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# The Challenger Style and its Impact on Sales Selection

*By Dave Kurlan, a top-rated speaker, best-selling author, sales thought leader and highly regarded sales development expert.*

This White Paper responds to [this article](#), which appeared on the Harvard Business Review Blog. The HBR article introduced a new selling style called the Challenger:

1. It categorizes salespeople into 1 of 5 styles.
2. It concludes that salespeople who belong to the "Challenger" style dramatically outperform relationship builders.

I agree with the overall premise but **there is nothing new here**. Objective Management Group, Inc. (OMG) has been identifying great salespeople for 24 years and while we don't call the best salespeople "Challengers", we certainly know the blueprint. Their sales DNA, a combination of sales specific skills and strengths - their sales core competencies – are consistent with those of the very best salespeople, the elite 6%. As a matter of fact, OMG has a number for it:

## 140

140 is a score that represents the Sales Quotient of the salespeople the authors describe as Challengers. The scale reaches 173 but it is rare to see a score that exceeds 155. Salespeople who depend on their relationship building skills, but lack the supporting Sales DNA and Consultative Selling Skills to accompany it, usually possess a Sales Quotient below 125.

I have concerns about the way the article's authors reached their conclusions because they gathered their data by asking salespeople to take a survey. Surveys generally prove whatever one sets out to prove. An even bigger concern is that Sales Executive Council Surveys are not usually comprised of companies like yours. 6,000 salespeople, from 100 companies that each generates billions of dollars in revenue, participated. You may wonder what could be wrong with that. I present 7 reasons why this survey and its conclusions may be faulty:

- Salespeople at large companies don't face the same resistance as your salespeople do;
- Customers don't usually get fired for making a decision to buy from large companies;
- Large companies can buy business if they choose to, meaning salespeople have access to resources that your salespeople don't have access to;
- Large companies spend millions of dollars on advertising so that their salespeople are presented with a welcome mat everywhere they go;
- Their salespeople are paid differently than your salespeople;
- OMG's data shows that salespeople that were assessed at some of these large companies are, on average, considerably less effective than salespeople from small and mid-size firms;
- Large companies have salespeople performing in very specialized roles;

A recent White Paper incorrectly suggested that you structure your sales force like the big companies.

For example, technology companies like, IBM, Oracle, EMC, Microsoft, Apple, Dell and HP; Financial services companies like, Merrill Lynch, Wells Fargo, Sachs, Citigroup and Bank of

America; Automakers like, GM, Toyota, Chrysler and Ford; Manufacturers like Stanley, Sony, Parker-Hanifin, Gillette and Proctor Gamble.

With regard to structure, I refer to the maze of roles (inside incoming, inside outgoing, telesales, account management, business development, major account sales, national account sales, field sales, territory sales, product experts, channel sales, market-specific sales, etc.), responsibilities (job description, account description, quotas and requirements) and traits (personality traits which are not at all predictive of sales success) required to perform effectively in those roles; and how those requirements match up to customer requirements.

In most cases, large companies complicate and detail sales force requirements as a result of inadequate performance. With the help of consultants from other large companies they redesign the organization based on what they think customers need from the sales force. These redesigns don't increase sales, they simply add unnecessary layers of sales leadership, and the resulting increase in sales occurs only because attention was paid to the sales force, metrics were put in place, training was provided and new expectations were set. All of the other complications are just that – complications.

If you lead the sales force of a Fortune 1000 company this is all well and good. But if you have a small or mid-market business, it doesn't work for all of the reasons previously mentioned. Salespeople from large companies will have success with their prospects regardless of the structure of the sales force and more surprisingly, regardless of whether those salespeople are effective! And what about salespeople from smaller companies? Those salespeople must focus on finding, selling and closing business every waking moment. Sales Leaders from smaller companies must be certain that they have the right people in those selling roles, thoroughly train them, hold them accountable to high expectations, and coach them every day.

Strong salespeople working for large companies are often assigned to a single large key account and are more visible than they would be if they worked for a small to mid-size company.

In summary, it has been obvious to me for more than 20 years that salespeople who have the correct combination of strengths to support selling, along with consultative selling skills – in other words, elite salespeople - will outperform relationship builders. Somebody simply had to come along and put a name on it to make it news. The Challenger Style.