



E-BOOK SERIES

GETTING CONSULTANTS INTO A

# SELLING MINDSET

IAN PRICE

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## PART ONE

## INTRODUCTION

As consultancies, along with everyone else, navigate their way out of lockdown, it is more important than ever to secure new business particularly when many clients and prospects may themselves be in survival mode. Now there is an urgent emphasis on the need to sell.

While some that I work with recoil from the 'S' word, forgive me for referring to this activity as "sales". It is common for consultants to regard sales - both the activity and the word - with a mixture of disdain and fear. "I've provided my partners with scores of very warm leads," one marketing head told me, "but they've consistently been 'too busy' to pick up the phone and call a single one of them." While it is always possible to blame an overwhelming workload for not making time for selling, this is often a form of avoidance rather than poor time management. It is also less about sales skills in the traditional sense than it is about mindset. I have often heard founders of consultancies described as "natural" sales people with an apparently divinely awarded gift of teasing out client needs and persuading them to sign on the bottom line. These people are rarely schooled in the techniques of selling; rather, they have developed the habits of successful selling out of necessity. If you start your own consultancy, you learn how to sell quickly or else fall by the wayside. Where consultancies have trained people in the traditional skills and techniques of selling, the results have been mixed at best. That's not to criticise the sales training. As G.K.Chesterton

said of Christianity: "It's not that it's been tried and found wanting; it's that it's been found difficult and not tried." Since selling is already outside the consultants' comfort zone, trying new techniques feels risky and when they do not appear to work at the first attempt - as is usually the case - the usual pattern is to revert to previous behaviours.

I believe that developing the ability in consultants to sell is 10% to do with process and skills and 90% about mental toughness. In this context, mental toughness is primarily about building resilience, developing a growth mindset and learning the virtues of persistence, self-control and focus. Getting consultants into a selling mindset may seem an uphill struggle but it can be done.



## PART TWO

CONFRONTING  
THE 'S' WORD

The place to start is with attitudes to selling. If the word itself provokes a negative reaction, then the chances are that the consultant will be reluctant to pursue the activity with enthusiasm.

As part of the research for his book *To Sell is Human*, US journalist Dan Pink went online and asked his contacts to give him the first three words that came into their heads when they thought of “sales” or “selling”. The resultant word-cloud is very revealing when it comes to prevailing attitudes to sales with words such as “pushy”, “sleazy”, “ugh” and “yuck” standing out. For many consultants, the activity of selling is associated with manipulative purveyors of goods we either don’t want (“double-glazing”) or have hidden faults (“used cars”). In game theory parlance, these are zero-sum transactions. But when we ask consultants about the projects that they have sold, they cannot think of examples of where they’ve acted in a manipulative way. Indeed, all their work has added value to the client and met their needs. In other words, they have sold positive-sum transactions.

The zero-sum style of selling has more or less died in the business-to-business world although it remains in pockets of business-to-consumer. In the zero-sum selling world, every prospect can be turned into a customer with the right techniques - this is why you need objection handling, closing skills, influencing skills and all the other black arts that still get taught in sales training workshops.

Consultants needn’t worry about these unattractive behaviours as they themselves are in the positive-sum world where it is all about establishing a potential fit. Can we deliver work of value to our client that can form the basis of an enduring and mutually valuable relationship?

It is also worth confronting some other myths about selling. Many consultants that we meet see themselves as “not cut out” for selling since they are often introverted and analytical. The widespread assumption that high-performing sales people need to be extroverts is not borne out by science. Research by Adam Grant of the University of Pennsylvania mapped sales performance for a sample of sales people against their position on the introversion-extroversion psychometric scale. High extroverts, it turns out, perform as badly as high introverts - they are less likely to listen to the customer about their genuine needs and more likely to try to impose a pre-ordained solution on them, often disliked by customers. The best sales performance is delivered by people in the middle of the scale - or “ambiverts”.

In short, consultants are invariably better-placed in terms of personality and skills to grow business than they are inclined to think.

## PART THREE

# COMPONENTS OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS: RESILIENCE

Not every piece of sales activity results in a new client or piece of work. Follow-up emails or phone calls to new prospects may go unreturned; proposals that were about to be given the go-ahead drift for no apparent reason.

The fact is, selling brings with it adversity in all its forms ranging from lack of response to messages to outright rejection. Learning resilience – the ability to bounce back from such adversity – is a fundamental component of growing confidence in selling.

As for dealing with the inevitable adversity, evolutionary psychology tells us that we are wired to retain memories of bad experiences and to avoid exposing ourselves to similar ones. While consultants may not be entirely conscious that they are indulging in displacement activities, the likelihood is that they are in avoidant mode; having previously tried – and possibly failed – to deliver on the sales part of their role, they are, as the old saying has it “once bitten, twice shy”.

The good news is that is possible for consultants to be coached out of this negativity. The first step is to help them understand how their minds work, particularly with regards to risk and

avoiding adversity. The second is to work on their optimism, something American psychologist Martin Seligman has shown to be a predictor of success in selling. By optimism, Seligman means explanatory style or the way in which we explain events to ourselves. If, for example, a consultant has tried calling a recent contact to convert him or her into a prospect but not heard back, the internal explanation may be pessimistic: (“I’m not cut out for selling”, “that person doesn’t think me worthy enough of a response”, “our firm has such a poor reputation, they won’t even return my call”). These pessimistic explanations are invariably mis-placed and consultants can learn to replace them with optimistic ones, usually revolving around the fact that the contact is, like everybody else, hopelessly busy and has forgotten the call in the first place. Cultivating a sense of learned optimism is possible through workshops and additional coaching and delivers proven results.

## PART FOUR

## COMPONENTS OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS: GROWTH MINDSET

Drawing on the work of American psychologist Carol Dweck and her book *Mindset*, I encourage consultants to develop a growth as opposed to a fixed mindset.

Colleagues can keep an ear out for “fixed” language from consultants such as “it’s not in my DNA to sell”, or “calling prospects is futile and a waste of time”. With this mindset, consultants will see adversity as something confirming that they are ill-suited to selling. Those with a growth mindset however will embrace it as part of the learning curve.

Consultancies can also help team members by establishing social norms that make selling an accepted part of the role. Having a charter or a set of values that explicitly covers the sales part of consultants’ role – particularly where they themselves have been part of the process of devising them – can have a big impact on attitudes and behaviours.

Many consultants view sales people as born not made. Again, as with many other dimensions of achievement, it turns out that with a growth mindset it is possible to build the relevant skills. This requires a shift in attitude as well as the disciplined approach athletes, musicians and artists use to learn their craft. These tools are eminently transferrable to the business of sales.

## PART FIVE

# COMPONENTS OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS: **PERSISTENCE**

Many consultants feel low in confidence when they approach selling and look for ways in which they can boost confidence.

I counsel against this as most of these - including such tactics as taking on dominant posturing - are little more than gimmicks. They amount to what psychologists call “empty positive thinking”.

Instead of thinking of confidence as a necessary prerequisite for starting the journey of growing one’s sales skills, I prefer to treat it as an output, something that naturally grows as a consequence of sticking with it and having a growth

mindset. Persisting in this way may be easier said than done but any pursuit, from golf to learning a musical instrument, becomes easier to master with dedicated time for purposeful practice and a clear and detailed goal-mapping structure. The act of carving out dedicated selling time and sticking with it will ultimately yield results.

## PART SIX

## COMPONENTS OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS: **SELF-CONTROL**

Since the twenty-first century workplace is replete with distractions, there will always be something to pull consultants away from the frequently challenging task of selling.

The problem is exacerbated by the design of apps and communications services with a number of alerts and notifications that are actively designed to distract. This is much less about “time-management” than “mind-management”. Learning to shut out distractions, legitimising the right to be unavailable at key times and resisting the temptation to allow sales activity to be displaced by other “urgent” tasks are all components of the self-control needed to succeed.

There is a wealth of scientific evidence that frequent distractions and interruptions deplete our ability to focus leading to a vicious cycle in which it becomes increasingly difficult to stay on task. As with other dimensions of mental toughness, there are practical tools that can be brought to bear here in order to limit distractions and improve self-discipline.



## PART SEVEN

# COMPONENTS OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS: FOCUS

Consultants that I meet consistently explain lack of sales activity on delivery imperatives.

A case or project needs attention and this inevitably displaces business development activities such as making phone calls or attending conferences. At first glance, this may appear to be about time management but my experience is that the causal driver of an apparent inability to make time for business development is lack of confidence. Without addressing the underlying confidence issue, working with consultants on time management is a little like treating the symptoms of a cough with cough medicine but ignoring the underlying lung infection. In addition to building confidence with the other dimensions of mental toughness there is also quite a lot that can be done to free up time for focused sales activity.

Firstly, there is the habitual multi-tasking that I see in all twenty-first century workplaces. Far from being a necessary virtue of office life, research suggests that by multi-tasking we take 30 percent longer to complete our work than by doing one task at a time; we also make twice as many mistakes.

Secondly, consultants that thrive at selling become good at delegating, trusting their team to take care of client issues rather than having to immerse themselves in unplanned client work.

Thirdly, good sales performers in consultancies carve out time for selling activity - whether for making phone calls or attending events - and stick to it, refusing to let it be displaced by other "urgent" work. They also approach these activities with a purpose and accept that the efforts may not yield an immediate return.

## PART EIGHT

# THE POWER OF PROCESS

The five dimensions of mental toughness described in parts Four to Eight are what really determine success in selling.

This is as true for consultants as it is for “industrial” sales people. Scientific research by US psychologists such as Martin Seligman and Angela Lee Duckworth provides ample evidence for this. Common problems that are perceived as failures of sales technique are more likely to be caused by lack of mental toughness.

A common example is the glut of proposals that get stuck in the pipeline forever without closing. It's not that the consultants responsible are poorly trained in closing techniques - something that should remain exclusive to the zero-sum world - but that many of these proposals are not genuine opportunities in the first place.

For this reason, Recludo Consulting's emphasis is heavily on mental toughness rather than focusing on sales techniques, methodologies and processes. However, taking a simple approach to these areas can pay large dividends in sales performance.

## PART NINE

# CLARITY OF PROCESS

It is possible to over-engineer sales processes but it is nevertheless important to have one.

Recludo Consulting uses a simple six-stage process as follows:

- Lead
- Contact Made
- Initial Meeting Arranged
- Proposal Presented
- In Negotiation

This structure or something similar is perfectly adequate for most selling contexts.

Something I come across in consultants that are feeling their way into the selling part of their role is that they will often meet prospects but will then return to the office with no clarity as to what happens next. The importance of the sales process lies in understanding exactly where any opportunity is and what the purpose of any meeting or call is. Usually, the purpose is to move the opportunity to the next stage of the process.

## PART TEN

# PIPELINE MANAGEMENT

Developing a cohort of consultants that are high-performers in the sales part of their role is significantly aided by having good pipeline management.

This also gives senior managers a tool with which to forecast future revenues (subject to proper qualification - see below). Having an appropriate CRM tool is an important part of this. I favour Pipedrive with its simple graphical interface that allows a user to see the health of the pipeline at a glance.

Effective sales CRM use allows a consultant to take some of the anxiety out selling. The more comprehensively the CRM is used - particularly in using it to diary follow-up activities - the more selling can feel like an emotionally neutral process rather than an ego-depleting activity.

Pipeline management should also be supported by well-structured sales meetings reviewing the health of the pipeline. These should not be sales star chambers in the tradition of industrial sales teams. Rather, they should be opportunities for colleagues to support one another and also constructively challenge.



## PART ELEVEN

# PROSPECTING

One of the old truisms about the sales business is that it is a “numbers game”. In some respects, this is a myth because indiscriminately calling prospects say, from a phone directory, can be pointless as there needs to be evidence of a fit, some sort of positive-sum opportunity.

Having said that, there is more than a grain of truth in the truism because having lots of opportunities in the early stages of the pipeline means that there is a much greater likelihood of closed sales. Too few opportunities can lead to a reluctance to qualify properly with the common resulting problem of a log-jam at the proposal stage.

All sales people - including senior, career “industrial” sales people find prospecting difficult. It is, after all, the part of the process most fraught with negativity. Most opportunities at the first stage of the process will not proceed through to closure. The task of prospecting, therefore, can fill consultants with dread and they often begin to think of it as “cold calling” with all its zero-sum associations.

With the right tools, it is possible to generate opportunities with greater ease than is often initially apparent. Delegates of Recludo’s programmes are given practical tools in identifying opportunities and invariably have many more than they first thought. They also come away with highly practical ways in which they can generate their own new opportunities.

## PART TWELVE

# QUALIFICATION

Along with failing to sustain a healthy number of opportunities in the early stages of the pipeline, failure to qualify is the most important symptom of a lack of mental toughness.

This usually manifests itself at the proposal stage of the process. A prospect agrees to take a look at a proposal but the consultant never hears back. Follow-up emails and calls go unreturned and what seemed like a promising piece of work becomes lodged in the sales pipeline equivalent of purgatory.

A simple process can be used in order to qualify opportunities. This requires certain conditions to be met before the costly and time-consuming task

of writing a proposal should be embarked upon. Disciplined organisations require a simple written qualification form to be completed and attached to the opportunity on the prospects CRM entry. This form covers crucial questions such as whether the prospect has sufficient budget for the work under discussion and whether the individual the consultant is dealing with has the authority to approve the proposed work.

Many consultants at first feel diffident about qualification but the skills in asking the right questions in a way that is not confrontational can be taught.

## PART THIRTEEN

# FOLLOW-UP

It can take months and even years for many opportunities to flow through the pipeline to closure.

In a positive-sum environment, the time has to be right for the prospect to work with a consultancy and many external factors may prevent this happening at the point of first contact: the most common factors are organisational change and lack of budget.

For this reason it pays to follow up in an appropriate and disciplined manner, one that strikes the balance between being persistent on the one hand and harassing the prospect on the other.

By exploiting the task management facility available in all CRM packages and pre-agreeing follow-up with prospects, following up can be a routine part of the sales process rather than something filled with negativity.

## PART FOURTEEN

## SUMMARY

Among consultants and “industrial” sales teams alike, great sales people are made not born.

Recludo Consulting’s interventions have helped many consultancies develop their people’s ability to sell alongside delivering their consulting expertise.

A typical intervention comprises the following steps:

- Research interviews with a sample of delegates
- Design of bespoke workshops
- Delivery of workshops face-to-face or via Zoom
- Follow-up one-to-one coaching

Outcomes from Recludo’s interventions include:

- Increased confidence in approaching the sales part of the role
- Better sales behaviours including prospecting and follow-up
- More consistency in carving out time for selling and getting past the “too busy” problem
- The ability to persist
- The ability to bounce back from negativity

Ultimately, selling can - while initially forbidding and full of negativity - be a source of great personal satisfaction along the journey towards mastery; it can also, of course, be an important contributor to professional success and advancement.

Ian Price is a performance psychologist and, through his company Recludo Consulting, a specialist in building mental toughness for selling in consultants. He is also the author of personal development book Head Start.





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