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Accelerate Results with Physics: Apply the Inverse Zeno Effect

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In a difficult economy, the rules of the game change, but often our actions don't. We continue to beat the same drums and hope for different results. We work harder, and yet it feels like we're spinning our wheels. This is particularly true for salespeople, who suffer significant financial and emotional impact if they can't keep their numbers up. How can you keep your sales staff engaged, motivated and productive, even in down times?

While it could come as a surprise, a principle derived from experiments in quantum physics can be applied to this problem. In these experiments, physicists have discovered that they can slow down subatomic activity (the Zeno Effect) or speed it up (the Inverse Zeno Effect) just by measuring it. The way they measure, what they measure and when they measure determines whether subatomic processes will be accelerated or impeded. The measurement system and philosophy in play will have a significant impact on the outcome.

The same is true in the achievement of your business goals. Whether you're missing your revenue numbers, your margin is eroding or your sales conversion rate is off, examining and retooling your measurement system alone can change or modify your sales results. By applying the following steps of the Inverse Zeno Affect, you can modify your existing measurement systems and accelerate your results:

1. Change the context: Measurement in sales is usually associated with judgment. You make the numbers or you don't; you're a success or a failure. As the numbers skew ever lower, even the most optimistic salesperson will feel crushed under the weight of his or her own goals, and begin to apply the Zeno Effect, rather than its inverse. By shifting the purpose of the measurement system from administering judgment to creating value, the conversations around the numbers can change. What can be learned from the measurements you're taking? How can you apply this information to create new opportunities? Changing the context gives you and your team the emotional room to innovate and try things out.

For example, if the entire team is suffering from a dearth in sales, you might choose to have an offsite brainstorming session in which the team is encouraged to throw every idea on the table without judgment. (To lighten up the atmosphere, you might make it clear that this is not a "retreat" but a "summit.") More holistically, the way you talk on a daily basis about the numbers and performance will make a huge difference. Is your language judgmental or supportive? Is your tone encouraging or disparaging? Examine the culture you've created around your company's measurements. Is it harshly competitive, or does it uplift the team as a whole? Leading learning exercises around the numbers will teach the sales staff how to gain wisdom from their own results.

2. Change the focus: We have a tendency to focus on the numbers that mean trouble, rather than the numbers that spell success; a sure formula for applying the Zeno Effect and impeding results. For example, we look at the missed goals and the lost sales rather than looking at the sales that were actually completed. Why were those sales successfully closed? Were they all in a specific industry? Were the leads all generated from the same source? Was there more frequent contact with the client, or less? What are the best practices you can glean from your own successes and apply to create different results? Focus on what you want and how to re-create it, rather than creating what you don't want. What gets attention gets action.

3. Pick the right measures: Are your measurements directive enough? If orders from existing clients are declining, measuring overall sales in a given period won't help, whereas measuring the number of sales to new prospects will. Are your measurements selective enough? Are you looking at a top line that's so amorphous that you can't pick out the problems? If sales are declining, there are many variables that could be responsible. Are your measurements designed to ferret out client attrition, margin erosion, lead conversion, and order frequency, for example? The right measurements can pinpoint the issues, provide guidance in developing a strategic response, and apply the Inverse Zeno Effect to get results faster.

4. Choose 3-5 key metrics: Some salespeople have scorecards with 20 or more measurements against which their performance is pegged. With so many "priorities," it makes sense that the efforts of such a salesperson would be diffused as to perhaps become ineffectual. By choosing the top 3-5 key metrics – that is, the top 3-5 measurements that have been proven to drive results – you will put the attention in your organization where it belongs, rather than creating Multitasking Attention Deficit Disorder in the ranks.

5. Look forward, not back: Many businesses are hamstrung by the fact that they're always looking at last month's numbers. Did we make budget or didn't we? Reviewing the past has limited value. If the look back is on a short enough timeline, a business may not even see the valuable trend data there that would inform the future. Instead, encourage salespeople to plan future growth in their businesses in different areas by specific amounts in given periods, using information gained from the changes you've made in the way you apply your measurement system. Working those plans will return greater results, because by making this shift in focus, you will have inspired your staff with a vision of a better tomorrow. Just like the physicists who learned that by measuring along the path where they thought a subatomic particle might show up they were able to entice it there faster, so, too, can your forays into the future apply the Inverse Zeno Effect and help create the outcomes you want.

Lastly, lead this change in your measurement system as if you mean it. Changing it isn't enough to apply the Inverse Zeno Effect. The context, the focus and the measurements have to be concrete and consistent. Your employees won't buy into it if you don't. If you're the member of an executive group, make sure that your peers understand the importance of the initiative and ask them to back it up fully. Challenge system limitations that don't allow you to get to the measurements you need to create success.

It may take a couple of periods for the Inverse Zeno Effect to completely kick in, but when it does, both you and your sales staff will be happier with the results.

<<bug>> Kim Marcille is an expert on strategic innovation, and an internationally renowned speaker and consultant. Kim's 20-year background in business leadership ranges from Fortune 500 experience to small business ownership. Kim is founder

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