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MENTAL TOUGHNESS: HOW LESSONS FROM SALESPEOPLE ARE BEING APPLIED TO THE RUGBY FIELD

Lessons from sport are often applied in business but Jamie Ford's work with salespeople has recently seen his mental toughness training be taken from the board room to the sports arena. He explains to NZ Sales Manager the mysterious attitudinal 'X factor' and why seemingly positive salespeople often crumble under pressure.



NZSM: Cutting straight to the chase Jamie, in your experience dealing with sales professionals and business owners over the years, what separates top sellers from the rest?

JF: They have the mental toughness "X factor" attitude to continue persevering towards their goals when others fall by the wayside, and despite well meaning friends advising them to give up. If you ask any group of people what makes the difference when it comes to results, the vast majority will say, "Attitude!" Thomas Edison and Colonel Sanders are great examples, as is Sir William Hamilton.

NZSM: You've done a lot to apply the work of renowned American psychologist Professor Martin Seligman in New Zealand – for those who haven't heard of



Seligman can you explain what he does and the significance of his work for sales managers?

JF: Professor Seligman is regarded as one of the ten most important psychologists in the history of psychology, and he specializes in motivation. His studies of over 1 million salespeople enabled him to unpack the “X factor” attitude in motivation that makes the difference between the average salesperson and the super stars. He also designed a test for this attitude, called the SASQ which is now being used by the Canterbury Crusaders and the Wallabies rugby teams, as well as business organizations such as ANZ National Bank.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of his work is that he proved that the X factor attitude is learned, and that puts us in the happy position of being able to actually help sales people can develop this attitude, with big improvements in their results.

NZSM: A “positive attitude” and “mental toughness” are always high on the list of managers when they’re looking for salespeople but many salespeople appear outwardly positive yet crumble under pressure. Is mental toughness part of a positive attitude or are they two separate things?

JF: No! They are not the same and managers will make progress faster with their salespeople if they get

to grips with this vital difference. Most of us learn the importance of presenting ourselves with a “positive attitude” at an early stage in life.

But it’s a superficial front, and doesn’t indicate that the fundamental mental toughness needed to persevere against the odds and succeed, is present.

Mental toughness is something much more fundamental and valuable.

Think of it this way. Mental toughness

Mental toughness is the foundation of the house you are building, while a positive attitude is merely the interior decorating

is the foundation of the house you are building, while a positive attitude is merely the interior decorating. One is absolutely vital to everything that follows, while the other, the interior decorating, is open to personal preferences without creating any great risk of structural failure.

A positive attitude is a “nice-to-have”, while mental toughness is the “must-have” X factor attitude.

NZSM: You mentioned that this type of thinking can be learned - aren’t some people just born more optimistic than others?

JF: Optimism and pessimism, as styles of thinking, are learned. While we are somewhat pre-disposed to one or the other, the major factor by

far is accidental learning when we are very young.

The impact of this accidental learning is huge. More than 1,000 studies with the Seligman test show that those salespeople with the more optimistic thinking style outperform those with the more pessimistic style, by 30% on average in sales results. In some industries it goes as high as 300%.

But the good news is that this old learning can be replaced by new learning.

NZSM: To date most of your work has been done in the business world with salespeople. Can you tell us a bit more about

your work with the Canterbury Crusaders? Many readers would suggest the Auckland Blues are the ones who need a bit more mental toughness...

JF: The work with the Canterbury Rugby Union and the Crusaders Franchise is focused on developing their resilience and optimism - that X factor attitude we talked about which is often referred to as mental toughness.

This involves assessing their present levels of that critical attitude; working with their leaders and coaches to embed that attitude into their culture and practices; providing coaching expertise and resources.

The intention is that optimistic and resilient thinking habits of high



performance become the norm.

As for the Auckland Blues... Well all NZ sports teams would be wise to follow the Crusader's lead! In fifteen years of using Seligman's test we have come to the conclusion that pessimism is endemic in our culture and action is needed urgently on all fronts, including sport.

NZSM: Some sales managers deliberately seek out salespeople those who have excelled in competitive sport – what's your take on this?

JF: Sports people are comfortable with goals and targets. They are competitive and want to win. They understand the fact of failing and having to get up for next week's game. They are also comfortable with regular

training and individual coaching.

Those are the norm for top salespeople, and therefore the probability of a person who has excelled is sport excelling in sales is quite high, and the risk of another recruitment failure is reduced.

NZSM: Last year you correctly predicted on national TV that both the All Blacks and Silver Ferns would lose their respective world cups based just on the language they were using. Can you explain what happened in a bit more detail?

JF: It's as obvious as the nose on your face to a trained observer. We give away clues to our deeply embedded thinking style habits in the way we talk about why we have succeeded or failed in our endeavours. Technically this is

known as our "explanatory style".

I've been using the All Blacks and Silver Ferns in case studies for many years now, and this provides insight into their thinking style habits. What makes this relevant to my predictions is that the science behind it proves, beyond doubt, that those with the more optimistic explanations beat those with the more pessimistic explanations.

With the Silver Ferns there is a strong pattern of more pessimistic explanations, while the Australian Diamonds are more optimistic in their explanations.

Similarly for the Black Caps (NZ Cricket Team) winning is an aberration while losing is the norm. It's the other way around for the Australian Cricket Team.

In the fact the Australian cricket team were once asked to name the second best side in the world. Their answer was Australia B! Now they were not intending to be perceived as arrogant. That's the way they think.

NZSM: Kiwi's versus Aussies... we often accuse Australians of being arrogant yet we praise their mental toughness... is this just symbolic of Kiwi's being more pessimistic in general?

JF: My observation is that it is more than symbolic. I think that Aussie's have a more optimistic thinking style, and this comes across as "arrogance" to Kiwi's, but it's not intended that way by the Aussie's. It's an outcome of accidental learning at an early age. Fortunately for them!

Kiwi's on the other hand are accidentally learning a more pessimistic way of thinking from an early age.

What ought to concern us all is the way that Australia has been able to maintain a high OECD ranking for many years. I think it is currently #3, while NZ has slipped to 23 from # 3 in the early 1950's.

It's my strong opinion that this has a lot to do with optimistic and pessimistic attitudes, alongside other factors. In fact, treasury people are studying this connection. If we had a national optimism project, like Scotland, I think a surprising degree of improvement would be achieved in a relatively short period. A national optimism survey would be a good start.

NZSM: You worked as country manager for the international sales training organisation Learning International (now AchieveGlobal) quite some time ago – have you noticed any improvement in the way Kiwi salespeople sell since then?

JF: This was in the early 90's. I

have noticed some improvements. Unfortunately there are still appallingly low standards of sales practice being accepted, and I'm sure we have all been on the receiving end of some of that.

A good number of corporate's do provide their people with quality skills training. Unfortunately there is far too much reliance on "product knowledge training", when the evidence is strong that sales go down after product training. Instead of asking questions to help define how to assist clients achieve their goals, salespeople engage in unloading all their newly acquired "product knowledge", and turn off the customer.

One very good indicator of progress is the growing practice of appointing "sales coaches" to work with the sales team members. In some cases the coach is a consultant, in many others the coach is an internal sales expert.

Jamie Ford is currently working on a new book called *Mental Toughness – The X Factor In Your Attitude* and you can find out more about his work at www.foresight.co.nz.



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Sales Automation

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- 2. More Sales
- 3. Secure Data
- 4. 24/7 Access
- 5. More Profit
- All of the above

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