

WHITE PAPER SERIES

Fast Forward:

# Driving Your “B” Players to the “A” Team

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Top performers make a company work. It’s more than their impact to the bottom line; it’s the way they work for an organization as a whole—whether it’s by taking on a leadership role, or developing honest relationships with customers.

When you have top performers, they “generate a lot of energy, enthusiasm and excitement. They help fuel a healthy culture,” says Bill Golder, sales vice president for Miller Heiman, Inc.

Every company wants more world-class sales performers, and few have as many in their ranks as they would like. Golder contends that you must understand what a top performer’s required traits and skill sets (or “DNA”) are as they pertain to your specific organization. And, “many organizations have the opportunity to manage talent better,” he says.

### What Makes a Top Performer?

Jason Reed, sales vice president for Miller Heiman, believes this skill separates the top performers: They’re exceptional listeners. “Top performers know listening is more than being quiet. It’s about really listening to what the customer says and dovetailing smart and insightful lines of questioning from the information the client shares.” Reed points out that understanding the client’s circumstance requires those types of listening skills. He says, “Top performers have these skills and marginal performers often don’t.”

He and Golder agree on another trait that propels exceptional performers to the top: business acumen. A salesperson who understands, and is interested in business, will be more successful in uncovering customer challenges and making honest and credible connections. Interpersonal savvy, or EQ [Emotional Quotient], also comes into play, according to Reed: “Some people have it; others just don’t.” Situational fluency is so important in the sales world, and sales reps with high EQ are able to thrive regardless of ever-changing sales environments.

Golder indicates that there “always needs to be a good cultural fit” for top performers to excel. A top performer in one organization might not be a top performer in a different organization. “Top performers blend well with culture and pace—it isn’t just skills, knowledge and traits.

“A sales rep could deliver numbers consistently, but not bring value to the organization in terms of leadership. Top performers bring an intangible value to an organization beyond the numbers,” Golder states.

“Without question, there’s a lot to be said for the consistent, serious and professional manner in which top performers sell to prospective clients and manage their portfolios. They aren’t haphazard. They have serious standards and disciplines that can be replicated,” says Reed. They regularly apply their own business processes to how they sell.

### Get to the Core of Top Performers’ DNA

Golder suggests that organizations get to the core of their top performers “DNA” by using a scientific profiling approach (like Miller Heiman’s Predictive Sales Performance<sup>SM</sup> assessment), and by performing win analyses. “Having a win/loss analysis in place for deals is healthy, but it’s doubly effective when one of the outcomes of the analysis is discovering what happens when top performers win deals.”

Reed says, “Identify the habits of rainmakers; top performers know that X calls a week result in Y live meetings and ultimately yield Z closed sales—and they’re disciplined, consistent and get results. Institutionalize this information to build management controls and drive compliance throughout the entire sales organization.” According to Reed, a legitimate selling process with discipline and compliance through the ranks is fundamental to scaling sales growth. If the organization has bought in to the selling process, and if it’s practical and can be replicated by entire sales force, then an environment for quantum sales growth is the result.

### Bring Bs to As

Many companies buy in to the concept of systematizing best practices and propagating them throughout the organization, Reed says—and those companies are thinking in the right direction. But it’s easier said than done. Coaching B and C level players to become A-level producers isn’t easy. Companies must create a foundation that enables a consistent approach to selling to be driven down through the rank and file. “It becomes increasingly important that there’s a common language, consistent process and discipline about how you go to market,” he states. It’s only at this point that systematizing best practices is even possible.

“There’s a fine line between your best people and the rest,” Reed goes on to say. “Sometimes the line can be pushed.” As he puts it, the trend has been to refine and manage operational efficiencies in all departments, functions and divisions within companies—except for sales!

Sales, traditionally, has been considered to be more nebulous—more of an art form. Thus, operational approaches to selling have been neglected. But, Reed says, this is changing fast: “Companies are quickly realizing the tremendous value in systematizing their sales process.” He is quick to mention that the “art of selling” is still important, but that today’s market demands more than just a friendly personality and a low golf handicap.

Now, the trend has reached the sales world, and the result of systematizing sales processes can be just the push that’s needed to nudge the B-level players in the right direction. “You won’t get the middle pack to shoot completely to the top. You can, however, get them to move up a rung or two,” Reed says. “Moving the core middle forward even incrementally can be profoundly valuable to the entire sales organization in terms of performance.”

The key to moving Bs to As, according to Golder, is prompting sales managers to devote energy to the right group. Often, sales leaders get caught up in managing C-level salespeople, who seem to need the most resources. The other possibility is that managers are trying to be the A-level super-salespeople by handling deals themselves. Both of these activities, Golder says, represent misallocation of the sales manager’s time. Any organization that can help its sales management find more time to spend with the bulk of its sales force—the B players—will see the benefits of better revenue.

And, while the onus is on management to help the sales force reach the next level, by providing the right resources in terms of training and support, the rest, Golder says, is up to the individual salesperson. “As a salesperson, so much of what’s delivered comes from your individual efforts and contribution. That’s part of the reason people are in sales.”

## Measuring Performance

Three key elements should be gauged to determine the level at which any salesperson is delivering: skills, activity and revenue. According to Golder, this is how it works:

**Skills:** the general sales ability and attributes required to be successful in the organization.

**Activity:** showing up, working hard, playing to win, being persistent.

## Revenue: meeting the numbers.

And, Golder says, if you have a development process in place, it requires companies to really think about ways in which they should measure progress rather than just top-line revenue. They can begin to think of the components for success on a more granular level: “How effectively are my people executing on the skills for this job? If companies can define that, and have a good process in place to make sure salespeople get feedback on execution of measurable skills, it will contribute greatly to the expansion of the A-player population.”

As Reed stresses, even an incremental positive difference in the core middle’s approach to selling can significantly impact an organization’s number: “Not everyone will be a rainmaker; nudging the Bs and Cs forward just a little is arguably the best move a sales leader can make. It has an even greater impact than making the best better.”

## About Miller Heiman

Miller Heiman has been a thought leader and innovator in the sales arena for almost thirty years, helping clients worldwide win high-value complex deals, grow key accounts and build winning sales organizations.

The company is headquartered in Reno, Nevada and has offices around the world. More information can be obtained by visiting the company’s website at: [www.millerheiman.com](http://www.millerheiman.com).