

# Salvaging Problem Salespeople



*OR...*

*Beating Off  
the Alligators*



**Brian Jeffrey**

Understanding the problems that problem salespeople have is your first step to applying the right solution to get the person back on track and productive again.

Enjoy the read.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brian J". The signature is stylized with a large, looped initial "B" and a trailing "J".

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# Salvaging Problem Salespeople

*by Brian Jeffrey*



Some people will delight in telling you that all salespeople are problems and nothing but problems. That's not quite true. But every now and then, despite all your best efforts at trying to hire the right person, you hire a problem.

Sometimes you inherit the problem — a salesperson hired by your predecessor, who didn't (or couldn't) solve the problem and it now becomes yours. Sometimes the problem simply springs up out of nowhere — a formerly good performer gone sour, and you have to deal with it.

What you do about the problem depends on what the problem is and its magnitude. Sometimes there's nothing that can be done. Other times it's simply a matter of coaching the person. More serious problems may be solved with counselling while the biggies may require major surgery (termination).



If you think the customer from hell is bad news, try the salesperson from hell!

Whether you hired the problem salesperson or inherited him, the problems generally fall into three categories:

1. Operational
2. Personality
3. Performance

## OPERATIONAL PROBLEMS

Operational problems are generally created by the company's internal systems (or lack thereof!). They're often beyond the salesperson's control but can cause a great deal of frustration for the person and can create a demoralized sales team. Typical operational problems include:

- Excessive paperwork requirements
- Procedural quagmires
- Draconian credit approval process
- Lack of administrative support
- Asking salespeople to collect overdue accounts
- Prolonged delays in paying expenses
- Problems between departments
- Tight cash flow
- Lack of management direction
- Inventory problems
- Inability to quickly respond to customer requests
- Complicated sales process
- Needless reports
- Too many meetings
- And so on

Operational problems, while not directly related to the salespeople, are often blamed on them. Examples:

- Stringent credit approval procedures that slow down the sales process and cause the accounting and sales departments to be at each other's throats. But the salespeople are perceived as being uncooperative and demanding.
- Lack of administrative support to get written proposals generated in a timely manner resulting in lost opportunities. But the salespeople are blamed for the loss.

In most cases, operational problems are not evident to management because they are too close to the forest to see the trees. It sometimes takes an unbiased, outside view to uncover the real problem(s).

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**NOTE:** Don't burden your salespeople with complex call reports that take hours to complete at the end of each day. Yes, call reports are important, but they should be simple, concise, and of more value to the salesperson than the company.  
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Be cautious about accusing a salesperson of being a problem until you're sure that the root cause isn't the system he or she has to work with. Listen to the person's concerns with an open mind. Sure salespeople like to whine, but sometimes their whining can carry a powerful message about how you can make the operation more efficient.

Frank, round-table discussions can help get to the bottom of most operational problems. When the problems span more than one department, make sure all the key people have a say. Use standard problem-solving techniques to keep finger-pointing to a minimum. Remember the four problem-solving questions:

- What is the problem?
- What are the causes?
- What are some solutions?
- What is the best solution?

Brainstorming the answers to these questions will keep you moving in a productive direction.

On occasion you may face a situation where you are unable to solve the cause of the operational problem. Say, for example, that tight cash flow is causing delivery problems and one of your salespeople is causing havoc. You've made every attempt to explain the unsolvable situation, yet the salesperson is unable to understand or appreciate the circumstances and cannot or will not adjust to this reality. What should you do? Then it becomes time for the salesperson to move along to a new opportunity, probably with another company.

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*NOTE:* It's difficult for salespeople to maintain their focus on making sales when they're drowning in paper, procedures, and interdepartmental problems. It's often the sales manager's job to act as a facilitator and/or arbitrator to get operational problems solved, or at least minimized.  
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## PERSONALITY PROBLEMS

Some salespeople are like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. They get along well with customers but aggravate their fellow workers, support staff, and others. You can rarely afford to have this type of person on staff because they are disruptive and destroy morale.

Let's face it, not everyone gets along with everyone else. People like people who are most like themselves and when someone comes along who marches to a different drummer, they don't always hit it off. Or when two or more people with big egos try to inhabit the same space, interpersonal conflicts can abound. It takes a great deal of maturity and effort to handle personalities that differ substantially from our own.

Personality problems and conflicts aren't likely to go away. A person's personality or temperament is pretty well what they are born with. Some people are more flexible than others and can modify their behaviour to accommodate others. But modifying your behaviour is not the same as changing your personality. Under stress, people will

revert to their innate personality traits. So when times are tough, a person's real personality is likely to surface. Sometimes this personality is a shining light that guides the rest of the team out of the darkness. At other times, the person takes us *into* the darkness and we say he or she has a bad attitude.

Much like one bad apple can spoil the whole barrel, one bad attitude can poison the work environment.

Fortunately, most salespeople are positive by nature. Habitually negative people don't last long in sales, so when a salesperson's attitude turns sour, it's usually because some external force has overwhelmed the person. These external forces might be an operational problem, a change in compensation plan, a major lost sale, or general frustration with his or her performance level.

You solve attitude problems by getting to the bottom of the situation and correcting the problem. Even when you are powerless to correct the problem, just talking about it often relieves the pressure. Sometimes all it takes is a sympathetic ear.

If whatever is bothering the individual can't be changed, it's time to suggest that he accept the situation and get on with the job. If he can't manage that, perhaps it's time for him to move along to another company where the climate is more to his liking.



Always try to salvage a person  
before you replace him or her.

## PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

Performance problems are sometimes difficult to diagnose. It's hard to know if your new salesperson is just slow off the mark or if he's a non-performer. And it's not easy to tell if a seasoned salesperson is simply having a bit of a dry spell or if she's developing into a chronic poor performer.

Uncovering performance problems is easier if you've been keeping proper sales records. These records will allow you to do performance comparisons to uncover the problem areas.

Performance problems seem to fall into four categories: non-performers; poor performers; over-performers, and; burnout.

### Non-Performers

This problem generally surfaces with new salespeople although, occasionally, an old-timer can become a non-performer, usually because of burnout. To a great extent, sales is a numbers game. So if a new salesperson isn't making his or her numbers on a continuing basis, it's time to part company. Sounds blunt but it's the only way.

The first thing to do is decide what is a reasonable time for a new salesperson to come up to speed in your company. Then provide the training, support and coaching, and monitor the results. Give the person every opportunity to succeed. If the results are not there within a reasonable amount of time and you can't identify why, cut your losses. You can't afford non-performers. No company can.

### Poor Performers

A poor performer is usually someone who already has a proven track record, either within your organization or with another company, but is not performing up to par. Assuming the person is not suffering from burnout, it's time to monitor his or her activities more closely.

When things are going well, you can (and should) monitor *results*. When things are not going well, it's time to monitor the *activities* that lead to results. For example, is the poor performer:

- Making enough calls (if not, why)
- Qualifying prospects properly
- Spending too much time socializing instead of selling
- Poorly organized (spends more time preparing to sell than selling)
- Overly organized



- Planning properly
- Not following up on opportunities
- Not taking advantage of existing leads
- Having personal or family problems that are side-tracking his or her efforts

Sit down with your problem child and set mutually acceptable quotas, activity levels, and a time line for reaching them. It's important that he be given enough time to bring his performance up to an agreed-upon level. Your job is to assist him to hit the targets, on time.

It's important that the targets be mutually established. If the salesperson isn't involved in setting the targets, he won't feel responsible for reaching them.

If a salesperson isn't meeting his sales targets, look at his sales activities. Is he making the required number of calls necessary to make quota? If he is making the required number of calls, what's happening or not happening on those calls? Why isn't he closing the business? This may be the result of a skills deficit and some training may be in order. If he's not making the required number of calls, why not? You may have an organizational problem or perhaps a lazy salesperson. (Or worse, a lazy salesperson with an organizational problem!)

Poor performers can usually be coached or counselled back to full production by a patient sales manager. We'll look at coaching and counselling later.

### **Over-Performers**

While this may seem like an odd problem, having an over-performer on staff can be very disruptive. These are the people who sell more than any three of your other salespeople but create havoc while doing it. Required paperwork is incomplete or a mess, and other people are always having to pick up after them. Team spirit is shot to hell because the over-performer has his own agenda and isn't going to let something like team spirit or cooperation with others stand in the way of his commission cheque.

What do you do with over-performers? Sometimes nothing. Sometimes you can use the over-performer as an example for the others to emulate — providing the over-performer’s bad habits aren’t too bad and you’re prepared to deal with the increased aggravation. Most often we simply tolerate the over-performer and vacillate between being sorry we don’t have more salespeople like him and being glad we don’t!

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**NOTE:** In my experience, I have found that everybody has an aggravation level and a utility level. When their utility level exceeds their aggravation level and they’re performing, I’m prepared to live with the problems. However, when their aggravation level exceeds their utility level, it’s time for a change, and that usually means out the door!  
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While some over-performers are simply hard-driving, highly focused individuals (with the emphasis on “individual”), others have a tendency to self-destruct. In their zeal to make a sale, they do something unethical or dishonest and their world crashes down on them.

## **Burnout**

Good salespeople are masters at hiding burnout. They may continue to appear positive and upbeat, but their sales numbers will tell the story. Other signs of burnout are failure to keep commitments, reports not being turned in on time, excessive forgetfulness, change in general attitude, and low or no motivation. The three major causes of sales burnout are health/medical problems, personal problems, and overwork.

As a sales manager, you’re not really qualified to handle health or medical-related problems. You can, however, suggest (or in some cases insist) that a person get a thorough medical. A good general practitioner can also uncover personal problems, particularly if there are no major physical ones.

Many sales managers aren’t qualified to handle personal problems. While I don’t recommend you turn into an amateur psychologist, sometimes all it takes is a sympathetic ear and the problem becomes self-solving.

Overwork is an insidious problem. The person usually knows she isn't firing on all cylinders but can't afford to stop and get her internal engine repaired. So she tries to run faster, which only causes more problems. Sometimes the only cure is a forced vacation or rest. Watch for people who don't take their annual vacation. They may be building up to a performance breakdown.

## COACHING AND COUNSELLING

Sales managers have been used to their "commander-in-chief" role where they give orders and the soldiers (salespeople) obey. Things are changing. Over the past few years, sales managers have been expected to take on the role of coach for their sales team, and the more progressive ones have also developed their counselling skills.

### Coaching

Just like athletes, salespeople need to be coached if they're to perform at their best. Don't confuse teaching with coaching. Many sales managers fail to make the distinction between these two roles. Teaching is "show and tell." Coaching is "observe and suggest."

Teaching is something you do before you set the salesperson loose on your prospects. It's best done in the comfort of your office or during formal training sessions — although some companies use the B-L-B method (blind-leading-the-blind) where they send the new recruit out with a more seasoned salesperson, often with interesting results.

Coaching, on the other hand, is best done in the field, after the salesperson knows what he or she is supposed to do. I call this curbside coaching. It's a way to build or improve on the strengths that the salesperson brings to your company. You may never be able to get rid of a person's weak points, but you can build up his or her strong points so that the weak ones become small in comparison.

Curbside coaching doesn't always take place at the curbside. With inside salespeople, it can be done in a quiet corner of the sales floor, in

the stockroom, or during a planned coffee break. Telemarketers can be coached at their workstations during planned coaching breaks.

### **Guidelines for Curb-side Coaching**

Curb-side coaching should be done immediately before and/or after the call. The best place is in the car, while it's parked, with the motor turned off and your minds turned on. Don't make a big deal of it. Coaching should be something that you do naturally and the salesperson expects you to do in your role as sales manager. The important thing is to do it systematically and properly. Whenever possible, confine the coaching to just one point or idea. Don't overwhelm the salesperson.

Don't feel obligated to coach. If the call went well and there are no particular points to be made, don't make any. Simply compliment the salesperson on a strength you noticed and get on with the next call. When doing corrective coaching, always start with a positive — something that the salesperson did right. After you make your corrective point, finish with another positive note. The idea is to keep the salesperson's attitude as positive as possible while helping her improve her selling skills.

Before the call, help the salesperson set some call objectives. Help her develop the habit of putting her mind in gear before opening the car door. After the call, compare the pre-call objective with the actual call results. Help her determine what follow-up activity would be appropriate. Ask the salesperson what, if anything, she would have done differently during the call and why.

### **Develop and Use a Checklist**

This will simplify your note-taking during the call. Use it to check off the things the salesperson does right as well as those areas that need attention. Here are some items you could include in your checklist:

**General Coaching Checklist***Personal Qualities:*

Appearance: dress, posture  
Courtesy: to fellow employees and customers  
Decision-making abilities  
Drive  
Enthusiasm  
Health and physical condition  
Initiative  
Morale  
Reliability  
Self-control  
Stamina

*Job & Product Knowledge:*

Knows the product  
Knows competing products  
Knows company policies  
Knows market conditions  
Knows advertising and sales aids  
Knows customers and prospects

*Personal Organization:*

Customer records in order  
Has income goal  
Knows how many sales to make to reach the goal  
Knows how many calls to make for each sale  
Organizes work in advance  
Territory is organized  
Makes good use of waiting time  
Uses a personal organizer or other time management tool  
Automobile is clean and organized  
Sales literature is neat, clean and available

### **Sales Skills Coaching Checklist**

#### *Pre-Call Preparation:*

Understands customer's business  
Sets call objectives  
Has overall account strategy

#### *Opening the Sale:*

Established rapport and got customer's attention  
Set appropriate tone  
Kept the sale moving along

#### *Qualifying the Prospect:*

Gained interest  
Used open-ended questions  
Encouraged customer to talk  
Used questions to develop needs  
Developed needs that we can satisfy  
Determined who the decision-makers are  
Determined financial limits and/or restraints  
Uncovered competitive situation  
Kept control of the sale

#### *Selling Benefits:*

Linked features and benefits to customer's needs  
Knew at least five appropriate facts and benefits  
Used sales tools  
Used appropriate evidence  
Kept the customer involved in the sale  
Was aware of buying signals

#### *Demonstrations:*

Knew how to demonstrate the product/service  
Demonstration was applicable to the sale  
Got and kept the customer involved

*Handling Objections:*

- Understood the customer's concerns
- Put concerns in the proper perspective
- Had a ready answer for common objections
- Properly acknowledged objection before handling
- Used appropriate techniques

*Motivating the Prospect:*

- Fully understood how product benefits customer
- Was able to verbalize how customer will benefit

*Closing the Sale:*

- Recognized when to stop selling and start closing
- Used at least one trial close
- Attempted at least one close
- Knows more than one closing technique

*After the Sale:*

- Terminated the sale at an appropriate time
- Has a clear understanding of the next step
- Has a follow-up plan or procedure

*Prospecting:*

- Asked for referrals
- Keeps a current list of suspects and prospects

You can use a one to five or one to ten scale to quantify each time and the complete checklist. Having a "score" allows you to compare the salesperson's score on subsequent coaching calls to see if there has been any improvement. It also allows you to rank the members of your sales team as well.

## Counselling

Counselling goes beyond coaching. When you're in your counselling role, you're acting more as a mentor than a coach. Sometimes you'll find yourself acting more like a parent than a boss.

Counselling is a serious conversation with a well-defined purpose. It's not a social event, so skip the usual pleasantries and cut to the chase. Here's a five-step process that will help:

1. *State the problem.*  
Stick with the facts as you understand them. This is not a time for confrontation, but for realization that a problem exists.
2. *Get agreement.*  
If the salesperson doesn't acknowledge or agree with a problem, he doesn't have one. That doesn't mean the problem doesn't exist, it only means the salesperson doesn't see or acknowledge it. It's still there and it still has to be solved, so the more immediate problem is getting the salesperson to realize a problem exists. It's also a good idea to get agreement on the magnitude of the problem or situation.
3. *Listen.*  
Hear the other person out. What's his side of the story? Are there extenuating circumstances? What are the facts as the other person sees them? Stay neutral and keep your emotions in check. The other person may want to vent his feelings and, if you take the venting personally, counselling can quickly turn into conflict.
4. *Mutually develop an action plan for improvement.*  
Get specific. What needs to happen when, who is responsible for what, how will you both know when the target has been reached? Make sure the salesperson agrees to the plan and his part in it. Document the plan so that both people have something to refer to. If you think the problem is serious enough to result in termination if it isn't corrected, get the salesperson's



signature on the plan as acknowledging it. You don't want to get involved in an unlawful dismissal dispute where the salesperson says he never agreed to the plan.

5. *Monitor the results.*

Schedule follow-up meetings to review the salesperson's progress. These meetings can be short, informal ones or formal, weekly sit-down reviews. It shows that you're serious and interested in the salesperson's progress towards improvement.

Coaching and counselling won't solve all your performance problems. But they're among your best tools for getting the job done.



If you want to counsel, listen!  
Don't offer solutions until you  
understand the problem.

## FINAL THOUGHT

While you might wish it weren't so, a sales manager's job is one of solving problems — performance problems, interpersonal problems, corporate sales problems, you name it. It's a big part of your responsibility. It's also what keeps the job interesting. Each day brings new problems and rarely the same one twice. And it's the people problems that are always the most challenging. But, hey, without problems to solve, who would need sales managers anyway?

Good luck!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Brian Jeffrey** is a sales management consultant and former sales trainer with over 40 year's experience. He's the author of *The Sales Wizard's Secrets of Sales Management*, *The 5-Minute Sales trainer*, 18 ebooks, and over 100 articles on selling and sales management.

Brian provides sales management consulting, coaching, and mentoring to business owners and sales managers. He has had many sales successes (as well as a few spectacular failures) and has learned what works, what doesn't, and why — information he readily shares with others.

Find out how Brian helps companies maximize their sales at **[www.Quintarra.com](http://www.Quintarra.com)**.

