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# What Makes a Good Salesman

by David Mayer and Herbert M. Greenberg



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More than 35 years ago, the insurance industry embarked on an intensive program to solve the problem of costly, wasteful turnover among its agents. Estimates at that time indicated that there was a turnover of better than 50% within the first year and almost 80% within the first 3 years. After the expenditure of millions of dollars and 35 years of research, the turnover in the insurance industry remains approximately 50% within the first year and 80% within the first 3 years.

What is the cost of this turnover? Nearly incalculable. Consider:

- The substantial sums paid new salespeople as salary, draw on commission, expense accounts, and so on, which are wasted when those salespeople fail to sell.
- The staggering company costs, in time, money, and energy, of recruiting, selecting, training, and supervising people who inherently do not have the ability to succeed.
- The vast costs caused by lost sales, dropouts, reduced company reputation, poor morale, permanently burned territory, and the like.

What accounts for this expensive inefficiency? Basically this: companies have simply not known what makes one person able to sell and another not. As Robert N. McMurry has observed:

“A very high proportion of those engaged in selling cannot sell. . . . If American sales efficiency is to be maximized and the appalling waste of

money and manpower which exists today is to be minimized, a constructive analysis must be made of what selling really is and how its effectiveness can be enhanced. . . . We must look a good deal further—into the mysteries of personality and psychology—if we want real answers.”<sup>1</sup>

It was the obvious need for a better method of sales selection that led us to embark on seven years of field research in this area. The article which follows is based on the insights we gained as to the basic characteristics necessary for a salesperson to be able to sell successfully. Confirming the fact that we are on the right track is the predictive power of the selection instrument (battery of tests) that we developed out of the same research; see *Exhibit I*.

### Two Essentials

Our basic theory is that a good salesperson must have at least two basic qualities: empathy and ego drive.

#### Ability to Feel

*Empathy*, the important central ability to *feel* as another person does in order to be able to sell him or

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<sup>1</sup>“The Mystique of Super-Salesmanship,” HBR March–April 1961, p. 113.

## EXHIBIT I Three Examples of Predictive Results from Selection Instrument Based on Empathy and Ego-Drive

Number of people predicted for each group*		Data end of (months)	Actual sales performance (number of people who reached each quarter of sales force)				Quit or fired
			Top half		Bottom half		
			Top/quarter	2nd/quarter	3rd/quarter	Bottom/quarter	
IN THE RETAIL AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY							
A	34	6 mos.	17	13	1	0	3
		18	19	9	0	0	6
B	49	6	9	23	8	2	7
		18	10	19	8	0	12
C	60	6	0	9	20	14	17
		18	0	2	21	8	29
D	52	6	0	0	10	18	24
		18	0	0	9	7	36
IN THE INSURANCE INDUSTRY							
A	22	6 mos.	13	4	1	0	4
		14	13	4	0	0	5
B	55	6	7	23	11	2	12
		14	11	20	7	1	16
C	56	6	1	5	19	12	19
		14	1	4	11	5	35
D	48	6	0	0	4	10	34
		14	0	0	3	4	41
IN THE MUTUAL FUNDS INDUSTRY							
A	11	6 mos.	5	4	1	0	1
B	20	6	4	9	3	0	4
C	49	6	0	4	15	12	18
D	34	6	0	1	7	10	16

\* Predictions made on basis of test, without seeing people or any records:

A means outstanding, top potential as a salesperson, almost certain to succeed with high productivity.

B means recommended, good productivity, and can sometimes be designated as developable into an A.

C means not recommended; even though a C can under the right circumstances edge into becoming a low B.

D means absolutely not recommended; the applicant concerned has virtually no possibility of success.

her a product or service, must be possessed in large measure. Having empathy does not necessarily mean being sympathetic. One can know what the other person feels without agreeing with that feeling. But a salesperson simply cannot sell well without the invaluable and irreplaceable ability to get a powerful feedback from the client through empathy.

A parallel might be drawn in this connection between the old anti-aircraft weapons and the new heat-attracted missiles. With the old type of ballistic weapon, the gunner would take aim at an airplane, correcting as best he could for windage and driftage, and then fire. If the shell missed by just a few inches because of a slight error in calculation or because the plane took evasive action, the miss might just as well have been by hundreds of yards for all the good it did.

*These are salespeople with poor empathy. They aim at the target as best they can and proceed along the sales track; but if the target—the customer—fails to perform as predicted, the sale is missed.*

On the other hand, the new missiles, if they are anywhere near the target, become attracted to the

heat of the target's engine, and regardless of its evasive action, they finally home in and hit their mark.

*These are salespeople with good empathy. They sense the reactions of customers and are able to adjust to these reactions. They are not simply bound by a prepared sales track, but they function in terms of the real interaction between themselves and customers. Sensing what customers are feeling, they are able to change pace, double back on the track, and make whatever creative modifications might be necessary to home in on the target and close the sale.*

### Need to Conquer

The second of the basic qualities absolutely needed by good salespeople is a particular kind of *ego drive* which makes them want and need to make the sale in a personal or ego way, not merely for the money to be gained. Their feelings must be that they *have* to make the sale; the customer is there to help them fulfill their personal needs. In effect, to top salespeople, the sale—the conquest—provides a powerful means of enhancing their egos. Their self-

pictures improve dramatically by virtue of conquest, and diminish with failure.

Because of the nature of all selling, salespeople will fail to sell more often than they will succeed. Thus, since failure tends to diminish their self-pictures, their egos cannot be so weak that the poor self-picture continues for too long a time. Rather, the failure must act as a trigger—as a motivation toward greater efforts—which with success will bring the ego enhancement they seek. A subtle balance must be found between (a) an ego partially weakened in precisely the right way to need a great deal of enhancement (the sale) and (b) an ego sufficiently strong to be motivated by failure but not to be shattered by it.

*Salespeople's empathy, coupled with their intense ego drive, enables them to home in on the target effectively and make the sale. They have the drive, the need to make the sale, and their empathy gives them the connecting tool with which to do it.*

## Synergistic Effects

In this discussion of the relationship of empathy and ego drive to successful selling, we will treat these dynamic factors as separate characteristics. Indeed, they are separate in that someone can have a great deal of empathy and any level of ego drive—extremely strong to extremely weak. Someone with poor empathy can also have any level of ego drive. Yet, as determinants of sales ability, empathy and ego drive act on and, in fact, reinforce each other.

People with strong ego drives have maximum motivation to fully utilize whatever empathy they possess. Needing the sale, they are not likely to let their empathy spill over and become sympathy. Their ego needs for the conquest are not likely to allow them to side with the customer; instead, it spurs them on to use their knowledge of the customer fully to make the sale.

On the other hand, people with little or no ego drive are hardly likely to use empathy in a persuasive manner. They understand people and may know perfectly well what things they might say to close the sale effectively, but their understanding is apt to become sympathy. If they do not need the conquest, their very knowledge of the real needs of a potential customer may tell them that the customer in fact should not buy. Since they do not need the sale in an inner personal sense, they then may not persuade the customer to buy. So we frequently say in our evaluations of potential salespeople, "This person has fine empathy, but he (or she) is not likely to use it persuasively—he (or she) will not use it to close."

Thus, there is a dynamic relationship between empathy and ego drive. It takes a combination of the two, each working to reinforce the other—each enabling the other to be fully utilized—to make the successful salesperson.

## Need for Balance

It calls for a very special, balanced ego to need the sale intensely and yet allow the salesperson to look closely at the customer and fully benefit from an empathic perception of the customer's reactions and needs.

Thus, there are a number of possible permutations of empathy and drive. An individual may have a high degree of both empathy and drive (*ED*), or little of either (*ed*), or two kinds of combinations in between (*Ed* and *eD*). For example:

*ED*—Salespeople who have a great deal of both empathy and strong inner sales drive will be at or near the top of the sales force.

*Ed*—Salespeople with fine empathy but too little drive may be splendid people but will be unable to close deals effectively. These are the "nice guys or gals." Everyone likes them, and from all appearances they should turn out to be the best people on the force. They somehow "don't make it." People end up liking them, but buying from the company down the street. They are often hired because they do have such fine personal qualities. Yet their closing abilities are weak. They will get along with customers, understand them, and bring them near the close; but they do not have that inner hunger to move customers that final one foot to the actual sale. It is this last element of the sale—the close—which empathy alone cannot achieve, and where the assertive quality of ego drive becomes the all-important essential.

*eD*—Salespeople with much drive but too little empathy will bulldoze through to some sales, but they will miss a great many and will hurt their employers through lack of understanding of people.

*ed*—Salespeople without much empathy or drive should not actually be in sales, although a great many present salespeople fall into this group. An employer would avoid much grief by finding this out in advance, before so much effort is spent in trying to hire, train, and spoon-feed people who do not have within them the basic dynamics to be successful.

## Failure of Tests

Since the selection of top salespeople is potentially of such enormous value, why, it might be

asked, has there been so little success to date in developing methods to preselect effectively?

For at least 50 years, psychologists have been working very hard in the area of testing. Almost every aspect of human personality, behavior, attitude, and ability has at one time or another come under the scrutiny of the tester. There have been some notable successes in testing, most especially perhaps in the IQ and mechanical-ability areas. Of late, personality testing, especially with the increasing use of projective techniques, has gained a certain level of sophistication. The area which has been to date most barren of real scientific success has been aptitude testing, where the aptitude consists of personality dynamics rather than simple mechanical abilities.

#### Four Reasons

The ability to sell, an exceedingly human and totally nonmechanical aptitude, has resisted attempts to measure it effectively. The reasons for this failure up until now are many, but there appear to be four basic causes for sales aptitude test failure.

1. *Tests have been looking for interest, not ability.* The concept that a person's interest is equatable to ability is perhaps the single largest cause of test failure. Thus, tests have been developed through asking questions of successful salespeople or successful individuals in other fields, with the assumption that if an applicant expresses the same kind of interest pattern as an established salesperson, he or she too will be a successful salesperson.

This assumption is wrong on its face. Psychologically, interest does not equal aptitude. Even if someone is interested in exactly the same specific things as Althea Gibson or Rod Laver, this of course does not in any way indicate the possession of a similar tennis skill. Equally, the fact that individuals might have the same interest patterns as successful salespeople does not mean that they can sell. Even if they want to sell, it does not mean that they *can* sell.

2. *Tests have been eminently "fakable."* When people are applying for jobs, they obviously will attempt to tell the potential employer whatever they think the employer wants to hear. Given a certain amount of intelligence, applicants will know that they should say they would "rather be a salesperson than a librarian," regardless of their real preference. They know that they should say they would "rather be with people than at home reading a good book," that they "prefer talking to a P.T.A. group to listening to good music," or that they would "rather lead a group discussion than be a forest ranger."

There are manuals on the market on how to beat sales aptitude tests, but, even without such a manual, the average intelligent person can quickly see what is sought and then give the tester what the tester wants. Thus, the tests may simply succeed in negatively screening those who are so unintelligent that they are unable to see the particular response pattern sought. In other words, since they are too dull to fake, they may be screened out. Perceptive interviewers, however, are likely to notice this kind of stupidity even more quickly than the tests do, and can probably do a better job of this negative screening than the average fakable test.

3. *Tests have favored group conformity, not individual creativity.* Recent critics of psychological testing decry the testers who are seeking conformity and the standardized ways in which they judge applicants for sales and other occupations. This criticism is all too valid. Creative thinkers, impulsive free spirits, original, imaginative, hard-driving individuals are often screened out by tests which demand rigid adherence to convention—an adherence, in fact, that borders on a passive acceptance of authority, a fear of anything that might in any way upset the applecart of bureaucratic order. Paradoxically, these fearful, cautious, authoritarian conformists, although they might make good civil servants, or even fair controllers, or paperwork administrative executives, would never make successful salespeople.

Many of these tests not only fail to select good salespeople, but they may actually screen out the really top producers because of their creativity, impulsiveness, or originality—characteristics which most tests downgrade as strangeness or weakness. We discovered a situation of this type recently in working with a client:

A company in the Southwest embarked on an intensive recruiting effort for salespeople. We began receiving the tests of a number of applicants. These tests all appeared to follow a certain pattern. The applicants were not quite recommendable, and all for about the same reason—a definite lack of ego drive. For the most part, they had some empathy, and without exception they had good verbal ability, but none had the intense inner need for the sale that we look for in a productive salesperson.

After about 20 such tests came through our office, we questioned the sales manager as to what criteria she was using for screening the people who took the test. We found that before she gave the applicants our test, she had them take the sales aptitude test which had been developed by her company some years before. Those people who scored high on that test were given our test.

We had previously analyzed that company's test and found it to be a fairly good verbal abilities measure, and to some extent a measure of intelligence and insight. People with strong ego drive could not as a rule score near the top of that test. And so the very individuals with the quality we were seeking—strong ego drive—were actually screened out. We then asked the sales manager not to use that test but to screen only for credit reference and general appearance, and to give our test to those who passed this simple screening. After that we began seeing the expected number of "A" and "B" recommendable applicants—about one person in every five.

4. *Tests have tried to isolate fractional traits rather than to reveal the whole dynamics of the person.* Most personality and aptitude tests are totally traitological in their construction and approach. They see personality as a series or "bundle" of piecemeal traits. Thus, someone may be high in "sociability" while being low in "self-sufficiency" and "dominance." Someone else may be high in "personal relations," but low in "cooperativeness." Somehow, the whole (or the *Gestalt*) gets lost. The dynamic interaction that is personality, as viewed by most modern-day psychologists, is buried in a series of fractionalized, mathematically separable traits.

Thus, it is said that salespeople, somewhat like the Boy or Girl Scouts, should be very "sociable," "dominant," "friendly," "responsible," "honest," and "loyal." The totality—the dynamics within people that will permit them to sell successfully—is really lost sight of. Clearly, someone may be "sociable," "responsible," and so on, but still be a very poor salesperson.

In our research we attempted to bypass traits and to go directly to the central dynamisms that we believed were basic to sales ability: empathy and ego drive. By seeking these deeper, more central, characteristics, we immediately reduced the possibility of faking, since the respondent would find it extremely difficult to determine what *in fact* was being sought. Needless to say, the importance of interest as a variable has been reduced sharply, and the conformity factor has been completely subordinated to the basic central characteristics being measured. Thus, rather than starting with the question, "How do salespeople collectively answer certain items?" we began with the question, "What makes a really fine salesperson?" and then, "How do you discover these human characteristics?"

This use of central dynamics rather than traits, with its corollary implications, has produced what we believe to be a positive method of predicting sales success that is advanced beyond what has been done to date.

## Fallacy of Experience

Many sales executives feel that the type of selling in their industry (and even in their particular company) is somehow completely special and unique. This is true to an extent. There is no question that a data-processing equipment salesperson needs somewhat different training and background than does an automobile salesperson. Differences in requirements are obvious, and whether or not the applicant meets the special qualifications for a particular job can easily be seen in the applicant's biography or readily measured. What is not so easily seen, however, are the basic sales dynamics we have been discussing, which permit individuals to sell successfully, almost regardless of what they are selling.

To date, we have gained experience with more than 7,000 salespeople of tangibles as well as intangibles, in wholesale as well as retail selling, big-ticket and little-ticket items. And the dynamics of success remain approximately the same in all cases. Sales ability is fundamental, more so than the product being sold. Long before they come to know the product, mostly during their childhood and growing-up experiences, future successful salespeople are developing the human qualities essential for selling. Thus, when emphasis is placed on experience, and experience counts more than such essentials as empathy and drive, what is accomplished can only be called the *inbreeding of mediocrity*.

We have found that experienced people who are pirated from competitors are most often piratable simply because they are not succeeding well with those competitors. They feel that somehow they can magically do better with a new company. This is rarely true. They remain what they are, mediocre, or worse. What companies need is a greater willingness to seek individuals with basic sales potential in the general marketplace. Experience is more or less easily gained, but real sales ability is not at all so easily gained.

Among butchers, coal miners, steelworkers, and even the unemployed there are many—*perhaps one in ten*—who, whether they themselves know it or not, possess ability to be an "A," top-producing salesperson; and at least one in five would be on a "B" or better level for most types of selling. Many of these are potentially far better salespeople than some who have accumulated many years of experience. The case of "Big Jim," as we shall call him, is a good example:

All we knew about Jim at first was that he had walked into the showroom of one of our automobile clients in response to its ad and had taken our test. We reported that he was the only "A" in the group, and strongly recommended that he be hired. There

was shocked silence at the other end of the telephone. We were then told that his test had been included as a joke.

As it was described to us, he had ambled into the showroom one morning wearing dungarees, an old polo shirt, and sneakers. He had then gone on to proclaim, "I sure do hanker to sell them there cars." The dealer had included his test just to get a laugh, or perhaps to see if we were sufficiently alert to weed him out. The man had never sold a car or anything else in his life, and had neither the appearance nor the background which would indicate that he ever could sell anything.

Today he is one of the dealer's best salespeople. Soon after he started working, he "hankered to see that there Seattle World's Fair," and sold enough cars in the first week of the month to give him money to get there and spend two weeks. On his return he made enough money in the last week of the month to equal the staff's monthly average.

Obviously, most people down from the hills wearing dungarees and sneakers are not going to be top salespeople. Some, however, may be, and their lack of experience in no way reduces the possibility that they have the inner dynamics of which fine top producers are made. It is equally obvious that a great many people who present a fine appearance, a "good front," do not turn out to be top salespeople. The real question—and always the first question—is, "Does this person have the basic inner dynamics to sell successfully?"

## Background Blindness

Putting emphasis on experience often works in another way to reduce sales effectiveness. A company grows used to seeing its employees in various job "slots," in certain departments, limited to special kinds of experience. Such people may be doing a satisfactory job where they are. But it frequently happens that the blind habit of "special experience" has kept the company from using the person in a more effective and appropriate way. For instance:

A western company in the leasing business wanted us to evaluate a branch employing 42 people to determine why there had been a mediocre level of sales activity, why there had been some difficulties among the employees, and whether some of the 42 should possibly be let go. After looking at the test of each person, we did an "X ray" of the branch; that is, following the table of organization, we evaluated the staff, department by department, especially in terms of who was working with, over, and under whom, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of each department.

Virtually all the people on the staff were found to be worth keeping on, but a good third were sug-

gested for job shifts to other departments. Thus, the person with greatest sales ability, together with a great deal of managerial ability (by no means the same thing), was found in the accounting department. But that job did not completely satisfy her. She has since become the new branch sales manager, a more appropriate use of her considerable abilities.

One of the older people, though rated an adequate "B" salesperson, was evaluated as an "A" office manager. He had good empathy, but not the strongest ego drive, which was why he was a "B" rather than an "A" salesperson. But on the managerial side, he had the ability to handle details, relatively rare for a salesperson; he was able to delegate authority and make decisions fairly rapidly and well. These qualities, plus his good empathy, gave him excellent potential as a manager, but not as sales manager, for his only moderate drive would have hurt him in the latter position. As office-administrative manager, the position he was moved up into, he has performed solidly.

The former office-administrative manager, a person well able to handle details reliably and responsibly, but with little empathy (and thus unable to deal understandingly with her office staff), was moved laterally into the accounting department, an area in which she had had some previous experience, and where she could carefully deal with and manage details rather than people.

Thus, what counts more than experience is the person's basic inner abilities. Each present employee, as well as each new applicant, should be placed in the area where he or she can be most creative and productive.

## Role of Training

The steelworker, the coal miner, the displaced textile worker, or for that matter even "Big Jim," regardless of how much real sales ability each possesses, cannot suddenly start selling insurance, mutual funds, electronics equipment, or automobiles. Each one will need training. Companies have spent very large sums of money in developing effective training programs. When they are working with a person with potential, these training programs can and do bring out this potential and develop an excellent salesperson. Without sound training, even "A" level salespeople are seriously limited.

Yet how often have individuals gone through long and expensive training programs only to fail totally when put out into the field? When this happens, the trainer, and perhaps the training program itself, is blamed, and sometimes even discarded. But most

often it is neither the trainer nor the training program that is at fault; rather it is the fact that they were given the impossible task of turning a sow's ear into a silk purse. The most skilled diamond polisher, given a piece of coal, can only succeed in creating a highly polished piece of coal; but given the roughest type of uncut diamond, he or she can indeed turn it into the most precious stone. Here is a case in point:

About three years ago, a company in the Northeast installed an especially fine training program, in which a great deal of money was invested. At the end of two years, the results of this program were appraised. It was found that sales had not increased beyond what might normally be expected in that industry during that period of time. The investment in the training program seemed to have been a total waste. The entire training program was therefore dropped. Six months later, we were asked by management to test and evaluate the present sales force and to try to determine why the training program, so highly recommended, had failed so badly.

The reason was immediately apparent. Out of a sales force of 18 people, there was only one rating "A," and his sales actually had improved after the training program. Two others were "B" level salespeople, and they too had improved to some extent with training. The remaining 15 were "C" and "D" salespeople who should not have been selling in the first place. They simply did not have the potential of good salespeople. They were rigid, opinionated, and for the most part seriously lacking in empathy. This type of person rarely responds to training, no matter how thoroughgoing the program. This was an obvious case of trying to make silk purses out of 15 assorted sow's ears.

The role of training is clear. It is vital. In today's highly competitive market it is most important to bring every employee up to his or her maximum potential of productivity. Efficiency in training, using the best of modern methods, is necessary to do this. But training can succeed only if selection succeeds. Good raw silk must be provided first, before

the training department can be expected to produce the silk purses. Just as few manufacturers would allow their products to be produced on the basis of rough estimates of size and weight, but would demand scientific control of these basic characteristics, so too must the process of selection be made more scientific and accurate.

The role of the salesperson is so vital to the success of a company that it is amazing to these writers how little stress industry has placed on selecting the best raw material. To sell effectively in the U.S. market of today, a salesperson needs to have empathy. To sell effectively in the foreign market, crossing cultural lines, requires even more empathy. And marketing goods and services anywhere calls for a great deal of ego drive. The U.S. Department of Commerce recently stated that American industry has no problem with its production. Its main problem is distribution. Effective salespeople are the key to distribution, and proper selection is the key to finding, using, and profiting from salespeople of good quality.

## Conclusion

Industry must improve its ability to select top salespeople. Failure to date has stemmed from such errors as: the belief that interest equals aptitude; the fakability of aptitude tests; the crippling emphasis on conformity rather than creativity; and the subdivision of people into piecemeal traits, rather than understanding them as whole people. Experience appears to be less important than possession of the two central characteristics of empathy and ego drive, which a person must have to sell successfully. Training can only succeed when the raw material is present.

Selecting people with empathy and ego drive should contribute in some degree to helping industry meet one of its most pressing problems: reducing the high cost of turnover and selecting genuinely better salespeople.