Conviction: Why Skills Alone Are NOT Enough
By Scott C. Watson and Ron Gajewski

Assessing the developmental needs of a sales organization normally involves measuring behaviors against a set of competencies or performance metrics, in order to pinpoint skill gaps. Identifying and assessing so-called soft skills is challenging, but with solid science and a good dose of common sense, our knowledge in this area is advancing. One company, however, posed a question for which research-based answers were not available.

After covering various assessments of his team (prospecting, calling high, qualifying, financial acumen, presenting, and negotiating), the battle-tested sales VP asked, “What about the fire in the belly?”

He explained that some of his best sales people lacked a bit of polish and sophistication, but they believed so fervently in the value of their solutions that clients responded positively. Could we measure conviction? Could we quantify that intangible attitude some sales people possess that enables customers to “take the leap?”

We set off to identify what made up “conviction,” where it comes from, and how business leaders can instill more of it in their sales and marketing teams.

Our findings? The differences in performance associated with conviction are often as large, and in some cases larger, than differences due to exemplary skills alone.

Research Background

This project involved 62 sales people at a professional services firm who completed our PowerView® assessment (100% response rate). The assessment included a full range of skills and strategies carefully selected by the management team as the must-have skills for success. As is necessary for measuring impact, we tracked cause-and-effect by identifying and measuring leading indicators and lagging indicators of performance. For this study, we expanded the battery of leading indicators to encompass knowledge, skills, and conviction.
Definition and Measurement of Leading Indicators

- Knowledge was measured in these areas: product, technology, industry trends, competitive landscape, and regulatory issues.

- Skills were assessed in these areas: prospecting, calling high, qualifying, displaying financial acumen, presenting, and negotiating.

- Conviction was defined as your most deeply held beliefs about the value of your role and your solution. It is belief, rooted in personal experience.

Measuring Conviction

If conviction is the outward expression of a deeply held internal belief system, how do you measure belief? Simple questions about behavior are insufficient. Two equally skilled sales people, selling the same product or service at the same price point can convey radically different levels of conviction. Our hypothesis was that high levels of conviction, when paired with a genuine concern for the customer’s needs, translated into a greater sense of trust. Higher levels of trust would then, in theory, translate into more frequent purchase decisions.

The first step to cracking the code on conviction was to put ourselves in the shoes of the customer. They’re facing a business problem, but before pulling the trigger on a major purchase, a critical list of questions must be answered in the customer’s mind. Will it work? Can we afford it? Is this the best option? How will it perform over the long haul? Will these people support and service us with excellence?

If these are the key decision points, obviously sales people must have clear and sufficient answers to each question. They must also have a fairly high level of conviction around each or the message will fall flat. What’s more, rarely is a purchase decision made in a vacuum. Other options and competitors will be considered, if for nothing else than peace of mind for the customer.

We used a “comparative cognitive technique” to measure a sales person’s conviction. Our assessment covered four key areas selected by the management team as most relevant to this professional services firm and their customers:

- strength of brand and reputation in the marketplace (how well known, and the nature of messages associated with the brand)
- range of solutions and product offerings
- quality (reliability) and performance (results)
- price vs. value (what you get vs. what it costs)
We then asked the managers to identify the two strongest competitors in each area. Sales people were told, in effect, “You’re in the trenches every day, working with clients, and selling against our competitors. We need your candid insights on how we’re doing in each of these areas.”

We asked the reps to rate their own firm as “the best,” “average,” or “worst” in each of the four areas, when compared to actual competitors. Values were assigned to each factor to create an Advocacy Index™ for each sales person ranging from 0-100.

To complete the analysis, we compared various “lagging indicators” such as sales revenue and quota achievement to each rep’s conviction score.

**Insight #1: Skills and knowledge are only part of the equation.**

By themselves, expertise (knowledge) and ability (skills) are often insufficient to move others to take action on your ideas. You must also have a genuine level of conviction.

**Insight #2: Conviction is strongly linked to sales results.**

We divided people into three equal-sized groups with Low, Medium, and High levels of conviction. Regardless of tenure, experience, or location, those with the highest level of conviction produced the greatest results.

![Conviction and Performance](image)

**Insight #3: Conviction can be cultivated and developed.**

After seeing the dollar-value of conviction, the obvious and immediate question is, “How do we develop consistently high levels of conviction among our sales team?” In our experience, conviction is NOT the same as charisma. High conviction is not dependent on personality type or personal style. Rather, we’ve found conviction is developed and driven in at least four ways.
First-hand experience: When a specialist accurately diagnoses and treats your 11-year old daughter’s seizure disorder, after three other physicians had missed the clues, your belief about the skill and value of that doctor will be unshakeable. You’ll tell anyone who will listen. Why? You’ve personally been deeply and positively impacted by their work.

If sales reps lack conviction, send them to visit successful clients and give them case studies showing the quantifiable benefits of your solution.

Relationships: If someone you trust has had a single terrible experience at a restaurant, their vivid story of a “surly waiter” or “sand in the salad” will strongly influence your perceptions. More than likely, you’ll believe them and you’ll steer clear of the restaurant, even if you’ve had a positive first-hand experience in the past.

Relationships strongly influence our belief systems. That’s one more reason to pair up new reps with more tenured sales people who display high levels of conviction. It will help them “drink the Kool-Aid.”

Insight into the Customer: When salespeople have taken the time to understand the full spectrum of issues—and possible solutions—facing potential customers, they can speak with much greater authority and conviction about a proposed solution. Imagine your doctor, upon hearing about a pain in the center of your chest, immediately recommending a heart transplant without conducting a single test. Are you suspicious? Of course. No matter how fervently the doc believes you need a new heart, he’s not convincing because you know he doesn’t have sufficient insight in your condition. What if it’s just heartburn?

If sales people are not closing deals, they may be using a sales discovery process that is insufficient. Consequently, they may lack the data and the insight necessary to be convincing.

Personal Values: A salesperson’s personal values must also be considered. Though often hidden beneath the daily noise, character qualities such as integrity, honesty, respect, and genuine care for others will affect behavior. They will animate the reps’ approach and reveal their true intentions. Is the driving motive to “do the right thing for the customer?” or “to close the deal, no matter what?”

Transparency and integrity are important. Customers have a finely tuned sense of what’s really driving a sales person’s behavior.
Conclusion

The next time you’re trying to figure out how to help under-performing sales people move up, it may not be their skills or strategy. You may not need to bring in a motivational speaker. Ask them how “we compare” in several key areas that your customers care about most. Their answers may surprise you. The impact of shifting their “conviction perspective” will be seen in their sales results.

About the Authors
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Scott Watson is a true training industry pioneer, having conducted nearly 1,000 training measurement projects. After graduating from Texas Tech in 1992 with his Master’s Degree in Communication, Scott joined Acclivus Corporation, an international sales consultancy and training firm. At the time, little was known or being done about the measurement of training initiatives. Part statistician and part “sales guy,” Scott has spent the past two decades connecting changes in human behavior with business performance. Scott has authored articles on sales performance and training measurement in numerous trade and business journals, including USA Today.

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