



**Becoming a  
Successful  
Senior  
Sales  
Leader**

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**The Secrets to  
Thriving in this Role**

**BY BILL ZIPP**



## Be careful what you wish for, as the saying goes, you just might get it.

As a young boy, I wished for a puppy. What I got was daily walks and regular yard clean-up. As most children do, I thought having a puppy meant cute, cuddly fur and fun, frolicking games. Tell that to the pooper-scooper.

As a teenager, I wished for my own car. What I got was a perpetually empty wallet from gas, insurance, and repair bills. The first car I owned burst into flames after I worked on it. True story! Not good.

I won't even tell you what happened when I got my first house, another wish on my list. It was a 100-year-old disaster worthy of Tom Hanks and Shelly Long's comedy, *The Money Pit*. My version of that movie wasn't funny at all.

Many sales managers wish for a promotion to senior leadership. That is, making the move from being a frontline manager to being a manager of sales managers. Or from being a manager of sales managers to being a manager of managers who manage sales managers.

### **I tell them to beware.**

This transition is fraught with more peril than the transition from independent sales contributor to frontline manager and has doomed many leaders to lateral movement for the rest of their careers. Here are the reasons why—the three big challenges of senior sales leadership.



## Challenge One: The Math

There's nothing more fun than frontline leadership. You and your team of eight (or so) reps become a close-knit group. You go to battle together, celebrating your wins and comforting each other in your losses. Up-close-and-personal, frontline sales leadership is a family affair.

The math of senior leadership, however, doesn't allow for this intimacy. A manager of sales managers goes from being one leader with eight direct reports to being a leader of three or four leaders with their own direct reports. That's a jump from eight relationships to thirty-six, from being a shepherd to being a rancher.

### **The math is more complex than that, however.**

As a frontline sales leader you were concerned with the relationships you had with your team and their relationships with each other. Now you're concerned with the relationships you have with the managers who report to you, their relationships with each other, their relationships with their sales teams, and the relationships those team members have with each other. Not to mention the cross-functional relationships you're now responsible for nurturing.

### **That's a lot of people!**

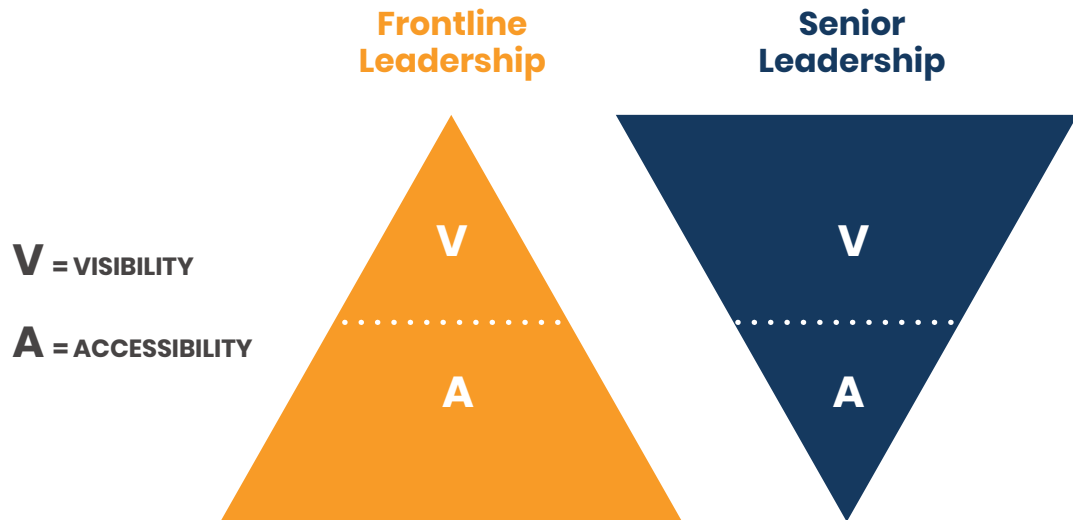
This dynamic becomes even more complicated when the managers you manage take on managers themselves. The relational load of senior sales leadership, like the universe, expands at an exponential rate. Be careful what you wish for.

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## Challenge Two: The Flip

The second challenge of senior leadership is a concept I call The Flip. It's not well understood, but failure to grasp it can destroy your effectiveness as a manager of sales managers.

By The Flip, I mean a dramatic change in visibility and accessibility. A frontline leader has high accessibility to his or her team—again, the role is up-close-and-personal—but low visibility to the rest of the organization. Then an inversion occurs where a former frontline leader, now a manager of managers, has higher visibility in the organization but lower accessibility to the rest of the team.



A leader who leads through the power of personal presence—and, frankly, what successful frontline manager doesn't—is in big trouble when The Flip occurs. Why? Because that presence becomes diluted to undetectable microns. Senior sales leaders who try to maintain the same accessibility they had as frontline leaders quickly burn out due to management math (See Challenge One above). If they don't address this dynamic, however, they're seen as distant and aloof.

Neither of these alternatives works.

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## Challenge Three: The Telephone

We're all familiar with the children's party game called telephone. Telephone is played when one person whispers something into the ear of another person who whispers what they heard in the ear of another person, down the line of a dozen people or so. Then the person at the end of the line tells the group what they heard, and everyone laughs and laughs and laughs at how different it is from what was originally whispered.

**Except you're not laughing. You're not laughing because that's your life as a senior leader with this third, very real challenge.**

It was hard enough as a frontline sales manager to get everyone in your team on the same page, but you did it. Eventually. And life was so much easier. Getting the vast array of people and personalities you're now responsible for on the same page has become almost impossible. You understand this metaphor all too well—herding cats.

Sometimes, just like in the game telephone, the message is not just a little bit off; it's completely and totally erroneous. Like the time when the president of the college I graduated from received a letter from a major donor threatening to pull all his funding from the school because this president had not one but two Cadillacs. What the president actually had was two cataracts and immediate surgery was needed.

**Telephone strikes again!**

# The Secrets to Success as a Senior Sales Leader

There are five secrets to overcoming the challenges of senior sales leadership. Like ingredients in a great recipe, each need to be present for your meal to turn out well.

1. Personal Credibility
2. Organizational Culture
3. A Far-Near Focus
4. Communication: Cascading and Cross-Functional
5. Leadership Multiplication



## Secret One: Personal Credibility

**Here's the brutal truth:** Most senior leaders lack credibility. They have a title. They have a salary. They have a corner office and (maybe) a seat in the boardroom, but they don't have the hearts and minds of the people they lead. And this lack of credibility undermines their effectiveness.

Consider the table below. In the left column there's a leader with positional authority, the authority that comes from title, rank, and status. It's conferred on this person by virtue of their place in the hierarchy of an organization. Positional authority is wielded from the outside in and often produces short term wins, but its lack of personal credibility doesn't deliver long term results.

| Positional Authority                       | Relational Authority                       |
|--|--|
| Formal role in the organization            | Informal connection with people            |
| Title, rank, and status                    | Trust, respect, and loyalty                |
| Enforcement from the outside in            | Empowerment from the inside out            |
| Minimal credibility. Short term compliance | Maximum credibility. Discretionary effort. |

Relational authority is different, as we see in the right column. It's the authority that comes from real connection with real people and earns the trust, respect, and loyalty of those people. These connections establish the personal credibility of a right-column leader and empowers employees from the inside out to give one hundred percent effort, one hundred percent of the time.

### Which of these leaders do you want to be?

The trick is, real, relational authority is harder to gain than a mere promotion to senior leadership (And yes, I know, getting that promotion wasn't easy). It involves deeply connecting with people and earning their trust and continuing to connect with them day in and day out, never taking these people for granted.

**Here's how to do that: Four connection points for gaining credibility as a senior leader.**

## Team Meetings

**The meetings you lead are the most visible opportunity you have to establish credibility with others.** In this one-to-many environment, there's the opportunity to make maximum connection within a minimum amount of time.

So... Run great meetings! Don't leave anything to chance. Use them as a way to publicly praise others and make sure to laugh at yourself. Show up early and mingle—making even more personal connections while reading the temperature of the room—and linger afterwards. You'll be deeply rewarded relationally for doing these simple things.

## One-on-one Meetings

**Not all the connections you need to make as a senior leader are in public, however.** Private one-on-one's are an indispensable tool for deeply connecting with others. Conduct these meetings with the leaders who report directly to you, but also conduct skip level one-on-one's with the people who report to them.

Eliminate all distractions from your one-on-one meetings and be fully present in them. Actively listen to the people you're with, paying attention not just to their words but the emotions behind those words. Ask good questions, leaning forward, making eye contact, fully engaging in the conversation.

People may forget what you have to say in a public presentation, but they will never forget how you made them feel in a private, personal encounter. Your credibility will soar when you master this mode of interpersonal interaction.

## Delivering Good News

**This may be the most enjoyable aspect of being a senior leader, celebrating success.** But there's a pitfall to avoid when doing it. The pitfall I see leaders slip into is celebrating with a jab at the end. You know the drill, "We've had a great year ... Now go have an even better one!"

That makes as much sense as making a deposit in your bank account and then drawing that same amount of money out of the account immediately. Celebrate success to celebrate success, not as a means to manipulate more output. This honest, authentic deposit of appreciation will accrue rich relational equity and produce a robust rate of return without you having to jab at it.

## Delivering Bad News

**Conversely, delivering bad news is the least enjoyable aspect of being a senior leader.** Ironically, it has the potential to deepen your connection with people in a way delivering good news never can.

**If...**

If you honestly tell the truth, refuse to blame others, and take responsibility for fixing the problem at hand. The temptation for senior leaders when on the hot seat is to spin a story, or, worse yet, delegate the delivery of bad news to someone else. Both destroy your credibility.

When there's bad news to report, do it yourself with care and candor, grace and truth. People will follow you forever if you do.

**Here's the bottom line on credibility:** Be real. Being real means bringing honesty and humanity to your leadership, and with these, humility and authenticity. The way up is down here. Travel that path.



# 2

## Secret Two: Organizational Culture

**Throughout history, fire has provided heat for cooking, light for travel, and warmth for comfort.** But as we've seen recently in the West, it can also be deadly and destructive. Organizational culture, too, can be life-giving or soul-wrenching.

**Culture is the combination of beliefs and behaviors any group of people embraces, from businesses to churches, families to nations.** It's the way individuals in these groups think and act over time. Culture drives how we participate in meetings, treat our customers, and pursue our goals. Or in the words of the brilliant Peter Drucker, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast!"

There's a culture building exercise I do with all the senior leaders I coach. The exercise involves filling out a blank piece of paper with four columns on it. In the far left column, we write down what this leader would like to see define the culture within his or her sphere of influence. We usually come up with a handful of words or phrases. In the next column, we list how these words or phrases show up behaviorally. That is, the specific, observable actions that embody them.

**Now the fun begins.** I ask this leader for stories about people on their team who lived out each of these specific, observable actions, listing those stories in column three, and then we brainstorm creative ways to recognize and reward these actions, captured in column four.

I then send my coaching clients on a mission to light the fire of organizational culture. But they can't do it by using columns one and two. They can only use columns three and four. That is, telling stories and providing recognition and reward.

**I do this for two reasons.** First, we've all gone numb with values initiatives that put plaques on a wall and posters in the hallway. Employees roll their eyes at these lame attempts at loyalty and continue on their way unmoved. Second, the very best way to scale culture is through telling stories and providing recognition and reward. Ancient tribes have done this for centuries around the fire pit before organizational consultants started charging thousands of dollars to do it (not as successfully, I might add).

**What's the outcome of this exercise?** The senior leaders I work with begin to duplicate the values they want embraced by their people by embedding them into the culture through repeated stories and positive praise. From that moment on, nothing remains same.

# 3

## Secret Three: A Far-Near Focus

**Six days after I got my driver's license, I totaled our family car.**

It wasn't a deadly accident, but it was devastating to my fragile adolescent ego. I was driving in traffic, looked down to see how fast I was going, and looked up to a complete surprise. The cars in front of me were stopped at a red light.

I didn't see that coming!

The collision wrecked not just our car but three other cars caught in the crossfire on a crowded, six-lane California thoroughfare.

My failure as an inexperienced driver was not having a far-near focus. I wasn't able to look out at the flow of traffic on the horizon in front of me and quickly look down at the dashboard for important information without causing a disruption.

**Inexperienced senior sales leaders make the same mistake.** Some paint a glorious vision for the future, never looking at present reality to see if the sales organization is hitting its number, the business equivalent of gasoline. Others become obsessed with dashboard KPIs, never looking out to the horizon and, therefore, crashing into an unseen obstacle.

Successful senior sales leaders cast a compelling vision for the future but are also clear about current reality. These leaders help their companies thrive by having big, bold dreams while at the same time, working in the nitty-gritty details of the present to make sure those dreams actually get done.

| Far Focus                                  | Near Focus                                |
|--|---|
| Long range vision                          | Quarterly objectives                      |
| Annual planning                            | Monthly metrics                           |
| Without Near Focus: inconsistent execution | Without Far Focus: no strategic direction |

Vision and execution. The future and the present. Leadership and management. That's what it means to have a far-near focus.

# 4

## Secret Four: Communication

**There are two kinds of communication senior sales leaders are called on to provide:** cascading communication and cross-functional communication. Like water in a river, both must flow freely.

### Cascading Communication

**Cascading communication flows with clarity and consistency.** Clarity entails thinking through the content of your message and removing unnecessary clutter and needless complexity. Not that your people are stupid. It's just that they live and work in an environment overflowing with information, from marketing to sales, personal to professional, texts to email, plus YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, Slack, Facebook, LinkedIn. You get the idea.

Decide what you want to say and say it well—short and sweet, clear and concise. As a young leader, I was once given this piece of advice: “Bill, stand up, speak up, and shut up.” Maybe a little harsh but most certainly apt (at least for me).

### Now stay on message.

My business background is in commercial radio. One of the challenges we faced with our on-air clients was their wanting to change an advertising campaign in the middle of its run. Because it was their advertising campaign, they listened to the commercials most every time they aired. Predictably, they got bored with hearing the same jingle, promotional offer, and tagline day in and day out.

The problem was, those commercials were just beginning to make an impact on prospects and customers. Changing them would reset the clock and sow seeds of confusion. Most people need to hear something almost ten times for it to really sink in.

Recognize that you're extremely familiar with the words you want to say as a leader. You've thought them through in your head for weeks. You've written and rewritten them multiple times and practiced saying them to trusted colleagues before sharing them with the entire team.

Then when you do, you're done, ready to move on, like radio advertisers, to the next big thing, while your people are left trying to absorb what you said. Follow this advice from organizational change expert John Kotter: Over-communicate by a factor of ten.

**“The most carefully crafted messages rarely sink deeply into the recipient’s consciousness after only one pronouncement,”** Kotter explains in *Leading Change*. “Our minds are too cluttered, and any communication has to fight hundreds of other ideas for attention. A single airing won’t address all the questions we have. As a result, effective information transfer always relies on repetition.”

### **Cross-Functional Communication**

The second kind of communication you’re called on to provide as a senior sales leader is cross-functional communication. **Cross-functional communication flows by balancing these two ingredients: inquiry and advocacy.**

Now that you have more visibility within the organization, you also have more opportunity to interact with other leaders—especially C-Level executives—in a way your frontline role did not allow.

The temptation when you’re new to this opportunity is to speak out too stridently. Your intent is good—to show up as a strong, capable leader—but the impact is not good. The impact of this intensity sends shivers down the spine of your cross-functional peers (Trust me. I’ve done this. Sadly, more than once).

Inquiry and advocacy, however, achieve the opposite. Balancing them looks like this:

- **Asking questions**
- **Listening intently**
- **Stating your case**
- **Asking more questions**
- **Continuing to listen**
- **Stating your case further (if needed)**

This is the key to effective cross-functional communication, and the key to being invited into more and more meaningful company conversations.

# 5

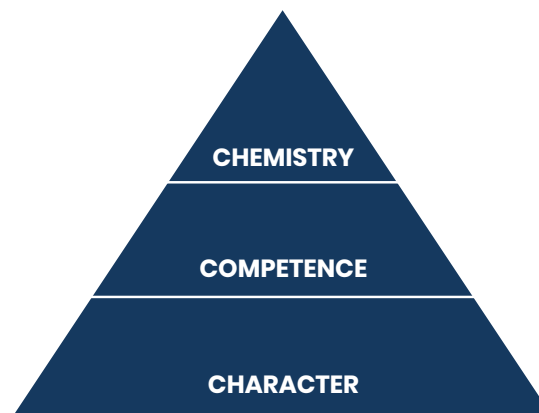
## Secret Five: Leadership Multiplication

**Finally, a top priority for any leader is duplicating themselves in others.**

A genius with a thousand helpers is still a genius. That person is just not a leader. A leader, especially a successful senior sales leader, uses their genius to multiply more leaders.

While volumes have been written on leadership development, here are its core components: **character, competence, and chemistry.**

**Character means that you're a man or woman of your word:** you do what you say you'll do. It means your people can depend on you, and you'd never ask them to do something you wouldn't do yourself. And character means that you act this way when things are going well and when things are going poorly, when you're having a good day and when you're having a bad one.



**But character isn't enough in leadership.** We've all worked with someone about whom we could say, "He's a heck of guy but doesn't get stuff done."

**Competence builds on character by fulfilling one's professional responsibilities at the highest levels of excellence.** It's born from a commitment to master the demands of the job, not for ego or self-glorification but to maximize contribution to the company.

And finally chemistry. A squishy word, to be sure, compared to character and competence. But don't be fooled by its squishiness. It isn't easy to pull off.

**Chemistry is the ability of a leader to connect with people and spark a meaningful relationship.** A warm smile, a firm handshake, eye contact, and a genuine compliment combine together to forge a powerful chemical compound: human.

Be this kind of person. Build these kinds of leaders.



## Conclusion

**What do you wish for? A puppy, a new car, a bigger house? Or a promotion to senior leadership?**

All these things are fine, but they come with their own set of challenges, especially a promotion to senior leadership. It's dramatically different from being a frontline sales manager. But it also has rewards: greater visibility within the organization and an expanded voice in decisions that are made.

Step into this role wisely, knowing what awaits you and being committed to establishing personal credibility, building organizational culture, developing a far-near focus, providing a consistent flow of communication, and developing a robust leadership pipeline.

**With these, you will do well.**

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