

WHAT GREAT SALESPEOPLE DO

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The Science of Selling Through Emotional Connection and the Power of Story

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ISBN: 978-0-07-176974-7

MHID: 0-07-176974-9

The material in this eBook also appears in the print version of this title: ISBN: 978-0-07-176971-6, MHID: 0-07-176971-4.

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APPRECIATION

We would like to thank the following people for making this book possible.

From Mike:

My grandmother, Genevieve Bosworth, and my sister, Leslie Bosworth Schuler, the most influential storytellers during my first 30 years. My whole extended Bosworth clan, for their love and support; my children, Brendan, Brian, and Shiloah; my emotional support group of Judy, Jean, Madeline, Rosy, Gina, and Julie; my intellectual support group of Charles, Dave, Ron, and Kevin; my sales role model Jim Campbell; my wonderful life partner, Jennifer Lehr; and most of all, my creative and courageous partner and coauthor, Ben Zoldan. Ben's courage in leaving his comfort zone has been an inspiration to me, and collaborating with him has been tons of fun!

From Ben:

My loving and supportive wife, Tia, and our two beautiful daughters, Zoe and Abby—I cannot get enough of their stories; my entire family and my close circle of friends; Mark Sage, L.M.F.T., a true role model (especially for role modeling real empathy); and my coauthor of this book and cofounder of our Story Leaders business, Mike, whom I have known for more than 15 years. Mike has been a mentor, friend, and is family to me.

From the both of us:

Will Allison, our collaborator on this book project, who through his empathic listening helped bring our voice to the page.

John Burke, the best Story Leader we know, an inspiration to us both, someone who challenges the status quo.

Phil Godwin, for having the vision to take a leap of faith and bring Story Leaders into his business and for being a blast to work with.

Tom Albers, an innovative software executive who supported our efforts to launch Story Leaders, LLC.

And finally, all the people mentioned in this book, from the stories you shared with us, to the research you provided— we are so appreciative!

—Mike and Ben

INTRODUCTION

Ben's Story: Zoe's History Lesson

Before we get into what great salespeople do, I'd like to share a story about my daughter Zoe, one that brought new meaning to the work Mike and I are doing.

Last January, my wife and I attended a midyear parent-teacher conference. Zoe was in sixth grade, and we were expecting the usual—a glowing report. But this meeting was different. I could tell there was a problem from the moment we sat down with Zoe's teacher.

“Zoe is struggling in history,” she said. She explained that Zoe's test scores had dropped. Maybe it was Zoe's comprehension, or maybe it was her recall—the teacher couldn't be sure. The news hit me like a punch in the stomach. Something was wrong with my little girl, and the teacher couldn't even tell me what it was. On top of that, I'd always loved history, and I wanted it to be a subject my kids loved, too.

That night, I asked Zoe about history. She said she hated having to remember stupid names, dates, and facts. “Why do I need to know what happened to a bunch of old men 200 years ago?” she asked.

They'd just finished studying colonial American history, so I asked her what she'd learned about the Revolution.

“They signed the Declaration of Independence,” she said.

“What did that mean?”

“I don't remember,” she said.

Over the next few weeks, I asked some of Zoe's friends about history, and they all felt the same way she did. I just didn't get it. I remembered history lessons as being full of exciting stories about interesting people. To this day, I still remember learning about Paul Revere in grade school.

Paul was born to a French immigrant father who came to the new colonies when he was 13. Paul's mother was a New England socialite from an established Boston area family. As a young boy, Paul loved working as an apprentice to his father, a silversmith. His dad was known as the best engraver around, and Paul wanted to be just like him. He instilled in Paul an entrepreneurial ethic: “Make something of yourself.”

Paul also greatly admired his mother and her community activism. The family went to church every Sunday and discussed politics, business, and religion at dinner every night. No subject was out of bounds. Paul soon began to form his own views on important subjects of the day, particularly the Church of England.

When Paul was 17, his father died. Paul was doubly crushed. He wanted to take over the silversmith business, but according to English law, he was too young. With few options, he enlisted in the Provincial Army to fight in the French and Indian War. During the war, Paul experienced tyranny and oppression firsthand. He emerged from the army an independent thinker who was not afraid to challenge the status quo and fight for what he believed was right.

Because I connected with Paul's story, I never had any trouble understanding and remembering the related historic events: the Boston Tea Party, the colonies voting to reject British rule and adopt the Declaration of Independence, the “shot heard around the world,” and of course Paul's famous ride (“The British are coming, the British are coming!”). But when I tried telling Zoe the story, hoping to spark her interest, she just gave me a funny look.

“Dad,” she said, “that’s not how we learn history.”

That’s when I remembered seeing the new Smart Board in her classroom during the parent-teacher conference. Smart Boards are “interactive whiteboards” that have begun replacing traditional chalkboards in a lot of American classrooms, and all of the classes in Zoe’s school had gotten them at the beginning of the year. Among other things, Smart Boards allow teachers to present their lessons in the form of PowerPoint presentations. [Figure I.1](#) on the following page shows the PowerPoint slide Zoe’s teacher used in her lesson about the Declaration of Independence.

You can see the difference between the ways Zoe and I learned history: All she got was *what* happened. I got the *what and* the *why*. Of course, Zoe isn’t the only student to suffer this sort of “teaching,” and the problem isn’t confined to our educational system. The same thing is happening every day in corporate America. We try to educate our salespeople by burying them in an avalanche of facts and figures. Then they go out into the field and do the same thing to customers. It’s little surprise so few of those customers buy in. They don’t like it any more than Zoe did.

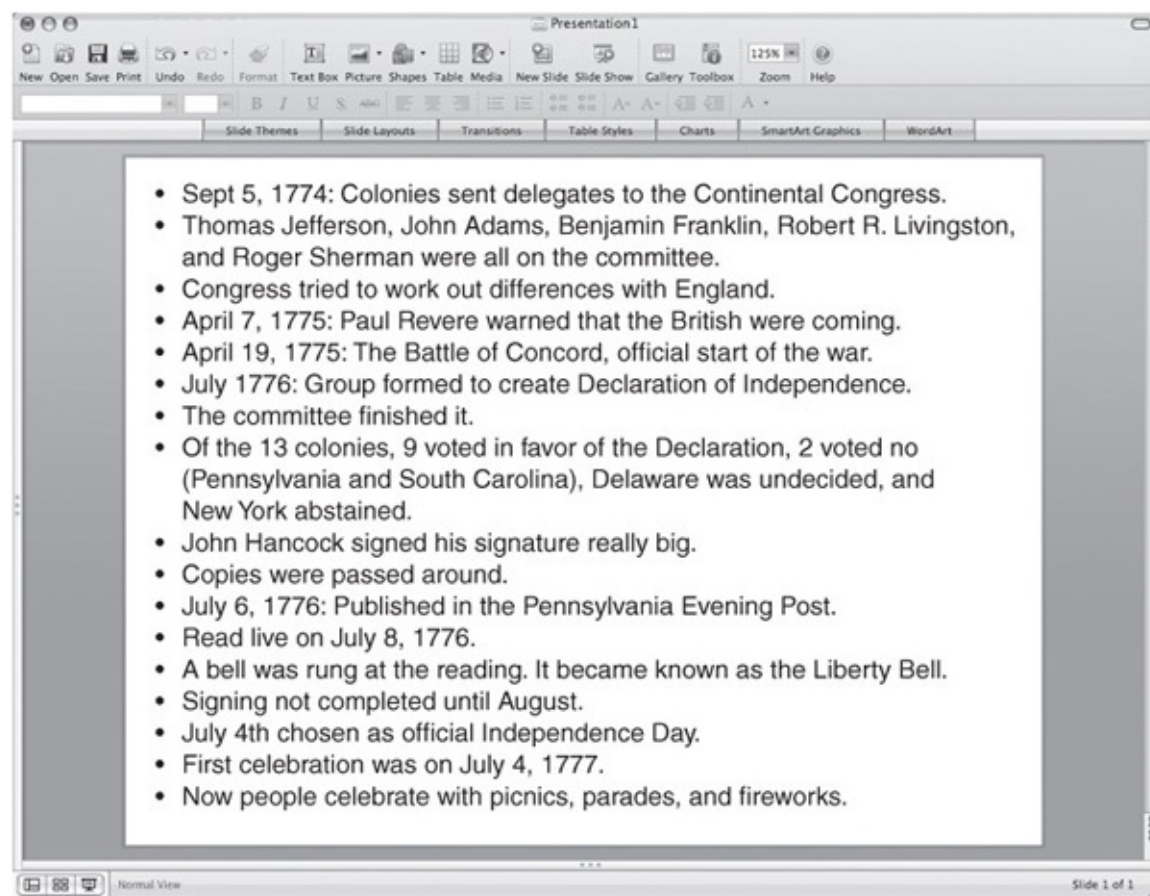


Figure I.1 The PowerPoint Slide Zoe’s Teacher Used in Her Lesson About the Declaration of Independence

Why Did We Write This Book?

We set out to demystify *what great salespeople do*.

We began this journey primarily for ourselves, to improve how we sell. Sales is the only career the two of us have ever known. And we wrote this book to share what we’ve discovered along this journey—how we can all better influence change in the world.

Here’s what we have always known about selling:

People decide *who* to buy from as much as *what* to buy.

People prefer to do business with people like themselves.

Selling is a social endeavor involving interpersonal relationships.

A person's effectiveness as a communicator has a direct impact on his or her effectiveness selling.

The best salespeople communicate in a way that gets people to share information about themselves; fosters openness to new ideas; and inspires others to take action (i.e., to buy).

What we *didn't* know was what makes the best salespeople such effective communicators. Was it personality, intelligence, persistence, experience, background, or just plain luck? Was it an inherent gift, or could it be learned and taught?

We've been training salespeople for a combined 40 years. For most of that time, our definition of selling has been some variation of "helping people solve problems." The definition was based on the belief that the decision to "buy" is like problem solving, logical and rational.

At the time we got into the sales enablement industry, empirical industry research had established that what distinguished successful sellers from less successful ones was questions: the best sellers asked their customers questions. Lots of questions. So for our Solution Selling and CustomerCentric Selling workshops, we taught salespeople to ask buyers a series of logic-oriented questions designed to lead the buyer to conclude the seller's product was the logical, *right* answer.

As it turns out, a lot of our basic assumptions were wrong. People are not logical and rational when making the decision to buy. Furthermore, asking buyers questions—at least the kinds of questions we were training salespeople to ask—is not an effective means of connection or persuasion. In fact, the way we conditioned salespeople to ask questions has proven to be often counterproductive.

It also turns out that a lot of the early sales industry research had misinterpreted what the most influential salespeople were actually doing. They weren't just asking buyers questions; they were establishing emotional connections, building what we used to call "rapport." They were doing things that weren't being taught in our training or anyone else's.

In the introduction to his bestselling book *Solution Selling* (1994), Mike wrote, "Superior sellers (I call them Eagles) have intuitive relationship building skills; they empathically listen, they establish sincerity early in the sales call, and they establish a high level of confidence with their buyer." These skills—relationship building, empathic listening, and so forth—were not addressed any further in the book because, frankly, we didn't know what else to say about it. To our knowledge, they weren't teachable skills. Either you had the gift or you didn't.

Nearly two decades after the publication of *Solution Selling*, the sales profession hasn't changed much. Other professions have evolved and moved forward, but we're still doing things the same way we did 20 years ago, and it's still not working.

When we first began training salespeople, we used to talk about the "80/20 rule": in most companies, 20 percent of the salespeople brought in 80 percent of the business, while the other 80 percent of salespeople fought over the scraps. Only a few salespeople were able to develop mutual trust and respect with customers. Only a few were able to reach the high level of connection that fosters collaboration, the reciprocal sharing of ideas and beliefs that can move people to change.

If the prevailing sales models worked, you'd expect a shift away from the 80/20 rule over the years as more sellers improved and took a bigger slice of the pie. In fact, it's gotten worse. Recent research shows that the gap between the best sellers and the rest of the pack has actually widened. This is an especially hard pill for us to swallow, because we're the ones who created the paradigm.

So why aren't we as a profession getting better at what we do? What's holding us back? And why haven't we been pursuing these questions more aggressively? It's ironic: somewhere along the line, a profession whose prevailing model is based on questions stopped asking questions about itself.

So we did it. We began challenging our own beliefs, starting with, "Is there a better way?" This led to more and more questions, a domino effect, and soon we found ourselves in fields of study that had been previously off limits to us—fields that explored the mysteries of communication that we'd written off as unteachable because they fell outside the purview of our models and industry research.

What we soon learned was that we should have been looking for answers outside the sales productivity industry all along. People in other disciplines already understood a lot more about sales than professional salespeople did. Our research led us to an entirely new definition of selling. Selling isn't about "solving problems" or "providing solutions." Selling is *influencing change*—influencing people to change. This definition is based on a greater understanding of how we decide to trust some people and not others, how we decide to take a leap of faith and try something new, how we decide to buy or not to buy.

In this book, we share our stories and our findings, drawing on our decades of personal selling experience and synthesizing research from a wide range of disciplines including neuroscience, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and others. We pull it all together into a field-tested framework developed in our Story Leaders workshops. It's a book for sales professionals and for anyone else—executives, politicians, teachers, attorneys, consultants, parents, and so on—whose work involves influencing others, whether you're "selling" products, services, ideas, advice, or beliefs.

By demystifying *what great salespeople do*, we believe we ourselves have learned to better influence change, develop deeper relationships with our customers, and find greater meaning in selling.

CHAPTER 1

The Old Paradigm

It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.

—Charles Darwin

Ben's Story: John Scanlon

It was early 2008, and I was teaching a CustomerCentric Selling workshop to a longtime client. During the workshop, one of the students, Jason, asked if I'd like to sit in on a sales call he had scheduled for the afternoon immediately following the class.

By this point, I had worked with this company for a while, and I had trained virtually everyone in the organization—everyone except one key person, the CEO John Scanlon.

On Friday afternoon, having just finished the class, Jason and I headed to a conference room down the hall for the sales call. The prospect, a CIO, was there with two of his IT directors, plus an unexpected fourth person: John Scanlon, my client's CEO. I quickly realized it would be a great opportunity to showcase our methodology to someone who'd always been too busy to come to the workshop. The sales call began with Jason doing everything he'd just learned. He opened with an agenda, gave a quick overview of his company, and within the first two minutes transitioned into his diagnostic questions in an attempt to get the buyer to open up about his situation.

The prospect, however, didn't respond the way that he was supposed to. Although Jason's questions were straight from the "playbook," the CIO's answers became increasingly abrupt. Soon he was down to one-word answers. Worse, his body language—arms crossed, stiff posture, zero eye contact—was registering what could best be described as irritation.

Within minutes, the call flipped: Jason was no longer the one asking the questions. The CIO had taken over the interrogation, and Jason was responding by talking about *what* his products do, the very thing we try to avoid early in a conversation. I couldn't help myself. I jumped in to try to get things back on track. I asked the CIO what I thought was a perfectly reasonable question about his current environment. I can't remember exactly what I said, but I do remember the CIO getting upset and cutting me short.

"Stop!" he said. "You're not getting me. Stop asking me so many questions and tell me what you do."

Ten seconds in, I had crashed and burned along with Jason. I looked over at John, the CEO, and could only imagine what he was thinking: "*This is what we're training our salespeople to do?*"

After a few seconds of very uncomfortable silence, John, who had been quiet this whole time, leaned forward and, in a calming, soft voice, said, "Hey guys, this reminds me of a time when I was at MCI . . ." And he began to tell a story about when he used to work for MCI and the chaos that resulted after a merger. He very specifically described how he and his management team had made a series of mistakes that led to a series of customer problems. As John was telling his story, the feeling in the room immediately began to change: the CIO began to relax. He uncrossed his arms. He set aside his BlackBerry, which had been consuming his attention, and leaned toward John. John ended his story with, "What I learned from that experience was . . ." The story lasted no more than three minutes, and when he was finished, John fell silent. He didn't prompt anyone else to speak, and he didn't ask any

questions. I had no idea what to do at that point. I could think of nothing to add. Neither could Jason.

After only a few seconds, the once-tense CIO said, “You know, John, I was a client of MCI at the same time, and here is what I went through . . .” And then he launched into a related story about a similar experience. And John listened—really *listened*.

When the CIO was done with his story, the room got quiet again. Then John started another story, but this one was more personal. It included his kids and was only marginally relevant to the conversation. The CIO then offered a story about *his* kids, plus his in-laws. This went on for probably another 30 minutes, with John and the CIO alternating between personal, business, and company stories. And then, about 45 minutes into the meeting, the CIO said, “Here’s the thing, John; we’re on three continents. Can you support us on all three continents?”

John gave the question some thought. “I have no idea,” he said. “We’ve never done this before.”

I looked over at Jason and could tell he wanted to strangle John. We were thinking the same thing: *No! You can’t say that to a prospect!*

“But I am in this together with you,” John added.

The room fell silent again as Jason and I sat there in disbelief. Finally, the CIO turned to his two IT directors. “Okay,” he said. “What do we need to do to get started?”

The three of them talked it over, and then the CIO turned back to John and gave him the green light to move forward. The meeting was effectively over, the deal closed, and the details to be worked out later.

As John and the clients left the room, making friendly small talk, I was left sitting there in silence with Jason, both of us wondering, “What just happened?”

Decoding the “John Method”

Although the sales call was a “success,” I left feeling deflated. I’d flopped and so had the person I’d just trained. I’d had plenty of my own unsuccessful sales calls in the past, but this was different. This one was supposed to showcase the methodology, but it hadn’t.

At first, I wasn’t able to make sense of what John had done. When I got to the airport, I went straight to the lounge, ordered a drink, and tried to decode what I had watched John do. On a cocktail napkin, I wrote down a list of words that reflected what I thought I saw in John:

Vulnerable
Caring
Authentic
Listened
Storyteller

I sat there staring at the list, trying to get my head around what it all meant.

John had shared real stories—some professional, some personal—but in all cases, they were unlike any stories I’d ever heard before in a sales meeting. He was vulnerable; all of his stories included some admission of his own mistakes, which seemed crazy to me at the time. Even as the CEO, he didn’t try to come across as Superman; he just seemed human. He had a point to every story he told, though I wouldn’t realize this until later. He was patient and demonstrated empathic listening—real listening beyond anything I’d known was possible. He seemed to really care. Ultimately, he somehow got the CIO to reveal everything that Jason would have wanted him to reveal: his challenges, his goal

his personal experiences, his beliefs.

But the kicker was what John *didn't* do. He never asked a single question. Not even one. And yet he was able to get the guarded, arms-crossed CIO to completely open up and reveal himself.

Later, when I asked other people about John, the response was always, “He just puts people at ease. He has all the intangibles.” Nobody could explain what those intangibles were, nor was anyone teaching the “John method.” Everything John did seemed to work, and it looked so simple. He was a better salesperson than anyone in his sales force—the people I had trained. What did that say about our sales training?

When I tell people this story now, some say, “John had an advantage because he is the CEO.” My question is, “Was John able to sell that way because he was the CEO, or was he the CEO because he could sell that way?”

We Didn't Take This Stuff Seriously

The next day, I drove to the bookstore near my house, went straight to the business section, and found the sales shelf. I'd brought my napkin with the list of words. I started going through all the sales books, including ours, *CustomerCentric Selling*. I wasn't able to find a single one that included a meaningful discussion of authenticity, vulnerability, listening, or storytelling.

To my left were the psychology and relationships sections. On a hunch, I started going through those books too. This time, I found a wealth of content that explained the qualities John had demonstrated—books about listening, caring, empathy, authenticity, vulnerability, story sharing, emotions, connecting, and relationships.

Next to the psychology section was the medical reference section. I looked at those books as well. They dovetailed with the psychology and relationship books in their emphasis on new brain science and neurobiology. I was finding that all of these disciplines built upon each other, and that they all took human behavior and relationships much more seriously than we did in the sales training world. *These* were the books that were teaching the “John method.” That's right—there were better sales training books in the psychology and medical reference sections than in the business section.

Mike's Story: 87/13

In many ways, it was just another annual affiliate meeting, similar to the dozens I had hosted in the past. As I sat down in the conference room with our CustomerCentric Selling affiliates, I was looking forward to an inspirational annual kickoff event. I was surrounded by my friends, colleagues, and disciples, all of whom shared a belief in our methodology.

More important, I truly felt, at the time, that I was achieving my goal to help the vast majority of sales professionals to become better at their craft. Decades ago, Xerox found that the top 20 percent of its sales force was responsible for 80 percent of the sales revenue, while the other 80 percent struggled to make the remaining 20 percent of the revenue. I believed, with all my heart, that both the Solution Selling and CustomerCentric Selling methodologies held the key to helping the bottom 80 percent.

The meeting began as all such meetings do, with everyone settled in and ready to hear something new. One of my partners had hired a sales industry researcher to be the keynote speaker. As he started his presentation, Greg Alexander, founder of Sales Benchmark Index, put up a slide with two numbers on it: 87 and 13. He told us that the 80/20 rule was no longer true. Instead, in business-to-business (B2B) sales, after indexing 1,100 B2B sales organizations—including many of our clients who employed thousands of salespeople we had trained—he'd found that the ratio was now 87/13. The top

13 percent of salespeople were now responsible for 87 percent of the revenue.

I stared at the slide. The net effect of decades of sales training hadn't helped the great mass of salespeople. Instead, systems like Solution Selling and CustomerCentric Selling had made the best salespeople even better, leaving their peers even further behind. A few days later, it really hit me. Despite my best intentions, I hadn't accomplished what I set out to do—help the bottom 80 percent pay their mortgages, send their kids to college, take vacations, and provide for their families. I realized that my confidence in our methodology had turned into intellectual arrogance.

At first, I tried to cram that uncomfortable realization back into the bottle. The 87 percent must be lazy, stubborn, or resistant to change, I told myself. If they really tried, they could learn how to do it. After all, it had worked for me. And I thought I had evidence that our training wasn't the problem. The number-one complaint I heard from sales managers was that the bottom 80 percent of their salespeople quit trying to use the methodology within 10 days of the workshop, whereas the top people had an easy time putting the methodology into practice and therefore stuck with it. It stood to reason that the few top sellers were successful because they used our methodology, while the rest underperformed because they didn't.

At CustomerCentric Selling, we prided ourselves on using our methodology to sell our methodology, so I took out a pad and ran the numbers, hoping to prove myself right. No such luck. Of approximately 40 affiliates, five of them had brought in 90 percent of our revenue—and it was the same five people every year. In theory, if all 40 were using our methodology, the revenue spread would have been a lot less disproportionate. But the real “aha moment” wasn't that 87/13 was alive and well within my own organization. That moment came a little later when I looked under the hood at those top five affiliates and considered what set them apart from the others. And there it was: they were the ones who had what we used to call “the mojo,” the ability to forge real emotional connections with their customers. They weren't necessarily using the methodology they were selling. They were doing something different—more like what John did.

Ben's Story: Learning from the Inside Out

Ever since the John Scanlon experience, and even more so after our affiliate meeting, Mike and I had committed ourselves to learning more. We'd been immersed in research, from psychology to interpersonal relationships and even the neurosciences, studying subjects previously way outside our realm. The more we read, the clearer it became that our sales model—the one we'd been teaching all those years; the one we believed in—was badly flawed. We'd wildly misunderstood what made great salespeople great. We'd given it our best shot, based on what we knew at the time, but we still hadn't cracked the code on what the best were doing.

Now, piece by piece, without quite meaning to, we began to develop a new approach, one that drew on other disciplines and on new scientific knowledge. Our research became more intense. We moved away from a logic-oriented model and began to focus on emotional intelligence and the power of connection. The answers lay in the neurosciences and psychology. We were learning about the brain and the mind—how it works, the neurological sources of feelings such as empathy, and recent discoveries that have reshaped our understanding of how and why people change. This was light years ahead of what was happening in the sales training departments of corporate America.

Along the way, we realized that John Scanlon wasn't the only one who embodied our new understanding of influence. Now that our eyes were open, we saw it over and over again in all the other top salespeople we knew, the same innate qualities that John had exhibited.

But the big question for us was: were they really innate qualities or could they be learned? By that

point, Mike and I couldn't turn back. It would have been a copout to accept the old explanation: "He just puts people at ease. He has all the intangibles." We set out to deconstruct and codify those intangibles.

My wife was more than a little skeptical.

"You're going to teach *what*?" she said. "What do *you* know about connectedness and vulnerability?"

My first reaction was to ignore her, but she was right. At that point, I had only an intellectual grasp of the material I'd been studying. For proof, I needed to look no further than my own personal relationships. I could talk about vulnerability, but I had not yet learned how to really open up and be vulnerable. I could talk about emotional connectedness, but I'd never connected with a client as effortlessly as John seemed to do. On top of it all, I'd hit a rocky spot in some of my most important personal relationships.

Fast-forward one month. I was now in therapy. But even though I showed up every week, I really wasn't interested in delving into the events of my past. I resisted. The therapy seemed as big a waste of time as I'd decided it would be from the start.

Luckily, out of guilt and a sense of obligation, I stayed with it. And wouldn't you know, before long I began to develop a deeper, more personal, more profound understanding of emotional connection, one that dovetailed with everything I'd been studying. Through therapy I was learning to look within to search out my memories and experiences and form stories around them that had meaning. For the first time, I was learning how to use language to express feelings and emotions, to articulate the autobiographical stories that account for who I am. This, in turn, helped me listen more empathetically to other people's stories. By searching out my own experiences—how I felt and the reasons for those feelings—I became more authentically curious about others. I was learning the John method from the inside out.

In retrospect, it's little wonder I'd been so tied to our old sales methodology. It was a left-brain, logical approach that appealed to me at a time when I was living a left-brain life. It was hard for my ego to let go of what I thought I knew. But now, thanks to this journey inspired by John Scanlon, I finally saw the limitations of our old methodology and became open to the more powerful possibilities of whole-brain selling.

And as it happened, Mike and I found ourselves on very similar paths—in our discontent with the old model, in examining our own personal experiences, and now in our shared belief that we could and should go to a place that had been so off-limits to us before. We also both realized we had to experience these new ideas from the inside out, addressing our own struggles first before we could begin to think about teaching others.

Earth Is No Longer the Center of the Universe

There is only one thing more powerful than all the armies in the world; that is an idea whose time has come.

—Victor Hugo

The Geocentric Model

Understanding how we decide to act is really a story of technology. Technology changes paradigms. People once believed Earth was the center of the universe and all other objects orbited around it. Aristotle's geocentric model served as the predominant cosmological paradigm into the sixteenth century.

There were many good reasons to believe all heavenly bodies circled our planet. The geocentric model was “state of the art” for its time. Astrological observations suggested that the stars, our sun, and all known planets revolved around Earth each day, making Earth the center of that system. The second common notion supporting the geocentric model was that Earth does not seem to move. To an earth-bound observer, our planet appears grounded, solid, stable. What better hypothesis could anyone have come up with, other than Earth was the center of the universe? There was no other explanation.

The first big challenge to the geocentric model came along in the sixteenth century. With the advent of the telescope, Copernicus observed new phenomena, such as instances of moons orbiting other planets. To the majority of people at the time, however, the evidence was not strong enough to change their beliefs.

In 1609, further advancements in technology enabled Galileo to seriously challenge the geocentric paradigm. He was able to see the moons of Jupiter orbiting the planet. However, the evidence was still not great enough to change most people's minds. It took one more year before the tipping point arrived. In that one defining year, as technological advances further improved the telescope, Galileo was able to observe additional planets in orbit around a greater body, just as he had observed with the moons of Jupiter. This was enough evidence to finally dispel the prevailing state-of-the-art model. Through disruptive technology, the world's leading cosmological paradigm was turned on its head: Earth was no longer the center of the universe.

Logic Is No Longer the Center of the Sales Universe

Since ancient civilizations, people have been attempting to understand how our minds work and how we decide to act. Aristotle declared that reason, logic, and rational thought are at the center of our decision-making processes. He believed that emotion wreaks havoc on our otherwise logical behavior. Other influential thinkers ascribed a more significant role to emotion, but they lacked the technological tools to substantiate their theories. As a result, the realm of emotion, intuition, and “gut feel” went unexplained for centuries. Meanwhile, the paradigm of logic and reason became the basis for the study of influence and persuasion and found its way into twentieth- and early twenty-first-century paradigms of selling.

Just as Aristotle lacked a telescope that could reveal the true nature of the universe, he lacked a “telescope” into the brain that could reveal the true nature of human behavior. Even during most of the twentieth century, the brain was largely a mystery. Since the mid-1990s, however, advances in technology have given scientists the capability to monitor brain processes in real time. With the

advent of technologies such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), brain scanning, and other digital brain imaging technologies, a new era has emerged in the neurosciences.

Recent observations have completely reshaped our beliefs about what motivates us to act and how we make decisions (e.g., when and how to change and whom to trust) and respond to stimuli. It's a classic case of disruptive new technologies changing a paradigm. We now have a new understanding of influence, persuasion, and selling. We are reminded that Earth is not the center of the universe, and that logic and reason, it turns out, are not at the center of our decision-making processes.

Mike's Story: The "Solution Sale"

When I was first asked to be a sales trainer in 1976 for Xerox Computer Services, my paradigm of selling was based primarily on logic and reason. I defined selling as the process of helping someone solve a problem using our products. At the time, I was the number-one salesperson in the company, and how I "solved someone's problem" was the only way I could explain what differentiated me from the rest of the sales force. I agreed to move into the role of trainer because I saw it as a way to help others.

My paradigm of selling was also shaped by my work with behavioral researcher Neil Rackham in 1979. Revenue production at Xerox, as at most companies, was highly disproportionate, so Xerox hired Rackham to study what the top 20 percent of salespeople were doing so we could teach it to the mediocre masses. This study was called the SPIN project.

Rackham conducted the study by recording the behaviors of both buyers and sellers in 1,500 sales calls made by the top 20 percent of Xerox sellers. We focused on what was observable at the time, given the technology of the time: the types of questions those top sellers were asking.

After poring over the data, all of the people on the SPIN project team, including me, arrived at a linear, logic-oriented, questioning approach. The paradigm held that for a buyer to cooperate with a salesperson, the salesperson had to learn how to ask a series of questions that would lead the buyer to see that the seller's offering was the solution to the buyer's problem. The B2B sales training and productivity industry was born.

Many "variation on a theme" sales methodologies can be traced to the original methodologies—SPIN Selling, Solution Selling, Consultative Selling, CustomerCentric Selling, and so on—all of which were based on helping a buyer use reason and logic to solve a problem, and which include a logic-oriented "value proposition" in order to help a buyer justify a decision. Our global definition of selling was based on the belief that decision making was primarily linear, logical, and rational.

This paradigm discounted the value of emotional connection. At the time, we had no way of even articulating how any two individuals connected emotionally. I had a hunch that people made emotional decisions and then justified those decisions later using logic and value. A basic principle of my early training methodology, Solution Selling, stated: "People make emotional decisions for logic reasons." However, none of us in the industry knew how to explain what an emotional decision really was, much less how to influence one on purpose. The best theory I could muster at the time was that the buyer would want to buy from the seller who created the best vision of using his or her product. Our paradigm of selling was based on the science of the time. We couldn't look inside buyers' and sellers' hearts and minds; all we could do was study their external behaviors and draw our conclusions accordingly. That was the state of the art.

What we didn't focus on during the SPIN project was how the top sellers connected with buyers *before* they started asking their questions. Back then, we used terms like "woo," "mojo," and "gift of

gab.” However, we had no scientific evidence that something deliberate and replicable was happening. It was just “magic.” In fact, Xerox convinced me that emotional connection (what they called—“rapport”) is the unique chemistry between two people, and no two combinations are the same. I took that as gospel and trusted it for years. I believe the rest of the industry did too. My gut still told me that people make emotional decisions and then support those decisions after the fact with logic. I just had no model to support my gut feeling, no evidence to prove it, so I just didn’t deal with it.

And so the old paradigm remained intact. We modeled what we could research and explain. It wasn’t until new technologies came along—technologies that allowed us to “see” inside the brain—that we finally had our own version of Galileo’s telescope, one that forced us to completely reevaluate our logic-based sales paradigm.

The New Science of the Brain

Technology over the past 15 years has seriously undermined our old understanding of decision making, persuasion, influence, and change. For the first time in history, neuroscientists are able to see into the source of what was previously unexplainable: how our minds actually work.

Breakthroughs in the field of neuroscience have revealed that our decisions are not solely based on logic—not even close. In fact, decision-making processes are much more complex and use a highly integrated system throughout our entire bodies. We are not the machines of reason and logic that we previously thought we were. As Richard Restak, author of several books about the brain, states, “We are not thinking machines, we are feeling machines that think.”

We have learned that it is important to better understand our internal systems: how we work, how we respond to outside stimuli, how we learn, how we recall experiences, and, ultimately, what activates what parts of our internal systems when we interact with others.

It’s useful to make a distinction between the brain and the mind. For simplicity, we will define the brain as “the organ of thought and neural coordination” and the mind as “the process that regulates the flow of energy and information throughout our bodies.”

A quick overview of this new understanding of the mind includes four aspects of the brain that are relevant to understanding how people change:

1. The three-part structure
2. Right and left hemispheres
3. Neuroplasticity
4. Mirror neurons

“But I’m a Salesperson, Not a Brain Scientist”

We promise not to get too sciencey. What follows is just a quick primer, some fundamental concepts about the brain that we’ll return to again and again in subsequent chapters. Once you grasp these basic concepts, you’ll begin to understand how and why people decide to change, how the brain goes from “here’s where I am today” to “here’s something new I want to try.” Possessing that knowledge will give you a major advantage as an influencer.

The Three-Part Structure

According to neuroscientist Paul D. MacLean, the brain developed in three stages (see [Figure 2.1](#))

over the course of human evolution, resulting in a “triune” structure (i.e., consisting of three parts). First came the reptilian (survival) brain, then the limbic (emotional) brain, then the neocortex— (thinking) brain. Today, that’s the same order in which our brains develop in the womb.

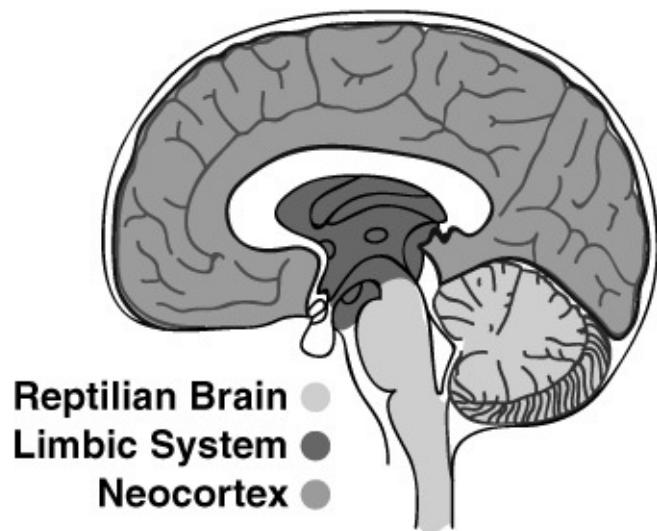


Figure 2.1 The Evolution-Designed Brain

The *reptilian (survival) brain* is the most primitive brain structure, making up the part of the brain that originally dominated the forebrains of reptiles and birds. Every species with a central nervous system has this structure. The survival brain regulates basic survival functions such as breathing and blood flow as well as instinctual behaviors related to aggression, dominance, territoriality, ritual displays, and the “fight or flight” decision in response to danger. When you instinctively swerve to miss an oncoming car in your lane, that’s the highly evolved survival brain in action. You don’t stop to think, you don’t weigh the options, you don’t consider pros and cons—you react.

Approximately two hundred million years ago, when the first mammals appeared, the *limbic (emotional) brain* evolved. Surrounding the survival brain like a doughnut, the limbic system gave mammals a unique capability—to *feel*. The emotional brain is what separates mammals from other species and gives them the ability to evaluate their conditions: “Is this good or bad?” As such, it’s the primary part of the brain that motivates our actions (and even our reasoning and thought) and gives us the ability to learn, remember, adapt, and change. It’s the limbic brain that draws us to what feels good and repels us from what doesn’t. The limbic brain is believed to be responsible for motivation and emotion.

Like the limbic brain, the *neocortex (thinking) brain* is also found uniquely in mammals, but it is massively larger, proportionately, in humans than in other mammals. It’s what makes humans distinctly different from all other species. The newest and least evolved part of the brain, the neocortex forms the outer layer and confers the ability for language, abstraction, planning, perception, and the capacity to recombine facts to form ideas. In short, the neocortex gives humans the unique advantage of advanced thought. But with this newest part of the brain comes a disadvantage, too: we can think too much.

The Brain’s Operating System

Aristotle put forth the idea of “proportionality,” proclaiming that our emotions are in equal and direct proportion to our reason. It was a compelling idea for its time, but just as technology eventually showed us that Earth is not the center of the universe, technology has also revealed that reason and emotion are not equals at the center of our internal universe. In fact, our emotions drive our reason.

As author and success coach Tony Robbins told the audience during his presentation at the 2006 TED conference, “I believe that the invisible force of internal drive, activated, is the most important thing in the world. . . . I believe *emotion* is the force of life.”

Neuroscientists would concur. Thanks to new technologies, scientists have been able to map the brain’s neural pathways, the specific routes by which information travels inside our heads. One important fact they’ve learned is that information flows from the inside out—from the survival brain to the emotional brain, to the thinking brain. Since the emotional brain gets information before the thinking brain, it is capable of functioning independently of the neocortex, subconsciously, without cognitive thought. This makes sense, in evolutionary terms, because the emotional brain was there long before the thinking brain.

In his seminal book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman describes the limbic (emotional) system as the brain’s first responder. All sensory information goes there first. The limbic system processes the information and sends its response to the thinking brain, which then produces its own response. The brain, therefore, produces an emotional response before it produces a cognitive one.

The limbic system is like the operating system on your computer. All of the rest of your “software”—your thinking brain—sits atop this operating system (figuratively and literally) and is dependent upon it. You might say that our emotions have a mind of their own. Our rationality relies on our emotions. We’re hard-wired to feel first, think second.

In cases where sensory information carries little or no emotional weight, the thinking brain can assume a dominant role. But in cases where strong emotions are involved, the limbic system plays the main role in our behavior. The more intense an emotion, the more dominant the limbic system’s response.

In the world of selling, the subject of emotional connection has always been considered off limits, too touchy-feely. No more. Now that we know emotion is what drives people to do what they do—what drives buyers to buy—it’s a subject we can’t afford not to focus on. Logic and reason, while still factors in a buyer’s decision, are more likely to figure in after the fact, as a means of justifying a decision driven by emotion.

Like Dating a StairMaster

In the opening scene of *The Social Network*, Harvard student and future Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg (played by Jesse Eisenberg) sits at a small table in a crowded bar with his girlfriend from Boston University, Erica (Rooney Mara). Zuckerberg is obsessed with getting into one of the exclusive Harvard final clubs. He gives Erica a highly detailed, highly logical explanation of why it’s so important for him to do so. And then he logically asserts that she should be grateful to be his girlfriend. He tells her that if he gets in, he’ll be taking her to events and gatherings, and she’ll be meeting people she wouldn’t normally meet.

“What is that supposed to mean?” she says.

“Wait. Settle down.”

“What is it supposed to *mean*?” Erica says. “I’m going back to my dorm.”

“Wait,” says Zuckerberg. “Is this real?”

“Yes.”

“Then I apologize.”

But Erica has had enough of his logical, calculating, insulting behavior. She keeps telling him she’s

leaving to go study. He repeatedly tells her she doesn't have to study.

"Why do you keep saying I don't have to study?" she finally says, exasperated.

"Because you go to B.U.," Zuckerberg says. "Want to get some food?"

"It's exhausting," she says. "Going out with you is like dating a StairMaster. I think we should just be friends."

"I don't want friends," Zuckerberg says.

"I was just being polite," Erica says. "I have no intention of being friends with you." She takes a deep breath. "Look, you are probably going to be a very successful computer person. But you're going to go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a nerd. And I want you to know from the bottom of my heart that that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole."

Right Brain, Left Brain

Zuckerberg, as he's portrayed in the movie, functions on a purely intellectual level. He's clearly brilliant, but his mind seems disconnected from his heart. He wants a girlfriend, but he's incapable of establishing a real emotional connection with the girl sitting right across the table from him. He has all the right answers, but he can't open his mouth without saying something insensitive. He has zero social cognition, zero empathy, zero relationship skills. He comes off as rude and cold.

But whereas Erica sees Zuckerberg's behavior as a personal failing, a neuroscientist might see it as a matter of left brain versus right brain. (It's time for a little more science.) The neocortex—the thinking brain—is separated into two halves, or hemispheres. The brain architectures, types of cells, types of neurotransmitters, and receptor subtypes are all distributed between the two hemispheres in a markedly asymmetric fashion. As a result, the two hemispheres perform different functions and are responsible for processing different kinds of information. Think of the two halves as parallel but different processors; they give the human brain the ability to process information more effectively and exponentially faster.

The *left hemisphere* is primarily concerned with linear reasoning functions of language such as grammar and word production; numerical computation (exact calculation, numerical comparison, estimation); and direct fact retrieval. The left brain is analytical, logical, and rational. It thinks in literal terms and loves to solve problems and label things. It's the side of the brain that craves information. Give it some information, and it'll want more information about the information it just got.

The *right hemisphere*, on the other hand, is said to be the creative and emotional side of the human brain. It is primarily concerned with the holistic reasoning functions of language such as intonation and emphasis; approximate calculations and estimations; as well as pragmatic and contextual understanding (i.e., "common sense").* The right brain thinks in pictures, images, and metaphors. It has the capacity to visualize and conceptualize. Social cognition resides in the right brain as well. All autobiographical memories are stored on the right. "Our right hemisphere gives us a more direct sense of the whole body, our waves and tides of emotions, and the pictures of lived experience that make up our autobiographical memory," writes Daniel Seigel in *Mindsight*. "The right brain is the seat of our emotional and social selves." The right brain is also directly connected to the limbic system and to the central nervous system—to all of our senses. As Jill Bolte Taylor puts it in *My Stroke of Insight*, "We are all kinesthetically connected through our right sides."

The left brain says "no" because it becomes paralyzed from too little or too much information. The right brain says "yes" because it can imagine the possibilities and use intuition to fill in gray areas.

We make decisions primarily with our right brain. Think of the college you attended, the car you drive, ~~the home you bought, the significant other you chose to spend your life with, the names of your children, the political party you favor.~~ If these were all logical, left-brain decisions, all of us—or at least all of us in similar circumstances—would drive the same car, the one that gets us from point *a* to point *b* most affordably and efficiently. There would be *one* right car, the logical choice. We'd also belong to the same political party, live in the same neighborhood in the same kind of house, marry the same kinds of men or women, and have the same number of children with the same names. Because there would be one right answer.

Of course, we don't live our lives by logic. Every day, we make subjective decisions based on intuition, emotion, and the experiential memory that resides on an autobiographical shelf of the right brain.

But as salespeople, we've been taught to help buyers make a decision using logic. We've been taught to help them solve problems. It's little wonder that at some point in the buy cycle, buyers often get paralyzed and decide to maintain the status quo. Up until now, we haven't been speaking to their right brains. We haven't reached their emotional centers, the place where decisions are actually made. We've been selling like computers, not people. Can you imagine having Mark Zuckerberg sell to you?

What Kind of Brain Are You?

In our Story Leaders workshops, we train a lot of salespeople with engineering backgrounds, people whose job it is to sell to other engineers. And a lot of them tell us, "I'm a left-brainer." Which is to say, their right brains are telling them they're left brainers.

That you have to be one or the other is a myth. Research shows that while one side is dominant at any point in time, both the left and right hemispheres operate simultaneously, all the time, in all of us. Sometimes, however, as a result of understimulation or underdevelopment, one side can become disproportionately dominant. Such is the case with the Mark Zuckerberg character in *The Social Network*. He's so left brain that he can barely connect with another human being. But the good news for the Zuckerbergs of the world is that they can change. Science has shown that, even in adults, the brain retains its plasticity.

Old Dogs Can Learn New Tricks

For a long time, everyone believed sales was a left-brain game. Today that view is being challenged more and more. In *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, Daniel Pink posits that the future of global business belongs not to the left-brainers but to people with highly developed right-brain skills.

But when we focus on right-brain skills in our workshops, senior sales executives are often skeptical. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," they say. It's an objection based on the belief that we lose the ability to learn as we get older. Thankfully, it's also a myth.

Science has established that plasticity in the brain is a constant throughout our lives. "Plasticity" refers to the brain's ability to change and grow by making new synaptic connections to form new thoughts and ideas. Experience is what drives these changes in the brain. In the past 10 years or so, scientists have come to understand that we are constantly shaping our brain structure with every new experience. While it's true that this process occurs more rapidly in children, it nevertheless continues into adulthood.

It's this simple: we have new experiences; the brain makes new connections; new memories are formed. The brain constantly changes, grows, learns. Even in the old dogs among us.

One key factor in this process is the emotional weight of our experiences. Memories are formed in the limbic area, the emotional brain. The stronger the emotion associated with an experience, the better we remember it. If you're studying for a test, for instance, you're far more likely to remember the material if you have an emotional reaction to it, if you *feel* something. In the long run, we tend to remember more clearly the way an experience made us feel rather than the facts and details associated with that experience.

Monkey See, Monkey Do

Human beings, it turns out, are genetically wired to be empathetic.

When we see someone smile, we are inclined to smile ourselves. When we see someone suffering, we are inclined to feel their pain. And we all know what happens when we see someone yawn.

In the past 20 years, neuroscientists have discovered a physical basis for empathy. The brain is made up of tens of billions of cells called “neurons,” a special cell that sends electrochemical signals to other neurons. Studies show that some of these neurons have mirroring behaviors. A “mirror neuron” is a neuron that fires both when an animal acts with intent and when the animal observes the same action being performed with intent by another. It essentially “mirrors” the behavior of the other as though the observer itself were acting.

Intent is important because it arises from the brain's emotional center. If you pick up a glass of water because you're thirsty, you're likely to trigger mirror neurons in your dinner partner's brain. But if you act without intent—if you simply pick up the glass and put it down—you're unlikely to trigger mirror neurons. For the same reason, a fake yawn is much less likely to be mirrored than a real one. The degree of intent (i.e., emotion) is also important. The stronger the observed intent, the stronger the mirroring. Watching a waiter perform the Heimlich maneuver on a choking restaurant patron will produce a much stronger mirroring effect than watching your coworker perform the Heimlich on a dummy in a training session.

Mirror neurons were discovered by scientists studying macaque monkeys in the early 1990s. The scientists implanted devices in the monkeys' brains so they could observe neurons “lighting up.” When JoJo the monkey watched another monkey eat a banana, for instance, the same neurons fired in JoJo's brain as when JoJo himself ate a banana. (Today, brain imaging devices allow scientists to make such observations noninvasively.)

Subsequently, mirror neurons have been discovered in humans as well. Their existence in humans essentially means that we have the power to be emotionally contagious. We can create a sense of well-being in others, just as we can create unhappiness or pain. As Mark Goulston writes in *Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone*, “We constantly mirror the world.”

Later in the book, we'll discuss the important role that mirror neurons can play in sales, particularly with regard to storytelling and empathetic listening.

Solving a Problem Is Not the Answer

So ends our quick primer on recent developments in neuroscience.

Obviously, we've barely scratched the surface. For the purposes of this book, though, all you need to know are the three-part structure of the brain, the right and left hemispheres, plasticity, and mirror neurons. These are the key concepts that have reshaped our understanding of selling by demystifying how people decide to act and, by extension, how buyers decide to buy. All along we believed that the decision to buy was a linear, logical one when in fact it is primarily an emotional one, governed by th

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