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INCREASING COMPETENCY

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There is a business model rooted in psychology generally known as the four levels of increasing competency. No doubt you are already familiar with this concept, but you may be interested to learn how it applies when training someone how to perform any job. The actual origin of the 'conscious competence' learning theory is uncertain and can be traced back thousands of years to ancient philosophers, such as Confucius or Socrates. Experts such as Noel Burch, an employee with Gordon Training International, developed the Conscious Competence Ladder in the 1970s. Additionally, Dr. Donald Kirkpatrick, Martin Broadwell, Paul Curtis, and Phillip Warren to mention a few, have written books and developed entire training programs based on this model.

In brief, the four levels of increasing competence are as follows:

1. Unconscious Incompetent = you don't know that you can't do it well.
2. Conscious Incompetent = you know you can't do it well.
3. Conscious Competent = you do it well, and you think about the work as you do it.
4. Unconscious Competent = you are so successful it's "automatic" - you do it well, without thinking about it.

The model suggests that an employee will typically increase his or her competence over time as he or she becomes more proficient at a job, usually through additional training and work experience. It theorizes that a performer becomes so good at a job, the individual achieves an "unconscious competent" performance level. In other words, the employee is on automatic pilot so to speak.

However, in sales, it has been my experience that salespeople are able to reach the "conscious competent" phase, but it is almost impossible to achieve the "unconscious competent" phase. Why do I say that? Over time a salesperson can

perform much of his job without having to think through every step, but during the sales process, he or she may inherently take shortcuts and begin to deviate from the original sales presentation, or even forget key steps altogether. The salesperson might unconsciously edit the sales presentation, omitting key actions such as asking pre-commitment questions or failing to mention improved customer outcomes. This perfunctory editing can continue for months, and only later, if you compare the original sales presentation to the version the salesperson is now using, would you realize that it is far different or condensed from the initial presentation. Unfortunately, this is happening quite frequently in many organizations - the company develops a sales presentation to address specific issues or unspoken objections, trains the team to deliver this presentation and over time an underperforming salesperson abandons it.

So, how does a company address this issue? It starts with acknowledging that your sales force does not reach a self-sustainable level of competency. Salespeople are like athletes that require continued practice and coaching on fundamentals to attain and maintain maximum performance. To make the statement that a peak level of performance can be achieved, and maintained, without practice is to oversimplify the sales process.

As you consider the various aspects of the sales process, it is impractical to think that it can be taught once and subsequently the learner will automatically grow in a level of competency to where he or she no longer needs to study and practice. No, sales fundamentals should be imparted on a consistent basis and practiced without let up to reach maximum performance - just like a top performing athlete. Can you imagine Patrick Mahomes, the breakout star rookie quarterback of the Kansas City Chiefs, or any other stellar athlete, making the decision

to no longer study film or show up for practice? The best athletes study the game and train with more intensity. The same is true with your top performers on your sales team. They must study and practice.

Continual sales process training should provide your team with the right balance of practice to keep them on course, without sidetracking them. My recommendation is to spend about 5 minutes every day on a review of the sales process and another 20 minutes per week on practice and meditation. This extent of training and practice should keep the salesperson continuously thinking about the fundamentals of selling, but not so distracted that they cannot do their job.

Also, I meet many individuals just starting in sales, and they know nothing about one of the most critical aspects of their job - sales psychology, and sales process. Unfortunately, these new salespeople fall into the unconscious incompetent level - the "you don't know that you can't do it well" stage. Many of these individuals are failing at their job, of course, because they are "unconscious incompetents." How can new salespeople be made aware that they are not performing up to the level of competency necessary to be successful? It may seem strange that someone needs to be made aware that he or she is not good at something to start to make progress, but that is what the model of increasing competency is teaching. Once a new salesperson becomes aware that he is not good enough at his job then he can start to make progress. Then the individual can be taught the fundamentals of sales including sales psychology and sales process; otherwise, they are likely to continue failing never knowing why because they are simply unconscious. Therefore, a new salesperson needs to be aware of their need to learn the fundamentals of sales and put forth the effort to climb the competency ladder to a "conscious competent" level which puts them on the path to a successful career.