

Put it together

How to build a successful team

Walk into any bookstore and you will see many titles that include the word "secret" — the secret to success, happiness, money, marriage, sex, health, fitness, sport and so on.

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If, like me, you have eagerly purchased one or more of these books in the hope that your wishes will be fulfilled, your dreams realized, then like me, I'm sure you will have known disappointment. At the ripe young age of 49 I am convinced that the real secret is that there is no secret — no easy way, no shortcut that will guarantee success.

Rather, there are a range of views, ideas, experiences, teachings, lessons, methods and systems that have worked well for others and deserve to be tried to find out what works for you. I have found it useful to condense a system or process into common, everyday terms that have meaning for me. This saves me the need to remember the whole system or process, and it gives me an easy mental hook or concept to work with. It may not be academically pretty, but it works for me.

The concepts

- Putting names in a hat
- Who's the boss?
- The gardener
- An extension of the agent
- The drummer/take the rap
- Throw enough mud
- Look at the map

- Pick the fruit
- Your neighbor's garbage
- Long live the differences!
- The fault is mine
- If you care, dare to criticize
- Balance
- Learn to laugh

In hindsight, I now realize that my first years in sales management with another company were spent in a kind of maze. I knew what was required of me — recruiting, training, developing, etc. — but I didn't have it all together in a usable personal philosophy. Changing companies presented me with the opportunity to start afresh, and I developed a fairly simple but, for me, useful personal philosophy as follows.

Putting names in a hat I want to have a team of salespeople that, if my next-door neighbor asked me to refer him to someone, I could put the names of all of my team into a hat, draw one out without looking, and say, "That person will look after you."

While I haven't adhered to that philosophy 100 percent, it has served as a very useful guide for me in the team-building process. It has helped give me direction and a frame of reference that has aided in channeling my efforts in a consistent direction. Today I have a much more detailed philosophy, thanks to the AMTC program, but in large part, it has the same effect, though it is certainly more explicit.

One advantage of our current philosophy is that it can be published and distributed to team members who, thus, have a better appreciation of our standards. Whatever its form, I believe that a vital in-

redient for long-term success is a usable, workable philosophy.

Who's the boss? Without doubt, we stand or fall by the performance of our people. Computers, systems, and products, no matter how clever or sophisticated, are worthless without the right people. Our agents clearly understand that they are our most valuable asset. We do not practice the traditional master/servant relationship. In fact, the reverse applies. We, the sales managers, are the servants of our agents. Managers with traditional views have warned us against this concept, but it has worked well for us. The principle has never been abused and is based on mutual earned respect.

The gardener In many ways I liken myself to a gardener. The most successful gardeners ensure that they have the right position for their garden bed — a place where the soil is satisfactory and where the right balance between sun and shade is available, and where there is protection from the wind. In other words, the gardener establishes the environment.

I have applied the same principle as a sales manager. I am responsible for my team's environment, both physically and mentally. Trust, respect, encouragement, support, and open and timely communication are all aspects of the job that I accept as my responsibility. The gardener cannot do the growing for the seeds, and I cannot make the sales. However, we are both the creators of our environments. Here are some of the activities I have undertaken to create the positive environment we enjoy.

1. Friendly, cooperative, helpful, interested support for our agents is the number one priority for both team secretaries. When selecting a secretary, this is a major consideration.

2. An open-door policy works well. The only time my door is closed is during interviews with recruits or confidential discussions. Agents are encouraged to talk over any issues or problems, regardless of

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how busy I look. Again, through mutual respect, this arrangement is not abused.

3. Each agent knows (and it has been tangibly demonstrated) that I will support any legitimate issue or concern to my fullest ability.

4. I encourage the concept that "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

5. I act as a filter for matters that the head office tends to overcomplicate (I translate head office instructions, memos, etc.).

6. In every contact with our agents, we look for some good points to mention or some encouragement to give.

Another likeness to the gardener metaphor relates to the seeds we plant. A bean seed will produce beans. It doesn't matter how much the gardener wishes that the seed would grow at a faster pace, be bigger, greener or produce different fruit. The capability of the seed is inherent in it.

The gardener can assist growth with fertilizer, weeding and so forth, but the inherent capacity of the bean seed is to produce beans, in its own time, at its own pace. It is critical that the gardener carefully selects the right seeds — the seeds that ultimately will produce the results he or she wants.

In similar fashion, the people we recruit have their own inherent capabilities. We cannot make them be what they are not. Again, careful selection is paramount and helps to increase our chance of getting the productive recruit, but each person must be given the opportunity to develop his or her own potential at his or her own pace.

We can fertilize with training, support and encouragement, but we cannot do the growing, nor attempt to make our people grow my way. I do not believe there is any one right way, but there is a way that works best for each individual. The task is, through experiment and persistence, to find that way.

An extension of the agent While I have always wanted the team for which I am responsible to be recognized as a quality performing outfit, I have never set goals or targets for individuals (apart from attempting to satisfy the insatiable head office appetite for statistics). Instead, my statement to our agents is "I want for you what you want for you. If you want to shoot for the stars, then I want that. Al-

ternatively, if you want to perform at a moderate (though acceptable) level, then that, too, is what I want."

Perhaps paradoxically, many in our team have been well-above-average performers — in fact, we consistently have the highest number of award winners on our team. I believe this concept is tangible evidence of my respect for each of our agents — that they are capable of making responsible decisions in keeping with their own personal standards and motivation.

The drummer/take the rap One of the surest ways to stress personal disharmony is to continuously strive to conform to the beat of someone else's drum. Whether that beat is in the form of goals, targets, objectives, a particular level or award set by someone else, or in trying to live up to others' standards or expectations, the result is the same. It is far better in my opinion to establish your own beat after taking into account the requirements of your position and your own wants and needs. This is a difficult task, but it is worthy of the effort.

Of course, it's a two-edged sword — when you take the responsibility for setting your own standards, you also have to take the rap for not meeting them. You can't blame others for your own decisions.

Throw enough mud "Throw enough mud and some will stick" is an old saying. Essentially, that is my training philosophy.

I have very real difficulty in coming to grips with the modern idea of "measuring training effectiveness." I really can't see how that can be done (but I respect the rights of those who use that ideal). To me, much of the value of training comes at different times for different people. Sometimes, something clicks straightaway with one person, while for another the penny drops at some future time when he or she is ready. The important principle, I believe, is to train and keep training. When a person is capable of properly receiving

that training, he or she will. Until then, I keep throwing the mud.

Look at the map I live in a city with a population of just over one million people — a reasonably sized metropolis. If one of my agents were to phone me and say, "Help, my car has broken down, can you come and give me a hand?" my first reaction would be, "Sure, where are you?" If the agent had no idea of where he or she was, how could I help? If the agent had no map to determine his or her whereabouts, it would be extremely difficult to go to his or her aid.

Similarly, if agents don't maintain records and statistics, how is it possible to work out where they have broken down in their business activities? How can I help if we can't get to where the problem is? This little story seems to help some agents (unfortunately, not all) to accept the need for maintaining some form of statistical base for themselves. The tried-and-true calls, appointments and sales seem to be those that work best for us.

Pick the fruit

One time, when I was at my wit's end after becoming embroiled in a protracted struggle with the head office (which I lost), an agent who had been up a few dry gullies in his time said to me, "Pick the fruit, don't get tangled up in the roots." It was advice that I have used over and over again, not just for myself, but also with my team. There will

always be things happening with which we disagree, and if we focus on them — get tangled in the roots — we'll be the ones to suffer. There is always plenty of fruit to pick, regardless of what's happening with the roots.

Your neighbor's garbage I think it was Zig Ziglar who said, "You wouldn't let your neighbor come over to your place and dump his garbage on your lawn, so why do you allow some negative person to come along and dump his or her mental

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garbage in your mind?" Keeping a positive outlook and refusing to permit negative thoughts to gain a toehold is not easy; in fact, the opposite is true, but it is worthwhile to strive for.

Long live the differences! I can't treat every agent the same, but I can give every agent equal opportunities. Some team members are people I would be happy to be with at any time. With others, I have little in common. Some are critical, some are warm, some are self-centered, and some are caring and giving. Which group a person fits in is no predictor of performance. Successful agents come from each group. Interestingly enough, the nonconforming agents, those who at times

I would like to take to with a two-by-four, more often than not are the ones I and others most profit from in terms of ideas and new ways of doing things. They tend to drag us more conforming people along with them ultimately to our benefit. Long live the differences.

The fault is mine We have a number of different team meetings and training sessions. Only one of these, our Monday morning meeting, is compulsory. That meeting is for all new team members with fewer than four months of service or those who are below minimum performance. All other meetings or training sessions are voluntary. If I can't put on a meeting that our self-employed agents consider worthwhile or of interest to them, then the fault for their lack of attendance is mine, not theirs. That puts the pressure on me, and rightly so, to work hard at putting on meetings of real value and interest to team members. I wouldn't want it any other way.

If you care, dare to criticize Without genuine, honest feedback, it is impossible to see ourselves as others do. We can sail along thinking that all is well while won-

dering why our performance is not at our desired level. It can well be that something we are doing or something about us is the problem, but we can be blissfully unaware of that condition unless someone cares enough about us and has the courage to draw our attention to it.

In pointing out shortcomings, there is a considerable risk involved — the risk of a hostile reaction, resentment or bitterness. However, my belief is that if you care enough about someone else, you will take that risk. Though the person may initially be upset, if he or she knows you are not destructive but helpful, good will come from your criticism and your relationship will be strengthened. It's a two-way street though, and while I encourage my team

to make their criticisms of me, the initial hurt is still there when they do. Incidentally, anyone is obviously free to accept, reject or ignore criticism.

Balance It is so easy in this business to get out of balance. We need balance in family, sport, community, spiritual, work, social and health areas, but we also need balance in our mental outlook toward the job we do, the industry we are involved in and the income we earn. These days, we are particularly subject to never-ending comment in the media by all sorts of people and groups with their own axes to grind that we in the sales side of the insurance industry are

- Overpaid
 - Overaggressive
 - Overconcerned with our own pocket
 - Underconcerned with our clients real needs
- And we represent companies that are
- Badly managed
 - Too conservative
 - Out of touch
 - Producing inefficient products

It is important to me to keep in mind and promote to my team that, although we are not perfect in product or person,

we do have a very important role to play in society. When disaster strikes a family, we are the only ones who will call with a check rather than a bill. As inefficient as our products are said to be, they are often the only asset a person or family will have apart from their home and its contents. Furthermore, most people wouldn't have that protection or asset unless we called on them to encourage and help them to buy.

Finally, the market sets the price it is prepared to pay for any goods or services. Our remuneration reflects our market value.

Learn to laugh *Reader's Digest* used to have (maybe still does) a segment entitled "Laughter Is the Best Medicine." We need plenty of that medicine in our jobs and in our lives. It's easy to take ourselves too seriously. We need to lighten up and laugh at, and with, ourselves. Encourage practical jokes and irreverence to hierarchical structures, play tricks, tell jokes, circulate cartoons, tell stories about yourself as well as others. As my daughter says, "Mellow out!" That doesn't mean to be disrespectful or that there isn't time for seriousness, but it does mean balance.

I do not wish to argue that what I have presented is right. Rather I wanted to talk about some of the concepts that appear to have had a positive influence on our team. I have no doubt that other teams are equally as or more successful using different concepts or philosophies. Terrific. Long live the differences. ■

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