

put the sales bull in our pasture

A sardonic man once said, "Bulls do not win bull fights. People do."

As a star player in Fantasy Sales League, you certainly are no stranger to winning fights. Last month, in particular, you won despite facing the steep challenge of trying to sell painted toys in a market still rattled by recent lead paint recalls. You turned things around by teaching your sales team how to align and redirect the prospect's mindset to get the results they want.

This month, you face an even more onerous challenge: fighting through your own company's bull.

THE WONDERING HERD

You are the new CEO of Merrill Lynch & Co., the largest investment brokerage in the world. Last quarter, the firm announced it would write off \$8.5 billion in bad debt that it had accumulated mostly through investments in the subprime mortgage industry, and your predecessor, embattled chief executive Stan O'Neal, suddenly left the company. No longer a "thundering herd" of investors, your client base is scared stiff. They are wondering whether there will be more surprises on the balance sheet and whether their investments are safe. A bull market? They won't even return your brokers' calls.

You are a skilled executive with experience running a big company, but you have never faced a challenge like this before. What are you going to do?

BULLISH ON AMERICA

Your first move is to hire a brand consultant, who tells you to take the company back to its roots. So you embrace the image Merrill has so long cultivated via its logo – a bull, ready to charge – and its venerable slogan, "Merrill Lynch Is Bullish on America," and you direct your team to charge.

But after just two months, you can see this isn't working. Aggressive and dominant by nature, your sales team is bullish – too bullish. They are talking rather than listening. They are closing rather than enrolling. They are running roughshod over what cautious clients are asking for – and they are coming across as full of bull, so to speak.

So you fire that brand expert and take matters into your own hands.



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NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Now the hard work begins.

First, you take responsibility for the bad news. You hold yourself publicly accountable. You make the rounds on talk shows and news stations, acknowledging the impact of Merrill's poor decisions, and showing how the company is going to get back to winning for its clients.

Next, you call an emergency summit for your executives who manage the sales force. You let them know that you are reversing the company brand and attempting to change the mindset of the entire organization.

"Merrill will keep its trademark optimism," you tell your team. "But no longer will we wield our size, strength and power as a threat. Instead, we will cultivate a nurturing persona. We will walk softly and focus entirely on serving the needs of the client. We will

Seen in:



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be a new bull – one that listens actively, one that stays calm, one that people can trust."

One of your top people asks, "But how are we going to get them to be bullish if we don't demonstrate it?"

"With non-verbal communication," you respond. "You know, I recently came across a famous study by a Stanford University researcher by the name of Dr. Moravian, whose work centered on the idea that communication comes in three forms: words (the actual words we say), voice quality (the tone, volume, inflection, etc.) and body language (the position and movement of our bodies). He found that words make up only 7 percent of communication. That's right, just 7 percent. So what makes up the rest?"

"Voice quality?" someone suggests.

"Right," you say. "Voice quality accounts for 38 percent of communication. And, believe it or not, the other 55 percent of communication is body language – how we move when we are not speaking. In other words, how we listen."

A wave of confusion sweeps the room. A regional VP asks, "How can we communicate just by listening?"

"Not just by listening, but by actively listening. Listen with a goal of discovering the mission and goals of your clients, and finding out how you can create value for them. Listen for what may not be revealed at first. Listen for ways to make them successful."

You sense that you have everyone's attention now. A question comes from the back: "But how can we teach our people this?"

"Here's an interesting tool for you to give them to measure whether they are listening actively. Think of the 2:1 ratio. Remember when your mother told you that there's a reason you have two ears and one mouth? If you are speaking two times as much as your

prospect, you aren't listening. Instead, you are waiting to speak. At the end of the conversation, you have no idea what the prospect's immediate needs are. And you certainly haven't determined your prospect's long-term needs. Within that context, how could you possibly create value for the prospect?"

CREATING VALUE

Confident that you have made your point, you continue:

"Have your team think of the 2:1 ratio this way," you tell them. "The prospect is speaking twice as much. The Merrill broker is listening. We are using our airtime almost exclusively to ask open-ended, broad-based, fact-finding questions. Then, and only then, will we have the opportunity to enroll clients in our solutions."

You can see by their faces that your team understands the distinctions you are making. They know that when they have not been getting the results they want, it's useless to resort to bullying the prospect. They know they shouldn't worry about talking more or making their points louder or more stridently. Instead, they understand the value of zeroing in on and making changes to the biggest piece of their communication that is determining how the audience receives the message: how actively they listen.

"Change your communication and you'll change your results," you conclude.

The executives get it. The firm has a new strategic direction. Gradually, and with much hard listening work, the bull will restore trust.

That's a victory. We'll see you next month.

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