90% of All Sales Force Training Fails

"Here's the problem--and the solution."

By Duane Sparks, Creator of Action Selling

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sales Training's Dirty Little Secret

Investing in training for your sales force seems like a perfectly sensible business practice. It must be a smart thing to do; after all, sales training is estimated to be a billion-dollar industry.

Then again, that really means nothing except that we're selling it and you're buying it. Here's the problem: I estimate that 90% of the training that salespeople receive fails to produce meaningful, long-term performance gains. Yes, I'm biased. But several other authoritative sources put the figure in the high 80% range.

A billion-dollar industry with a failure rate approaching 90%? Even I'm disgusted with that. Why would any company want to waste training dollars and everyone's time doing something that has a one-in-ten chance of producing a significant payback?

But You Still Need To Do It

With the ever-accelerating speed of change in both knowledge and technology, it is clear that we have a choice: We either continue to learn or we allow our skills and knowledge to become obsolete.[4]

I can't tell you how many times I've heard, "We only hire experienced salespeople," as if that were a solution. The idea that sales experience is a "living textbook" has two major pitfalls.[16]

1. As the world changes, our methods for dealing with situations lag the change. Old coping techniques become ineffective without us ever realizing it. So we continue to make the same selling errors time and time again.

2. In a sales career spanning 30 years, the same one-year's experience can be repeated 30 times. The quantity of experience is not necessarily connected to its richness or intensity. Following Action Selling workshops, I've heard hundreds of veteran salespeople say, "I wish I'd learned these skills 30 years ago."

The Bottom Line

Here's the situation as I see it:

1. Individuals, as well as the companies that employ them, must continue to learn in order to remain competitive.

2. Experience and learning are not synonymous.

3. Since 90% of sales training fails, there must be some special characteristics about the 10% that succeeds. Identifying those characteristics is crucial if you want training to pay off.

Top-performing sales organizations are increasing revenue, in a constricted economy, by investing in sales training.

-Aberdeen Research

Most courses are too long, too boring and too PowerPoint. This impacts buy-in and ROI

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WHY DOES SALES TRAINING FAIL?

Everyone has experienced a great seminar. You laughed, you cheered, you took notes. But a month later, I'll bet you could barely recall the name of the speaker, much less the things you "learned." Research shows that 87% of the information delivered in seminars and workshops is forgotten in 30 days. After that, the retention rate gets worse.[14]

Trainers and educators attribute this mainly to a lack of learning "reinforcement" following the event. They're partly right. But there's more to it than that. Because the learner's inability to recall information isn't the only reason why most sales training fails. It isn't even the primary explanation.

Here are the three biggest reasons why any given training program will fail to produce lasting performance improvements:

Problem A: Wrong Content

First, you have to teach the right things. Many skills, traits, and qualities contribute to sales success. For example, personality and motivation definitely have an impact on performance. The trouble is, you can't teach personality and motivation—and salespeople can't "learn" it! Training has to focus on skills that can be taught, learned, mastered, and measured.

Motivation? We've all seen salespeople who work extremely hard and make a lot of sales calls. Yet in every sales force, there always seems to be another salesperson who makes far fewer calls and lands much more business. Is hard work part of the formula? Absolutely. But the quality of that work has more to do with success.

One more thing: There might be a hundred skills that are teachable and learnable, and that contribute to sales success. But you can't teach anyone how to do a hundred things well. You need to identify, teach, and reinforce the handful of skills that are most critical to high performance in a sales role.

Problem B: Rejected By Salespeople

You've seen them—the sales reps who come to a training session with the attitude that they already know it all. The body language alone speaks volumes: arms crossed, eyes rolling, virtually daring the instructor to say something that might interest them. These people were not properly prepared to come to your training. And without motivation, there can be no learning at all.

Salespeople need to be sold on the need for training and the benefits it offers them. And I mean they have to be sold on the need for this particular program—not on the idea of training in the abstract or on learning as a swell thing.

This sale is no different from any other sale. The buyers (your salespeople) must see the program as a solution to needs that they agree exist. If they don't recognize and agree on the need, the training will be a waste of time. The benefits of using and mastering the skills have to be perceived as far greater than the investment of time and effort required.

Salespeople must have equity in what you are attempting to teach; they must have skin in the game. For example, if they have participated in developing the Best Sales Practices that your company intends to adopt, you've got a good chance that they will buy in.

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Problem C: Ineffective Transfer

Transfer is a term we use for learning that actually gets applied in the field. It's the only reason why a business organization, as opposed to a school or college, would want to do training in the first place.

Most people mistakenly think of transfer as a synonym for follow-up or reinforcement—things that happen after the training program is over. Sure, that's part of what needs to be done. But other factors play into the transfer process as well.

Here are the critical elements that determine whether learning will transfer from the classroom to the job:[15]

1. Students must be actively involved in the entire learning process.[3]

2. Early in the training process, students need to connect the learning to their life experiences. It has to make sense in the world they know. They need to see relevance right away.[3]

3. They must know that there will be follow-up activities and assessments that measure what they learned and how well they are applying the new skills in their day-to-day work.

4. They must be held accountable by their managers to demonstrate the use of new skills and knowledge in the field. This cements the message that management believes the learning was important.[27,29]

5. Managers must minimize the transfer distance by helping learners apply new skills and knowledge on the job—quickly.[5,22]

Aberdeen Research reports 70% of reps are trained 4 times per year while managers are trained 2 times per year. This creates a transfer issue.

Lots of Talk and Failed Attempts

Corporate trainers, including sales trainers, have discussed these issues for decades. And companies that create their own sales training or buy it from sales training companies are certainly aware of the questionable benefits they usually get. Why, then, does the problem persist? My answer is that most sales training does produce an immediate result. It just doesn't last.

Most sales training programs contain *some* useful information. Immediately following a training session, some salespeople will pick up an idea, take it to the field, and score a sale that they wouldn't have gotten before. Instant ROI! Terrific! But a few months later they're back to their old behaviors. It's called relapse.[20]

So the relapse problem isn't apparent until sometime down the road. Only when you look back a year later do you realize that nothing that was taught actually stuck. Surely you should be able to expect more than a short-term blip in return for your investment of time and money in sales training.

Do you recognize and agree with the dilemma as I've described it? Then suppose we talk about the solution.

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THE VISION FOR EFFECTIVE SALES TRAINING

Let me paint a picture and then fill in the details:

Problem	Solution 1	Solution 2	Solution 3
Poor or Wrong Content	Well-documented Sales Process	Focus on Critical Selling Skills	Custom Tailored to Your Company
Rejected by Your Salespeople	Student & Manager Are Properly Prepared	Needs for Training Must be Agreed Upon	Student Involvement in Best Sales Practices
Ineffective Transfer System	Implement Field Coaching Procedure	Install Systematic Reinforcement	Measure Learning & Application

Note: If these capabilities are present in your sales training methodology and you implement them properly, you'll escape the 90% failure rate for sales training.

WHAT DO THE SUCCESSFUL 10% DO?

Problem A: Wrong Content

Highly effective content is a basic virtue claimed by everyone who ever designed a sales training program. But what, exactly, makes content effective?
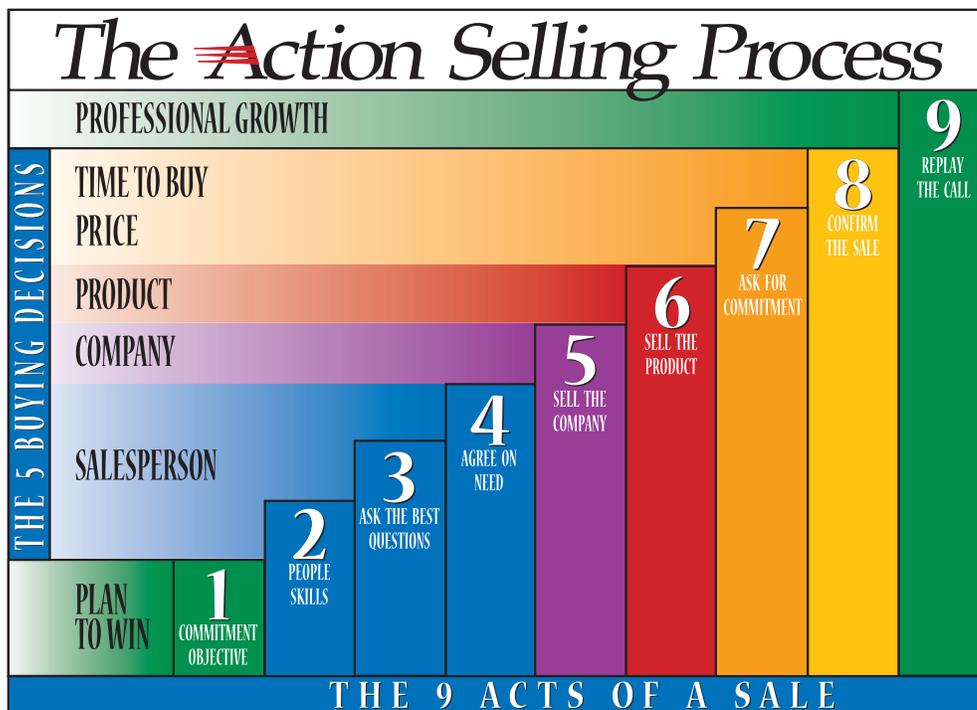
1 | A Well-Documented and Effective Sales Process

Well-documented means that the process taught in the program derives from solid research and rings true to experienced salespeople. It has to be undisputable. If salespeople can punch holes in it, you're done.

To me, well-documented also means that the process can be *shown*—that is, expressed visually—and can be understood without a great deal of explanation. This will make it easy to teach and learn.[7,30]

It has to be logical. Let me give you an example. The Action Selling Process, shown below, is based on the research-supported conclusion that buyers facing any major purchasing decision actually make a series of decisions—always in the same order. It is logical; therefore, that salespeople should follow a sales process that matches up with the customer's buying process.[6]

Aberdeen Research reports that 45% of Best-in-Class (BIC) companies will increase spending on sales training this year. BIC grew revenues by 11% while laggards decreased by 9%.

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The Action Selling Process

THE 5 BUYING DECISIONS

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

TIME TO BUY

PRICE

PRODUCT

COMPANY

SALESPERSON

PLAN TO WIN

1 COMMITMENT OBJECTIVE

2 PEOPLE SKILLS

3 ASK THE BEST QUESTIONS

4 AGREE ON NEED

5 SELL THE COMPANY

6 SELL THE PRODUCT

7 ASK FOR COMMITMENT

8 CONFIRM THE SALE

9 REPLAY THE CALL

THE 9 ACTS OF A SALE

Any sales system can give you a series of steps to follow. That's fine until you need to diagnose why the process isn't working in a particular selling situation. Then you're stuck. On the other hand, when a system's methodology is based on the way that buyers actually make decisions, you can always determine which buying decision they are not sold on and adjust your game plan from there.

Once you understand that all customer resistance stems from one or more of the customer's 5 Buying Decisions, you always have an answer to the question, What do I do next? When you run into a stall or objection, you know exactly which steps need to be done better. What's more, your manager can coach you with a clear roadmap to follow.

This is why the Action Selling process is known as the "GPS for Selling." It functions as a highly reliable positioning, navigation, and timing system that can be used on a continuous basis in any selling situation, in any type of business, and with every type of buyer. That's an effective sales process.

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2 **Focus On Critical Selling Skills**

You can't expect salespeople to change their behavior in 100 different ways. You have to narrow it down to the most important areas for change. And those "areas" need to be demonstrable skills—not personality traits, not how they carry themselves, not inner motivation.

Beginning in 1990, we launched our mission of finding the selling skills that make the most difference in performance. In 1995 we developed and validated an instrument that measures skill acquisition and skill application. By comparing skill improvement to performance change during the past 15 years, we were able to identify the most impactful selling skills. We call them The Five Critical Selling Skills. (See box.)

The Five Critical Selling Skills™

1. Buyer/Seller Relationship:

When sellers understand the series and sequence of sub-decisions that customers go through when making a major buying decision, and skillfully match their sales process with the buyer's decision-making process, success rates improve dramatically.

2. Sales Call Planning:

What is your Commitment Objective for this sales call? That is, what do you want the customer to agree to do next? Failure to have a Commitment Objective is the most frequent mistake made by salespeople. That's followed by failure to devise a questioning plan for the sales call and failure to prepare a Company Story. Poor planning skills often result from the lack of a clearly defined sales process to follow.

3. Questioning Skills:

The impact of poor questioning skills is horrendous. Eighty-six percent of salespeople ask the wrong types of questions. The question is the number-one tool in the salesperson's kit. Unfortunately, it's either used improperly or it's rusty.

4. Presentation Skills:

Most salespeople think that they are fantastic presenters. They can spew large quantities of data about their products. The problem is, customers don't want that. They want you to zero in on specific solutions based on their unique needs for your product or service.

5. Gaining Commitment:

Most salespeople agree that this is the skill they most need to improve. If a salesperson is not good at gaining commitment, why is he or she on anyone's payroll? Yet research shows that 62 percent of salespeople don't ask for commitment consistently on their sales calls.

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3 Custom Tailored To Your Company

One size does not fit all where sales training is concerned. A basic principle of effective training is to tie the learning to organizational objectives. Which of your company's business goals can be met by improvements in your sales process? Training works best when salespeople have a clear vision of how the things they learn can help them and their company accomplish desired goals.[25,26]

Now, determine exactly which lacks or gaps in selling skills are hindering goal achievement. Those will become skill objectives for the students. Once they are determined, the sales force has its marching orders for where they will focus their energy during the training experience. They will see the training as a solution to agreed-upon needs.

Next, you'll need to set some Training Objectives. Since the reporting structure of each company is different, your company will need a customized plan for learning and, especially, for reinforcement and transfer. Where are salespeople and teams located? Who do they report to out in the field? That's where the learning, practice, and reinforcement really needs to happen in order to accomplish your business objectives.

Once you have your business, skill and training objectives in alignment, all you need to do is tailor every learning activity to your selling environment, your company strengths, and the value proposition of your products and services.

Does all of that sound daunting? Extremely worky, to say the least?

Consider how Action Selling has designed its materials. We use an open-architecture method for training, reinforcing, and certifying sales people. Every exercise uses this principle. It essentially requires each student to tailor the application of skills to their individual selling situations while the exercise is being completed. Everything is customized while it is being learned.

Best-in-Class outpaced lagards by 55% in their adoption of "train-the-trainer" approach to imbed training in their culture.

Aberdeen Research

Problem B: Rejected by your salespeople

What good is a sales training experience if the salespeople don't buy into it? Yes, the dogs have to eat the chow.

1 **Students and Managers Properly Prepared**

Most companies sadly underestimate the importance of preparing salespeople to receive training, as well as preparing their work environment to receive trained students.[4,15]

Two critical adult learning principles come into play when you consider how you will prepare your students and their managers for a training experience:

Adult Learning Principle: Students with higher pre-learning motivation demonstrate greater learning and more positive reactions to training.[11]

Adult Learning Principle: Trainees with more support from their supervisors enter training with a stronger belief that the content will be useful.[9]

So, what can you do to prepare students and their managers for a training initiative?

- **Benchmark their current skills.** Use a validated assessment to determine how much knowledge they have prior to training. This exposes skill development needs for each individual salesperson. Your training will then be positioned as a solution to validated skill gaps that each student actually has.

- **Survey their *perceptions* of their own skills.** A skills survey will tell you how the students view their current skill set. *Student surveys don't always agree with what the Benchmark assessment actually reveals.* This gives students an opportunity to share their own perceived needs for training. Just as in a selling situation, you want the customers to verbalize their needs before you present a solution. Students are more willing to receive a solution when they've had input on what they need.

- **Give them plenty of information on what the training is all about.** Many trainers want to keep this a secret for reasons that are, frankly, ridiculous. Uncertainty and doubt set the stage for buyer's remorse. Action Selling actually requires each student to read a short book about what they are going to learn before attending the program.

- **Managers need to be trained on the skills at least as much as the students.** If you send a trained student into an untrained environment, any learning that occurred will vaporize very quickly.

- **Managers must reinforce the learning.**   Your learning plan needs to provide managers with an opportunity to be integrally involved in the reinforcement process. They need lesson plans and systems to manage reinforcement in the field. Action Selling provides weekly Skill Drills™ and a Learning Management System that is used in the field for structured reinforcement activities.

- **Managers need to hold their salespeople accountable for using new skills on the job.** What's more, managers need to be held accountable for the learning of their teams. If you don't have systems in place that measure the quantity and quality of the field-based activities, chances are they won't get done.[15,27]

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2   Needs for Training Must be Agreed Upon By Students and Managers.

Have you ever made a sales call where you were so sure you knew what the customer needed that you skipped your needs assessment and went straight into the presentation of your solution? Let me guess: Even if your solution was right on the money, you lost the sale.

Why? Let's look at it in terms of the way your salespeople and their field managers are likely to react if you try to ram a training solution down their throats like you did with that customer.

- They will reject your training solution for a reason that has nothing to do with its content, its quality, or its timing. If you want salespeople to buy into your training initiative, they need to be treated like customers. When you don't involve a customer in the needs-identification phase, that customer will resist you. The first buying decision a customer makes is whether to buy the salesperson. In this case, that's you. I don't care if you own the company and pay their salaries; right now you're selling, and if you leave them out of the needs phase, those salespeople will not buy *you*. Therefore, they won't buy the training.

- When salespeople are able to verbalize their needs and you agree with them on what those needs are, *then* they will become open to your solution.

- The same is true with sales managers. Their needs for tools that will allow them to be effective at transferring learning to the field must be uncovered and agreed upon.

- Do not—do NOT—just lay it on them and expect them to swallow it. That approach doesn't work when you're trying to sell your products and services. And it doesn't work when you are trying to sell training.

3   Involve Salespeople and Managers in Preparing Best Sales Practices:

I guarantee that the answer to every sales problem known to man can be found inside your sales force. It's just hard to extract without a procedure for doing it.

- If you were to ask the top performing salespeople in your company what they do, exactly, that lets them be as successful as they are, you would get many answers, most of them misleading or downright wrong. The fact is, a lot of top performers can't communicate what they do that makes them effective.

- Since your target for sales training usually is to take the B and C players and move them up a notch or two, you really need input from the top people in order to give them the advice they need.

- But those answers are locked inside the top performers. You need a key to get them out. You need to break down the skills into small components, using exercises that require documentation of the skills being used. The sum of these exercises is the answer to the question: What do the Best of the Best actually do?

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The Action Selling process identifies key exercises to perform during the training that extract the Best Sales Practices while they are being completed. As byproducts, you'll have:

- ✓ Your preferred Sales Process
- ✓ The Best Questions to ask customers for:
  - ➢ Uncovering needs
  - ➢ Building rapport
  - ➢ Understanding company issues
  - ➢ Learning about personal issues
  - ➢ Revealing money issues
  - ➢ Learning the status of the competition
  - ➢ Discovering the time frame for a buying decision
  - ➢ Uncovering buying Influences
- ✓ The Best Value Needs to uncover based on your strengths
- ✓ How to present TFBRs (a process for presenting features & benefits)
- ✓ Commitments to gain in every sales call
- ✓ Your Company Story
- ✓ How to handle stalls and objections

All of these Best Sales Practices need to be extracted and documented, simultaneously, as the training is being delivered.

Problem C: Ineffective Transfer System

Why would you spend a dime—or a minute of anyone's time—on sales training if nothing is going to transfer into the field? Most training companies talk about the need for reinforcement and follow-up but never deliver a systematic method for doing it.

87% of what is taught in the classroom is forgotten in 30 days without an effective transfer system.

This is by far the biggest reason why 90% of sales training fails. Everybody knows that transfer is the huge question mark hanging over long-term success with training. Maybe 90% of the people who talk about it are not being honest about their ability to pull it off.

Here is what an effective transfer system looks like:[23]

| PREPARE (Online) | TRAIN (Classroom) | REINFORCE (Online with Manager) | ASSESS (Online) | CERTIFY (Online) |

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1 Field Coaching Procedure

When the field manager is left out of the equation, you are doomed to failure. You've heard all the excuses: "I'm too busy already." "Sales management is only part of what I have to do." "My background isn't in sales." Yet sales managers absolutely must be held accountable for the learning of their troops. What to do?

- First, managers need at least as much training as their salespeople are going to get. I recommend that they attend an initial workshop designed for managers and key executives in the company—and then go through the same training that their sales teams will attend.

- Managers need to be given all of the necessary tools required to be competent in a field coaching role.[6] Examples include:

  ✓ Pre- and post-sales-call review forms that follow the sales process

  ✓ Easy-to-use online access to the reinforcement activities that their salespeople are completing. Provide 'dashboard' reports as well as detail so they can drill down and observe who is doing well and who is not.

  ✓ Conduct skills assessments of each member of their team as they go through the field reinforcement phase. This should include remedial learning advice for each sales rep.

  ✓ Instructor guides that allow managers to look like rock-star trainers when they conduct reinforcement exercises in an interactive online setting like Go-To-Meeting.

- Ultimate accountability must be present, so nobody can hide from the truth about what is or isn't being accomplished.[2]

  ✓ Managers need to achieve certification on the skills, too.[17]

  ✓ Salespeople's learning should to be compared and ranked against their peers.

  ✓ Put some teeth into the requirement to certify on the skills by adding an incentive.

- Inspect the managers' work by looking at the dashboard reports on learning progress. Drill down occasionally to let managers know you are interested in outcomes. Attend one of their online reinforcement meetings.

- Speak the language yourself. Ask salespeople questions that will help you understand how often and how well they are using the skills being taught.[2]

- Involve top-level executives in the learning. This sends a clear message that the training is important.

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2 Install a Reinforcement System

When I say "system," I mean an automated method for conducting periodic Skill Drills™. Without this, you can't possibly ensure that learning activities are taking place in the field.[24]

- Timing is everything. Skill practice needs to start immediately following a learning experience. This is essential for long-term retention. I suggest starting the reinforcement the next business day following the kickoff of training.[18]

- Without a formal procedure for reinforcement, transfer is extremely difficult. Today, if you don't have a web-based system that prescribes and assigns work to the student, you are way behind the curve.

- The assigned activities must be consistent with the skills that lead to mastery. Students need to know exactly what skill each exercise is helping them to learn and practice. Don't waste their time with activities that lack a clear and specific skill-improvement objective.[13,21]

- Implement the agreed-to sales cycle on your CRM tool. Use the specific language that was taught in the training. This allows for daily interaction by your sales team with the learning.

- Make sure that your reinforcement plan includes field homework that is being done every day. This forces the concepts into routine use. That's what you want to see.

- Leverage today's mobile technology to connect sales coaches with field salespeople. Just-in-time coaching is the clear ticket to getting newly learned skills implemented in the field.

Using an online system to track compliance with reinforcement activities holds people accountable and increases transfer.

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3 Measure Learning and the Application of the Learning

Here's the finale, as well as the most critical ingredient of any learning plan. Remember the old management-by-objectives saying, "What gets measured gets done?" Well, in training, "What gets measured gets learned." If you fail here, your chance to achieve long-term results is gone.

- Measurement of learning should permeate the entire training process, from the preparation phase through certification.

- Measurement systems must be validated. Otherwise, participants will question or reject them. You'll lose credibility and give students a reason to doubt what you are trying to accomplish.

- Only 10% of companies evaluate behavior change on the job following a training investment.   Remember that 90% of sales training fails. Do you suppose there's a correlation here?

PREPARE (Online)	→	TRAIN (Classroom)	→	REINFORCE (Online with Manager)	→	ASSESS (Online)	→	CERTIFY (Online)
Benchmark Assessment						**Skills Assessment**		**Final Certification**

✓ Benchmark your salespeople's skills before you start. This gives everyone a "learning" goal. Students will approach training quite differently than if they are given only a "performance" goal. They will seek to improve their abilities instead of trying to hit the performance goal with the behaviors they already use.

✓ Assessments that are taken immediately after a workshop are useless. They only measure short-term learning. That's not your goal.

✓ Instead, assess students approximately 90 days following the learning. This is a better measure of retention. And it gives you a better feel for what's been learned and what hasn't.

✓ This assessment must be prescriptive. It needs to provide feedback and assign specific activities that will lead to mastery and certification on the skills.

✓ Each assessment must measure both knowledge gain and ability to apply what has been learned. Knowledge alone has little to do with transfer.

✓ Compare the skills assessment to the benchmark. Show everyone how they have moved their skills forward.

✓ Create a certification standard for sales teams. Give them a specific goal that equates to mastery. Don't make it easy. They need to be challenged by this or it's a waste of time.

✓ The certification assessment must focus primarily on application of skills, not just knowledge. Certification occurs several months downstream from the launch of the training, so it's all about what has stuck and what hasn't.

✓ Those who fail to certify on the first try should be given a second attempt. But don't relax the standards. Provide certificates only to those who genuinely earn them.

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SUMMARY

No doubt this discussion makes effective sales training sound like a daunting proposition, hard to pull off. Sorry, but it is. I've invested nearly 30 years in the development of content and systems for student motivation and transfer. I wouldn't suggest that you try to duplicate this effort when the results are available from my company for a very affordable price.

I know what other companies in the sales training industry are providing. Some of their content is very good. The problem is simply this: The reason for sales training's 90% failure rate has to do with all of the factors I've described. You can't cover only one or two bases and expect to get long-term results.

All of us in sales have developed certain habits, no matter if our careers span five days or 50 years. Some of those habits work against us; they're dead wrong. Changing habits is the hardest thing that a human is ever asked to do. But when sales organizations approach training in the way I have described, it works every time. And with Action Selling, it's not that hard to do.

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