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INSPIRE LEADERSHIP:

To break the loop, find the root

To be fully productive, managers need to avoid the role of “central problem solver.” Here’s how they can get their employees thinking and delegate problem solving back to them.

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In working with sales managers, I am sometimes reminded of Bill Murray in Groundhog Day. Murray's character, Phil, becomes caught in a time loop in which he awakens each morning to live the same day over again, desperately searching for the behavior that will set him free. Sales managers can get caught in their own time loop in which they wrestle with the same problem day after day, whether it's trying to increase add-on sales, getting salespeople to ask for the order, or improving greeting techniques.

Appraising the Situation

If you're an owner or sales manager, ask yourself:

- Are you constantly attacking the same problem(s)?
- Do sales associates repeatedly bring problems to you that they should be able to solve?
- Are employees hesitant to discuss problems when they first occur?
- Are your solutions—rather than those of the employees—continuously being implemented?
- Are successful solutions slow to be communicated and adopted across the organization?
- Is everyone using a different problem-solving approach?

Best Practices

Take the following steps to break free.

Shed the role of primary problem solver. In effective organizations, all employees— not just the manager—solve problems. To develop your staff 's ability to solve problems, explain that you expect anyone who raises an issue to suggest a possible solution. If an employee says he can't think of a solution, resist suggesting an idea. Ask him to sleep on it and see if an idea occurs. Helping employees develop problem-solving abilities not only increases the variety and quality of solutions but also improves implementation. People who are personally invested in an idea will commit to implementing it.

Attack root causes, not symptoms. People frequently propose a solution before a problem has been fully analyzed. Let's say there's a problem with add-on sales. Are employees unable to make effective recommendations, or are they able but unwilling? Why are they unwilling? Effective problem solvers take time to listen and question before acting.

Adopt a problem-solving approach across your organization. To develop better root-cause analysis, have everyone in the organization use the same problem-solving approach. Encourage everyone to ask *Why?* at least five times before adopting a solution. Suppose you're working with a sales

associate who's unsuccessful at add-on sales. Your first query might point to a motivational issue rather than a skill deficit. Before admonishing the employee, ask *Why?* again. Perhaps the employee feels he's being pushy when he shows additional items. Ask *Why?* Has the customer given a clear sign she wants to leave, or does the employee not understand enough about her likes and desires? If the latter, *Why?* If employees adopt the five-question approach, they'll begin to reinforce one another in thinking more deeply about problems and learn to address root causes rather than symptoms.

Track outcomes and document solutions. Be systematic in measuring and testing how well a solution is working. Allow enough time to give it a chance to work. If it's working, quickly document and distribute it across the organization to avoid duplicating efforts.

Discipline yourself to make the up-front investments. It's easier to slap a Band-Aid on a symptom than to think through root causes, but you'll spend more time trying other solutions when the first one doesn't work. If you think more deeply about problems, initial solutions will work more frequently, saving time and money.

Sales managers are often unaware of how often they solve the same problem. Don't let it happen. Create an organization of problem solvers who dig deeply for root causes to break the loop and reach new levels of sales and profitability.

About Shanker Inc.

Martin Shanker is the founder and president of Shanker Inc., a Manhattan-based international management consulting firm for such companies as Burberry, Cartier, The Estee Lauder Companies, Ralph Lauren and Van Cleef & Arpels. Described as a 'behaviorist' by The New York Times, Martin specializes in helping global brands accelerate sales and profit by growing their companies from within. By addressing the tough issues of sales and management teams, and the behavioral dimension of retail relationships, Shanker Inc. offers a unique, multi-dimensional way for companies to achieve success through their own people.

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