

Good conduct

What it really means to orchestrate an account team

My title is account manager and what I do is orchestrate." I have heard these or similar words many times over the last year, as the term "orchestrator" becomes more widely used. But the concept is still not fully understood and the skills for orchestration are not widely developed.

The dictionary description of orchestrate is "to organise a situation or event so that a desired effect or outcome is achieved" and this is not a bad one for our purposes. We know the outcomes we want to achieve, and in an increasingly complex world the days of the "lone-wolf" salespeople doing everything themselves are largely over. Some recent research has helped us understand the key attributes of a successful orchestrator. Below are our conclusions with some questions to help you to figure out your own skill levels.

EMPATHY: The ability to appreciate the situation from another person's perspective is absolutely critical if you are going to get the support and buy-in of people from other functions within your team. Key questions:

- Can you write down how everyone in your account team (everyone who touches your customer) is measured and paid?
- Do you know the major challenges faced by everyone in your account team (what keeps them awake at night)?

LEADERSHIP: There are many definitions of leadership. Here we mean: do people who work in your account team want to follow your direction? This will involve you in building and sharing visions for the future, setting an example and encouraging everyone in the team along the way. Key questions:

- Could everyone in your account teams explain with passion and commitment what you are trying to achieve with each customer?
- Does everyone who works on your accounts regularly go out of their way to help you in reaching your goals?
- Are you clear about the standards of behaviour expected when dealing with your accounts, does everyone in the customer facing team share these standards and do you receive regular feedback indicating that others in the team regard you as a role model in terms of behaviour and attitude?



PLANNING: This is different from leadership, although allied to it. Planning is not filling out forms for an account or opportunity, but it does mean communicating effectively where you are with each customer, what it is you want to achieve and how you are going to achieve these things. Key questions:

- Can you describe in detail what will be different in 12 months time about the relationships that you have with your top customers or prospects?
- Could you describe in detail the strategies that you are pursuing in each account, as well as describing what strategies you have decided not to adopt (which implies that you have made conscious and considered choices about strategy)?
- Do you have a firm action plan for everyone in each of your account teams?

DELEGATION: It is critical, especially as complexity increases, that account managers effectively delegate tasks and responsibilities. Failing to delegate is leading to either burn-out or "thrashing" by salespeople. Effective account managers have learned the art of delegating. Key questions:

- Could everyone who deals with your account give a clear explanation of their role, responsibilities and accountabilities as they apply to particular customers?
- Do you have mechanisms in place to effectively "close the loop" on every delegated task or responsibility?
- Looking at your "to do" list, are you convinced that every item is best carried out by yourself?

ASSERTIVENESS: Many salespeople get confused about the difference between being assertive and being aggressive. Aggression is all about "me and my point of view", while assertiveness recognises that others have valid interests and views, although "I still have a right to my opinions". Aggression can be very positive as an attitude towards a competitive landscape, but in terms of personal style, while it can help to win battles, it will break down relationships and lead to long-term problems. Some salespeople can have the opposite problem of being too submissive in dealings with customers and colleagues, and all too easily give in to their views. Key questions:

- Are you always assertive with the people in your account team, or are you sometimes overly aggressive, or even submissive?
- Are you always assertive with customers – finding out what their real issues are, and pushing back on them when they make unreasonable demands?

CONFLICT HANDLING: Inevitably some conflict will occur inside any team of people dealing with a customer – it is natural because smart organisations often set up competing situations. For example, most salespeople would like unlimited time from pre-sales support, but the pre-sales manager only has finite resources to share. Key questions:

- Do you fight for your position when it is the right thing to do?
- Are you prepared to compromise when it is expedient to do so?
- Do you seek win-win solutions in situations that are important, and are you prepared to put in what is often a large amount of effort to find them?

The rewards for salespeople who embrace true orchestration can be immense (I have seen a number of firms where people are burning out through trying to cope with a torrent of internal and customer-generated requests). Being a successful orchestrator will not happen automatically, and you will need to continually develop and hone your skills. **SF**

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