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Combatting Real Estate Professionals’ Insecurity

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Have you ever felt insecure in your career? Have you ever doubted your ability to fulfill your job duties? Or have you felt uncertain about your future within your company? If so, you are certainly not the only one in your field experiencing these emotions. While most are unwilling to admit their insecurity or discuss their self-doubt with their peers, insecurity is common among sales professionals. With time and intentionality, insecurity can be reduced by limiting exposure to stressors and through training to cope with stressors when they inevitably arise.

Stress in Sales

Real estate professionals utilize specialized skills to meet the needs of clients and experience unique demands which can be emotionally taxing. The day-to-day agenda in real estate is dynamic, unpredictable, and tenuous. Such a variety of tasks leads to a rewarding, albeit high stress, career. Buying and selling real estate is a complex transaction with a long sale cycle where real estate professionals are paid upon the closing of the transaction, months after the sales process is initiated. Uncertainty about when the next client will initiate the process and any delay in closing the sale can lead to significant financial stress for the agent. The system of commission-only payment combined with the extended time-period until payment is received creates a breeding ground for stress which is truly unrivaled.

What exactly is stress, and how can its negative effects be minimized? Stress is a process set into motion when demands in the environment tax or exceed an individual’s resources or emotions (LePine, Zhang, Rich and Crawford 2015). When stress threatens your natural balance of emotions, strain and discomfort are the result (Jex, Bliese, Buzzell, and Primeau 2001).

The transactional theory of stress discusses in detail how emotional reactions are evaluated in a two-step process (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). First, one evaluates whether an external occurrence has a positive, negative, or irrelevant impact to your personal welfare (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, and Boudreau 2000; Crawford, LePine, and Rich 2010). If the impact is positive or neutral, no stress occurs. If negative, then the second step evaluates whether one can
cope with the stress. If unable to cope, stress and discomfort arise as a threat to the natural balance of emotions.

Maintaining the natural balance of emotions should be our goal, and thus discomfort should generally be viewed as undesirable. Two prominent coping strategies exist (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Problem-focused coping encourages the individual to actively confront the source of stress when it presents itself. In contrast, emotion-focused coping aims to avoid the source of negative feelings prior to discomfort occurring.

**Insecurity**

When stress arises, the individual will either consciously (cognitively) or subconsciously (chemically) experience discomfort. Insecurity can arise as a response to the felt discomforts when the emotions cannot be reconciled with past beliefs and experiences. Every individual responds differently to this discomfort, with some becoming insecure while others dismiss the discomfort and return to their natural emotional state. (Kramer 1999).

Insecurity can be both a personality trait and a state of mind. A trait of insecurity is a continuous pattern of thought, feeling, and behavior (Hogan, DeSoto, and Solano 1977). Experiencing insecurity as a trait in one area of life typically morphs into insecurity in all areas of life. For example, continuous insecurity at work would negatively affect your emotional balance with friends and family.

A state of mind differs from a trait in that a state is transient, fluid, and arises only in specific situations (Fridhandler 1986). Normally a state of insecurity in one area would not negatively affect all emotional areas. For instance, temporary insecurity due to fear of job loss would not create insecurity in personal relationships away from work. Whether you are prone to insecurity as a personality trait or as a state of mind, it is reasonable to assume that anyone who experiences either type of insecurity longs to return to emotional balance.

**Sources of Discomfort**

Insecurity in the sales industry can arise from various sources and present itself in multiple ways. To avoid entering a state of emotional imbalance or to enable a return to balance, learning the common factors that create insecurity is vital. The most common factors which potentially lead to discomfort and insecurity are: uncertainty, self-doubt, low self-esteem, and external threats.

**Uncertainty**

When real estate professionals experience a lack of information about important external circumstances, discomfort is likely to occur (Yair 2008). For instance, insufficient information about a potential economic recession, unsubstantiated rumors about future layoffs, or uncertainty
about the closure of a sale and subsequent payment may result in a state of uncertainty. This uncertainty may sprout into insecurity and inhibit focus in the daily work routine. Often, agents become accustomed to a lifestyle supported by their sales success, and that lifestyle may become part of their self-identity (Hogg and Terry 2000). Whatever the lack of information may be, uncertainty about future income or career opportunities may distort self-identity and produce insecurity.

**Self-Doubt**

Self-doubt typically leads to discomfort in one of two ways: when a real estate professional questions his/her own abilities or when an agent questions the quality of the product being sold. While low self-esteem is based upon an evaluation of the complete self, self-doubt differs from self-esteem because it is related to negative feelings about a select few important abilities (Hermann, Leonardelli, and Arkin 2002). During a survey conducted about sales professionals’ insecurity, one sales professional discussed self-doubt associated with ability by stating, “What will happen to me is that if I do fail with a customer, I start questioning myself with every other customer.” Insecurity arises from doubt when sales professionals incessantly evaluate their own ability, with a focus on specific imperfections and shortcomings in their ability to perform necessary work (Oleson, Poehlmann, Yost, Lynch, and Arkin 2000). Perceiving yourself as incompetent in key areas in your work often leads to insecurity and may ultimately result in a lack of motivation combined with a generally negative mood. The second type of self-doubt occurs when sales professionals question the quality and competitiveness of the product or home they are selling. This doubt can develop into personal insecurity from their inability to meet client needs. Typically, feelings of self-doubt are recurring and do not dissipate with time or experience unless the source of discomfort is intentionally addressed.

**Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem is a global evaluation of one’s overall self-worth (Baker and McNulty 2013; Libby, Valenti, Pfent, and Eibach 2011). Sales professionals may experience discomfort related to low self-esteem when their perceived inability to perform multiple tasks overflows into an insecurity that permeates into all areas of life. A perceived failure in one event can lead to a chain of negative feelings and result in low self-esteem. For example, one event in which the sales professional reveals a lack of knowledge to a client may result in a decrease in how s/he values his/her whole self, or a chain of negative feelings may sprout from failing to meet expectations and grow into a fear of losing a client and a fear of ultimately losing management’s trust. In this way, negative events develop into a low self-esteem.

**Felt Threat**

Threats arise when external events call into question one’s positive self-regard (van Dellen, Campbell, Hoyle, Bradfield 2011). Secure individuals typically are able to shrug off the effect of
an external threat to remain emotionally positive (Ein-Dor and Tal 2012; Rom and Mikulincer 2003). However, external threats can compound and increase the insecurity of an already emotionally sensitive individual. (Cameron, Stinson, Gaetz, and Balchen 2010; Leary and Baumeister 2000). External threats present as a situation that is outside of the control of the threatened individual, such as a competitor having access to superior products with higher consumer demand. Sales professionals’ discomfort may arise when their performance and results are affected negatively by external threats (Krishnan, Netemeyer, and Boles 2002; Ingram, Lee, and Skinner 1989).

**How to Reduce Insecurity**

To excel in the real estate industry, which produces so many emotional highs and lows, it is vital to acknowledge that discomfort may arise from many sources. One professional surveyed described how “the emotions run the gambit… there’s not a profession out there… that provides the amount of emotional roller coaster that a sales professional runs on day in and day out” throughout an entire career. If negative emotions become insecurity, this may affect the professional’s attitude toward clients and result in insufficient focus to maintain productivity and positive relationships with customers. For example, one professional discussed the negative effects of insecurity as follows: “If you’re not excited about what you’re doing, then you’re probably not going to do it real good… the people you’re trying to sell to will know that, they’re probably not really going to want to buy from you.” To maintain emotional stability and career success long term, it is of the utmost importance to develop the ability to prevent discomfort from morphing into insecurity, as well as the ability to fight to suppress insecurity so that you may return to emotional stability.

**Reducing the Source of Discomfort Before it Arises**

As an individual, become aware of the source of discomfort that particularly affects you. If necessary, you may need to avoid the source of stress altogether by withdrawing from the environment (Lewin and Sager 2008). Seek out information to reduce your uncertainty. Ask for both positive feedback and critiques from coworkers and clients to reduce your self-doubt and boost your self-esteem. Take control of your own effort and emotional responses to avoid the negative effect of external threats.

As a manager, realize your potential to positively affect your employee’s emotions and job productivity (Evans, Schlacter, Schultz, Gremler, Pass, and Wolfe 2002; Wortuba and Simpson 1992). Provide validation when your employees succeed to boost their self-worth and debunk their self-doubt. When they underperform, provide proactive feedback on how employees can improve and emphasize their value to the organization. Persuade the team member that you are on their side and create a positive work environment to reduce perception of external threats.
Addressing Discomfort After it Occurs

When discomfort is felt and insecurity results, it is important for individuals to be able to diffuse their own insecurity and return to emotional stability by using coping mechanisms. To diffuse your insecurity, you must attempt to identify the source of your stress. Aim to understand what led to the increase in stress and address the root cause. Seek the advice of others, create a support system, and openly discuss your feelings. By actively confronting the source of stress, you may reduce the impact the stress has on your emotions (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). By understanding your emotions, you may be able to change your emotional response to regain control and return to a secure state of mind (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice 1998; Chan and Wan 2012; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004; Singh 2000). As one example of coping, frontline employees who routinely interact with customers have been observed using surface acting (modifying facial expressions) and deep acting (modifying internal feelings) as means to regulate their emotions when customers induce stress (Chan and Wan 2012).

When team members experience insecurity, managers can diffuse the negative emotions if they have the emotional intelligence to recognize the insecurity. Managers should become aware of the predominant sources of stress and discomfort. During particularly strenuous times when a team member loses a client or experiences a sales slump, knowledge of the sources of stress enables the manager to help that individual return to emotional stability.

Conclusion

The selling profession is filled with stress and emotional discomforts. To remain productive in your career, it is important to remain emotionally secure. Common sources of stress and insecurity include uncertainty, doubting your abilities, a low self-esteem, and external threats. By gaining awareness of prevalent stressors, you may be able to reduce insecurity by addressing the source of discomfort prior to insecurity arising, or reduce insecurity by actively confronting discomfort when it inevitably occurs.
Recommended Reading


References


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