

FROM THE SIDELINES

Chapter Eleven

The Seduction of Potential



Excerpt From:

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By Keith Rosen, MCC

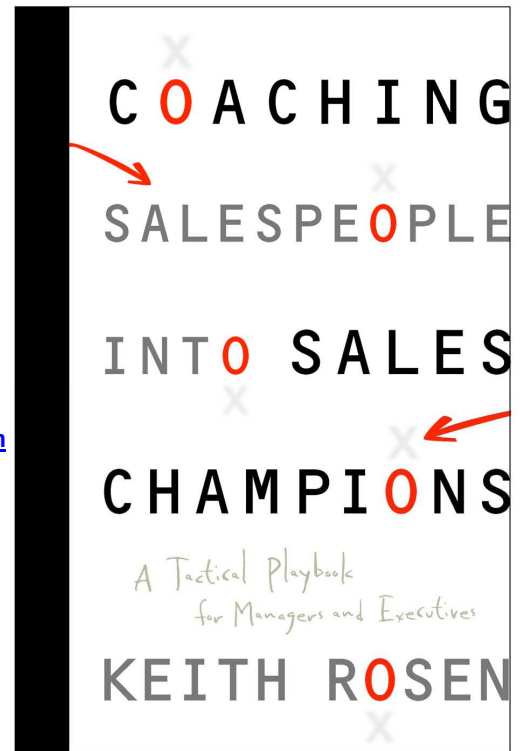
COACHING SALESPEOPLE INTO SALES CHAMPIONS

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE SEDUCTION OF POTENTIAL



Potential Is the Holy Grail

There are three areas in which managers constantly struggle. One area is deciding who to hire and where to find good talent. The second is deciding who to invest the time in turning around, and the third is determining who to let go and when to do it. These are the tasks that managers complain about the most.

When it comes to making these decisions about their employees, the questions I hear most often, the ones that keep managers up at night, sound like this:

- "I'm not getting the production I need from my team, even when I continually push them. How do you turn an underperformer into a top producer or at least into an average, acceptable producer?"
- "When does it make sense to invest your time, money, and resources into someone who you feel you can turn around?"
- "How can I determine (with great certainty), based on a defined set of criteria, benchmarks, and measurable steps, when to cut the proverbial cord and let someone go?"

During a coaching workshop, on the first day of a weeklong conference, someone asked a question about how to handle an

underperformer. While this manager was sharing in great detail the challenges she was having with a salesperson she hired several months ago, I noticed an interesting reaction from the audience. I glanced out at a sea of people, their heads nodding up and down in agreement, as if she was sharing not just her story but everyone's story.

She talked of an experience that practically every manager and business owner in the room was able to relate to: an all too familiar tale of a new, promising hire with incredible potential who wasn't working out.

Everyone has a story about an underperformer. This manager's story continued about a candidate with a wonderful resume, great background, stellar references, and a seemingly positive attitude and disposition. A candidate who was given the opportunity to work with her. A candidate whom she felt had the potential to live up to her expectations. A candidate whose experience seemed to be a perfect complement to this new sales position.

I listened intently as she described this experience. Her once positive level of exuberance, her hopes and dreams, evaporated before our eyes, as she painfully explained how this promising young superstar became one of her biggest disappointments, frustrations and expense. And it wasn't as if she just called it quits after a few weeks and fired this person. Like most managers, she invested precious time trying to turn the person around. The more she invested in supporting and training this person, the more her expectations were shattered.

Are you tripping over your own potential? Or worse, are you relying on other people's potential to ensure your success?

This manager was stuck. She didn't know what to do. At this point, this new hire was costing her money, time, selling opportunities, and resources every day. This manager completed her story, sounding as drained as if she and the rest of the audience were reliving their personal staffing nightmares, touching what seemed to be an open

wound that simply would not heal. With what sounded like a desperate cry for help, she concluded with something I hear quite regularly, "Keith, what should I do?"

The room was silent. All the managers and business owners were gripping the edges of their seats, waiting, anticipating a magnificent piece of brilliance, a solution to this common and painfully eternal dilemma.

My response was, "Do not be seduced by the ether of potential."

The Seduction Begins: The Ether of Potential

Yes, we are often seduced by the potential that we believe we see in others. We see potential in the people, as well as in the opportunities, all around us. We recognize the untapped potential in people who we have a vested interest in: our children, spouse, coworkers, partner, supervisor, and, of course, in our staff. We see potential in our new hires as well as the untapped potential in the veterans on our team.

We believe that sometimes, if we wait, if we're patient, if we give them just a little more time, more resources, better training, more attention, they can finally live up to their potential. We believe our employees when they tell us, "Just give me a few more weeks. I'm about to close in on two big sales. Yes, I know my performance has slipped, but as I told you, those personal problems that have been distracting me are no longer there."

Quite often, managers are seduced by and get hung up on potential opportunities and past defining moments.

We think, "Okay, if they really could turn it around that would make my life so much easier. After all, it sure beats the painful and time-

consuming process of having to recruit someone new, let alone having to figure out how to cover a territory with no salesperson!"

This belief is counterintuitive. Ironically, it costs you more to keep someone like this on your team. More time, more lost sales, more money and resources, more lost selling opportunities, more conflict, more internal problems. Then you have less time to focus on growing your business and on the people who *are* performing: the people who make you look great, who are coachable, and who want to truly live their potential today.

And that's when it happens. The seduction begins. Now, you begin making decisions based on your emotions, feelings, hopes, and unrealistic scenarios, rather than on the facts and what is best for you, the company, as well as the person in question.

The seduction of potential clouds your better judgment. If you're looking for evidence of this conundrum, then just glance over at the people on your team today. Think about the people you have hired in the past who did not work out. How many people can you think of who you hired, when, in your heart, there was a warning sign, something telling you that this person was not the right fit? Call it your gut reaction, your instincts, or intuition. Your internal barometer was desperately trying to tell you something, and you chose not to listen.

The Hard Cost of Complacency

How many times have you been in a situation with an underperforming employee when every week you convinced yourself and others, "Just one more week. He'll turn it around. I know he can do it. If he just follows the program. Just let him get through this next project. I hope he brings in some new business soon." I refer to this type of behavior as Mother Teresa Syndrome. Signs that you might be suffering from this condition would also show up in your internal dialogue. "I can save him. Just a little more time. And I will sacrifice more and more in order to do so!"

We often hire people based on their potential rather than on what they have truly and measurably achieved. As such, we try to develop the potential we see in them. After all, the goal of management is to make your people more valuable. The key here is investing your time in making the right people more valuable. Otherwise, it's a time-consuming and exhausting exercise in futility.

"Wait and see" is not a contingency plan. Hope is not a strategy.

You continue this internal battle, as you struggle to come up with the right decision. "If he stays, maybe he will turn it around. If I fire him, then what do I do? I have to start the recruiting and training process all over again. What if I fire him and he goes to work for the competition and becomes a superstar? Let's just wait and see what happens tomorrow."

Creating extreme scenarios, relying on costly assumptions, and making decisions that are fueled by hope, fear, and consequence still keeps you from recognizing the truth. The truth is, as human beings we have a tendency to lie to ourselves and then believe our own lies.

You Can't Build a Business on Potential

There is no *potential* in terms of how you currently define it or embrace it in your life. The way managers rely on potential is more of a smokescreen, a diversionary tactic, an attachment to a certain outcome, a rationalization for their salespeople's performance, a justification for their own behavior or for doing something they want to do, or an excuse not to take certain actions.

Potential lives in the future; possibilities are created in the present moment.

You don't hire people based on their potential. Here's a more vivid and beneficial definition of *potential*. Potential is based on something that you have not seen yet nor have evidence to support. Potential resides in the future, fueled by your own personal expectations. Besides, if you are attempting to make hiring decisions based on people's potential, and the candidates haven't been living their potential by the time you meet them, then what makes you think they are going to start living it when you hire them?

Either people strive to live their potential each day or they don't. It's that simple. It's management's responsibility to ensure each person on their team has the systems, tools, resources, training, and coaching that allows them to live their potential every day.

Besides, if you don't know whether you have made the right hiring decision within the first 30 to 60 days, then you are in deep trouble. If you think giving the new hire one more chance, more time, or more training is the answer, it is not. This is a lie, a justification, and a story that you're telling yourself (S.C.A.M.M.). Eventually the pain of keeping that person around will become so evident that the person either quits or gets fired. Consequently, you as the manager have surrendered all of your power to act by choice and, instead, are now in a state of reaction and in dire need of a new candidate. Inadvertently, you have put yourself in the dangerous position of having to hire a new person out of desperation; a person who you know in your heart is not the right fit..

If neither you nor your staff are currently using and leveraging your talents every day, then none of you are living your potential. It's not that you cannot improve. The difference between working off potential and lifelong improvement or building a high performance, collaborative team of self-motivated people is this. With potential, you're looking for something that you have not seen yet nor have evidence for. With lifelong improvement, you're working with a known

quantity and have the empirical evidence (possibly from past experiences) that supports your belief that turning this person around is truly possible. You have the verification and evidence that the situation can be made better.

The real problem is, managers wind up collapsing potential with possibility. So, what truly seduces you is the *potential of possibility*.

What's missing for managers is *certainty*. It's the uncertainty, the unknown, the fear that paralyzes managers who have to make the decision whether to terminate someone or invest the time in turning them around. Managers rely more on their fear based gut reactions than on the facts.

Having certainty and confidence in their people supported by evidence is a healthier, more productive model when creating new possibilities. This is what I refer to as authentic human potential. The certainty comes from having an executive sales coaching program. Once you have a structured coaching program that holds people accountable on a daily and weekly basis, you no longer have to make the decision to keep them or terminate them. Now, underperformers will make that decision for you, based on the defined set of criteria and measurable action steps they need to take to demonstrate their commitment to their position and to dramatically improve their performance. A step-by-step turnaround strategy that you can employ is covered in detail in Chapter 12.

If you are responsible for hiring, developing, and managing a team, what process do you have in place to leverage their strengths from the time of hire through their first 30, 60, 90, even 120 days in their new positions? Would having a Thirty-Day New Hire Orientation Program for every new hire based on measurable productivity steps and objectives help you and your team? Wouldn't this simplify your life dramatically? Now that you have a proven process documented, either the new hire is sticking by the program and achieving the expected results, or not. At this point, there's no room for you to be

seduced by the potential of possibility. There's no probation or waiting for the year-end performance appraisals.

You can now run your business or manage your team with greater efficiency. Once these processes are in place, you'll be able to get back to doing what every manager is destined to do in the first place: make your talented people more valuable.

When to Let Go

"The most rain we've had in about 80 years!" That's what the news reported as a result of the constant rain that had been falling for days, fully expediting my lesson about the downside of having a fully finished basement.

In home after home in the New York area, people began the arduous task of pumping hundreds, sometimes thousands, of gallons of water out of their basements. Streets were like rivers, running with water from all the basements that were being drained. And then there was the damage, not only the structural and cosmetic damage to the houses, but to all the possessions: miles of carpeting, furniture, appliances, and everything else that once made a house a home.

At this point, I had been living in my new home for only about five months, following a 15-month construction project. When we first moved in and the movers arrived with our lifelong possessions that had been in storage for over a year, I couldn't believe how much stuff we had accumulated! Stuff that I've lived without for 15 months. At one point, I asked Eddie, my mover, to take it all back. He said, "You'll probably wind up throwing most of this out."

Well, dozens of unpacked boxes later, we found a place for everything that Eddie was kind enough to bring back to me: in the garage, the attic, and the basement.

Now ironically, not five months after moving in, this flood forced me to throw out at least 80 percent of the boxes stored in my basement. These were the same boxes that I paid to have in storage for 15 months, the same boxes I paid to have moved out of my old house, into storage, and then into my new house, the same boxes that were taking up precious real estate in my new home. The kicker is, for the most part I had no idea what was even in the majority of these boxes!

I needed to give up. That's right, I needed to quit. Without the flood, these boxes would probably have remained undisturbed for years, simply taking up space and adding to household clutter. Yet, because of this natural disaster, I was forced to clear out this clutter, the things that I did not use or that no longer served me anymore.

Master the Art of Giving Up

Doesn't the same philosophy apply to our business, our career, and our life? The fact is, there are things you are doing right now that are creating the very results you want to avoid. And you may already know this! Yet we still hold on to things that are not working: the toxic people or relationships that we're better off without, the strategies we keep thinking will eventually work, the limiting beliefs we have about ourselves ("Well, that's just how I am"), the philosophies about selling, serving our customers, as well as developing and retaining our staff.

The most productive people on the planet have mastered the art of abandonment, that is, the ability to let go of the stuff that no longer works. This is not only limited to what you do but also to how you think: the limiting beliefs that keep you prisoner and stall your progress, preventing you from moving ahead.

The Top Trigger Points of Seduction

The seductive ether of potential can show up in many areas, not just when determining whether to turn around or terminate a salesperson.

Potential can cloud your judgment and overshadow what would be considered more prudent and productive choices.

Here are 10 additional areas that have been known to seduce managers who become tainted and corrupted by the ether of potential. Even though it is critical that salespeople possess many of the following characteristics, they do not replace the salespeople's inability to reach their performance goals and maintain a certain level of acceptable production.

1. *Loyalty*. Loyalty is essential, but is it paying the bills?
2. *Skills*. They may be talented, but are they using their talents to produce the results you expect?
3. *Efforts and Commitment*. Sure, they can put forth the effort and possess an unwavering commitment to you and the company, but do they have the innate ability to perform at an acceptable level?
4. *Passion*. Their enthusiasm can be contagious but ineffective in posting higher sales numbers.
5. *Product Knowledge*. No one may know more about your product and service. However, since this person has trouble even closing a door, your competition thanks you for keeping this salesperson employed.
6. *Overcompensating Qualities*. A gregarious, outgoing, and warm personality certainly makes for a pleasant atmosphere, in spite of the low numbers this salesperson continues to post each month.
7. *Perceived Additional Value*. They told you they know *who* and can bring in more business from *which* company, association, or organization? Are their people connections, networks, and what they say they can do for you (which has yet to materialize) that is keeping them around a bit too long?
8. *Fear*. Nothing is more seductive and paralyzing than allowing your decisions to be governed by fear as you ask yourself questions like, "What's worse, not having a salesperson or having an underperforming salesperson who might be able to turn his sales numbers around? Hmm, let me chew on this one for about seven months."
9. *Ego*. Allowing yourself to be driven by your ego prevents you from learning some valuable lessons, especially as you

continue to sell yourself on the idea that it's not your fault.
10. *Mother Teresa Syndrome*. The hard reality is, it is not your job to try and save every salesperson nor does it mean that if you can't, you're a failure. If you can't let this one go, then you might be better off working for a charitable organization.

Here's something I would encourage you to do. List 10 things that you can abandon either in your behavior, actions, or in your thinking. List the things that you are holding onto that are either no longer working or not generating the results you really want. Learn to let go. Who or what can you give up on today?



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Keith Rosen is the President of Profit Builders and the executive sales coach that top managers, sales professionals, and executives call first. As a prominent, engaging speaker, Master Coach, and well-known author of many books and articles, Keith is one of the foremost authorities on assisting people to achieve positive, measurable change.

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