

Leading and Selling

Chris McCusker and Robert Turknett

Leadership and Sales

The practice of leading has much in common with the practice of selling. Take, for example, the manner in which we choose our political leaders. A stump speech is a sales pitch. A national convention is a sales meeting. Market differentiation is accomplished through a party platform. A campaign promise is a value proposition. A political campaign is a sales cycle. Voting is the ultimate buying decision.

Leading is selling. And this is equally true in business as in politics.

Leaders Are to Followers What Sellers Are to Buyers

A couple of years ago, Chris McCusker interviewed Bob Galvin, who was Chairman and CEO of Motorola for nearly 30 years. During that interview, Galvin defined leadership as “going first in a new direction and being followed.” This is a useful definition of leadership because it breaks leadership into two pieces – “going first” and “being followed.”

This view of leadership can also be applied to sales. A buyer is led by a seller to go in a new direction with a product or service. “Going first” takes knowledge. A leader must understand which directions are the most valuable. Similarly, in sales, you have to know something about your services and your customers to get the most value from a relationship.

“Being followed” can be the more difficult part of leadership. Anyone can strike off in a new direction. But “being followed” is what separates the run-of-the-mill leader from the great one. “Being followed” in sales is “closing the deal” as well as building, maintaining and servicing the relationship.

Indeed, great leaders and great sellers are great for the same reasons. They have superior understandings -of customers, of their team, of their constituency. That understanding helps them chart a course. They have a special capacity to influence and inspire others. They are credible, trusted. Others are willing to follow them.

But, where do those deep understandings and capacities to influence others come from? How do they develop in a person? Can they develop in a team?

A Question of Leadership Character

What determines whether voters are buying what a particular candidate is selling? What determines whether members of an organization are following the course that a leader is charting? What determines whether a seller closes the deal and maintains a positive relationship with customers?

In our experience, there is a very simple answer: leadership character.

U.S. Army General Norman Schwarzkopf once said, "Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without the strategy." At its most fundamental level, leading – and selling, are about character – about who you are, not what you do. Ask yourself, "Are you the kind of person that others want to follow?" "Are you a seller who inspires trust and credibility?"

Character is especially critical in sales, when customers are challenged to move in new directions. A seller who can inspire is one who presents an external image that is consistent with her or his internal being. Fluff, posturing or grandiose rhetoric will not work for long in politics, business or sales. Instead, sincere, sensitive and deeply rooted communication – the kind that comes from authentic leaders, is what touches people in times of change and evokes the response necessary to face the adversity new directions always involve.

The Turknett Leadership Character Model

Those who succeed at leadership, at whatever level, will have developed strong leadership character. As an aid to leadership development, Bob and Lyn Turknett have developed a model of leadership character. It outlines core qualities that create the kind of underlying character that makes a leader worth following – and a seller worth buying from.



Notice that the foundation of leadership character – the base of the scales – is integrity. Without integrity, leadership behavior rings hollow. Also notice that the leadership scale is balanced between the qualities of respect and responsibility. Integrity is reinforced and enhanced by developing those other qualities of character—and particularly by achieving a dynamic balance of respect and responsibility.

Integrity is the most fundamental, basic attribute of character. Integrity is authenticity, knowing who you are and what you stand for, and being willing to let others know it too. It is also honesty – a willingness to tell the truth even when it is painful or difficult. Integrity is developed by ethical choice; to build it, you must be able to recognize ethical choices when they arise, reason your way through them, and stick to your convictions and decisions.

Leaders create a climate of respect when they develop and display the core character qualities of empathy, lack of blame, emotional mastery, and humility. For example, leaders (sellers) who are empathetic understand what others are feeling and are consequently better able to connect emotionally with followers (buyers). Empathy is especially critical in sales, which can produce concern and fear among buyers. The ability to understand, connect to, and modulate the emotional tone of the relationship is critical.

Humility, which is lack of arrogance, is vital for keeping the communication channels open between leaders and follower, sellers and buyers.

Leaders must create dissatisfaction with the status quo in order to motivate a change process. To do so without assigning blame will make followers more receptive to the mandate. Similarly, sellers must create dissatisfaction with the status quo without assigning blame.

The sense of partnership, participation, and fairness created by a respectful leader builds commitment, engagement, and a willingness to follow. When there's a climate of respect everyone may not be equal in terms of salary or position, but everyone's role is viewed as vitally important, and in one-on-one interactions, people are treated as equals. Just as people want to follow a respectful leader, people want to buy from a respectful seller.

Responsibility is the other side of the leadership character scale. It includes the core qualities of accountability, self-confidence, courage, and focus on the whole. Integrity is greatest when leaders balance respect and responsibility.

Accountability is critical for sales. Sales teams must execute flawlessly and must be especially concerned with servicing customers. Accountability on the part of a seller can build trust. Sellers who are open about their performance, who are willing to admit mistakes, and who always keep promises, are easier to trust than those who are opaque, never wrong, and inconsistent.

Focus on the whole means that one is accountable not only to one's own division, or team, but for the organization as a whole. In a sales organization, this quality of leadership character means that everyone thinks holistically. Responsible sellers take seriously the needs and successes of the entire organization as a whole – thinking like an owner or a shareholder – and that kind of holistic, selfless responsibility inspires others.

Creating a Culture of Leadership

Selling can be enhanced by leadership character. Leadership character is accomplished one person at a time. It lives in the heads and hearts of individual members of an organization. And, leadership character can be developed.

Leadership is needed at all levels in an organization – especially in a professional services firm, like a sales organization. Leadership is needed in every relationship and on every team.

Chris McCusker, Ph.D., Senior Leadership Consultant

Dr. McCusker is a Senior Consultant for Turknett Leadership Group in Atlanta, Georgia. He is an authority on Executive Education and has experience in leadership development with special emphasis on negotiation and managing cultural differences. His programs have been delivered in many regions of the World, including the U.S., Europe, South America, the Middle East and Asia, and they have been tailored to meet the needs of specific companies as well as diverse professional groups, including CEOs and executives, medical doctors, lawyers and architects. Through interviews with executives, he has developed and co-taught courses on leadership with CEOs from Procter and Gamble and PepsiCo. Dr. McCusker received a Ph.D. in Industrial-Organizational Psychology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he won a “Dissertation Research Award” from the American Psychological Association. He served on the faculty of Yale University’s School of Management for 10 years, and, recently joined the faculty of the A.B. Freeman School of Business at Tulane University in New Orleans. In addition, he currently teaches executive education for the John M. Olin School of Business at Washington University in St. Louis, the Graduate School of Business at Columbia University, the College of Business at Northern Illinois University, and the Yale School of Management.

Robert L. Turknett, Ed.D., CEO

Dr. Robert (Bob) Turknett is an executive leadership coach and licensed psychologist with over twenty-eight years of consulting experience. He is the Chief Executive Officer and co-founder of Turknett Leadership Group, an Atlanta-based consulting firm providing leadership and organization development services. Dr. Turknett specializes in CEO Consulting, executive team development and individual development and coaching. Bob has served as an executive coach to hundreds of senior leaders in both large and small businesses in a variety of industries. His unique approach to coaching blends psychological expertise with extensive business knowledge. Typical engagements involve individual work with a leader and the entire team producing leadership development results that impact the whole organization.

Prior to founding Turknett Leadership Group, Dr. Turknett was the co-founder of the Georgia Psychological Health Network and Chief Psychologist for the Georgia Regional Hospital System. He received his undergraduate degree in business from Jacksonville University in 1964 and his doctorate in psychology from the University of Georgia in 1971. He was a member of the Phi Kappa Phi honorary society. Dr. Turknett is also a member of the American Psychological Association, the Georgia Psychological Association, the American Management Association, the Society for Human Resource Management, the Atlanta Rotary, and the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. He is active as a United Way volunteer, and has served on the Campaign Cabinet and the DeKalb Advisory Board. Dr. Turknett devotes a portion of his time to pro-bono work each year.

About Turknett Leadership Group

Turknett Leadership Group is one of the oldest firms in the Southeast experienced in character-based leadership and organization development. Our highly professional staff includes licensed psychologists, organization development consultants, and seasoned business leaders – all of whom have years of experience coaching executives and high potential managers.

Using the Turknett Leadership Character Model as our principal guide – together with the latest in assessment tools and development techniques – we enable companies to select, develop, promote, retain, and engage the best performing, most ethical talent available. The ultimate measure of our success is your improved business and leadership performance. Some clients we have served: American Cancer Society, AGL Resources, Atlanta Hardwood Corp., BellSouth, Federal Home Loan Bank, Georgia-Pacific Corp., Kroger, Mercer Human Resources Consulting, Nextel, RTM Restaurant Group, The Home Depot and XcelleNet.