

How to Build an Agile Sales Force...

What is agility?

Webster definition of agile: having a quick resourceful and *adaptable* character

Agility is the ability to adapt individual behavior based on the situation the person is facing. Individuals who are agile read the situation, use the information they uncover to choose the best course of action, execute that action, monitor changes in the situation and adjust their actions as needed. Agility is cyclical and involves making good decisions, acting on those decisions, determining the impact of those actions and beginning the decision-making process again. The quality of the decisions impact both the quality and efficacy of the individual actions taken.

Do salespeople need to be agile in the sales approach they use?

Research by the Florida State University Sales Institute (and further validated by VantagePoint) identified that top performing sellers choose their sales approach based on the buying situation they are facing. Average and low performers use the same sales approach regardless of the buying situation. For example, using a consultative selling approach or a disruptive approach (Challenger) in all selling situations. High performing salespeople understand that agility is the secret to success.

How do you train sales agility?

Because sales agility is such a new concept, we studied other domains to properly define how to train agility and used our expertise in training to apply that to sales.

Other domains that require situational agility: Military, Sports, First Responders

What do they have in common? They enter situations without really knowing what they will encounter and the decisions they make and the actions they take have immediate, often dramatic consequences. They also share a common approach to training agility focusing on three things:

Three Pillars of Agility



Situational Intelligence



Situational Readiness



Situational Fluency

Situational Intelligence:

- They identify and document information on the most prevalent situations and clarify what indicators are aligned to each one.
- They identify the best course of action to take in each situation based on intelligence gathered.

Situational Readiness:

- They codify how the best performers execute the most common courses of action, detailing what top performers do that leads to desired results.

Situational Fluency:

- They train and drill the ability to recognize situations, choose the best course of action, and effectively execute the chosen course of action.

Example: Military Fighter Pilots

Situational Intelligence: The military gathers DOPE, Data on Previous Engagements. The U. S. Air Force uses this information to create a database detailing what was encountered, what was done, and the result. In other words, they clarify what pilots are likely to encounter and what works in those situations.

Situational Readiness: They then create depth and detail on what is known to work in specific situations. What are the best practices, or standard operating procedures (SOPS) on how to respond to the given situations that replicate how our most successful performers behave?

Situational Fluency: Fighter pilots then practice and practice again. They are given situational characteristics and asked to recognize and deploy the SOPS that match the situation. Essentially, they are trained and drilled on how to make smart decisions quickly while under pressure.

Fighter pilots learn what is called the OODA loop-- they **Observe** the immediate environment, **Orient** the information they've taken in and compare it to standard operating procedures, **Decide** the best next course of action, and take **Action** and monitor and observe the impact of their actions.

How does this tie to sales agility?

The same approach can be taken with your sales organization.

Situational Intelligence: 1) Identify the buying factors and the characteristics of the opportunity, that have the biggest influence on changes in seller behavior, 2) determine how the buying factors hang together to form unique buying situations sellers encounter, and 3) determine the sales tactics that are most likely to lead to the best outcome given a particular situation.

Situational Readiness: Clarify the specifics of executing the sales tactics most appropriate for the unique buying situations your sellers will face, which are your SOPs. What do your most successful salespeople do, say, and/or show during interactions with the buyer(s)?

Situational Fluency: Train and drill situational awareness, sales tactic selection, and execution of the appropriate tactics.

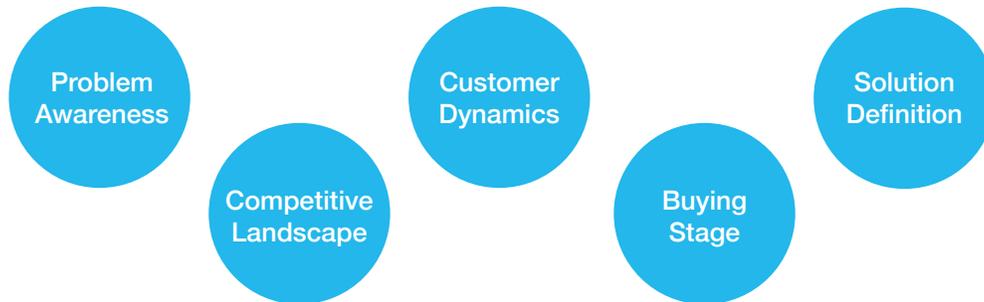
How do you train sales agility?

The principles of the OODA loop can be applied to sales as well. Selling with agility involves:

1. **Assessing** the situation: Drawing a picture of the buyer using a deep understanding of the buying factors that matter most.
2. **Choosing** the best sales approach: Aligning the buying situation with the sales objectives and the most impactful sales tactics.
3. **Executing** those tactics: Acting with effectiveness and efficiency while assessing buyer reaction and determining if a new choice needs to be made.

VantagePoint's Approach to Sales Agility

Assess is the foundation of sales agility, and often short-changed or overlooked by salespeople. Let's face it; most sales training focuses exclusively on Execute. Agile sellers pause and take the time to assess the buying situation by seeking information and making sense of the buying factors. Which factors? Our research has revealed five categories of factors that consistently impact customer buying situations:



As you may suspect, there are multiple buying factors in each category; however, these five categories focus sellers on what to look for in order to get an accurate picture of the buying situation they are facing. Through our research with multiple organizations across various industries, we have identified four common buying situation archetypes, as well as the patterns of sales behavior most effective for each situation archetype.

Once the buying situation is assessed, sellers then need to choose the sales approach that is most likely to lead to a win based on the buying situation they are facing. Our research has validated that there are four primary patterns of sales behavior exhibited by high-performing sellers:



Each of these patterns is effective under certain buying conditions and aligns with a particular situational archetype. We teach sellers to read the buying situation, choose the pattern of selling behavior most appropriate for the buying situation they are facing, and then to execute that sales approach effectively while monitoring buyer reactions.

You may be thinking “where is relationship selling in this agile approach?” Many of our clients ask the same question. The real answer is that relationship selling is a part of every pattern of selling. The most effective sellers use their interactions with buyers to connect with them, learn about them, and align to them in meaningful ways. Our position is that none of these selling patterns work if you can't connect with your buyers. Of course, relationships are important. That has always been the case and it is still true. What has changed over time is what it takes to align buyer preferences to your sales approach in a way that nurtures and honors the relationships you're building.

Adding in Machine Learning to be More Precise

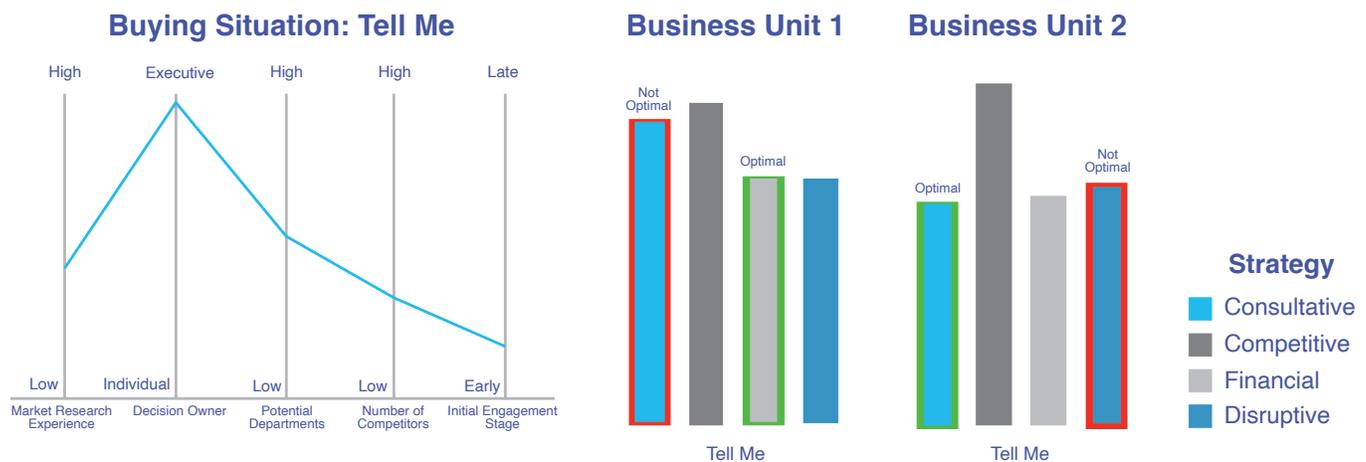
For many organizations, that information is game-changing. Yet there are other organizations who want more precision. They want to know the precise buying factors that most strongly influence the buying situations their sellers face. They also want to replicate the behavior of their top performers and know how they win in the various buying situations.

For these customers, VantagePoint does two things. First, we use deal-level data and machine learning to identify and distinguish the characteristics of the most common buying situations encountered. The interplay of those factors can then be analyzed, allowing us to clarify the unique buying situations faced by sellers for the organization or business unit. For example, across a large organization with multiple business units, the buying factors may remain constant, but the buying situation clusters may differ.

Second, we use machine learning to uncover the sales tactics used in each buying situation and how they cluster together to form patterns of sales behavior that lead to wins for each situation.

Real Example:

In the client example below, the line chart shows the five factors that were most predictive of changes in seller behavior and how those factors clustered together to form a unique buying situation for that client. The bar chart shows the most optimal and least optimal selling strategy for two distinct business units. Interestingly, for business unit 1, the least optimal strategy was the most optimal strategy for business unit 2. Imagine if we gave this client the advice that they should use only a consultative approach in a “Tell Me” situation. This would work well for business unit 2, but completely backfire for business unit 1.



This level of precision enables our customers to clearly understand the buying situations their sellers face, as well as the sales approach most likely to lead to a win in each buying situation.

Whichever approach our customer takes to gathering situational intelligence, we then train their sellers how to **assess** buying factors present in their deals, recognize the relevant buying situation, **choose** the strategy most likely to win, and then **execute** that sales strategy effectively. This is a very precise method of sales enablement and can work for tenured sellers as well as new hires.

You're likely hiring new salespeople on an ongoing basis. Imagine equipping them to understand how your buyers buy and how your top performers win most of their deals? You'll see a remarkable impact to their success acceleration!

So how does this model for agility work for sales managers? Do the same principles apply?

Yes, indeed they do. Let's explore this a bit further...

Situational Intelligence: Managers must determine the metrics most aligned to the results they are targeting, and which activities must be coached to align to those metrics.

Situational Readiness: Managers build out coaching plans (standard operating procedures) for how and when to coach to those activities in a rhythm of coaching conversations.

Situational Fluency: Managers are trained and drilled on how to identify the highest-impact activities, build the right rhythms, and conduct coaching conversations that have impact on the prioritized KPIs.

This is different from how most managers are trained to coach their sellers. Most coaching programs focus on “how to coach.” This is a very serious flaw in sales manager enablement. Managers who are trained only on “how to coach” rarely show adoption of the coaching model they’ve learned because they haven’t done the heavy lifting of operationalizing the coaching approach into their everyday sales management world.

If you want to enable sales managers in a way that drives real performance, managers must be trained in a way that reflects their real world. VantagePoint is the only company that does that. And we do it by teaching sales managers how to:

- **Align** the activities to results: Managers must first determine the situation they are facing by identifying the outcomes they are looking to drive within their sales team. The desired outcomes determine the activities that must be coached. The coaching plans (standard operating procedures) ensure coaching is aligned to the desired outcomes.
- **Execute** coaching plans: Managers execute their coaching according to their individual coaching plans, strictly adhering to the coaching rhythms identified.
- **Assess** impact: Managers monitor changes in leading indicators (KPIs) to assess whether the appropriate progress is being made. Changes to the activities they coach and how and when to coach is an on-going process that enables them to coach in an agile, adaptable way over time.

But what about replicating the behavior of top performing managers? Can we gain precise insight about manager behavior the way we can with seller behavior?

Well, fortunately the answer is yes. We can first identify the sales objectives (or KPIs) that high-performing managers focus on and to what degree. We can then determine the pattern of activities that top performing managers focus on to drive performance. In essence, we can isolate which objectives and activities top performers attend to obtain better outcomes.

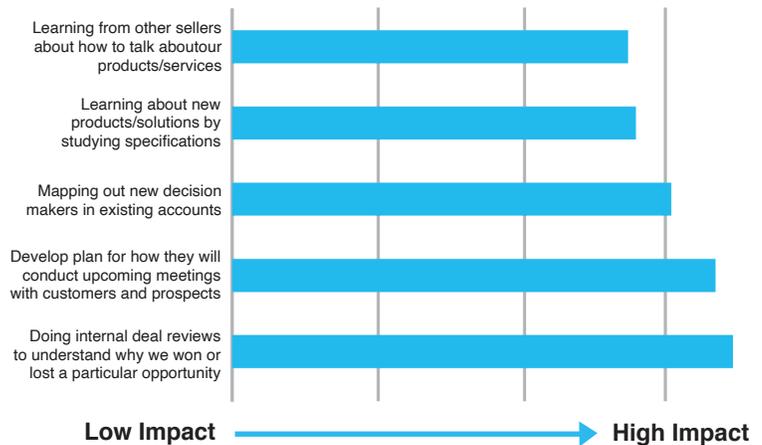
Real Example:

In the client example below, you can see the strategic objective focus of high performing managers versus core performing managers on the left. Note that the high performing managers have a significantly higher focus on selling new products and services compared with core performers. On the right, you can see which five activities – of all the activities we measure – are most highly related to sales performance. You will notice that one of the five highest impact activities is studying the specifications of new products and services. This linkage should not only be apparent, but it should also align with organizational objectives and KPIs.

Strategic Objectives (KPIs)

Objective Category	High Performer	Core Performer
Existing Product & Services	2.1	3.8
New Product & Services	3.75	1.4
Cross-selling/Up-selling	2.5	3.1
New Customer Type	3.5	3.75
Similar Customer Type	4.5	4.5
Scale: 1 = Low, 5 = High		

Activity Performance Drivers



Finally, we can isolate the specific coaching practices that top performers utilize to drive better outcomes. Using VantagePoint Performance, you can identify the activities they coach, the frequency and duration of their coaching conversations, and the topics they cover to drive results. If you are like our clients who want a precise understanding of high performing management practices, you now have a method for obtaining that critical information. With VantagePoint you have choice and flexibility, which means your seller and manager training investments are aligned internally to organizational goals, as well as aligned externally to your customer’s buying behaviors and preferences.