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WHY YOU SHOULD

ADD HUMOR TO YOUR SALES TRAINING PROGRAM

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WANT TO GIVE YOUR SALES TEAM AN EDGE?

Companies and universities are turning to humor for high performance

Adaptability training through improv games and activities helps sales trainees overcome barriers in communication and in connecting with others. Given its humorous nature, this type of training creates a safe environment for trainees to build competencies in recognizing and monitoring emotions, gaining empathy, recognizing bias, listening, and improving confidence and decision-making under pressure—all while having fun. When was the last time you attended sales training where trainees were engaged, smiling, and at times, laughing?

When I first started teaching sales, I noticed during training that students would stop in the middle of their first role play, look up at me stunned, and say, "I don't know what to say." This was frustrating, so I turned to Melissa Bowler, founder of Providence Improv Guild, to help me teach students to adapt with confidence and think on their feet, rather than feeling like a deer caught in headlights. Each semester, we started with a session on adaptability training and students breezed through role plays. We didn't understand exactly what was changing, but we noticed students were performing well and employers started coming to campus asking if there was something in the water at Bryant because our graduates were performing so well in sales. We started conducting research and found something very interesting. Before adaptability training, females reported lower confidence than males in their ability to make decisions, think during

stressful situations, and adapt to new information. After just one training session, we saw lasting improvements for both males and females, but what shocked us was that just one training increased the female group confidence levels to the same as their male counterparts. At that point, we knew we had something special.

Dr. Robert Peterson, Associate Professor of Marketing and Editor of Journal of Selling, uses adaptability training in his B2B class each week at

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Northern Illinois University. Peterson explains that in sales, "No one wakes up in the morning and is handed a script for the day. It's all about improvisation, but the goal is not to be funny, but valuable." Peterson takes his class to Second City in Chicago for training once a semester and has noticed a marked difference in student listening skills and confidence. He uses improv in class as a teaching tool and has found lessons in improv have expanded his teaching ability, "If spontaneity, creativeness, collaboration, and listening are important business skills, then improv is the perfect training tool. In fact, I am taking my 7th formal class myself at Second City and it has broaden my classroom teaching significantly."

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Dr. Andrea Dixon at Baylor University hosts an entire boot camp before the semester starts each fall including improv training. Dr. Howard Dover at the University of Texas at Dallas conducts improv sessions for mixed

groups of students and corporate partners. Dr. David Fleming at Indiana State University incorporates improv games to train students on presenting the features, advantages, and benefits of products and services, and uses improv as a tool to engage students in a world of digital disruption. Companies are using adaptability training to adapt to changes in the marketplace. For instance, Nick Valeri at Toast notes that adaptability and improv training have helped him make connections with customers.

Dr. Ellen Pullins at the University of Toledo found a huge theory and practice gap during her research in Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice. She found that, "Salespeople clearly know they should adapt. They report it as a critical skill and something that they do in interviews on best practice, but their customers tell a different story—one where the same salesperson walks in with a canned presentation, listens intently to the customer needs, signals agreement and understanding, and then pulls out the canned or preplanned PowerPoint." It is common sense to use adaptability training and apply it in sales; it is just not common practice yet. If you want your sales team to win more business and connect with customers more effectively, then give improv a shot. ▲

