**Hooked on Hopium**

If you are an autocratic leader or you have a problem with losing your temper, you may intimidate people—something that might compel them to feel as though they must hide things from you. Or tell you what you want to hear.

Of course, if you yell at *great* salespeople, they will either laugh at you or find a better boss. That said, there are plenty of bad bosses whose salespeople are afraid to tell them what is *really* happening.

The *Chicago Tribune* had a special section on the city’s top workplaces. Employees who participated in the survey also got to add their comments. Here are five statements made by employees about their companies:

1. “I have many opportunities to learn and grow at this organization.”

2. “I get the formal training I want for my career.”

3. “I feel genuinely appreciated at this organization”

4. “My manager listens to me.”

5. “It’s easy to tell my boss the truth.”

That last one jumped off the page at me.

Why *shouldn’t* it be easy to tell your manager the truth? I know sometimes the boss doesn’t like to hear bad news, but keeping bad news hidden is not the way for an organization to succeed. My late colleague Norm Goldsmith used to ask our Leadership Institute participants, “Would you rather have an employee come to you with a smoldering ember or a raging forest fire?”

Your reaction to mistakes and lost sales will determine how open and honest salespeople will be with you.

I’m not a shouter. I have rolled my eyes on a few too many occasions, but I don’t embarrass people in front of others. And I genuinely want them to improve. But one thing I learned the hard way is that salespeople want to please the boss. Sometimes, they try too hard to please the boss.

Let me tell you a story, because that’s what I do.

One of my salespeople came got back to the office at 4:30 p.m. He walked quickly past my door. He had just driven to meet a potential sales training client in Stevens Point, WI. The 225-mile round trip and the meeting had taken up most of his day.

“Hey Michael,” I called to him. He poked his head around the door and looked in my office.

“Come in,” I said to him. “How was your meeting today?”

“It was a great meeting,” he said. There was a smile on his face.

“So, you got an order, then?”

“It was the first meeting. I don’t have an order . . . yet.”

I continued debriefing Michael: “But you said it was a ‘great meeting.’” What made it great if you didn’t get an order?”

“Well, we talked for an hour and a half.”

“So, he didn’t throw you out.”

“He really likes the way we deliver our content online and thinks we’re onto something with the time-released training.”

The conversation went on for a few more minutes as he described the client and the company. Then I asked the $110,000 question. I call it that because I was about ready to put this “great” opportunity into our sales projections.

“What’s the next step, Michael?”

“He wants me to call him in the spring.”

“It’s October. Spring is six months from now. And that entire season is 92 days long. Do you have a day in the spring when he wants you to call?”

“No. He just said that he wants me to call him in the spring.”

“So, let me ask you again. How was the meeting that you just drove 112.5 miles to and 112.5 miles back from?”

“Terrible?”

“Use words that mean something, Michael. It was a *continuation*. You didn’t get a sale and you don’t have a next step on a certain date. That’s a continuation or a non-win. There’s nothing wrong with not closing. Nobody closes every sale. The mistake you are making is to call a meeting in which nothing positive happened a ‘great meeting.’”

Salespeople like Michael get hooked on *hopium*. They present and they hope. And their sales process ends there.

Your job is to give them a reality check—to help them look at failure as part of the process and not something to be ashamed of or worried about. What you want from your salespeople is honest communication. You want them to use language that describes what transpired, not how great the meeting was.

I know it sounds difficult. But failing to foster this kind of straight talk can lead to some dire consequences. Consider my conversation with Michael. If I had taken him at his word that it was a “great meeting,” I would have asked some entirely different questions—and possibly received some less-than-accurate answers.

“How many salespeople do they have that they want to train?”

“Thirty-eight, but they will be at 50 in the spring.”

“Do they want to train them all?”

“That’s what he was talking about.”

“How certain are you that this will close in the spring?”

“I’d rate it at 70 percent minimum.”

“I’ll put it in at 60 percent for now. Good work, Michael.”

Now, I have a six-figure order our projections that has no next step, and no real business being in the in the projections. That’s at least a partial explanation for why *Chief Sales Officer Insights* reports 54 percent of the deals that are projected to close never do.

Your salespeople may be hooked on *hopium*. If they are, they will surely blow the sweet-smelling smoke of *hopium* your way. You readily inhale it and continue to blow it up the line. Don’t. Ask questions. Make sure that a “great meeting” means the same thing to your salespeople as it does to you.

(Adapted from *The Accidental Sales Manager: How to Take Control and Lead Your Team o Record Profits.* Permission granted to reprint with attribution to the author Chris Lytle.)