

The Inner Game of Sales

By

Loretta M Siani, Ph.D.

What's the secret of winning the inner game? "If you think you can or you think you can't, either way you're right," said Henry Ford. In a nutshell, that's the secret of winning – at anything. Ask a winning salesperson. Ask anybody who has overcome impossible odds. They'll tell you. First and foremost, winning takes place in the mind. Inner victories precede outer victories. Winning is an inner game. It's a matter of overcoming the mental obstacles that prevent us from performing at our best. It's a matter of staying out of our own way. When we master the inner game we can *move mountains*.

Winners are pretty good at *moving mountains*. Is it easy for them? No. All it takes is everything they've got: all their talent, all their energy all their love, an unshakable confidence, relentless persistence and a predator's optimism to win. The rewards are worth it though. Let's take a look at some of the *software of the mind* that winners run to master the inner game, and see if it applies to winning the inner game of sales. Here are the topics we'll be examining: Making a *Decision*; Making a *Commitment*; Visualizing the Goal; Paying Attention, Concentration, Practice, Relaxation, and Detachment.

Winners Decide: The best way to win at the game you're playing is to pick the game you want to play. Winners play their own game – not the game somebody else wants them to play. This enables them to leverage their unique talents and give it everything they've got. When they come from their strengths this energizes them and hardens their inner game.

Winners also know the power that comes from making decisions. They know that life is the sum total of the decisions they make. They understand that their



decisions determine their destiny. Winners have a date with destiny. They do not put their destiny in anyone else' s hands.

There' s a story about a high school basketball player who dreamed of becoming a professional player. His coach kicked him off the team at the end of his first season of play as a freshman. Devastated and angry the boy vowed to never again let someone else' s decision determine his destiny. He decided then and there to practice until he not only got back on the team, but he became the greatest basketball player ever to play the game. That young boy was Michael Jordan. To this day Jordan tells this story as the turning point of his life. This was the decision that determined his destiny.

Winners like Michael Jordan make their decisions and then their decisions turn around and make them. They don' t let failures and setbacks stop them. They see them as pivotal decision making events. They use them to make one more decision to stay in the game. The force of decisions like these toughens their inner game. It develops their persistence and gives them the unshakable confidence necessary to continue marching boldly in the direction of their dreams. They experience the power of Goethe' s couplet:

Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it.

Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.

Mediocre sales people do not have this kind of boldness. They do not make the all-important link between the decisions they make and their destiny. They play other people' s games. They lack faith in their own decisions. They are locked in the prison of their indecision. They talk about things they' d *like* to do instead of things they have *decided* to do. This dissipates their energy and weakens their inner game.

I get sales reps in my training classes all the time who say things like “ I wish I could get really good at making presentations. Or, “ I’ d *like* to make 15 telephone calls for new business every day. They don’ t really decide to do these things. They don’ t realize the immediate power they would gain by simply making a decision to do them. Instead they proclaim wishes and preferences and then blame circumstances for not fulfilling them.

At every bend in the river they *go with the flow* instead of steering their own course. If they do decide on a course to follow or a target to hit they’ ll set their sights low. Then they’ re surprised that a low aim produces low results. They fail to see the cause and effect between the two. Most of all they fail to win at the inner game because they didn’ t make a decision to win in the first place.

Winners Commit: Commitment puts legs on decisions – rock hard legs that don’ t quit. Vince Lombardi expected, even demanded this kind of total commitment from his Green Bay Packers. “ Every time a football player goes out to ply his trade, he’s got to play from the ground up - from the soles of his feet right up to his head” . Winners play like this. They play with abandon. They tell themselves they will find a way or make a way. Their inner game brims with confidence. Their commitment gives them clarity of purpose. Clarity brings power. Power over themselves. Power over circumstances. Power to influence others.

Total commitment opens up whole new realms of possibility. It has been said that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. Commitment creates the miracle of synchronicity. Suddenly help comes from all directions. Whole streams of events occur that would not have otherwise occurred. Materials arrive, decisions are made, meetings take place, people of all kinds show up to lend assistance. Commitment opens up a reservoir of renewal and energy that overcomes every obstacle. It keeps people from

getting in their own way. There' s no way around it. Winning sales people are committed.

Mediocre sales people are not committed. They have an “ I don' t care” attitude. Apathy strips life from their dreams. They don' t play their game with the utmost of their abilities. When they come up against a competitor with equal ability who *is* giving it their all, they' re easily intimidated. Without devotion and dedication they lack the energy and the optimism to win on the inside. As soon as the boat starts leaking, when systems breakdown, when new prospects seemingly dry up, when the chaos of change takes toll on their business, when new technology requires more knowledge than they have, it interferes with their game. They use it as an excuse to get out of the game. Circumstances become handy alibis. Vigor and stamina depart from the scene. They fall down and stay down. They' re not committed.

WinnersVisualize: The power of vision is awesome. Winning is no surprise to people who realize this. They know that life is a mirror reflecting back to them the images they put into it. They are masters at presenting winning mental images into the mirror of life.

Long before Arnold Schwarzenegger was known outside the world of bodybuilding a sports columnist from the Tucson Citizen by the name of Steve Chandler¹ asked him what he was going to do now that he retired from bodybuilding. “ I' m going to be the number one box office star in all Hollywood, he said.” When Chandler asked him how he planned to do that Arnold replied: “ It' s the same process I used in body building. What you do is create a vision of who you want to be, and then live into that picture, as if it were already true.” Winners do this. They know what the end already looks like. They' ve seen the movie. Their vision delivers a detailed, sensory-rich,

¹ Chandler is now the author of two best selling books, *Reinventing Yourself* and *100 Ways to Motivate Yourself*. Read them.

emotion filled picture to their subconscious mind that then becomes a blueprint for action for their bodies to carry out. Winners are masters of the inner game. They' re working from a blueprint!

Mediocre sales people create blueprints for their bodies to carry out too. Only their blueprints are for failure. They defeat themselves before they ever get into the fray. They see themselves getting turned down by one customer after the next. Their persistent picture of failure creates the very event they worry about. They are visionary prophets of their own doom and their own worst enemies. What' s worse, they don' t make the connection between what they' re picturing and the results they' re producing. Their inner game is a blueprint for failure.

Winners Pay Attention: Attention is power. Winners understand that their destiny is built upon the chain of events caused by the decisions that they make. They also know that the ability to meet their destiny grows proportionately with the attention they pay to each link in the chain. Attention brings an almost supernatural power to everything they do.

How do they pay attention? They study. They keep records. They measure results. To keep their confidence high and stay at the top of their game they constantly analyze what went right and what went wrong. Immediately after every championship tournament Jack Nicklaus plays in, he takes a golf lesson from the resident pro at the course. He pays attention by getting objective feedback. Winners do this. They know *why* they won or *why* they lost. Because of this when they' re up to their ears in alligators they know what club to pull out of the bag. Their inner game is strong. They stay out of their own way.

I' ve seen the records kept by top level sales reps. They include every tiny detail about their customers and about the calls they make. Winning sales people keep

records like these, not for their sales managers, but for themselves. They're highly interested in every detail of the game they're playing. They realize that the more they pay attention and measure the results of what they're doing the better results they will produce. When alligators approach in the form of challenging new customers, they know how handy well kept records become. Suddenly they have a rich resource of evidence to draw from for new strategies, and for case studies and testimonials for getting new business. .

Mediocre sales people think paying attention is busy work. They're oblivious to the truth of the axiom that anything measured will improve. To them, keeping records, measuring results and getting feedback are all time-wasters. They think they can remember everything. They go from call to call never really stopping to analyze *why* they won or lost. Consequently succeeding performances are hit or miss. When they're up to their ears in alligators they're at a loss for what to do. They have no written record to refer to for a new strategy. Boredom sets in. Momentum slows. The inner game collapses. They haven't paid attention.

Winners Concentrate: Concentration puts winners in the present moment. It releases their minds from the clutter of distracting thoughts and emotions. Ego disappears. Fear is forgotten. Time stops. They're aware of nothing but what they're doing at the moment. Everything becomes more vivid and occurs almost as if it was happening in slow motion. They get into what psychologists call the *flow* state. Everything seems to go right. Every move becomes effort less and efficient. This kind of laser beam concentration allows them to not only play *better* but play *over their heads* It holds outside interference at bay. "A full mind is an empty baseball bat," said Branch Rickey, one of the greatest baseball managers of all time. Winners understand Rickey's metaphor. *Getting a hit* requires an uncluttered mind and total concentration.

Winning salespeople experience the rewards of concentration. They know it is their ability to concentrate in the face of impossible odds that gives them the winning edge. When sales are down, when the market is crazy, when service is embarrassing and Murphy reigns supreme they keep their eye on the ball. They don't stop prospecting. They don't stop selling. They keep playing their inner game like that tough little ant with high hopes moving a rubber tree plant. Winning sales people stay focused and achieve monumental increases in the worst of times.

Mediocre sales people don't concentrate. They spray their focus like a garden hose turned on mist. Their power is dissipated. They're distracted by everything. Their minds hop from one thing to another. When they're prospecting they think they should be taking care of existing customers. When they're in the field they think they should be in training. When they're in training they think they should be in the field. When they finally do manage to reign in their focus, instead of putting it on their game they put it on their fears. Instead of focusing on winning they focus on worrying. When markets change and computers fail their concentration on their game drifts. This robs them of energy and passion. When the outer game gets tough for them the inner game goes to pieces.

Winners Practice: Practice is the secret advantage most winners have over everyone else. It is the preparation that meets opportunity and turns it into success. It is the one thing that more than makes up for inexperience and lack of talent. Winners practice. They know that nothing gives them a bigger bang for less effort. They constantly drill the fundamentals even though they may hate it. "I hated every minute of the training, said Muhammad Ali, but he would remind himself "Don't quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion." Breakthrough performances and breakthrough insights occur when the discipline of practice is applied.

Great sales people practice. They rehearse their sales calls. They prepare for their meetings. They find out every thing they possibly can about their customers before hand. They anticipate every possible reaction and rehearse every answer. They practice with passion. They know that well practiced sales presentations are often the deciding factor in winning business. Practice multiplies hope in the face of tremendous odds – and not that stuck like a dope kind of hope that they sing about. Practice produces a well-founded, robust, around-the-corner, kind of hope. It animates the inner game like nothing else. . Practice creates winners.

Mediocre sales people don' t practice. They invest minimal time preparing their sales calls and presentations. I like what Barbara Geraghty said in her book titled *Visionary Selling*. She says, for mediocre sales people “ worry is preparation and ad-libbing passes for work. They take *winging it* to the level of an art form.” Playing it by ear rarely leads to success. More often it leads to lack of confidence. And we know what enormous interference lack of confidence produces in the inner game. One of a salesperson' s most painful moments comes when they have to admit that they lost to the competition because they didn' t do their homework. They didn' t practice.

Winners Relax: **Winners** want the control over their game that comes from relaxing. Relaxation diffuses fear. It creates the inner poise under pressure that is so necessary for winning. When a winner is relaxed they possess an unbeatable, well-balanced force.

Most athletes use a pre-game or pre-shot ritual that helps them relax and gets their minds focused on the game. This usually starts out by focusing on their breathing. They take several deep breaths to calm their nerves. They follow this up by going through some very specific steps in their approach to the ball or the game. Watch basketball players at the free throw line. See if they don' t first

put their attention on their breathing. Then watch to see if they bounce the ball the exact same number of times each time they shoot for the basket. Observe the tennis player as she takes her stance to accept a serve. See if it's not always the same. Or, see if you can identify the ritual way she lofts the ball into the air each time she serves. Golfers use rituals too. One golf pro told me that probably ninety percent of all amateurs make the same mistake when they step up to the ball. They don't use a consistent, repeatable approach that relaxes their mind and body and lines them up for a winning shot.

Rituals not only help relax mind and body they act to anchor mind and body to the experience of past successes. Body as well as mind remembers what it feels like to perform successfully. Body has memory. Rituals and relaxation techniques re-connect body and mind to winning behavior from the past. They help chase away doubts and demons. They dip into the well of past victories and ladle up the spirit of success into the present moment. Often when snakes show up, or the pressure's on, or things seem unbearably tedious, the difference between greatness and mediocrity rests on a person's ability to access this kind of spirit to create a win.

Winning sales people use conscious pre call rituals and relaxation techniques. They might do things like take several long slow deep breaths, do some stretching exercises, go over their presentation materials or visualize a positive outcome. To energize themselves they may use affirmations or give themselves a pep talk. I know one sales rep who has made a tape of all her favorite inspirational music – songs like Rocky's Theme, Chariots of Fire etc. She listens to this tape at full blast before every important sales call. These kinds of rituals both are calming and energizing. They put a winning people in a yes mind set that blocks out negative interference.

Mediocre sales reps do not know the importance of pre-game rituals much less the importance of relaxing. Before important meetings or presentations they make the deadly mistake of putting their focus on themselves and the bundle of nerves they' re in, instead of focusing on caring for their customers. This attention to nervousness makes matters worse. Often to cover up their nervous tension they' ll start talking as fast as an auctioneer – In sales training we always get a good laugh listening to the rifle fast delivery of sales reps about to pass out from nervousness over making a video taped role play. They sound like Mickey Mouse on speed. Mediocre sales reps have to deal with the interference of jangled nerves all the time. They don' t know how to relax.

Winners Detach: Finally, winners understand the paradox of the principle of detachment. They know that in order to acquire anything in the world that they want they first must relinquish their attachment to it. It isn' t that they give up their desire to win. What they give up is their desperate need to win. Thomas Merton translated a classical Chinese poem by Chuang Tzu that perhaps best expresses what happens to people who do not detach and are desperate to win.

THE NEED TO WIN²

When an archer is shooting for nothing

He has all his skill.

If he shoots for a brass buckle

He is already nervous.

If he shoots for a prize of gold

He goes blind

Or sees two targets-

He is out of his mind!

²Merton, Thomas, The Way of Chuang Tzu (New York: New Directions, 1965) p. 107

His skill has not changed. But the prize
Divides him. He cares.
He thinks more of winning
Than of shooting-
And the need to win
Drains him of power.

Winners let go of their need to win and put their attention on the job in front of them. They know that their chain of destiny is built one link at a time and they can only put their attention on the link that is in front of them. They don't worry about prizes or rewards that distract others. They are transfixed by their work in the present moment. They live the proverb of Marsha Sinetar's book *Do What You Love. The Money Will Follow*. This erases interference and conquers the inner game.

Mediocre sales people don't detach. Because they don't detach they come off as *pushy*. They are the ones that customers complain about all the time. Their desperate need to win business turns customers off. They can hear it in their voices. Customers figure that if a sales person is desperate they must not be very good. They don't want anything to do with them. They're too desperate.

In summary, *deciding, committing, visualizing, paying attention, practicing, relaxing, detaching* – these are only some of the *software packages* winners run to overcome their mental obstacles. There are others. You've probably already thought of some of them as you were reading this. The important thing to realize is the outcome of all of your affairs, from finances, to relationships to sales performance, is determined by the way you play your inner game. Whatever is showing up in your life is the result of your thoughts and the harvest of your inner game. Change the inner game and you'll change the outer

results. Master the inner game and you' ll *move mountains*. *Think that you can or think that you can' t*. Either way you' ll be right.