

### Three Stages of a Sales Agent

Sales agents and advisors have a life cycle, similar to that of the life cycle of a franchisee. There's a beginning stage, an intermediate stage, and the final result stage. Most agents and advisors behave in a similar fashion during the first two stages, but their behavior can differ dramatically in the final result stage. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

When a new agent begins working for you, they enter Stage One of their agent life cycle. They're brand new, fresh-faced, and eager to succeed. They soak up all the information and guidance they can from you. They look to you - Sales Manager, General Manager, District Manager - to help them succeed. They look up to you as the expert who will steer them through the rough and challenging waters on their path to success in their new business.

During this initial stage - the "Honeymoon" stage - you can do no wrong. They (hopefully) follow your advice and wisdom, and consequently start seeing their business and their income grow. This is the period of time when an advisor is most excited, most fearful, and most hopeful.

As their book of business continues to grow (assuming they haven't quit), they begin to enter Stage Two - the "Independent" stage. As they enter this second stage of their life cycle, the advisor has been working hard to survive and then to thrive in their business. They've been putting in long hours to meet the company's production goals, to meet your expectations, and to succeed.

At some point in this second stage, an agent will get to a place where they feel very independent. They start to feel like they're the ones who've been out in the field, calling on prospects, knocking on doors, getting rejected, and making the sales. And all the while, you've been sitting there, safe in your office, handing down commands and decrees. And then to add insult to injury, you're making money off *their* hard work!

And so, discontent sets in. The agent or advisor becomes somewhat disgruntled. They begin to find fault with you, with the company, with the products, and with the service. They feel, at some level, that your advice is hollow because - after all - they are the ones living and dying in the field while you sit in your office, insulated from "reality". And furthermore, the only advice you give is just advice that lines your own pockets; the advice really isn't for the good of the agents.

Some agents are more vocal than others during this stage, but nevertheless, it causes them to wonder whether they'd be better off striking out on their own. And this brings them to a crossroads, which leads them into the third stage of an agent's life cycle.



Stage Three is very interesting, because this is where the path splits, and the consequences vary widely depending on the path chosen. The first path of this third stage - the path most advantageous to you and your business - is the one where the agent decides that his or her relationship with you is more a partnership than one of adversaries. The relationship shifts to one of collaboration, cooperation, and sharing of ideas. An advisor who chooses this path also is certain to treat his or her business as a business. They will be focused on leveraging time, building systems, and growing income.

The second path taken by some agents is one of agreeability and satisfaction. These agents will be supportive of you and will be happy to be a part of your team, but unlike those agents on the first path, these agents are pretty happy with the level of success they've already achieved and are fine with maintaining the status quo. They'll put in some extra effort if you ask them to... but not too much.

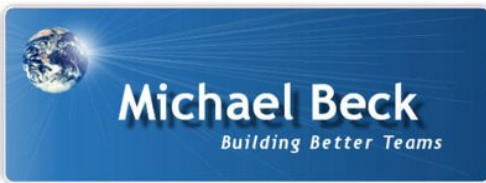
In contrast, some agents will take the third path. This is a path where dissatisfaction and apathy settle in. The advisor becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his or her situation, but not so unhappy as to leave. So they settle into a life of negativity and mediocrity. They live an existence of fault-finding, whining, and complacency. Their business is more about not failing, rather than one of success and growth.

The fourth path in this third stage is one where the agent's level of dissatisfaction and their desire for independence rise to a level where they simply leave. They may jump to another company ("the grass is always greener" syndrome) or they may strike out on their own. The bottom line is that they leave your team. It's especially disheartening if you've invested a lot of time, energy and emotion into their success. This is, obviously, the least desirable outcome of Stage 3.

Clearly, the most desirable outcome is for an agent to pursue the first path - one of collaboration, cooperation, and growth, and the second most desirable outcome is an agent who goes down the second path - one of modest and contented success. So the question then becomes, "How do you fill your sales team with agents and advisors who pursue the first path or at least the second one?"

The answer is two-fold. It starts with recruiting the right agents. One needs to recruit people who have the skills, attitude, and business-owner mindset necessary to succeed. Finding attracting and selecting the right prospective candidates is an art that can be mastered by anyone... with some guidance, some practice, and some self-discipline.

The second aspect to building a team of advisors who pursue the first path has to do with how well we perform as leaders. Exceptional leadership inspires the best effort in others. Unfortunately, elevating one's leadership competencies is more difficult than it sounds. It is difficult because we most often act and react unconsciously. And because we are unconscious of our habits, we are usually "blind" to them.



We're not consciously aware of our actions and words. It often takes an outside set of eyes and ears to help us change the habits which affect our leadership effectiveness. As we refine our leadership competencies, we elevate our ability to inspire our agents, to instill pride and loyalty, to create a vision for our business and our team, and ultimately to improve production.

The bottom line is that by recruiting effectively and honing your leadership skills, you can dramatically improve your agent retention and production.