

THE EVOLUTION OF SALES DEVELOPMENT: THE PROBLEM WITH THE CHALLENGER APPROACH

Anyone in sales today owes much of what they do to what's known as consultative selling. Done well, consultative selling wins business by "out-understanding the competition," so the chief currency in consultative selling is great questioning.

The reality, though, is most salespeople and organizations are only quasi-consultative, their interest in buyers circumscribed by whatever will serve the decision to buy. Consultative selling, while improving salespeople's professionalism, limits their effectiveness to questioning, to identifying and expanding on needs and then to positioning their solutions against meeting these needs.

Consultative sales training led by the traditional sales training companies now appears dated. Notions of finding an internal coach, asking questions and then positioning your solution based on the client's answers, still look, well, so 1990s—which is when this approach became fashionable.

Sales training has evolved – but to what?

Since its publication in 2011, the book *The Challenger Sale* has contested how both training companies and sales organizations view the sales process. The book states convincingly that, in complex sales situations, those salespeople who confront their clients' thinking, out-perform those with more traditional sales techniques. Its premise is that by generating insight and effectively examining clients' thinking, sales professionals will win.

The latest thinking correctly states that in our high-pressure, fast-paced world, where knowledge is readily available, salespeople must bring insight. The idea is simple: "People pay for insight," and will reward sales professionals who help customers find new and better ways of doing business.

The challenge of the Challenger approach

First, though, we must test: Would a buyer find the salesperson's method off-putting? Like the infamous model in which the customer gets "spinned," the Challenger approach includes terms like Teach, Drowning and Tension—language that buyers might find insulting or manipulative.

Another test: How much the model emphasizes listening to the prospective customer. While most sales training includes a focus on listening, Challenger Selling does not. It's taking sales back to the days of "show up and throw up," but in a seemingly more sophisticated package.

The assumption here is that salespeople can identify powerful and unique insights that are unknown to the client. The process assumes salespeople will uncover something unknown to the client, which they then teach them. Really? This is what we want to tell our salespeople: "Go out there and treat your clients as students?"

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Challenging with humility

We at the JMReid Group embrace the idea of challenging clients; the research certainly supports this. However, we believe in challenging with humility, and with being far more interested than interesting. We often challenge clients with comments like:

- “I don't know if I agree with your conclusion.”
- “If I were you, I'd be more worried about X, but that doesn't seem to be your concern. What am I missing?”
- “I think I might approach it differently by valuing X over Y.”

This approach is in the real world, where the sales person/organization is not all knowing. It does embrace insight and speaking with a point of view—with a large dose of humility. ***The learner is not the customer; the salesperson is.***

Mindset is the answer

We don't believe sales models or methodologies are the answer to success in sales; they are simply enablers. The salesperson's mindset is the answer.

Our approach is to explore the skills to truly challenge, the opportunities to assert control and the ways of doing both effectively. We also explore supporting principles—Belief in Value, Genuine Curiosity and Persuading through Involvement—principles any client would respond to and find valuable.

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