

Solving the Mystery

A Two Step Solution to Improving Sales Performance

Over the last twenty years and across many borders and sectors, a common lament we hear from sales leaders goes:

“It is a mystery to us why some of our salespeople perform at a much higher level than others. They look similar on paper, go through the same training, report to the same managers, have the same incentives, yet some excel and others don’t. We just don’t know why.”

Then, they will complete their thought by observing that if they could solve the mystery and raise the performance of more typical salespeople, they would easily meet, and likely surpass, their business goals.

If this sounds like you, then you will benefit from reading on about Tilden & Associates two-step solution:



1. Identifying key competencies for sales success through an Exemplary Performer analysis. Put another way, these are the disciplines and skills practiced by top performers that distinguish them from more typical ones.
2. Putting a Portfolio system in place to determine the level of proficiency in each salesperson. Based on the portfolio assessment an individualized coaching and training agenda is established.

The outcome is a higher performing sales force. This two-step process is different from the more common approach of placing all salespeople in the same training and hoping some of the skills they are taught stick.

Step One: Exemplary Performer Analysis

One size may fit all when it comes to ball caps.
But, it is a flawed approach when it comes to teaching and learning, including sales education.

We are all familiar with the curricula we experienced in schools and then at the university level. Let’s consider the latter.
New students start out with introductory courses usually labeled “101”. With that foundation in place, they proceed through more advanced courses at the 201 and 301

levels before they complete their concentration with some form of capstone experience, usually identified in the course catalog as “401”.

Yet, when it comes to selling skills sales leaders typically pile everyone, seasoned veterans and rookie salespeople alike, into a one size fits all 101 level class. The result for those of us who teach selling skills is a lot of kicking and screaming from experienced salespeople.

Of course, one of the benefits university registrars have over sales leaders and HR staff is an understanding of what courses comprise their curricula. They know the sequence of instruction for each concentration, including which basic courses serve as prerequisites to more advanced ones. Indeed, course descriptions include their prerequisites in the catalog. As a rule, sales leaders and HR staff have no sense of what comprises a comprehensive selling curriculum.



The interview based Exemplary Performer Analysis (EPA) is the vehicle for accomplishing step one in our two step solution: identifying both the processes and skills your top performers exhibit which set them apart from others on the sales force.

Once, we learned that an exemplary performer for an engineering firm took time to win the collaboration of senior engineers. When the milestone in the sales process came for a high level technical conversation between those senior engineers and technical advisers on the buying side, the engineers were willing participants. The more typical sales performers, on the other hand, did not cultivate internal relationships and senior engineers were less willing to participate in client facing conversations. The sales process then stalled.

Another time we learned that an Exemplary Performer moved beyond in-bound RFPs and probed to learn more about the strategy and performance issues that were *driving* the RFP. During our EPA interview he observed, “*It’s not like these guys got to work one morning and said, ‘Hey we don’t have much going on today. What do you say we send out an RFP.’*” More typical performers mechanically went through the exercise of completing the RFP and their win rates were much lower.

Routinely, we find that what distinguishes Exemplary Performers is a practice or a discipline everyone on the sales force can model. Top performers don’t possess super natural qualities. With customized training and coaching mere mortals on the sales force can learn to perform at a higher level too.

Step Two: Portfolio Assessment

With the key competencies for high performance selling identified in step one, the next step is to determine who on the sales force possesses them and at what level. But, we do not suggest traditional tests for this evaluation. Rather, we propose a Portfolio Assessment. Derived from visual and performing arts, portfolios have been used increasingly in a wide variety of settings to evaluate abilities. The essence of a portfolio assessment is that each salesperson needs to provide *authentic evidence* that they have mastered key selling proficiencies.



Traditional testing with right and wrong answers and percentile ranks would provide only proxy evidence that the salesperson has what is needed to succeed at a high level. Alternatively, the portfolio approach requires tangible proof. Traditional paper and pencil tests go no further than *knowing* what to do. Portfolios require both *knowing and doing*.

Many test takers perceive traditional tests as something being done to them. Conversely, portfolio assessments are recognized as a fair means of demonstrating mastery of essential skills. There is no arguing the relevancy or content validity of a well- conceived portfolio assessment.

Possible portfolio content could include:

- A pipeline for the previous quarter describing each of the milestones.
- A minimum of three cases where clients successfully advanced through each of the milestones.
- Their 3 (new) + 3 (profiling) + 3 (win expected) plan for the upcoming week.
- Analysis of different buyer modes (commodity, consultative and partnership) for an existing account including evidence of how they crafted their value message accordingly
- Analysis of different decision influences in an existing account including evidence and documentation of how they built and leveraged those relationships
- Personality profiles of each decision influence
- An account profile for an existing account they have developed in the last quarter.
- A list of questions they asked in their last three sales calls and the responses they received to those questions
- Analysis of a live account including:
 - Decision making hierarchies

- Functions and lines of business
- The client's production chain
- Three Account Plans
- Three recent presentations they have delivered

When portfolios are deficient, a clear and customized developmental agenda emerges. Both salespeople and their managers know what needs to be done to bring the content of the portfolio up to high performing standards. Rather than being sent off to prepare for a test, salespeople receive individualized coaching.

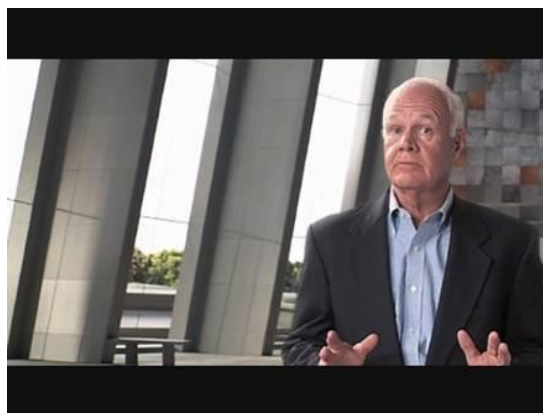
In summary, this two-step solution to improving sales performance will:

- Identify the key skills and disciplines that distinguish top performers from typical ones.
- Provide authentic evidence of mastery of critical selling abilities in the firm's unique sales process.
- Determine a coaching training and teaching agenda for the salesperson and his or her coach.
- Be accepted by the sales team as a fair and appropriate way to help them succeed.

Please let us know if you would like to learn more about this novel way of assessing sales competencies.

About the Author

In 1994, Dr. Arnold Tilden established Tilden & Associates, a firm that enables its clients to improve performance through sales training, sales leadership consulting, and executive development. In 1999, Tilden became a partner in PfP Consulting, Inc. a global sales and marketing practice specializing in financial services. Tilden has assisted many Global 50 and Fortune 1000 companies in improving performance including AccuWeather, Barclays Global Investors, Barnes & Noble, BNP Paribas, Credit Suisse, Fortis Bank, ING, KPMG, Johnson Controls, Ogden Newspapers, Perkin Elmer, QlikTech, Trane, United States Federal Reserve System and Wachovia. He has also consulted with regional firms in diverse industries including accounting, advertising, architecture, banking, engineering, higher education, information technology, insurance and manufacturing.



Tilden earned his doctorate from Temple University in educational psychology and has conducted landmark research in career development. He has taught psychology

(Psychological Tests & Measurement) and management (Human Behavior in Organizations) while serving as a college dean and vice president.

Dr. Tilden is a specialist with the Myers Briggs Type Indicator and has effectively used that model to advance leadership skills, career development and teamwork. He is the founder and author of *Successful Selling to Type: SST[®]* a sales model which improves communication effectiveness by applying MBTI principles and concepts.

Tilden's second book, *Rainmakers, Closers and Other Sales Myths*, was published by University Press of America in 2007. In it, he debunks popular sales myths to which many businesses subscribe and replaces sales mythology with his *Strategy, Structure and People System[™]*.