

getting the lead out of toy sales

Games make life fun – especially when you’re on a winning streak. And look at you. As a rookie player in FSL, you are off to a fast start at 3-0 for the season. Let’s run some quick highlight clips of your recent wins, then get you ready for the next match.

In your first game, as CEO of a struggling sub-prime mortgage banking firm, you embraced the strategy of the unstoppable mindset and guided your sales force in beating the competition.

In game two, you were the president of a Web design firm whose services had been commoditized by the Internet. You coached your way out of the crisis by focusing your team on building a deeper level of trust with customers.

Last month, you went back in time. You were in the oil business – until Rockefeller squeezed you out. You reinvented your company as a full-service brokerage and won by training salespeople to ask empowering questions.

This month you are a regional distributor of painted wood-and-metal dinosaurs, made in China. And you are coming off the worst holiday season of your life.

PLAYING WITH DANGER

Your clients are independently operated toy stores. Leading up to the holidays, they decided to cut back their orders in reaction to the wave of lead paint recalls that left shoppers wary of dangerous toys. And who could blame them? Since August, Mattel Corp. alone recalled dozens of popular toys, including Barbie Accessory Sets and the Go Diego Go! Animal Rescue Boat.

The downward spiral became self-perpetuating. Retail experts predicted a plunge in holiday retail shopping dollars and consumers became more cautious. Retailers reduced inventory, knowing that a weak holiday season would mean that they would have to borrow to stock their shelves in the new year, which meant less merchandise, lower profits, less hiring and less expansion.

And now that the new year has begun, your salespeople are telling you that nobody’s buying anything.

How are you going to turn this around?



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VICTIM MINDSET

If only you could tell the customer he’s wrong.

After all, you say to yourself, he is wrong. This is not your fault. It’s true your company imports toys, but they have been tested – there’s no lead paint. So why should you be guilty by association?

You’re not just saying this to yourself. In sales meetings, you’re saying it out loud. “I mean, come on!” you complain. “China’s a big economy. They’ve got room for high standards companies and low-life loser companies, just like we do in America. Congress needs to pass stiffer laws. They need to fine the rule-breakers out of existence.”

Energized, your salespeople hit the phones. Unfortunately, they have no clear vision to guide them, except a commitment to your statement that all of this is somebody else’s fault. It’s not until you hear your own words come out of their mouths that you realize how bad this sounds:

“China’s got low-life loser companies just like us.”

“This is not our fault.”

“Congress needs to pass stiffer laws.”

Listening to them complaining to cus-

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tomers, you understand that you have forgotten what it takes to be a winning sales culture.

A phrase comes back to you: “Stress is a choice.” You read this in the book, *QBQ: The Question behind the Question*, by John Miller. The book was about eliminating the dangerous habit of complaining about your problems. You realize this is exactly what you have been doing. You find your copy of the book and read a few lines:

“When we choose to ask a question like, ‘Why is this happening to me?’ we feel as if we have no control. This leads us to a victim mindset, which is extremely stressful. Even in cases where we actually are victims and our feelings seem justified, ‘Why me?’ thinking only adds to our stress.”

STORY VERSUS REALITY

“Listen up, everybody,” you tell the team. “I screwed up. I have been blaming everybody but ourselves for our problems. But you know what? I was wrong. It’s the responsibility of our industry to provide safe, fun toys for children. That means it’s our responsibility, all of us. We failed.”

“It wasn’t us, boss,” Allan puts in. “We didn’t paint the toys. And anyway, our toys never had lead paint.”

“That’s true,” you tell them. “That’s reality. So why are we having trouble selling them?”

Samantha says, “The toy stores think that anybody selling painted toys is trying to put them out of business.”

Everyone chuckles, and you laugh, too. You tell her, “Good story.”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“It’s a good story,” you repeat. “Remember when we used to say that reality is what really happened. The story is what reality

means. The two things can be completely different.”

Several people are looking at you questioning. “I’m not sure I follow,” Samantha says.

“In every sales situation,” you tell her, “there are two factors. There’s what really happened, and there’s what we say that means. We need to stop assuming we know why our clients aren’t buying and start asking.”

ALIGN AND REDIRECT

You continue: “So let’s get into alignment with our clients’ reality. The reality is they are afraid that these lead paint problems may happen again. So let’s tell them they are right to feel that way. They are right to feel angry. We’re angry too. But we’re also hopeful that our industry is taking steps to prevent this from happening again.”

“I get it,” Samantha says. “Don’t make them feel wrong for not trusting us.”

“Right,” you say. “And once you’ve aligned with them, redirect them to what they really want.”

“And what is that?” asks Allan.

Samantha says, “They want the same thing they’ve always wanted. They want to make kids happy and earn a profit.”

“That’s a good way to express it,” you say. “And we just have to demonstrate that our products can help them accomplish their mission. After all, there never was any lead paint in our products. Let’s tell them that. Let’s make signs for their displays that say, ‘We never had lead paint!’ Let’s help our clients build their reputations based on the fact that they stock our products.”

The team gets it, and off they go. No more blaming, no more explaining, no more complaining.

By redirecting your team’s mindset, you’ve achieved victory.

Congratulations. We’ll see you next month.

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