Buyers react by commoditizing these offerings and focusing on price alone. Striving toward the high standard of an awesome connecting experience is no longer merely optional. It's absolutely essential because buyers are accustomed to it in their B2C shopping experiences.

Lessons from the B2C Customer Experience

Businesses that sell directly to consumers have steadily increased efforts to enhance the customer experience (CX). Consumers have been conditioned to expect an experience that is personal and relevant. This experience, to be entirely satisfying, will involve consumers directly and engage them emotionally. Because buyers are being conditioned to expect this, what's lacking for them in their B2B experiences includes:

Experiences resonate and motivate when they touch people's hearts, not just their minds.

✓ **Direct Involvement.**

In *The Future of Competition: Co-Creating Unique Value with Customers*, the authors predicted that “consumers will migrate to businesses that allow them to be participants in creating what they want.”⁹ Consumers flock to businesses like Starbucks and Build-A-Bear Workshop for hands-on experiences to create precisely what they want.

✓ **Emotional Engagement.**

Personal involvement requires more than sharing opinions and directing product development. An emotional response, something happening *within* buyers, characterizes the awesome connecting experience. David Lewis-Hodgson, director of Mindlab International, where they study the science of decisions, describes it this way: “Shopping experiences trigger brain activity that creates euphoric moments. These euphoric moments can be triggered by experiencing something unexpected.”¹⁰

Connections are made emotionally, not logically. Experiences resonate and motivate when they touch people's hearts, not just their minds. The word *awesome* connotes an overwhelming feeling. B2B sellers need to engage at an emotional level with their buyers.

MEETING THE PREFERENCES OF TODAY'S BUYERS

Behaviorally, how can sellers create powerfully differentiating, awe-some connecting experiences for their B2B buyers, who bring high expectations from their B2C experiences? CX researcher Esteban Kolsky concluded that 86 percent of buyers will pay more for an emotionally satisfying experience that is relevant and personalized than for something generic.¹¹ The value of a meaningful and unique experience significantly exceeds the value of the goods and services accompanying it.

The need for B2B sellers to catch up with consumer sales thinking is crystal clear. Less obvious is how B2B sellers can provide personalized experiences and help buyers to participate in creating what they want. Currently, sellers are not trained, equipped, or expected to:

- Cause an overwhelming feeling of admiration or respect.
- Provide the unexpected that triggers a euphoric response.
- Connect with buyers personally.
- Enable buyers to participate in creating what they want.
- Make buyers feel significant or important.

The value of a meaningful and unique experience significantly exceeds the value of the goods and service accompanying it.

These expectations seem less like a job description for sales and more like one for leadership. Buyers told us repeatedly that they want

sellers to behave differently. Buyers resist “sales” behaviors and erect barriers to avoid sellers altogether. By contrast, they invite and welcome seller behaviors that produce awesome connecting experiences. Those behaviors are *leadership* behaviors.

Research Provides a Behavioral Blueprint

For over thirty years, Jim and Barry have continuously gathered and analyzed data about the behaviors of exemplary leaders.¹² By analyzing thousands of case studies and millions of survey responses from leaders around the globe and from all walks of life and backgrounds, they identified what leaders do when they are at their “personal best” as leaders. Their framework—The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership®—has been adopted by scores of organizations for their leadership development programs, and hundreds of researchers have used the model in studies about the effectiveness of leaders across a variety of settings and circumstances.

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership® framework is an evidence-based operating system for leadership that’s highly relevant for sellers. In our discussions and research with B2B buyers, we found that shifts in buyer demands directly corresponded to The Five Practices. Our research set out to determine just how buyers would respond to seller leadership, in the form of The Five Practices. Buyers in our studies spanned a variety of industries, company sizes, job functions, and ages. This cross-section of buyers represents different experience levels as B2B buyers, the number of sellers engaged with on a regular basis, the percentage of time spent working with sellers, and the buyer’s actual role in the decision-making process, including whether purchasing decisions are made by the individual or by a group.

We surveyed 530 verified B2B buyers online over a four-month period. To measure The Five Practices, we used a slightly modified version of the *Leadership Practices Inventory*® (LPI), one of the most trusted and widely used leadership assessments available. It consists of thirty statements about leadership behaviors, each of which is assessed

on a 10-point Likert frequency scale.¹³ For each of the leadership behaviors we asked buyers:

- How frequently do sellers you choose to do business with exhibit this behavior?
- What would be the ideal frequency of this behavior in sellers you do business with?
- How likely would you be to meet with a seller who demonstrated this behavior?
- How likely would you be to buy from a seller who demonstrated this behavior?
- Which leadership behaviors are the most important?

In our research with sellers, we also invited them to share stories about their personal-best sales experiences.

Findings and Implications

The results of our research are eye-opening. Buyers definitely want sellers to stop selling and start leading:

- The ideal frequency of each leadership behavior is statistically higher (beyond a chance level of probability) than what buyers currently experience with the sellers they do business with.
- Buyers are significantly more likely to meet with sellers who exhibit these leadership behaviors.
- Buyers are substantially more likely to purchase from sellers who exhibit these leadership behaviors.

We now have a clear behavioral blueprint of what buyers want sellers to do.

THE FIVE PRACTICES OF EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP®

Cam Johnson sells library automation and school security software. His company, COMPanion Corporation, dominates the field, a direct result of their commitment to customers. COMPanion continually pursues quality improvements to fulfill their mission of designing software with users in mind.

For Cam, opening the sale starts with researching the “mission, values, and beliefs” of the organization and learning all he can about the buyer. He looks for common ground and values, knowing this will give him a solid starting point.

Next, Cam asks open-ended discovery questions. When he does, he says, “I sit back and listen to every bit of information they give me.” He wants to understand buyers’ needs and long-term goals. When describing his personal best as a seller, Cam told us about a time when a buyer admitted he was seriously considering buying from one of Cam’s competitors. Having established common ground and shared values, Cam knew what to do. He first thanked the buyer for sharing this information. Instead of bashing the competition, he then shared relevant data and industry insights. He continued to demonstrate his commitment to the buyer by asking how he could earn the opportunity to work together.

When the buyer eventually chose COMPanion, he told Cam it was because of that commitment to do whatever it would take to be a partner. Over time, Cam has continued to faithfully deliver on all the buyer’s needs and affirm the buyer’s decision.

For many sellers, this may sound like business as usual. On the surface, what Cam described is a classic consultative sale. Looking through the lens of leadership, though, something more is visible.

Cam, like many successful salespeople who are preferred by buyers, actually demonstrated The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership:

- Model the Way
- Inspire a Shared Vision
- Challenge the Process
- Enable Others to Act
- Encourage the Heart

The Five Practices are all about behaviors. That makes them accessible to those who accept the challenge of leadership—the challenge of taking themselves, their buyers, and their organizations to new heights, of moving beyond the ordinary to the extraordinary. The Five Practices create the awesome connecting experience buyers crave.

In the remainder of this chapter, we introduce the five leadership practices and show how each is linked to buyer preferences. In Chapters Three through Twelve, you'll find stories from sellers who exemplify each leadership practice. Also provided are direct comments from buyers which further define and highlight the leadership behaviors they want sellers to exhibit more often.

The Five Practices create the awesome connecting experience buyers crave.

Model the Way

Model the Way is the leadership practice that addresses buyers' preferences for sellers who are consistent in displaying trustworthy behaviors.

To effectively *Model the Way*, you must first be clear about your own guiding principles. You must *clarify values by finding your voice*.

When you understand who you are and what your values are, you can give voice to those values in all you say and do.

As a seller/leader, your values aren't the only ones that matter. Everyone on the team—including your buyer—has principles that guide his or her actions. Therefore, you must *affirm the shared values* of the group. This requires involving everyone in establishing common values and holding everyone accountable for adhering to them. In this way, you will *set the example*. You will work to consistently align words and actions.

Model the Way matters because, without trust, there will be no sale. Buyers determine the trustworthiness of sellers by observing how they behave. Buyers are on the lookout for seller behaviors that demonstrate credibility, reliability, relate-ability, and an orientation focused mostly on the interests of others.

Inspire a Shared Vision

Inspire a Shared Vision is the leadership practice that will help you become more effective in designing and presenting the customized solutions that buyers prefer.

As a leader, you *envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities*. To do so, you need a clear picture of the buyer's current circumstances and desired outcomes. A one-size-fits-all solution with generic features won't be exciting or ennobling. Translating those features into relevant benefits and a picture of each buyer's unique future will be.

Even so, you can't command the buyer's commitment; you have to inspire it. You must *enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations*. Your vision will be exciting and ennobling when buyers can clearly see themselves as part of it.

It makes a difference when you Inspire a Shared Vision. This is how you gain buy-in before asking for the buy. It's how you deliver on buyer preferences for customization, and it's how you ignite buyers' passion for your solutions. Your buyers become, in essence, your internal sellers and leaders.

Challenge the Process

Challenge the Process is the leadership practice for creating unique and relevant value for your buyers, a daunting buyer preference and expectation.

Buyers are looking for sellers who can innovate and recognize opportunities by looking outside themselves and their usual resources for new and inventive solutions. You need to *search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and by looking outward for innovative ways to improve.*

Because innovation and change involve *experimenting and taking risks*, you can help buyers by creating a climate for experimentation, recognizing and supporting good ideas, and challenging business-as-usual thinking and systems. One way of dealing with the potential risks and failures of experimentation is *by constantly generating small wins and learning from experience.*

When you Challenge the Process, you create value. This makes a difference because buyers are disappointed when the experience isn't relevant, personal, and meaningful.

Enable Others to Act

Enable Others to Act is the leadership practice that positions your buyers to participate in creating precisely what they want.

Achieving success in sales, as in leadership, takes a collaborative team effort, one that springs from solid trust and enduring relationships. Leaders *foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships*. At a time when there are increasing numbers of decision-makers involved in purchasing decisions,¹⁴ you must find ways to engage every individual who will influence the decision and everyone who will be impacted by it, too.

To create true collaboration, you must *strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence*. Your buyers and internal partners are more likely to give it their all when they feel trusted, informed, and empowered.

Of all the Practices, Enable Others to Act matters most to buyers. That's because buyers strongly prefer two-way dialogue and being directly involved in generating insights and making decisions.

Encourage the Heart

Encourage the Heart is the leadership practice that cements meaningful connections between you and your buyers.

Consider what you're asking buyers to do when they partner with you. Ushering in change is arduous for buyers, as they must convince others, take a risk with you, dedicate budget and other resources, and invest time in making all this happen. That's why it's important to *recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence*. Formally or informally, one on one or in group settings, in simple or grand gestures, you can keep your buyers feeling good about the work you're doing together so they'll continue to move it forward.

Being a leader requires showing appreciation for people's contributions and *celebrating the values and victories by creating a spirit of community*. This applies to your buyers and their extended teams, and to your internal team as well.

When you Encourage the Heart, you deliver on the buyer preference for meaningful connections with sellers. This makes a tremendous difference as you work to build buyer loyalty and meet your sales objectives.



These five leadership practices—Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart—are what people are doing when they are at their best as leaders, and there's abundant empirical evidence that these leadership practices matter. The more you use The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership, the more you'll succeed with buyers by meeting their preferences.

IT'S TIME FOR REAL CHANGE

The case for change in seller behaviors is undeniable, not only from our research and experience, but in the work of many other academics and practitioners in the field. Despite all that's been researched and written, few sellers have significantly changed their behavior. While agreeing, in theory, that buyers want a connecting experience and value creation, sellers haven't sufficiently developed new skills to adapt to this new reality.

Perhaps there are misunderstandings about what gets results. Our seller-side research revealed an interesting disconnect. Seller stories about their personal bests include the leadership behaviors buyers desire, but sellers did not attribute their success to these behaviors. Instead, more than 75 percent of sellers' stories linked their success to persistence. But the word *persistence* isn't one buyers use in describing their preferences.

For sellers to make a change, they first need to understand what buyers want them to do. It's time to define behavioral changes in ways any seller can understand, observe, and adopt. Behaviorally, it's time for sellers to stop *selling* and start *leading*. The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership is a behavioral blueprint for doing precisely that. It offers sellers a new paradigm, taking them in a fresh direction, while conforming to effective selling approaches described by practitioners and researchers.