

# The Transparent Sales Leader

How The Power of Sincerity, Science & Structure Can Transform Your Sales Team's Results

by **Todd Caponi**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Sales leadership does not have to be hard. To maximize sales team and organizational performance, we need to optimize five core areas required to build, maximize, and maintain revenue capacity. There is a set of core responsibilities that can quickly become your structure to achieve those desired results. There is also a core set of drivers to intrinsic inspiration—the science of why your team continues to show up each day, perform at their best, stay, and advocate for the future of the organization.

In *The Transparent Sales Leader: How The Power of Sincerity, Science & Structure Can Transform Your Sales Team's Results*, author and accomplished sales leader Todd Caponi challenges long-held sales leadership standards, providing a modern, cards-faceup, science-backed, easy-to-implement framework for today's sales leaders. This book will become the foundation for new sales managers, a reference guide of ideas and refreshers for seasoned managers, and a vessel to maximize sales capacity of entire organizations. Transparent sales leadership is for those who believe that hitting revenue targets isn't the job, it's the outcome.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The values of transparency in sales leadership
- The five F's of transparent sales leadership
- Five buyer-centric perspectives on deal qualification
- Six primary categories of intrinsic inspiration

## Part 1: The Transparent Sales Leader Framework

### Transparency Defined

At even a subconscious level, we know that perfection isn't probable. This is why a product with an average review score of 4.2 will sell at a higher conversion rate than a product with nothing but glowing 5-star reviews.

When assessing an investment in our time, resources, or dollars in something new, our brain goes on a journey, filtering the good news until it has assessed the trade-off, which could be the price, what elements or features are not included, and what experiences others have had—especially the negative.

The negatives act as a disarming mechanism. It is almost as though a malarkey filter has been removed, where the positives and benefits of this decision can now flow freely. It works online. It works in human-to-human selling. It works in leadership.

Transparency sells better than perfection, retains better, upsells and cross-sells better, creates advocates better, and leads better. As a sales leader, transparency starts with an understanding that you are flawed, but still awesome. As Tyra Banks coined, you are “flawsome.” You are worth following but you are human, too.

Traditionally, sales organizations have kept their team members on a need-to-know basis. This underestimates their sales team members' ability to see through a muddling of the facts. The result is disengagement and likely turnover.

Transparent leadership is living the following values every single moment, consistently:

- Taking a cards-faceup approach to leadership.
- Setting proper expectations, consistently meeting them, and embracing the idea that those expectations are not always just rainbows and cotton candy.
- Embracing the idea that you do not have all the answers.
- Embracing the idea that you have weaknesses, and it's ok for others to know that.
- Embracing the idea that you are no more important than anyone else on the team, you just have different responsibilities.

It's not difficult for you to become a transparent sales leader. There is almost zero cost to being transparent as a lead-

er. In the end, the more transparency you give, the more you'll get in terms of reciprocal transparency, engagement, performance, tenure, and advocacy.

### The Five F's Framework

Confidence can be defined in two ways. Both firmly define confidence as a feeling but the interesting difference between the two is that for one, confidence is something you possess within yourself and in the other, it is something recognized by others.

Confidence begins with an “appreciation of one's own abilities.” Knowing your job, with a predictable structure, a plan, and a way to communicate it will set you apart from others with similar responsibilities. You'll have confidence. That structure, created and used in a transparent way, will create the confidence your sellers need through “the feeling or belief that one can rely on someone or something.”

What is that needed structure? It's the Five F's of Maximizing Revenue Capacity. The Five F's are the scope of your role. Every responsibility you have fits into it. Everything you do as a sales leader falls into one of these five categories: focus, field, fundamentals, forecast, and fun.

#### 1. Focus

From the beginning of your tenure as a sales leader, ensuring your team is working on the right opportunities in the right places at the right time is a core responsibility. This is centered on the realization that your sales organization's most finite resource is their time.

Not all customers are created equally desirable. Who will you say yes to? Who will you say no to? What criteria will you use for the gray areas in between to make that determination? This must be well defined, frequently reviewed, and adjusted as required.

Our natural inclination seems to be toward selling to anyone interested in buying. However, the focus, when done correctly, optimizes your return on time in such a dramatic way. It can be the difference between success or failure for a leader and, ultimately, for an organization. Focusing on the wrong opportunities can have catastrophic consequences.

At the rep level, the collection of times we are focused on the wrong opportunities at the wrong time adds up, and without even noticing, can have catastrophic consequences on your team's performance, too. The primary asset you have in your inventory is time. Focusing that time on the

# The best way to make a customer believe we truly care about their outcomes is to truly care about their outcomes.

right opportunities and the right individuals within those opportunities is the first step to optimizing that inventory.

## 2. Field

Based on your focus, your next responsibility is in building, maintaining, and growing the field organization, which is putting the right people in the right roles in the right places with the right tools and the right resources.

Just like salespeople need to always be on the lookout for great prospects, as a sales leader, it's likely you will always be recruiting. In hiring, determine the key attributes that make a successful team member, based on the required focus. Think about the solution, the industries, and their ability to acquire and maintain confidence with your customers and prospects.

Tools and technology have been used to scale, prioritizing volume over quality, relationships, and focus. The great gifts of technology were sullied by our forgetting that we're selling to human beings. We stopped seeing our customer's eyes, and instead focused our sight on our own metrics. Respect for salespeople has been ruined through scale.

How do we regain respect? You must be trusted to be respected. Trust and respect require a shift back to humaneness in our profession. It requires a shift back to ensuring our customers and prospects truly believe we care about their outcomes, not just our bank accounts.

The best way to make a customer believe we truly care about their outcomes is to truly care about their outcomes. The decisions you make as a sales leader around what tools and technology to invest in must come from a customer-outcome perspective. Build, maintain, and grow your field organization to best serve the focus, not the other way around.

## 3. Fundamentals

Your third ongoing sales leadership function is to drive the fundamentals that maximize the field's effectiveness. Now they must execute, and you must ensure that execution is aligned around the right *fundamentals*, imparted in the most efficient and effective way possible.

The word fundamentals is used on purpose. These are the central principles of which consistent execution is founded. You have a responsibility to ensure that your team members are executing consistently, the right execution in the right situations. On a regular basis, spend the time to break down each of the fundamental elements of a consistent performer.

The fundamentals are the simple things we must get consistently right. At a high level, it's categories like:

**Messaging:** Are we consistently messaging to prospects and customers correctly?

**Prospecting:** How effective are we at inspiring the interest and engagement of our focus targets?

**Discovery/Qualification:** How good are we at identifying the fit for both the potential customer and the organization?

**Presenting:** In the more formal engagements with prospects and customers, how are we at maximizing audience engagement, driving action, telling stories, and leading *to* our solution instead of *with* it?

**Negotiating:** Do we over discount? Do we erode trust at the goal line of our deals using techniques taught in hostage negotiation classes? Are we exuding price integrity?

Start with the basics. As a sales leader, just going through a simple self-scoring of your team is a good place to start. Periodically assess and then prioritize the investments you make in the fundamentals.

## 4. Forecast

The fourth category of responsibility is the requirement of a sales leader to be able to harness the team's ability to predict the future through an accurate forecast. Sales forecasting is traditionally fraught with inaccuracy. Yet, tradition reigns. Tradition subconsciously leads to deception, ultimately resulting in the quarterly surprise against anticipated performance.

There are five ways to buck traditional approaches to driving a forecast, which, when put together, can't help but drive forecasting breakthroughs. One of those is to rethink traditional forecast stages and milestones.

Tradition has created a systemic focus for sellers on the achievement of their own milestones. Each stage, such as qualifying, presenting, and sending proposals, is rewarding a sales person's subconscious dopamine system based on what that seller is doing. While those selling activities may align to a process, can you replace existing stage names with the correlating buyer behaviors that drive buyer decision-making progression?

When we focus our salespeople on recognizing *buyer behavior* instead of focusing on what salespeople should be doing, our ability to predict when the customer will act changes immediately. This mindset shift could result in the following five buyer-centric perspectives on deal qualification, easily remembered with the acronym, TEMPT:

- **Trigger:** Does the buyer see that their status quo is no longer sustainable?
- **Engagement:** The buyer is willing to put you on their calendar.
- **Mobilizer:** Is the buyer capable of mobilizing change in their organization.
- **Plan:** The engaged buyer is willing to chart a path, discuss, and collaborate to take the journey forward.
- **Transparency:** Are they okay with what we don't do? Will the truth sell it?

Buyer-behavior focused versus seller-activity focused will always win in your sales forecasting. Coupling that with the culture you create that embraces transparency, and you have the recipe for a more accurate forecast.

### 5. Fun

Finally, and potentially most importantly, to create a magnetic, engaged workplace, we must create an environment where your team has fun every day, loving what they do, who they do it with, and who they do it for. The oft-used work is engagement.

Engagement comes from you, the leader, and is key to performance, the mental health of both yourself and your team, predictability, reduced turnover, and even speed to hire.

When we are engaged, we're motivated to engage in the work and develop meaningful relationships with co-workers up and down. The fun factor correlates with your state of mind and, thus, your intrinsic inspiration. Intrinsic inspiration is your actions being driven without any tangible reward for doing so. You are engaging in behavior driven

by something inside of you, versus an external motivation provided outside of you.

In an optimal selling environment, compensation is a positive, secondary reinforcement—in other words, a *reward* for successful outcomes in performing the work versus the *motivator*. The key to having reps who show up every day, do their best, stay, and tell their friends is in creating an environment where they are rewarded for doing work they are intrinsically motivated to do.

Where does that intrinsic inspiration come from? It's time to talk about our feelings.

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## Part 2: The Behavioral Science of Intrinsic Inspiration

In their nebulous context, feelings can seem like we're talking about love, hate, anger, and fear. When used as a part of your sales leadership framework for considering, monitoring, and driving intrinsic inspiration, they become a powerful tool for performance, stability, joy, and success.

There are six primary categories of feelings that drive us intrinsically. This framework will change the way you listen, but more importantly, it will change the way you consider culture development and decision-making.

You as an individual and those on your team are subconsciously engaged by these six categories of feelings that, when maximized, result in low voluntary turnover and maximized team revenue potential. Balance these six. Use them as a guide to monitor and discuss the engagement of your teams. See the holes they form. They happen to spell out the word *praise*.

### Predictability

We do our best work when we can predict the future. When we go to bed at night, we sleep best and perform best the next day when we know what we'll be waking up to on the next day. Are you a consistent leader? Does the team know where you are all headed? Does each rep know what their day, week, month, and year might look like? Consistency and expectation drive engagement, unlike the inconsistent, moody, cards-hidden sales leader.

When we are in an uncertain environment, it is taxing on the brain. Our IQ goes down, as our energy-burning brains seek to make sense of the information it is taking in. Human beings are driven to situations or environments where

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there is a predictable expectation. Individuals tend to be less productive when they have feelings of uncertainty, inconsistency, and instability.

Consistent leadership does not have to mean being consistently warm, gracious, or engaging. Being consistently grumpy and distant is better than being inconsistent. Your team’s ability to predict what you will bring each day is a key component of their intrinsic inspiration—even if you are consistently a jerk. Avoid forcing the individuals on your team to spend unnecessary time and energy seeking predictable ground.

You are setting the prediction in the minds of your team from your first interaction, which is often during the interview process. In a market where the demand for great sales people far exceeds the supply, you may be thinking you have to sell the role aggressively to a candidate you perceive as ideal. The downstream from overselling and overpromising has massive repercussions.

In the context of intrinsic inspiration, predictability is our human drive to desire certainty. Your responsibility is to help your team forecast what their day, month, and future may look like and it begins before your team member’s day one and never ends. Embrace the truth and set accurate expectations to attract the right individual who will stay, perform, and advocate.

## Recognition

We do our best work when we are recognized for our efforts, validated for the impact, given status in front of others, and provided regular feedback. As individuals, we tend to work less and for shorter periods when we feel our efforts are not acknowledged or validated. As a sales leader, establishing regular opportunities to recognize, validate, and give status win out over the old-school “you’re lucky you have a job” sales leader.

Beyond achieving personal satisfaction, the visibility of doing so is a core driver of intrinsic inspiration. In other words, people want to be noticed. We are driven both consciously and subconsciously toward optimizing the attention

we receive and the perception others have of us. We buy fancy cars that are beyond our budget to be recognized for our successes. We will take a more impressive sounding job title to acquire a label we can tell our friends.

As individuals, this “recognition” category is broad in that it encompasses the overall coaching we seek to drive ourselves toward a goal. It also includes the simple need for validation, which shows appreciation for effort and should be considered daily. On a weekly basis, leaders need to seek out opportunities to recognize the efforts of their team members. Recognition is a public calling-out of both the positive contributions and a celebration of the effort for even the losses.

As a team leader, delivering feedback often drives intrinsic inspiration, too. To drive an individual to want to improve, avoid the list. Begin with a single positive, then deliver just one constructive opportunity to improve. Then stop. Now is not the time to move onto a second in each category. Wait a week, two weeks, a month, or some gap in time where feedback can marinate, adjustments can be made, and the individual is ready for the next opportunity to improve.

## Aim

We as human beings are driven in purpose, mission, helping others, or making an impact beyond just themselves. Individuals are less likely to do their best work when they feel their aim at work does not matter. There are three core questions to ask yourself:

1. Do the individuals on your sales team know what their work truly means to you, both professionally and personally?
2. To your organization and your customers?
3. To the customers of your customers?

Salespeople on a mission, with a true purpose beyond just striving to hit a number, making an impact daily that is a benefit to society will achieve more. They will stay longer. They will advocate.

Your team’s work matters beyond their number, but do

they know how? Make it your aim to align the work of your team to the outcomes of your customer's customers, and if it really matters, you'll find intrinsic inspiration for their job rise.

### Independence

We do our best work when we have control, autonomy, and the trust of others. Our personal freedoms drive the intrinsic inspiration to do our best work. When the opposite is true, when others control or observe most of our work, we become less engaged in our efforts.

One could argue that *independence* is the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Self actualization is summarized through the achievement of our full potential. Having control over ourselves, our ability to experiment, be creative, and control our environment is intrinsically invigorating. As a sales leader, you may totally agree with this, but when combined with the *predictability* element, a conundrum is created.

Before the pandemic of 2020, the technology to execute a remote sales organization existed. From a behavioral perspective, there's a reason it was never more pervasive. We are driven toward control, autonomy, and the trust of others. Remote work maximizes that feeling of control.

However, as a sales leader, we are also driven to predict. We are driven toward certainty. Our struggle to predict and gain certainty is multiplied when we cannot oversee those who control our destiny—our sales teams. Remote sales environments are great for sales people but inherently not great for organizational and sales leadership.

Whose subconscious desire wins? That's up to you as a sales leader. That's part of being transparent with your team. That is creating an environment where there is alignment between the environment and culture you create while gaining alignment with your team around their role in ensuring that environment and culture can exist.

As a sales leader, you will feel a need for your own level of comfort, which, without self-actualization as to your approach, can drive disengagement and a tendency to micromanage. Be aware of your own approaches to how you monitor your team's activity, encourage your team to take mind breaks, and create a culture where the mindset of luck thrives. Provide the freedom for your team members to optimize each day. We all have pockets of time each day when we feel most productive, and times we don't. As a sales leader, don't steal those productive times.

### Security

We do our best work when we are part of a team. Packs outperform individuals. It is your role as a leader to foster the team, foster security, and ensure each individual feels like someone has their back—versus the disconnected, you-against-everyone-else sales leader.

As a sales leader, fostering security and safety and being part of a team directly correlates to higher performance, lower turnover, and faster time to hire. In a remote or hybrid environment, achieving this connection becomes even harder. There are three ways to build and maximize the feeling of security between your team members.

**Hanging out:** Think of the bond you have with your spouse, kids, or best friends. You could literally sit on a couch doing nothing and have a blast together. Taking that to the work environment is much the same. Spending time in the trenches together, talking about our weekends, chats in the office kitchen area, or going out together after work creates bonds. Those opportunities to create bonds are much more difficult in a virtual environment. Provide virtual opportunities for your team to hang out, keeping in mind that the best way to foster team connectivity is to encourage these interactions to take place *without you*, the sales leader, involved in every one of them.

**Shared experiences:** Bonds become stronger through shared experiences, such as going through onboarding together, attending conferences, or partnering on strategic projects. Seek opportunities to create experiences for your team. In a virtual environment, do small team-building exercises. In an in-person setting, consider doing offsite charitable work or attending a sporting event.

**Shared goals:** Rally your team around hitting certain targets, with a special reward for hitting stretch goals. Think beyond the individual. Shared goals galvanize teams together as the third most effective way to build security.

Feeling alone or out on your own drives us to seek safety and security—a security only found by being part of a pack where we stay and thrive. Environments with the strongest teams, where everyone feels as though someone has their back and they have a connection with one another, directly correlates with higher performance and lower turnover.

### Equitability

Our brain's radar is wired to be aware of the perceived equitability of everything. Our equitability radar con-

stantly assesses whether the juice is worth the squeeze, and whether everyone around us is receiving the same reward for the same output. When either is out of whack, intrinsic motivation drops.

Equitability comes about through the fairness of monetary rewards balanced with the intrinsic inspiration categories such as predictability, recognition, aim, independence, and security. The effort and output are what we give up in order to get all that *rewardy goodness*. The second we feel like there are politics, favorites, or others receiving a larger reward for an equal or less effort or output, our brains start to go a bit crazy.

The office brownnoser gets all the recognition. The boss's buddy is first in line for the promotion. A peer is making more money than you with the same job and experience. When the effort is no longer worth the reward, we quickly find it difficult to turn on our brains for the task at hand.

The answer to the problem of perceived unfairness becomes an issue of transparency. What you perceive to be equitable may not be how others perceive it. And when it comes as a surprise and missing expectations, disengagement occurs, where our inspiration to keep going dissipates. Sharing your approach, decision criteria, and process early and often settles the perceptions.

Throughout history, the importance of sales leadership depended on the importance of the salesperson to an organization's success. Whether the economy is booming or not, embracing a structure for sales leadership allows you to extend your lead in the good times and continue to grow in the bad.



Todd Caponi fell into sales, then fell in love with the decision science surrounding it. He turned that into a career encompassing multiple sales leadership roles, including building the revenue capacity of one tech company from the ground-up into Chicago's fastest-growing, another where his efforts helped drive the organization to a successful IPO followed by an acquisition worth almost \$3B, and another where his turnaround efforts were rewarded with the American Business "Stevie" Award for Worldwide Vice President of Sales of the Year.

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