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Six Steps To The Top

Dr. Jeff Salz And *The Way of Adventure*

When Dr. Jeff Salz speaks about injecting adventure into one's professional life, he's talking about more than team-building exercises on obstacle courses.

"Most of us tend to live insulated lives in which the inputs that we access are limited," Salz explains. "Our senses of aliveness and creativity are less than they might be. We must get out there and push at what is familiar and comfortable in order to go beyond those things. When we do that, we open up larger possibilities and can become more effective and, ultimately, more successful."

Action And Adventure

Salz knows about pushing the envelope. As a traveler, explorer, corporate speaker, business consultant (to such heavyweights as AT&T, 3M, Mobil Oil and IBM), journalist and editor, Salz has amassed a résumé that is equal parts J. Peterman and Indiana Jones.

His new book, *The Way of Adventure*, presents a kind of consolidation of his experiences. It is a treatise on the role of risk-taking in personal and professional dealings, complete with a host of dead-on insights on innovation, motivation and service that make the book a must-read for sales managers and their reps alike.

Six Steps To The Top

At the center of the book is an action plan for achieving success through adventure, which Salz calls "The Six Steps to the Top." This is as much a reference to the peak of one's profession as it is to the Celestial Mountains of China (whose peaks Salz has scaled):

Step 1: Leap Before You Look

Even the heartiest salesperson may consider anything entailing risk with a certain amount of trepidation. Salz advises never to let caution keep you from thinking and acting outside the box.

"In sales or any kind of corporate setting, it's the quality of risk-taking, of leaping before you look, that will bring the ultimate success," he explains.

"It creates a sense of excitement and possibility, a sense of aliveness. It overcomes this 'paralysis through analysis,' in that we step into something perhaps even before it's timely. By thrusting ourselves into the thick of the action, we grow into a new awareness and new capabilities."

Such an approach to risk has clear implications to sales professionals who act as coaches or mentors. This helps their charges get beyond any initial uncertainty and take some risks.

"Certainly for people who are helping others grow into a more successful sales role, I do think you need to engage in helping people recognize that there always will be doubt or uncertainty. We may fail, but the failure itself can be a catalyst for new growth."

Step 2: Aim Higher Than Everest

Salz's concept of "action orientation" is particularly pertinent to sales managers. In Salz's view, safe objectives are pointless; the more unrealistic the goal, the better.

"People I find who are less than successful have set low goals and have been successful at attaining that low level of success," he explains. "Whereas people who are, in a great sense, successful over the long term, set unrealistic, enormous, larger-than-Everest goals. Even if they come up short, they have been transformed by the magnitude of the journey

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and the possibilities."

Realistic goals do not force people into new behaviors, he says.

"Big goals, even if we don't achieve them, force us to change our modus operandi," Salz explains. "I don't think you can truly understand what you're capable of until you give something more than what you think you're capable of in the attempt to reach a goal. It's only then that you discover that you have capabilities you never realized you possessed."

Hitting Your Peak

Salz illustrates his point with the words of another risk-taker.

"I interviewed [noted explorer] Bob Ballard for my book," Salz notes. "He says that mastering the art of peak performance begins with setting extraordinarily elevated goals. He said, 'Why not set your sights on a 10,000-foot cliff instead of a 3,000-foot cliff? Because if you fall, you're still going to die.'"

Salz laughs at the thought. "You might as well go for something great. The sheer size of your undertaking eliminates competition. It's not crowded at the top of the mountain; it's crowded at the base of the mountain. By setting really large goals, if you succeed, you wind up somewhere really incredible."

Step 3: Give It All You've Got

Unselfishness is also a mark of a well-rounded professional. "In my experience in sales," Salz explains, "I've found that if people determine that what you're all about is giving rather than receiving, they'll respond in kind. You often have to put aside a lot of old, worthless attitudes in order to recognize this. When you're in rough country, it becomes obvious that the more baggage you've got, the slower you're going to move and the less you're going to accomplish.

"In a sales management capacity," he continues, "you must encourage people to leave behind the old behaviors that weigh them down, the old patterns and assumptions. Only then can they discover how new, exciting and innovative behavior can be theirs."

Step 4: Work Some Magic

Opening oneself up to risk-taking and to the possibilities of new ideas is not an unusual act of magic, Salz explains, but a natural process of allowing yourself to find the excellence within you. He illustrates by discussing a trip he made to Peru to study with a shaman in a remote location.

"I went to learn what it was like to be this otherworldly character," Salz recalls, "a sort of supernatural person, a superhuman individual. What I found was a superbly natural human being. I got an insight that when you are fully vital and you've really evolved from the inside out, you really attract success by the person you've become.

"If a sales manager is acting as a mentor, there will be a kind of magnetic force to him or her, where people will be attracted to him or her, and the amount of directorial management style he or she would have to assume would be less and less. Working magic is really about being the kind of productive, enjoyable person that you would like to have learned from and worked with. The best salespeople I know and the best sales managers are the ones who are committed to that life-long education, to taking on new skills and new challenges."

Step 5: Keep On Your Bearing

Salz notes that the service component to selling is of utmost importance, but is sometimes overlooked.

"In times of competing priorities and wondering how to organize our to-do lists, we sometimes forget it's not about us; it's really about others," he says. "That's important to recognize, from a sales or sales management perspective."

He continues, "Pam Meyer, who gives wonderful talks addressing creativity in business, has a little piece of paper that she always puts on her podium that reads, 'It's not about you. It's about them.' Keeping on your bearing is really about service, where we can look at whatever it is we're doing — whether in sales or sales management — and recognize it must be about making someone else's life better. In the process of doing that, our work takes on new meaning, and we gain a new enthusiasm and energy."

Step 6: Enjoy The View

Finally, Salz proclaims a need to stop and appreciate work well done, and not just at the end of a campaign or when a goal is achieved.

"One of the issues I have about how business is run today is that we always wait until we've reached the mountaintop to say we're successful and enjoy the view," he says. "The truth of the matter is that we need to make frequent stops along the way toward our goals. That's where we really get a perspective that we wouldn't get by just trudging mindlessly along. It's also where we get a chance to look at not just where we're going, but where we've been.

"There's a certain anxiety and pain that comes from always being driven upward, looking at what we've not yet accomplished. There's a certain joy and stamina that comes from the celebratory moments in which we can look around and say, 'Look how far we've come.' Enjoying the view is not just about patting yourself on the back, but I think it's a necessary step in making it to the top. In these moments, we get a better perspective, but also we allow ourselves the sense of accomplishment."

A Good Equilibrium

Salz implores sales managers to take a good look at those goals to make sure reps are achieving the kind of balance required to stay effective over the long haul.

"The stories that I hear that are the saddest stories," he says, "are the people who have committed too much to a goal that was too numeric — too quantitative and not qualitative enough. And the time has come for them to retire, and they've got the boat and the second home, but they're on their third relationship — and that's falling apart - and their kids don't talk to them because they weren't there when the kids were growing up. They've had no balance.

"I tell them it's never too late to re-approach your life. It's never too late to have a happy childhood. As long as there's life, there's hope." ▲

Do Your Reps Lack Relationship Building Skills?

Four Concerns To Think About

Consultative selling is built on relationships — your reps' abilities to engage a customer in such a way that he or she becomes a kind of partner to that customer, providing advice and guidance and generally becoming an asset to the customer's business. When a rep is in that kind of a relationship, he or she is, in essence, a seed from which a tall tree of continuing sales can grow.

What Makes A Great Relationship

Relationships are built on trust that is earned through repeated interactions and engagements, through experience and the sharing of expertise. There is also a personal quality to trust, and it is a variable that can make or break a relationship, depending on whether your reps are able to create a bond with those customers. In the pursuit of business, some basic concerns are often overlooked by salespeople and their managers. Don't make the mistake of overlooking these four essentials, in particular:

✔ **A positive outlook.** A straightforward, positive attitude is a prerequisite for any salesperson, particularly those who want to engage in deep, trusting relationships with customers. Just as people tend to gravitate away from others who are always down or negative, customers are less likely to engage in consultative partnerships with reps who similarly exude a downbeat, pessimistic, unenthusiastic demeanor. Such an attitude is not constructive, and it is likely to come out in negative ways, through a rep's service, advice and work habits.

✔ **Polite manners and behavior.** Those things our parents teach us from the time we're first introduced into social situations have a tremendous impact on the quality of interpersonal sales relationships. Say "please" and "thank you." Shake hands firmly and warmly. Be courteous with everyone, from administrative assistants to chief executives. Listen before you speak, and most of all, know when to stay quiet. Reps need to be mindful of these things, if they're ever going to be accepted as valued partners in consultative selling relationships.

✔ **First-rate appearance.** First impressions do count for a lot, so reps need to look sharp in their initial dealings with customers. However, the last impression carries an equal amount of weight. Simply put, reps must look their professional best each time a customer encounters them. This is particularly pertinent if a rep regularly visits a client with a "business casual" dress code. Sales calls should always be made in business professional dress.

✔ **Excellent communication.** Customers are more likely to maintain close ties with sales professionals who initiate those close ties and help the customer maintain them through clear, regular communication. You can't over-communicate in a consultative relationship; the door must always be open, and the phone line must always be clear. ▲

How To Avoid Information Overload

One of the great aspects of computer and telecommunications technology is the fact that, with the right tools at your disposal, you can be reached, quite literally, anywhere, at any time. Clients who have problems can page you; reps who need to check in can call you on your cell phone; anyone can e-mail you and know you'll receive it quickly on your wireless organizer. You can be almost instantly reachable, wherever you go.

Beyond Double Duty

Of course, that fact is also one of the negative aspects of technology. You're on duty, in effect, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You can be connected to a conference call meeting while shopping for lettuce. Thinking of taking the family to the Bahamas for some rest and relaxation? Don't even think of not taking the cell phone and the laptop — you'll miss too much. If the mere existence of a cellular phone that accesses e-mail, calendars and a paging system doesn't intimidate you, it may very well pummel you into submission with its omnipresence.

Just because you can take your technology with you everywhere doesn't mean you have to be overloaded with the volume of data it throws your way. Here are some tips for managing your information and avoiding overload:

Keep your priorities straight. One of the most disorienting aspects of technology overload is the manner with which it entices users to multi-task when multi-tasking is not called for. If a call on your cell phone interrupts your typing of a memo on your laptop and that action reminds you to schedule a meeting with a rep using your Palm Pilot before he or she pages you again, you're doing way too much at once. Set task priorities and give yourself ample free time in which to do them. If your gadgets provide too many distractions, turn them off.

Lay down the rules of contact. Let people know how you prefer to be reached, and what times are off-limits for any contact. For example: if you wear a text pager, tell your subordinates and associates that you would like to be reached by that method. Also, give them a time after which they should not expect to have their message returned until the next business day — after dinnertime, for instance.

Give yourself time away from technology. No one can or should need to be available seven days a week. Give yourself at least one day each week when you don't have to touch a computer keyboard or wear a pager. Maintaining at least a little distance from technology will keep you from overloading and burning out.

Use only the features you need. You don't need to have the up-to-the-minute, latest and greatest version of your favorite gadget to be effective. Learn to use what you have until just before it clearly loses its effectiveness to meet the needs of your business. If you focus too closely on having all the new, cool bells and whistles, you'll spend as much time upgrading as you do responding to the technology. ▲

Observe The Golden Rule For Your Vendors

Are You Treating Them As You Want To Be Treated?

Your reps probably know what it's like to chase a customer who stays in the game to see how far down he or she can drive your price, only to select another vendor at the last possible minute. As a sales manager tasked with monitoring accounts receivable, you know the frustration of having to wait for a perpetually tardy customer who just can't seem to pay his bills on time, or who claims he never received an invoice. And everyone has probably dealt with customers for whom every shipment is a rush shipment, every order an opportunity to push for more favors, more freebies or more concessions.

Do Unto Others ...

These circumstances provide very challenging scenarios for you, your reps and your organization as a whole. But have you ever considered how your actions and habits are viewed when you are the customer, rather than the vendor? What do your vendors think of you? Consider the ever-pertinent golden rule in your engagement and relationships with those vendors. Do you, as the customer, treat them the way you want your reps and organization to be treated by your clients?

Think about the most frustrating clients you have, then consider your own actions and activities as a customer. Make sure, in the course of your relationship with vendors, you do the following:

Make an arrangement and stick to it. Certainly, if market changes or fluctuations make renegotiating a deal too valuable an option to pass up, pursue renegotiation on fair terms. Avoid haggling with vendors just to see how low they'll go on price. Put all your mutual expectations down on paper, sign that paper, and stick to your end of the bargain.

Keep special requests to a minimum. While emergency situations call for flexibility and, on occasion, special consideration from vendors (particularly customer-centric ones), try to keep requests for unusual or extraordinary perks to a minimum. If you've run out of an important component to your product or have a breakdown of your computer system during a busy time, you have cause to request extra effort from a vendor or to call in a favor. Those should, however, be exceptions, rather than the rule.

Pay on time. When your customers don't pay their bills on time, your organization is denied money that it counts on to maintain viability and reach its goals. Likewise, if you are consistently late paying your vendors, you set your organization up for a bad relationship, reputation and credit rating.

Be good to your vendor's reps. Consider the golden rule again when you're dealing with a vendor's rep, in a meeting, presentation or even over the phone. Treat him or her the same way you would want your reps treated in a similar situation. Let basic, good, professional behavior prevail in every interaction, every transaction. ▲

How To Outsource Sales Help

Points To Ponder When Augmenting Your Rep Force

Is your sales force a bit stretched, due to expansion into new territories or new sales channels? Why perpetuate a burdensome situation that will lead to burnout and inefficiency, when there is a perfectly viable alternative available to you if you use outsourcing?

Bringing in independent reps to help with a new or restructured territory can help your organization tremendously, and it enables your reps to concentrate on their current territories, or to acclimate themselves to their new ones. Independent reps bring their own experience, networks and client base to the table, and they present you with the possibility of extending your reach even further than was possible with your in-house sales force.

There are some considerations to make, however, to make sure you're properly engaging these resources and incorporating them into the equation of your business, in order to maximize their contributions to your goals:

✔ **Treat them like any prospective employees.** Examine any potential rep from outsourcing as carefully as you would a prospective employee who had submitted a résumé to you. Also, make sure he or she has experience in selling products like yours, or in selling in the territory into which you want to move.

✔ **Make them prove themselves.** Once they're on board, monitor their progress, particularly in the early going. Give them a short rope at first, particularly with decision-making about things like discounts or giving perks to attract new business — if they can't sell without those things, chances are they're not the kind of salespeople you're looking for. Also, make certain they buy into your process, using the tools and methodologies your organization supports.

✔ **Keep agreements short and simple.** The rep should be engaged for short contract periods, especially early on, and these periods should be renewable at your option. This allows you some flexibility in either keeping the rep on if things are going well, or opting out if they're not. Make sure all performance expectations are spelled out in these contracts and that the rep knows exactly what you expect the outcome of his or her engagement to be.

✔ **Make decisions with your organization's best interest in mind.** Keep the overarching goal of engaging outsourced help in mind. You want to enhance the performance of your rep force while it is in an expansion period. If, for whatever reason, that goal is not being met, do not hesitate to reconsider the wisdom of bringing in outside help. ▲

Riding A Knockoff Product To Success

While just about every organization wants to be innovative and original, attracting customers with unique products and model sales approaches, it is a simple fact of life that not every organization can fulfill this desire all the time. Original product designs — plans and projects that have never been seen before — are rare; rarer still are the companies that can leverage that originality into sales success.

Not Always Negative

It is another fact of life that, while most companies may not always be able to come up with a unique and successful product, many of them will copy their competitors' designs and try to grab as many customers as they can with their knockoff products. Indeed, the term "knockoff" has many negative connotations (fake jewelry or cheaply made appliances), when some knockoff products can, if properly manufactured, present an improvement over the original design. Even if the designs are the same, when properly positioned with customers, knockoff products can present a sales bounty that can help build a foundation for future innovations and success.

If you have such a product, consider the following:

You must project differentiation. If you've made an improvement to the original design, make sure that improvement is front-and-center in your differentiation strategy. Setting your product apart from the original as an improvement over the original is key — you need to let customers know, through demonstration or inference, that you are selling the better product.

You must promote your product well. You'll have to pull out all the stops to get your product in front of as many customers as possible by use of in-store displays, commercials, Web sites and demonstrations. This is particularly the case if enough time has elapsed between your competitor's launch and the launch of your copy product to allow your competitor to get a good head start with the public, their perceptions and their wallets.

You must have reps and middlemen onboard. Part of your efforts at getting your product out in front of the public must be directed at the people who stock and sell your product. You must convince them that your product is salable. Once they are on board, they can help stir up demand and get your product on store shelves, in displays and in the hands of customers.

You must be prepared to move on price. Often, knockoff products are sold at lower prices (because they tend to have lower manufacturing costs), so the makers/sellers of the original product will sometimes launch a preemptive strike at competitors by lowering their prices first. This could get dangerous for both you and your competitor, as bottom line profits will erode for both over time. Monitor your competitor's moves, but be judicious when it comes to slashing prices. There are better, more effective ways to differentiate your product. ▲

The Self-Propelled Sales Team

What Do They Need To Succeed?

Like a parent who is finally comfortable leaving a child at home unsupervised, there is a sense of calm or relief when you have a sales team that can be left alone to run an account. This doesn't mean you, as sales manager, need to take a completely hands-off approach (even parents call home sometimes, to check up on things). It simply means the team, on its own, can handle both the routines and surprises inherent to dealing with a long-term client account, without much (if any) intervention at the management level. They run the show themselves, and you get to turn your attention to other matters.

That doesn't absolve you completely of involvement with the account or the team. Teams need nurturing in order to succeed, but even before that, they need a sound beginning, a motivational infrastructure, if you will, that allows them to propel themselves and meet the challenges inherent to long-term sales engagements. Here are some things to consider when building the self-propelled team:

✔ **Who gets to supervise.** Although many teams work well as a collective of equals, you should pick one person to act as the de facto team leader. You need someone to take the lead on client contacts and to act as the intermediary between the team and management. Look for a solid, motivated person with qualities that will help inspire, challenge and encourage the reps on the team, in good times and bad.

✔ **What tools are required.** Never send a team of reps into the field without the tools they need to do their job properly; such inattention can only frustrate and demotivate your people. If they need technology in the form of cell phones, laptops and other devices (and they probably will), make sure they get what they require to succeed.

✔ **How to identify needs within the team.** In order to leverage the strengths of your rep force, for the good of your organization and clients, you need to know what those strengths are. By the same token, you cannot address the needs of your people (for training, rewards, personal and professional edification) without keeping up with what those needs are. Make sure your team leader keeps a finger on the pulse of the team and an open line of communication with you, in order to satisfy this motivational requirement.

✔ **How to provide stimulating work.** Reps will not feel motivated if they are forced to do paperwork all day. They need stimulation: interaction with people, opportunities to flex their skills at needs analysis and dozens of other things that comprise a motivated selling environment. If you don't provide them with interesting tasks on accounts and within teams where they can use their skills to shine, you won't be able to keep them happy and engaged. This will result in sub-par effort and service and, consequently, in an unhappy client. ▲

Use E-mail Newsletters To Generate Sales

Old Techniques, New Technology Add Up To Unique Tool

Your Web site can and should be more than simply a means by which customers can purchase your products. In order to bring customers back to your site, you have to provide continued value each time they visit. The nature of the Web as a communication tool enables this kind of flexibility and constant updating, but your range of content options is so wide, it may be difficult to choose how to best engage your customers consistently.

One excellent way is to take the customer newsletter, a tool that is often used in attracting and informing customers, and use it in a new context — over the Web — to increase its ability to attract and inform. There are so many user-friendly, relatively inexpensive software applications currently on the market that enable you to create, format, and post your own Web content, it's a wonder more sales organizations don't pursue this value-added Web feature. Here are some things to consider:

Stress the "free" nature of your content. Let Web customers know you're giving them something for nothing and that you will continue to do so at regular intervals. With this information, they'll visit your site repeatedly.

Stress the value of your content. Your articles and tips need to speak to the needs and concerns of your customers. If they do not, there is little value for those customers and, consequently, you will not likely get repeat business at your site that often.

Make customers the "stars" of your newsletter. With each issue, include an interview or article that features a customer, offering first-hand testimonial of the worth of your products. Indeed, testimonials can also be spread around each issue, in smaller pieces, or even just in "filler" blocks, interspersed between articles, throughout the issue.

Introduce new or upcoming products. Everyone likes to be in on a big secret, to be one step ahead of the person next door. Reward customers who read your newsletter with "inside" information on upcoming products. You can also run "teasers" and offer additional information via e-mail, thereby enabling you to collect e-mail addresses for your prospect database.

Make great offers. Add to your database by offering special discounts to customers via e-mail, when they give their addresses to you. Make it worth their while by actually making the offers something special — a deep discount or free item — that customers will find valuable. Your site, as a result, will also be viewed as more valuable to those customers. ▲

Use Your Travel Downtime Wisely

You'll Never 'Kill Time' In An Airport Again!

So many time-management books and seminars focus on finding little pockets of time in one's day to perform small tasks that, all told, can add up to big successes. Got five minutes to kill before a lunch meeting? Call a prospect or touch base with someone in your professional network. Got a 10-minute commute on the train? Read over that territory report your rep just handed you. Five minutes here, 10 minutes there — even the briefest portions or smallest blocks of your day can be spent doing something productive.

You don't get to read a whole lot about how to best spend an enormous and unexpected chunk of time when it falls in your lap, although most business travelers are experiencing such chunks with increasing frequency. Between late flights, canceled flights and rescheduled flights, such travelers (a good number of them sales professionals) can find themselves waylaid for hours upon hours with virtually no end in sight.

These periods can, if used wisely, wind up being some of the most productive hours of your day. Before your next business trip, think about these points:

Treat delays as inevitable. Go into your trip knowing you're going to have some period of downtime, and plan accordingly to have some material available to work on during that downtime. Bring lighter work (reports to read, performance reviews to fill out, etc.) to fill in periods of an hour or less, but always have something a little more weighty (projection figures, planning materials, etc.) on hand in case the short delay stretches into two hours or more.

Have what you need handy. Pack your briefcase and/or laptop case with downtime work in mind, keeping the materials you need to do both light and heavy work in appropriate spots where they can be accessed with ease.

Look around for opportunities. Conversations with other business travelers can be effective uses of downtime as well — networking opportunities you might otherwise never have had. Keep business cards close at hand and pen and paper within reach, to make for easy name and number exchanges.

Know where you are, and how to get out. Before you leave on your trip, download maps of the airports you'll be passing through and keep them handy, in case the amount of downtime makes it more efficient for you to rent a car to get to your destination. And for those long drives, keep a couple of book- or seminar-on-tape sets tucked away in your briefcase to make productive use of that time as well. ▲

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