

## Thoughts on the Five Seller Profiles in The Challenger Sale

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In **this post** we noted we often get questions about *The Challenger Sale*. Perhaps the most common question we get is, “What do you think of the five seller profiles?”

The five seller profiles, as defined by the authors of *The Challenger Sale* in “Selling Is Not About Relationships,” a *Harvard Business Review* blog post, are as follows. We list them in order by what they found in their study to be least to most likely to be a top performer in sales:

- **Relationship Builders** focus on developing strong personal and professional relationships and advocates across the customer organization. They are generous with their time, strive to meet customers' every need, and work hard to resolve tensions in the commercial relationship.
- **Reactive Problem Solvers** are, from the customers' standpoint, highly reliable and detail-oriented. They focus on post-sales follow-up, ensuring that service issues related to implementation and execution are addressed quickly and thoroughly.
- **Hard Workers** show up early, stay late, and always go the extra mile. They'll make more calls in an hour and conduct more visits in a week than just about anyone else on the team.
- **Lone Wolves** are the deeply self-confident, the rule-breaking cowboys of the sales force who do things their way or not at all.
- **Challengers** use their deep understanding of their customers' business to push their thinking and take control of the sales conversation. They're not afraid to share even potentially controversial views and are assertive—with both their customers and bosses.

### Relationship Builders

By their definition, a Relationship Builder is generous with time, strives to meet every need, and resolve tensions. In the book, they also mention “gets along with everyone” as a primary characteristic. This sounds more like a friendly customer service rep than a seller. It sounds like someone who wants to be liked more than anything else.

It sounds like Willy Loman. “Be liked and you’ll never want,” said Willy of his selling strategy. You’ll remember, however, this wasn’t working for him. The play wasn’t titled *Sellers Who Sell Like This Are Top Performers*, it was titled *Death of a Salesman*.

And this was in 1949.

The problem here is the label. Title this person a relationship builder and you can declare “Selling Is Not About Relationships,” which is provocative, but only because sellers who say, “Relationships are key to my selling success” are *thinking something different than the definition noted above*.

In the last while, I’ve spoken to dozens of senior leaders and professionals at major management consulting firms, technology companies, law firms, accounting firms, and several other industries that have complex sales. I say to them, “Tell me about the keys to your success in selling.”

Everyone mentioned relationships. Yes, everyone. When I asked them to tell me about the major points of what that means to them:

- *No one* described being generous with time, getting along with everyone, tension resolution, harmony, or really any of the key themes in *The Challenger Sale* definition.
- *Everyone* described some mix of the difference they make, trust they’ve built, the strength of the collaboration, and other themes focused on creating and delivering superior value.

I can’t imagine a partner at a prestigious management consulting firm describing the crux of their relationships with big company CEOs as being about harmony and time generosity.

Since most people think relationship building is about things *other* than what you find in this definition, the whole premise of selling-is-not-about-relationships seems more to mislead than anything else.

Based on our research and field work, a relationship is not the only thing selling is about. But is it, however, a pillar of success? Absolutely, though with a completely different definition.

One with substance.

## **Reactive Problem Solvers**

This one makes no sense to me. In the book, along with the core definition, this seller is also described as follows: “They come into the office in the morning with grand plans to generate new sales, but as soon as an existing customer calls with a problem, they dive right in rather than passing it to the people we actually pay to solve those problems.”

As for problem solving, getting to the heart of problems and finding solutions that will get the best results are concepts typically associated with solution and consultative selling. But the reactive problem solver isn’t nearly a good proxy for that.

As respected industry veteran Linda Richardson posted on her [blog](#):

But being in this business for many years, I would have liked to have seen the profile of a true Consultative Salesperson represented in the research not to be confused with the narrowly defined Relationship Seller. If the Consultative category had existed, it could have done better than the seemingly triumphant Challenger category. There is a saying that to a hammer, everything is a nail. So it was with this Challenger hammer.

Not only should a true consultative seller not be confused with *The Challenger Sale*’s Relationship Builder, but as well, don’t confuse it with the Reactive Problem Solver.

What stands out most, however, is that one of this seller's key characteristics is avoiding selling. Not so sure someone who *avoids* selling is a type of seller.

It seems obvious that, like the Relationship Builder (as defined by the authors), the Reactive Problem Solver has little chance at being a top performer.

## Hard Workers

Hard work is often associated with sales success. What happens, however, when hard work is the *defining characteristic* of the seller?

I recently had a conversation where the gist went something like this: "I have a lot of people that work at my company. If you asked me to describe some of them, I'd say a few of them are future-focused, problem solving innovators, a few are masters at growing their businesses, one is cantankerous and pushy but successful, and so on.

"There are two people I'd describe primarily as hard workers...they work hard, but I don't have anything else to say about them in terms of their success or styles. But they sure are pluggers."

Think of it like this: someone has all the sales skills, and all the personal attributes (except one), to blow the doors off of sales at your company. The only attribute he doesn't have is being a hard worker. In fact, he's the laziest person you know. Unlikely to put in more than 30 minutes of actual work a day. Oh, and just on Tuesdays.

Would you hire him? Of course not.

Now I have another person. She's willing to work day and night, weekdays and weekends, without losing any steam. She's always open to feedback, and will strive to get more done every day.

Only one problem: she doesn't get what you do, doesn't understand your markets or customers, and she's unlikely to be able to figure it out any time soon because she's not that bright.

Hire her? I don't think so.

Effort is a piece of the sales puzzle. It's a necessary piece—and some people have to work harder than others—but it's not sufficient for success.

In sales we don't award points on effort and never have.

Also, how does the hard worker approach selling itself? This we don't know.

Now 3 for 3 on obvious unlikelihood to be a top performer.

## Lone Wolves

Now we're getting somewhere. According to *The Challenger Sale*, Lone Wolves are second in likelihood to be a top performer. Surprising, right?

The five seller profiles were initially derived from hundreds of surveys of "frontline sales managers across ninety companies around the world."

They also note, "Lone Wolves tend to do very well despite egregiously flouting the system, because if they didn't do well, they'd have been fired already."

Thus, by definition, Lone Wolves come up as successful in the study. If they weren't, they'd be gone.

Again, however, how do Lone Wolves sell? We don't know. All we know is they're confident, don't follow rules, don't fill out trip reports, and don't use the CRM system.

The first three roles are unlikely to be top performers, so Lone Wolves are obviously going to be in the top half at least. Indeed, here they fell.

## Challengers

Finally, a definition that focuses on how the person sells. Challengers use deep understanding of customers' businesses to push their thinking and take control of conversations. They're not afraid to share potentially controversial views. They're assertive. All excellent characteristics when applied properly.

In the book, the characteristics that set Challengers apart are noted as things like offering the customer unique perspectives, has strong two-way communication skills, knows the customers' value drivers and business economics, can pressure the customer, and talk about money. These are important, but standard, pieces of advice given to sales people to succeed, and have been for decades.

However, I firmly believe the stronger the relationship (the kind based on trust and value), the more willing a buyer will be to listen to you in the first place, be persuaded by your arguments, and accept your advice.

It's an old adage—platitude even—that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Just because it's trite doesn't make it false.

In fact, in the "Selling Is Not About Relationships" article, you'll also find, "It's not because relationships no longer matter in B2B sales—that would be a naive conclusion." They go on to say that the relationship that does matter is based on value and progress against goals versus on convenience and being liked.

So selling actually is in part about relationships, just not the definition of the Relationship Builder given in the article itself. Oy, confusing.

## An Odd Beauty Contest

The idea of *The Challenger Sale* research is worthwhile: analyze sales reps to find out what makes for the best success, and help others to emulate that success.

Since the Challenger role consistently beats the other four sales rep types, obviously we should all emulate the Challenger, right?

Why, though, does the Challenger always win?

Think of this as a beauty contest. You have five contestants. Three of them are not good looking at all, one is the very definition of a wild card, and one has a number of classic characteristics of beauty. Odd contest, but not surprisingly, the good looking contestant keeps winning.

What would happen if this person was pitted against four other good looking people? Would they keep winning?

Who knows.