



FIND YOUR FIGHTING SPIRIT



SIMON BUZZA explains how salespeople can learn to adopt a winning attitude from mission-critical military thinking

Have you noticed how much more pleasurable it is to have meetings with optimists rather than pessimists? Cynics and pessimists suck the energy out of situations and people — they drag down group morale and can make an already difficult situation worse. Optimists, on the other hand, have a positive approach, lift spirits and raise morale. This is especially true in sales meetings where they can energise others and generate new and innovative solutions. In contrast, the grim warnings of the

defeatists and pessimists in sales have a seriously negative and direct impact on both their sales team colleagues and on the buyer's frame of mind.

Alarming, we manifest our attitude, both positive and negative, through our conscious and subconscious thoughts and communications. Our subconscious communications, both verbal and non-verbal, impact the sale as much as our conscious efforts. Buyers are canny individuals. They are often risk-averse, particularly in a tough

◀ economic environment, can sense a lack of confidence, belief or know-how, and this is often enough to put them off the first seller in favour of a second more confident and positive individual.

So, how do we control these subconscious thoughts and deliver a positive and winning attitude in our sales meetings? The Royal Marines Commandos and Special Forces have identified decision-making under stress as being decisive. They have developed activities and behaviours that help to overcome stress at key moments, and help them to think clearly and maintain a ‘winning spirit’, often to overcome overwhelming odds. We can learn from this in our sales preparation, planning and execution. Indeed, this gives us a template for managing stress and fear across all aspects of our life.

AWARENESS AND RECOGNITION

First, let’s understand what is happening here. It is easy to remain rational, composed and in control when things are going well. However, when things are not going to plan it requires great skill to remain calm and retain focus on the job in hand. When we are not feeling positive about a particular situation, our subconscious mind begins to take over and we feel stressed.

Stress can get in the way of accomplishing your objectives. It can keep you from becoming great at sales or whatever else it is you want to conquer. In the military, stress can, literally, stop you dead in your tracks. This is due to how the brain functions. In the brain’s desire to protect you from the

unknown, it can actually impede you from accomplishing your most important goals. The brain’s ‘fight or flight’ response can derail your logical train of thought and bring about manifestly inappropriate sales behaviours.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING STRESS?

Stress is produced by real or imagined events that are perceived to threaten an individual’s physical and mental wellbeing. But let’s be clear, the right amount of stress will allow a salesperson to function at peak performance — we all need the thrill of the chase. But excessive stress has biological and psychological consequences that reduce working memory and the capacity to process new information and learn. Stress can also trigger unhelpful habits — recurrent, often unconscious patterns of behaviour acquired through frequent repetition.

When you are confronted with a scary or stressful situation, in basic terms, your brain presses the ‘panic button’, triggering a cascade effect of involuntary responses. Your heart beats faster, you breathe faster, your blood pressure rises, and if the level of panic is sufficient, chemicals such as adrenaline and cortisol are released into your bloodstream. If the stressor is significant and not brought under control, the fight or flight system is activated and, like it or not, you’re in full panic mode. Unless you can get the panic cascade under control, or prevent it from occurring in the first place, the likelihood of overcoming your fears is quite limited.

How to react under stressful conditions has been an

issue at the forefront of Royal Marine Commando leadership development for many years. The commandos need leaders who can react quickly and effectively under pressure — panic, even nervousness, can have catastrophic consequences on operations that rely on speed, control, audacity and total self-belief.

More recently, this has also been a question on the minds of instructors at the US Navy SEALs’ Special Warfare Command in San Diego, California. They were losing a large number of potential SEALs from the training process because recruits could not control their fear response during key moments of training.

MANAGING STRESSFUL SITUATIONS

For commandos there are three levels of response, based on time:

- Immediate action drills (or ‘in the now’ activities)
- Medium-term preparation and training
- Long-term beliefs and values.

These military learnings and experiences can all be brought to bear in the commercial world of sales.

Immediate action drills

The challenge is how to respond to the immediate threat or change of circumstances when there is insufficient time to plan something in detail. One tool the elite forces use is immediate action drills, which are constantly practised until they become instinctive. Recent research shows that mind-fitness training techniques can lead to more efficient mental processing. This has led the military to develop techniques to help their elite teams override the panic system and remain focused and calm.

SEAL instructors decided to focus on what they call the ‘big four’ techniques: goal-setting, mental rehearsal, self-talk, and arousal control. A fifth, endurance, can be added to come up with the ‘GAMES’ approach to conquering your fears and stress:

Goal-setting: this involves creating very short-term and achievable goals, so that you are not overwhelmed by a bunch of extraneous thoughts and concerns and can remain focused on the task at hand. So, rather than drowning in the scale of the problem, take small bite-sized chunks and deal with them sequentially.

Arousal control: this element focuses mainly on breathing. Taking deeper breaths with longer exhalations simulates the body’s relaxation response and helps to mitigate some of the panic response.

Mental rehearsal: often referred to as visualisation, mental rehearsal is seeing you doing it over and over again successfully, as if in a movie. There is a great deal of research that indicates that your mind has a hard time differentiating between a vividly visualised scenario and one that actually occurred.

Endurance: this element is a recognition that this proactive approach to mastering stress is not something that will happen quickly. Your mantra should be ‘as long as it takes’. It’s a marathon not a sprint.

Self-talk: what a Special Forces team member says to themselves, particularly in times of stress, is very important. If they fill their mind with negative thoughts, they decrease their chances of success. It’s no different for salespeople.

A further piece of research from Harvard Business School has recently revealed the power of non-verbal

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communication in business. Holding one's body in 'high-power' poses for short time periods can summon an extra surge of power and sense of wellbeing when it's needed. In fact, 'power posing' for as little as two minutes stimulates higher levels of testosterone and lower levels of cortisol.

Medium-term preparation and training

Commandos do not achieve their high standards overnight. They practise scenarios they might face for real and explore everything that could go wrong. They make enormous efforts to replicate real conditions, so there are as few surprises as possible. Immediate action drills become hard-wired into their thinking processes. While businesses may not be able to afford the amount of time dedicated to preparation as the Royal Marines, the occasional training and rehearsal period would be a useful first step. Too often in businesses, training is a very low priority and staff are expected to be able to deal with every eventuality as it arises. For example, difficult negotiations are frequently undertaken 'on the fly' as those who are responsible for these are often said to 'have been doing this for years and don't need training' — a recipe for failure.

Being adequately prepared requires being in the right physical and mental condition for the unexpected. An acronym used in the military is SHEDO, which stands for: **Sleep:** helps the body repair, reduces stress and improves memory.

Hydration: avoids the physical and mental impairment of dehydration, which reduces reaction time and impairs decision making.

Exercise: reduces blood pressure, improves mood and reduces stress.

Diet: provides energy at the right time without hindering performance through excess weight and sluggishness.

Oxygen: induces calm thought under pressure through controlled breathing.

High-pressure, office-bound work can seriously erode mental and physical performance. Focusing on these five critical elements can improve performance 'on the day' for all those involved in high pressure commercial situations such as sales negotiations.

Long-term beliefs and values

Values are underlying, guiding principles. Values affect us at the deepest, subconscious level. Each judgement we make is based on our values. Our values can be classified as negative 'away-from' values, motivated by our desire to avoid, and positive 'towards' values, motivated by our aspirations.

Beliefs, like values, are principles held as true; thoughts or ideas we no longer question. Our beliefs have incredible power over our lives. Empowering beliefs are positive and help you to move forwards; limiting beliefs are negative, disempowering and work to hold you back. The good news is that, by reprogramming the subconscious mind, these beliefs can be shaped.

What the Royal Marines have done is embed a powerful set of values and beliefs into their organisation. Their ethos is made up of both individual and group qualities. The individual 'commando spirit' requires courage, determination, unselfishness, and cheerfulness in the face of adversity, qualities that are constantly referred to

PERFORMING UNDER PRESSURE

The ability to perform under pressure was identified as a critical success factor by Sir Clive Woodward in his role as the manager of the England Rugby world cup winning team of 2003 and later as director of elite performance at the British Olympic Association.

Woodward dismissed the commonly held idea that a coach or manager's job is to relieve pressure on his players. In his view, it is impossible for anyone to reduce the intense pressure of training for years in order to win a world cup final or an Olympic gold medal on one day. "To me the quicker you acknowledge that pressure is good the better, and then find people who perform best when the pressure is greatest," he said. He highlighted England's rugby world cup winning captain Martin Johnson as such an individual.

In his elite sports coaching roles, Woodward developed his 'T-cup' theory — 'Thinking correctly under pressure' — and spoke of learning from the mindset of the Royal Marines: "They practise scenarios they might face for real and explore everything that could go wrong. They make enormous efforts to replicate real conditions, so there are as few surprises as possible. The sporting world also makes great use of visualisation and scenario planning. A lot of business training, by contrast, is classroom-based, and generally there is only ever a plan A."

and lauded as the aspirational standards expected of the best. It helps the Marines to articulate and understand their commonly held values, remove any negatively-charged 'away-from' values (such as 'I won't be able to do that') and replace them with positive, empowering values (such as 'I believe that I can achieve this difficult and dangerous task'). A second set of group values — including unity, adaptability, humility, fortitude and humour — shape the way Marines work as a team.

KEY LESSONS FOR SALES

Positive spirits and winning attitudes are potential differentiators for sales teams and managers. Stress and negative thoughts can seriously inhibit performance. These are unconscious reactions to difficult situations. But experience and research show that it is possible to train our minds to overcome them. Awareness and recognition are the first steps.

Overcoming stress and focusing on winning spirits and positive outcomes is achievable by addressing those three key levels of preparation: immediate action drills (or 'in the now' activities); medium-term preparation and training; and long-term beliefs and values.

Elite military forces go to great lengths to embed this type of behaviour — and highly successfully. Their experience offers an insight into how sales professionals and organisations can turn attitudes into key differentiators that win them more business.

This is not a quick win, but is based on establishing lasting values and beliefs.

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