

Making the cut

Emotional intelligence is essential to sales success

by John Haime



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If you're a golf enthusiast, you've undoubtedly heard broadcasters announce: "If he can control his emotions today, he can win the tournament." If only it were so easy. No one ever tells us how this golfer might do it. If controlling emotions is so vital to winning, wouldn't you like to know how to do it—so you can perform at a higher level?

Surveying the leader board

Visit a major professional golf event early in the week and it is unlikely that you would be able to tell which players will be successful in the event and which players will be packing their bags and heading home after Friday's 36-hole cut. Unless professional golfers are under pressure in a dynamic environment, you can't separate the contenders from the pretenders. The separation occurs when the heat is turned up, when results really matter,

when the performer is pushed to his/her limits. The same applies in the professional selling environment.

Brain structures like the amygdala in the emotional or limbic regions of the brain can 'hijack' intellectual processes when intense emotions are experienced in the system. This is why even very talented professionals can make very foolish choices when under emotional stress. The ability to manage emotions under life's pressures is one of the key elements in separating elite performers from average ones.

Golf's greatest performer, Tiger Woods, has consistently reminded us in press conferences following major championships that managing emotion is a key to his success and consistency. Yet this is relevant to other highly pressured professions, too; studies have shown that in careers that involve sales, employees with high emotional intelligence are 12 times more

Diagnosis

Your numbers just aren't adding up

Prescription

Take lessons from golf masters to join the leaderboard

productive than employees with low emotional intelligence.

Full set of clubs

There are a few fundamental competencies that are "must haves" to reach sustainable, consistent levels of elite performance.

The driver. Self-awareness is the foundation for great emotional intelligence and, while it sounds simple and obvious, it can be elusive. My assessment work with sales professionals in the pharmaceutical industry has found that more than 60% of sales professionals could improve in this area. As a quick test, ask yourself several key questions:

- Do you clearly recognize emotions as they happen and how they impact your performance?
- Do you understand how your emotions impact others?
- Do you clearly understand your strengths and limits?
- Do you believe in your capabilities and have presence when addressing others?

You are self-aware if you have answered yes to each question.

Consider an example: Before 2004 Phil Mickelson was 0-46 in golf's major championships, but after a thorough assessment of his approach by Mickelson and his coaches after the 2003 season, the risk-taking, stubborn Mickelson was replaced by someone more self-aware and flexible. He now has a more vigilant approach to the long game, strategizing to keep his ball, and this approach is delivering confidence, consistency—and wins in major tournaments.

The short irons. A direct effect of high self-awareness is emotional self-control. Successful people, whether they are medical sales professionals or professional sports people, recognize emotions as they happen, and therefore have the opportunity to keep disruptive emotions under control in pressured situations.

The best golfers stay composed and positive after poor shots and do not allow negative energy to impact future shots. Similarly, elite sales professionals have to refocus quickly after a below-par sales opportunity. An optimistic approach on each shot/opportunity is critical following obstacles and setbacks.

The putter. A hunger for meeting a standard of excellence is the competency that perhaps most contributes to the consistency and sustainability of the world's best golfers, Tiger Woods and Annika Sorenstam. Great golfers, like successful sales professionals, constantly strive to improve in every area of their business, take calculated risks and always believe that they will succeed whether they are doing well or struggling. They believe in their hearts that they will find a way to win no matter what the obstacle.

Insiders on the PGA Tour believe that Tiger Woods has an additional, major competitive advantage over his rivals. Woods has the ability to adapt from tournament to tournament, golf course to golf course and shot to shot. He has been successful on all styles of golf

courses and has won each major championship multiple times. Adaptability is also a key competency. As customer and industry needs change, elite sales professionals adapt to customer and industry demands—and they do it quickly.

One major difference separates pro-

fessional golf from professional selling. Sales professionals require the core social competency of empathy to be an elite, consistent performer in their field. This difference, in my opinion, makes excellence in selling significantly more difficult than excellence in golf. While the elite professional golfer must only be concerned with their own emotions and the impact on their performance, sales professionals must understand not only their own emotions, but connect emotionally with their customers (and colleagues) as well.

In a time when medical sales representatives have become more of a trusted adviser to customers, it is critical they have much more than basic listening skills. They must develop a sensitivity to understand and respond to subtle customer signals. Today's sales professional must understand the challenges and issues the customer is experiencing and target needs with solutions. Self-awareness and empathy are key requirements to being a trusted adviser.

We're all performers in life, and pressures are unavoidable. So, it's best to be prepared and have the capacity to maximize your performance when the pressure arrives on the first tee, in a big customer meeting or during a big decision. Improving your ability to control emotions enables you to win. Just ask Tiger Woods.

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Keys to enhancing your emotional intelligence

Assess your emotional intelligence. Unlike IQ, EQ can be assessed. Become familiar with your strengths and limits.

Enhance self-awareness. Do you understand how your emotions impact your performance? Do you know how your emotions impact others? Do you understand your tendencies? Do you clearly understand your strengths and limits? Do you have presence when presenting ideas? Identify your tendencies under pressure—pay attention to the physical signs (heart rate, nervous feeling, etc.) Be aware of behavior in stressful situations and chart results.

Concentrate your energy and emotion on only those things you can control and influence. Determine what you can control and focus only on those factors. People are notorious for blaming everything under the sun for their own failures (just ask the average golfer!). Any focus on those things you have no control over will lead to frustration.

Reserve judgment on yourself and others. In each stressful situation you encounter, step back and give yourself a small amount of time before reacting. Choose your response after a quick evaluation of the situation.