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Strategic Sales Management

Strategic planning is an activity that is largely absent in most sales organizations of all sizes. Many of the senior sales executives we have worked with see their roles as more operational and functional than strategic. Strategic planning is, after all, the province of the CEO and the company's Board of Directors. Or is it?

We think strategic planning, in the traditional, formal sense, is as essential for success in the selling organization as it is essential for the success of the entire enterprise. Further, the lack of strategic planning at the senior sales management level is the primary cause for underperforming and unstable sales organizations.

It is fashionable today to declare that traditional strategic planning has outlived its usefulness. We do not agree. Strategic planning, which is simply the application of analytical thinking to the process of allocating limited resources for action is, we think, more critical in today's climate of discontinuity than it was in a time where businesses planned and operated on the assumption of stable, predictable markets.

What must distinguish today's strategic planning process from strategic planning as it was conducted ten years ago is the primary emphasis on situation analysis as an integral part of the planning process. Keeping a vigilant eye out for disruptive technological changes or changes in markets is the first step in today's strategic planning process.

Of all the departments in a corporate environment, the sales organization is the most affected when the company's financial performance changes, when product lines and service programs change and when technology changes. The selling organization is also usually the first department to feel changes in customer demographics and psychographics, new competitive alliances and macro-environmental changes involving the economy, social/cultural shifts and changes in government policies.

If it is true that the selling organization in any corporate setting is so vitally affected by changes in all these areas, senior sales executives must not only be included in the evaluation of situation analysis conducted at the Board level, they would be well advised to conduct their own situation analysis based on information developed by their sales and sales support teams. In an ideal world, the CEO and Board would require a situation analysis of their sales leader and would reconcile the sales leader's analysis with the work done by the Board.

The selling organization, like any other part of a business enterprise, operates within the reality of interdependence and limited resources. Its success is dependent, in large

measure, on all the others departments in the business enterprise. This reality requires that a portion of the senior sales executive's schedule be devoted to managing these internal influences. Time must, however, be reserved for the strategic planning process so prominently absent in many selling organizations today.

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