

Wheelabrator Group

Wheelabrator Group introduced coaching to reinforce the development of new selling skills for its highly-experienced sales force. This involved coaches carefully observing the coachee's interactions with customers, and guiding them in coaching conversations before and after 'live' calls to achieve more successful outcomes.

Wheelabrator Group specialises in surface preparation solutions for the automotive, aerospace, medical, steel, foundry and construction industries. These solutions are typically large-scale pieces of equipment – for example, wheel- and air-blasting machines – which are essential in the manufacture and finishing of precision-engineered components. In addition to providing these technologies, the company offers a suite of after-market support services including equipment modernisation, spare parts, maintenance and training.

The company formerly traded as International Surface Preparation Corporation, which was the product of a number of mergers and acquisitions of major North American and European shot-blasting and other surface preparation businesses. Renamed as Wheelabrator Group in 2005, the company was acquired by Mid Europa Partners from previous owners Bard & Company in February 2006. Its UK headquarters is in Altrincham.

Business context

Formed from a series of mergers of companies that were previously in competition with one another, Wheelabrator Group embarked on a rationalisation journey. This involved disposing of non-core businesses, pooling resources and standardising processes across the group. A key area identified for strategic realignment was sales and marketing. 'Our units were often going to market separately,' explains International General Manager, Clifford Parr. 'Some business units had their own website and separate sales channels, so we took a long hard look at things and began to consolidate.'

Parr soon realised that sales teams were sometimes unknowingly competing against each other in what they were offering the customer. 'At times customers were being presented with competing proposals for the same job, neither of which fully matched their explicit needs or illustrated clear benefits. There was a tendency to bamboozle the customer with superior technical specifications, but this often meant bundling in features and services the customer didn't necessarily need and couldn't afford. In effect, equipment was being over-specified and

we were giving away value to customers. Something needed to change.' Wheelabrator entered into partnership with the behavioural change consultancy Huthwaite International in late 2004. Huthwaite is a specialist in improving sales performance through training reinforced by coaching.

Finding a common language

In the absence of a recognised methodology for diagnosing sales capability issues, developing skills or measuring the improvement of sales staff, Wheelabrator aimed to:

- establish a 'common language' for the sales population to facilitate learning, reporting and discussions
- develop a 'best practice' sales process for the entire group and a single model of selling specifically suited to the kind of high value sales environment that the group operates in (typified by long cycles and multi-call scenarios)
- introduce a coaching culture into the sales organisation and create an environment for lasting behaviour change.

To achieve these aims, Huthwaite provided training in SPIN® selling skills for the salesforce, SPIN® coaching for sales coaches and set up the Wheelabrator Academy. (SPIN is a registered trademark of Huthwaite Research Group Ltd.) The Academy is a customised version of Huthwaite's Sales Management and Reinforcement Tool (SMART), an automated system for monitoring and evaluating the impact of coaching on sales outcomes. In total, 161 sellers from Europe, Asia and North and Central America were trained in Germany, France, England, Hong Kong and the USA. These individuals were then 'enrolled' into the Academy and coached over a focused period of three months.

SPIN coaching

The SPIN selling methodology has been developed by Huthwaite over a period of some 30 years based on observation of major sales interactions. It is rooted in the psychology of customer needs, which fall into two categories: 'implied' and 'explicit'. The SPIN method, when

applied consistently, provides the salesperson with questioning and listening skills for determining the customer's explicit needs (or for turning an implied into an explicit need). This enables them to establish the 'need pay-off' in the minds of customers and therefore improve the probability of achieving a successful outcome. But while this is something that can be grasped theoretically, it takes time to internalise the method and begin applying it effectively. This has to occur in practical scenarios and the coaching is designed to facilitate ongoing development and to reinforce the selling skills.

Choosing the coaches

To reinforce the development of SPIN selling skills, Huthwaite trained 30 Wheelabrator employees as coaches – 16 from the International business and 14 in North America. In North America, the coaches were the line managers of sellers, but those chosen in International were managers who were not in a line relationship with their coachees and, typically, not part of the sales organisation. This decision was a crucial factor in the relative success of the coaching cultures which subsequently developed.

In North America, the fact that coaches were senior sales managers often restricted their availability as coaches, as well as affecting their coaching style. 'When a sales manager observes a sales call there is a strong temptation to want to intervene and 'save' the call if it's not going well,' explains Parr. 'We wanted coaches who were neutral. Some came from HR and marketing, and those who came from sales were paired with coachees from outside their own area of technical expertise. All coaches were selected on the strength of their interpersonal skills and whether they could keep a cool head. And the fact they were not technically knowledgeable in that specific area meant they could retain critical distance, not get drawn in, and therefore focus on the real agenda.'

Training objectives

Huthwaite's training programme for coaches is based on the principle that trainees learn best by 'doing and reviewing'. Analytical and planning processes and coaching skill sets are introduced incrementally. Numerous small group or paired activities ensure that lessons are thoroughly embedded using exercises, roleplays, feedback and discussion of real issues. By the end of the course each participant should:

- have a thorough understanding of SPIN selling skills

- have prioritised their salespeople according to their coaching needs
- be able to build strong coaching relationships by using the most appropriate style and focusing their efforts on the most productive areas.
- have proven skills in accurately recording and analysing the behaviour of sellers and customers in 'live' sales calls
- be able to diagnose priority skill deficiencies and provide objective and focused coaching on and off the job
- have skills to build commitment to change and improved performance
- have tools and materials to reinforce, monitor and measure progress and results.

Pitching coaching at the right level

The majority of the sales force had reacted to their SPIN training positively, recognising its potential for improving their performance. 'There were a few cynics,' says Parr, 'but they were in the minority.' At the other extreme were those who were 'born to it', salespeople who went on a steep learning curve and immediately began applying the methodology successfully. However, the majority were 'keen, but struggling with the finer points'. Coaching aimed to reinforce the development of all three groups. 'We began with the low hanging fruit,' says Parr, 'the people who came out of the training with real enthusiasm and natural ability. We also concentrated on the majority who were very willing to learn, but who struggled initially applying their new skills. The handful who were perhaps more cynical were pushed from above to join the middle group.'

Coaching pairs

Coaching commenced in March 2005. Coaching SPIN involves both face-to-face and telephone coaching. Following pre-call planning – where the coach and coachee establish the nature of the call or visit ('Is it a potential sale?' 'Is it a follow up visit?' 'What are the expected outcomes?') and discuss how it will be approached – the coach then observes and records the kind of questions the salesperson uses and their timing, noting how successfully they apply the selling skills they have been trained in. Then there is a post-call analysis to identify the moments at which the call was seen to go well or badly. Coach and coachee agree on an action plan for refining skills prior to the next sales call. According to Parr: 'This allows the salesperson to develop their SPIN selling skills so that these

become part of their normal behaviour. What begins as a conscious technique, which they have to think slowly and deliberately about, ultimately becomes a subconscious action.'

Winning over the doubters

There were mixed reactions to being coached, ranging between excitement, nervousness and (in a few cases) resentment at being coached by someone that was more junior or less technically knowledgeable than the coachee. 'We had to be sensitive to this,' explains Parr. 'Our sales people have a huge amount of experience. They're typically senior professionals who are experts on the technical aspects of our products and are accustomed to successfully securing large value contracts. The fact that they're still willing to develop further is testament to their professionalism.' Initially, some individuals were nervous about being observed by a coach, but this was quickly overcome once the nature of the coaching was understood. 'Coaches are not obtrusive and they're not there to "tell tales" on bad performance,' says Parr. 'The majority saw it was part of a long-term investment in skills development by the company, and they were increasingly won over when they began to see how the techniques made them more effective sellers.'

Measuring the impact

Huthwaite's customised SMART tool enabled coaches to enter data based on their observed

calls and on their pre- and post-call coaching conversations. This enabled activity to be monitored and assessed throughout the three-month period of coaching and at the end of that period, Huthwaite was able to analyse the data to measure the impact of coaching.

The results demonstrated that face-to-face coaching in particular produced an improved 'SPIN profile' in the coachee (the profile is quantified based on the coachee's application of the techniques). And the improvement in SPIN profiles tended to correlate with the achievement of successful sales outcomes. One of Huthwaite's 'rule of thumb' measures when judging the success of a project is to look at the number of 'benefit statements' made by a seller, because research shows that a doubling of the number of benefits highlighted by a sales team will have a positive impact on their sales performance in future. At Wheelabrator, the overall result fell short of double the previous number of benefit statements, but there was a 'significant increase' by the end of the coaching cycle.

One year on, Clifford Parr is certain that the introduction of SPIN selling has provided the sales organisation with the 'common language' it was missing. And there's been a clear impact on the bottom line. 'Our margins have improved and this has been the best year in our history,' he says. 'Good coaching helps to influence a positive attitude. When it comes to effective selling, that's hugely important.'