



Reinvigorating the Human Side of Selling



Dr. Tony Alessandra, of Assessments 24x7, interviews *Listen to Sell* co-authors Mike Esterday, CEO of Integrity Solutions, and Derek Roberts.

Everything you read about sales today focuses on the emergence of AI and automation and how much information buyers have at their fingertips? So, are salespeople still relevant today? Are they even necessary? In *Listen to Sell*, Mike Esterday and Derek Roberts sought to write a book

that celebrates the sales profession as both noble and more important today than ever before. Mike & Derek lay out how buyers crave authentic, trusted, human connections with salespeople and so the human element of sales is actually it's most essential. And selling has to start between the salesperson's ears before it can ever happen between two people.

Dr.T: There are a lot of stereotypes out there about selling and what it means to sell. How do you define selling?

ME: It's true that there are a lot of misconceptions and sometimes negative stereotypes about selling. That's why we think it's important to be clear on

what it means to be a successful salesperson. We define selling as uncovering needs, meeting needs, and creating value for people. And we've found that when people shift their mindsets to view selling through this lens, it changes everything, from how they approach their job to how they measure success to the pride they feel in the role.

We adamantly believe that selling is a noble profession. Especially as some have begun to question whether the role still has meaning or whether they even want to be in sales anymore, we wanted to write this book to celebrate sales as a profession and the salesperson as a respected, valued partner.

Dr.T: How has the sales landscape changed in recent years?

DR: There's no question that the selling environment has changed in a variety of ways over the past few years. It's common now to see longer buying cycles and more complex sales involving multiple stakeholders with a range of diverse needs and interests.

At the same time, customers are better informed, but also more distracted. They are inundated with data and have so much information right at their fingertips. Most customers know a lot about a company and what it has to offer before they ever talk to a salesperson. They don't need someone to just run through all the features and benefits. That means what they need from a salesperson is changing. However, that doesn't mean they don't need an effective sales professional. In fact, the salesperson who can ask just the right question to make sense of all that information is potentially the most valuable resource in the whole equation.

In addition, selling itself has changed. Technology and sales enablement tools play a significant role in the selling process now. In the wake of the pandemic, customers are more accustomed to, and often even prefer, virtual meetings. This means that a salesperson who used to just "drop in" on their customers now has to adapt to this new dynamic. Virtual selling also requires better preparation and communication skills.

Dr.T: How has that affected salespeople's confidence, morale, and ability to be successful?

ME: As customers have become more informed and their time has become more limited, it's left many salespeople wondering what their purpose is and what value they provide. They don't want to be viewed as a "pushy salesperson" who's more of a nuisance than a help, but they may lack the confidence and skills to successfully operate in a new way. It's left many salespeople — including some top performers with long track records — feeling like they aren't in control of their own success anymore.

Dr.T: Why do you believe professional salespeople are so vital, especially considering how much technology can do today?

DR: As so much of the sales experience has become digitized and commoditized, trust and authenticity are now the biggest differentiators. Buyers crave trust and someone who will "speak human" to them.

This is one of the reasons we say it's a great time to be in sales. Thanks to technology, the qualification process has become more streamlined. Automation, marketing technology, mobile devices — all of these things have been a boon to sales efficiency. When salespeople don't have to spend so much time on those once labor-intensive processes, they're able to focus their attention and energy on higher level activities that create value beyond just a product that they're selling. That's a much more satisfying and fulfilling role to serve.

Dr.T: Can you expand on what you mean when you talk about "the human side of selling"?

DR: Technology is certainly ubiquitous, but research shows that in complex B2B sales, customers want human connection and interaction. They may still get the basic product information online, but that doesn't help them see opportunities or issues they might otherwise miss. It doesn't help them uncover

needs, shift their perspective, validate their fears, guide them with expertise and insight, or consult with other stakeholders to make sure they're getting the value they're looking for.

These customers still want to buy from people. Even more so, they want to buy from someone who is authentic, has the right intentions, is there to help them and that they can trust. The human side of selling refers to these uniquely human abilities, chief of among them being the ability to listen.

Dr.T: In light of all of this, what does it take to be effective and successful as a salesperson? What's changed and what hasn't?

ME: As the book explains, success in selling relies on two factors: skillset and mindset. Knowing how to sell and having a great process are always required, but especially amid never-ending disruption, knowledge alone isn't enough. In any economic or industry cycle, mindset is the deciding factor. It's why we say the most significant variable in your sales success is you — what you believe about selling and what you believe about how good you are at it, how good your product is, what matters to you, how committed you are and what you deserve to achieve. Your mindset can either limit your potential or remove all barriers in your way. The choice is yours.

Along with this, salespeople need to continually learn, develop and reinforce their skills, and they need the consistent support of a great coach. Ultimately, these have always been what makes a salesperson successful. Things may have changed externally, but the core success ingredients have not.

Dr.T: When you think about "listening" in sales, people assume you mean to listen to the customer. But you say it goes beyond that. How?

ME: We talk about listening in the context of three conversations every salesperson has: with yourself, with your customer, and with your coach. The conversation with yourself is that pivotal mindset issue. In the

book, we explore how you can do and be the best by listening to what you're telling yourself.

As for the conversation with your customers, the best way to get people to listen to you is to listen to them. The book details an easy-to-use process for listening to the words, body language, tone and messages between the lines, and for asking the kinds of questions that will provoke more in-depth conversation.

The third conversation involves listening to effective coaching from your manager. Done well, these conversations not only help salespeople understand their customers better, they also reinforce the essential mindset work that needs to be done.

Dr.T: What role does coaching play in helping sales professionals develop self-awareness and reach their true potential?

DR: Coaching plays a pivotal role. For example, many salespeople have self-limiting beliefs of which they are not even aware. One such belief is 'I need to be perfect.' This belief can prevent salespeople from meeting their activity numbers, because they're afraid to make imperfect calls. Coaches can help salespeople identify, unpack, and move past these self-limiting beliefs.

Sticking with the perfectionist example, they are often 'over-preparers': always preparing, organizing and getting ready to prospect or make calls. They tend to over-analyze and underact. Coaches can help identify that weakness as well as the thoughts or beliefs at its root. In this case, it's often a distorted view of something like 'all-or-nothing' thinking — the tendency to look at things in absolute, black-and-white categories. I'm either prepared or I'm not. Coaches can help these salespeople push past these paralyzing thoughts and realize that, while it's impossible to prepare for every scenario, it is possible to prepare some data points, thoughts, and questions, and rely on one's ability to handle any situation that may arise. It probably won't be perfect, but it won't be terrible either — and that's okay.

Dr.T: Considering the fact that coaching is such a critical success factor in sales, why aren't more managers doing it consistently?

ME: You often hear managers saying they just don't have time to coach. But when you dig a little deeper, you'll find that there's more to it. Our research shows that the real issue is a lack of skills and confidence to do it effectively. When you're not confident in your ability to do something well, you're naturally going to prioritize other activities.

We also found that many organizations are focusing coaching efforts primarily on the skills and activities side of sales. The mindset issues aren't getting enough attention. Mindset not only impacts salespeople's success, it impacts the coach's effectiveness. People will rise up to — or live down to — what you believe is possible for them to achieve.

Again, definitions matter. If everyone in the organization has a different definition of what effective, consistent coaching is, that's a significant barrier to developing a coaching culture.

Dr.T: How can someone who's been successful in the past but has hit a plateau break through that barrier and regain their momentum?

ME: Plateaus can often spawn self-reinforcing and self-limiting behaviors. To move past them and regain momentum, you have to break through the belief boundaries that are limiting progress.

Here's where a strong sales manager/coach makes such a difference. As mentioned above, people will gravitate to the level of performance their managers appear to settle for. The person hits a plateau, the manager assumes they've peaked, and so they stop challenging them to improve. The employee sees that this is the performance level their manager accepts, so they settle in. We call this the law of limited performance.

Leaders need to understand what perceived limitations are hindering employee success and help them go beyond their comfort zones by showing they

believe more is possible for them to achieve. Throughout the book, we highlight "coaching corner" strategies that managers and salespeople can use to reveal unrecognized possibilities and achieve these kinds of breakthroughs.

Dr.T: As you were writing the book, was there anything that surprised you — anything that shifted the direction or emphasis from where you started to how the book ended up?

DR: We certainly wanted to speak directly to the salesperson as they engage a changing landscape and increasing technology. However, as we wrote the book, we also realized that we needed to include a strong coaching component to help sales leaders as well. As a result, we included almost 200 coaching questions and tips for managers that can also be used as a self-coaching guide by individual sales professionals.

Dr.T: What do you hope people take away most from reading this book?

ME: Regardless of your current level of sales success, you can dramatically improve. Recognize the power of mindset and achievement drive, which is the multiplier of sales success. Now is the best time in history to be in sales!

DR: You are the most significant variable in your sales success. By having a strong combination of mindset, skillset and coaching, you can produce incredible results. Customers, especially in complex sales, still want to be listened to and valued as a human. We believe that is best accomplished through you. ■

Mike Esterday, CEO and Partner of Integrity Solutions. **Derek Roberts**, Chief Executive of Roberts Business Group and Executive Partner with Integrity Solutions. Find out more about *Listen to Sell* [here](#)