

Managers: Rid Your Sales Team of Parasites

By, Landy Chase, MBA, CSP

In most businesses, the development of sales professionals consists of three basic stages. Each stage is a transitional period in which the sales person assumes a different form than in the previous stage. Because this process in some ways parallels that of our friends in the insect world, I call these three stages Larval, Termite, and Parasite.

Sales Larvae are the neophytes of our profession - soft, helpless, legless individuals who, due to lack of knowledge and experience, fumble blindly about their sales territory. This is not an issue of ability. They simply haven't yet mutated into full-fledged sales people. You probably still remember your first day in your sales career. If so, you certainly remember your days as a Sales Larvae. If you're a manager, your job is to turn your Larvae into full-fledged Termites as quickly as possible.

Termites are those sales people at the top of their game. They are fully equipped with the tools and skills necessary to methodically work their way through the toughest sales barriers. Like Larvae, Termites are a relatively easy stage for the competent sales executive to manage. It is the third stage of sales person development that gives most supervisors migraine headaches - the dreaded "Parasite".

Parasites are long-term sales employees who have, after years of tenure within the company, no longer call on new accounts, and live, often quite comfortably, off of the business generated by existing customers. They have forgotten along the way that their first priority is to grow their market or territory through new business development efforts. Over time, they lose their ability to forage for their own food, and instead attach themselves to the bloodstream of the host employer, drawing nourishment in the form of a paycheck. Hence the name.

The "Parasite" sales person represents a difficult personnel problem. Because of their time with the company, most sales executives will feel obligated to cut these people some slack and look the other way, allowing the Parasite to feed undisturbed. After all, here you have a tenured, long-term employee - one who has often been a dependable producer in years past. Further, they are often well-liked and respected, and bring a lot of experience and industry knowledge to your business. An argument could be made that they are "deserving" of Parasite status, and I understand that logic completely. I just don't agree with it.

Why? Because, as the business owner or sales manager, you have a business to maintain. Check that - you have a business to *grow*. After all, the last time I checked, the job of a sales person was to grow the business, not to baby-sit it. Where will your company end up if your sales force isn't meeting its growth objectives?

There are significant negative consequences to your Larvae and Termites for tolerating this situation. Having a different set of rules for your senior sales people sends a poor

message to the rest of the team about you and your management style. In effect, the policy that you are publicly condoning is as follows:

- We have two (or more) sets of standards - one for our Parasites, and one for everyone else;
- We don't treat everyone equally;
- We don't hold people accountable for results;
- Becoming a Parasite, i.e. not having to produce, is a long-term reward for sales seniority within our company;
- If you stay around long enough, you, too, may become a Parasite.

Do I sound harsh? Do you think I'm cold, cruel and heartless - that I don't care about people? You couldn't be more wrong. These issues have nothing to do with popularity contests or your relationships with your people. Yes, you need to have good relationships with your direct reports. However, you must hold your sales people accountable for new-business results if you and your company are going to succeed. Therefore, your Parasites must "morph" back into Termites. These talented and capable freeloaders must learn to forage for their own food once again. Here are some suggestions to reverse the developmental process:

- (1) Introduce a revised, two-tiered commission plan that (a) pays a much higher premium on new business and (b) a significantly reduced commission on work from existing customers. This will serve to compensate your sales people for their efforts in a manner more corresponding to the effort required to close business, and will put their focus where it needs to be - on finding new clients. Announce this change well in advance of its implementation, to give your people an opportunity to prime the pump with new opportunities. Rest assured you will get a lot of negative feedback from your parasites on this idea; some might even elect to leave the company. Stick to your guns. Don't forget that you are paying your sales people to grow your business.
- (2) Tie most of your rewards and recognition programs to achieving new account development. Lavish praise and financial reward on those who respond to your focus on new business. Additionally, tie in part of the compensation plan to profitability of the business that your reps are selling. This will serve to remind them that not all new business is good business.
- (3) With a Parasite, you have, for all intents and purposes, a dormant sales territory. Give your Parasite a reasonable timeframe to change their work focus, and monitor their efforts in new-account development. If they show no interest in doing what is required, or if they don't make progress, give the prospects in the Parasite's territory to a more aggressive sales person. Yes, I know it sounds harsh. As I see it, though, your only other option is to be a popular failure.
- (4) Introduce specific accountability goals for new account growth. Tie in significant financial incentives for goal attainment, such as a quarterly bonus for meeting new-business objectives. At the same time, introduce negative consequences for failure to

meet minimum objectives. Parasites will generally not release their grip on their host unless pain is applied to the source of the food supply.

- (5) Finally, don't allow your Parasites to hold you hostage. One of the most common reactions that Parasites have to these management directives is to threaten to leave the company and take their customer relationships with them. They will often want you to believe that the future of your company hangs in the balance of their continuing to represent you. Don't believe it! I have seen this scenario play out many times. I have yet to see a single instance where the company suffered a significant business decrease by the departure of a Parasite. In fact, it is not uncommon for customer relationships to actually improve and grow with the Parasite's departure.

Most of the parasites reading this piece will squirm in their chairs as they read through the list. Hate me if you like. From the movie *The Godfather*, I quote the mission statement of a highly successful business enterprise, the Corleone family: "It's not personal. It's business". Go ahead. Make your Parasites an offer they can't refuse.

Based in Charlotte, North Carolina, Landy Chase, MBA, CSP is an expert who specializes in speaking to corporations and associations on advanced professional selling and sales management skills. For more information, visit his website at www.landychase.com or call (877)550-2655.