

***Good to Great Selling with Decision Styles:
Turn Customer Blind Spots into
Engaging Communication***

(2016:1)

A large, stylized graphic consisting of a black curved shape on the left that transitions into an orange curved shape on the right, resembling a stylized 'S' or a path.

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Good to Great Selling with Decision Styles: Turn Customer Blind Spots into Engaging Communication

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Executive Summary

The ultimate key to selling is to help the customers decide to buy the offers that are being made. It is not only this final decision that makes decision-making so essential in trying to improve sales performance. There are also a myriad of many small decisions that both the customers and the sales people make during and after sales meetings that eventually leads up to the final buying decisions.

Most sales trainings focus on methods for exploring and developing customer needs. It is rare, though, that they address the question of how to improve the interpersonal chemistry in personal selling. Consider your best versus worst customer meetings and you will find that how well you socially interact with them typically has a significant impact on whether the customers want to proceed towards buy decisions or not.

Interpersonal chemistry in sales meetings is much too important to be left to chance. Our research has found that it can be explained by how well the different decision-making habits, called Decision styles, of both the sales persons and the customer match each other. The purpose of this paper is to present the Decision Dynamics Decision Style Model™ and to discuss how it can be applied to greatly improve personal selling outcomes.

We all develop various Decision styles that influence how we view other people and what they say and do. Having a similar style to your customer improves communication, while people with different styles tend to misunderstand one another. We call this “blind spots”. By learning more about your own and your customers’ Decision styles, you can turn customer blind spots into more engaging sales communication and better results.

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Think about your best customers. What makes them the best? Now think about your worst customers or prospects that resist buying. What makes them so difficult?

More importantly, what separates your best versus worst customers? Can it be their intelligence? We have a tendency to see good customers as being smart and bad customers as being a bit stupid. Some sales people, however, seem to be able to win these worst customers for some strange reason. It is *not* smart to conclude that the unwilling customers are stupid.

Is it then you who lack the communication skills to get your message across? Sales people are indeed different in how well they sell, but this is not determined by their own or customers' innate characteristics, such as IQ, receptive abilities and communicative skills. Instead, it is more due to the *relationships* between themselves and their various customers. Just like beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, so are good versus bad customer relationships largely based on the interpersonal chemistry between the sales people and their different customers.

Great sales performance is about improving the chances of finding and developing many good customer relationships. Sales specialist Neil Rackham (1995) also points out that successful sellers attribute their success to relationships, but few really know why some relationships turn out better than others. How can this be achieved when good customer relationships seem to be unpredictable? Sometimes it just works. Other times, we cannot get through despite our best efforts. Is it down to luck or can we find any useful patterns to interpersonal chemistry that can improve our chances?

We find that customer relationships depend to a large extent on *the engaging fit between the Decision styles of the sales person and their customers*. This paper will present the Decision Style Model™ as a powerful tool to understand and improve customer relationships. You will learn about customer blind spots and how they can be converted into engaging communication and thereby greatly enhance sales performance.

What are Decision styles?

We all make decisions, big and small, all the time. Any action or thought, such as interpreting people and situations, communicating and cooperating with others, solving problems, and working with processes require many micro-decisions. It is not a question if you make decisions or not, but rather about how well you make them and how they add up to your performance over time.

Sales people know this quite well, since they are trying to influence their customers' decision to possibly buy their products. During the sales process, both sales people and customers make many decisions. For example, the seller decides what products to pitch and how. The customer decides how to evaluate and communicate about these offerings with colleagues and others.

The Decision Style Model™ is a tool to help us understand, develop, and manage our own and others' different ways of making decisions. It is based on more than 40 years of international research and practice with millions of personal profiles.⁴

Decision styles are our learned habits of how we process information and make decisions in different ways. They are *not* about IQ where one style is smarter than another. There is no one best style. All Decision styles have both strengths and weaknesses. It is their fit with specific situations that determine how effective they are.

They are based on two fundamental dimensions. Firstly, how much information does one use when making a decision? Some use little information to reach a decision quickly and act upon it. We call them *satisficers*. In contrast, there are *maximizers* that prefer to make sure that they have as much information as possible to make the right decisions.

Which is best? It depends on the situation. If it is urgent, satisficers tend to perform better. If long-term consequences are more important, maximizers are likely to perform better. However, how do they view each other when interacting? Satisficers tend to view maximizers as slow, suffering from analysis paralysis, and they must be stupid to need so much information and still not being able to decide anything. Maximizers can see Satisficers as hasty, irresponsible, and "loose cannons" that are too stupid to think beyond their noses.

Secondly, does one choose one alternative and stick with this solution over time or do one choose several options and switch between them or keep open over time? We call the first *unifocus* and the second *multifocus*. Again, it depends on the situation which of these is best. In stable and relatively certain situations, unifocus can be more efficient, while multifocus are probably better in uncertain, changing situations with many different persons. How do these unifocus and multifocus view each other? Unifocus are likely to see multifocus as unreliable. They keep switching sides all the time. In contrast, multifocus can think that unifocus are stubborn, rigid, and unable to adapt to change.

If we combine these two dimensions of information use and solution focus, we get the Decision Style Model™ with four basic styles as shown in Figure 1 on the next page:

- a) *Decisive* style that acts fast in a clear, focused, and efficient way;
- b) *Flexible* style that also acts fast, but in open, sociable, and adaptive ways;
- c) *Hierarchic* style that analyzes and plan carefully to achieve long-term quality;
- d) *Integrative* style that analyzes a lot too, but in creative and participative ways.

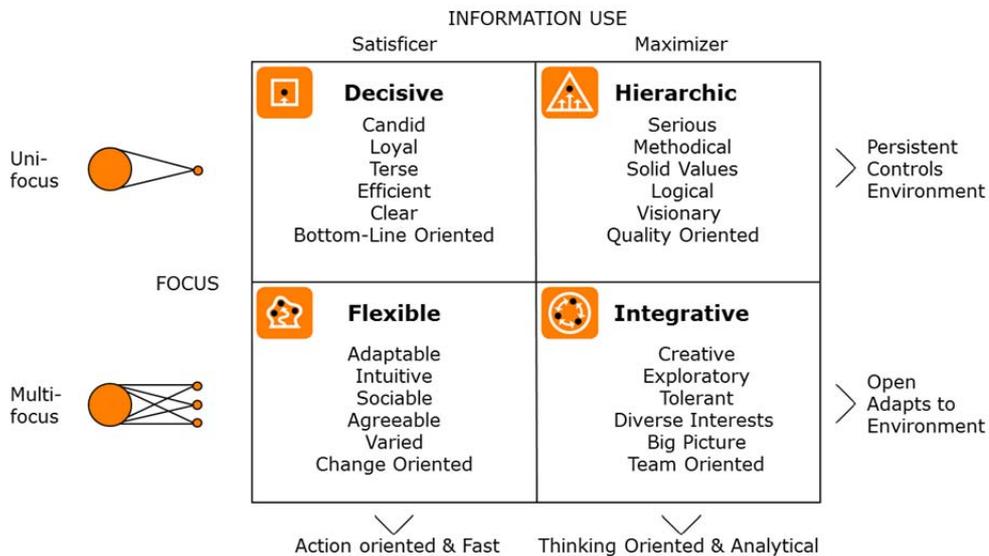
What Decision styles do your customers and you have?

Think again about your best customers. Which Decision style do you think they have? It is often difficult to attribute only one style to a certain person, since we all use more than one style over time. Research shows, however, that we tend to use one style more than the others in certain situations. So please make your best guess as to which quadrant your best customers tend to be the most.

Conversely, which Decision style do you think that your worst customers have? Finally, which Decision style do you think best describes yourself?

⁴ Eg, Driver, Brousseau & Hunsaker (1993), Driver (1999), and Brousseau, Driver, Hourihan & Larsson (2006).

Figure 1. Four Decision Styles



Do you see a pattern in your responses? Do your best and worst customers tend to have the same or different Decision styles? Almost every sales person that we have asked answers that they have different Decision styles. How different? Are they diagonal opposites that are different in both the information use and focus dimensions or “merely” adjacent Decision styles that differ in just one of these dimensions? Here, we find more varied answers but there is a relatively higher frequency of diagonal opposites.

Finally, what Decision style did you guess for yourself? Is it more similar to your best or worst customers’ Decision styles? Most likely, *your best customers have more similar Decision Styles to yourself in contrast to worst customers.*⁵

From customer blind spots to engaging Decision styles

Our systematic tendency to devalue people who make decisions in different ways to ourselves is shown in Figure 2 below. It is equally relevant in leadership as it is for selling. The key to improved sales performance is to turn disengaging customer blind spots into engaging, relationship-building communication. Let us take a look from the customer’s point of view at different sales people depending on their Decision style in the left hand column. A Decisive customer interacting with a Decisive sales person in the upper left hand box is likely to find the sales person as fast, action-oriented, and reliable.

However, the same customer can view: (i) a Flexible sales person as fast, but unreliable due to the seller’s tendency to change between alternatives; (ii) a Hierarchic sales person as focused, but too slow getting stuck in details and analyzing too much information;

⁵ The same patterns occur when evaluating managers. Larsson & Duval Thomsen (2013) found that around as many as 90% view their best managers as more similar to themselves than their worst managers. We call these difficulties that managers and direct reports have with different Decision styles for “talent blind spots”.

Figure 2. How Decision Styles create disengaging blind spots versus engaging communication

	Decisive	Flexible	Hierarchic	Integrative
Decisive	Fast action and reliable	Fast but unreliable	Focused but slow	Hopelessly slow and unreliable
Flexible	Fast action but rigid	Social and fast	Awfully rigid and slow	Open but slow
Hierarchic	Focused but hasty	Horribly hasty and unreliable	Serious and quality-oriented	Thoughtful but unreliable
Integrative	Incredibly hasty and rigid	Open but hasty	Analytic but rigid	Open and creative

and (iii) an Integrative sales person as both hopelessly slow and unreliable, that is, the worst of both worlds and “doubly stupid”.

These three non-matching combinations are cases of more or less disengaging customer blind spots (red text) that undermine the sales person’s credibility due to style differences. In other words, we tend to be blinded by frustrating differences in how we process information, make decisions, and communicate. The good news is that these blind spots can be turned into great opportunities for engaging more customers.

Please read through the other three rows with how Flexible, Hierarchic, and Integrative customers tend to view sellers with different Decision styles. You will notice how we tend to like and be engaged by people with similar styles (ie, along the top left to bottom right diagonal). In contrast, we have difficulties and worse interpersonal chemistry with different styles. The worst and most disengaging interaction tends to be with the completely opposite Decision styles that can be viewed as “toxic” or “doubly stupid”.

It is also possible to turn this matrix around so that the seller is one of the rows viewing different customer styles. Which of the four rows do you recognize the most as your own view of your best versus least good customers? If that row happens to coincide with the Decision style that you guessed for yourself, your initial guess may be correct.

It is important to note that you, your customers and people in general tend to use more than one Decision style. This makes establishing your own and others’ Decision style by guesswork alone rather difficult and imprecise. However, we have developed research-based indicators and especially a highly validated *StyleView™* questionnaire. It has helped more than a million practitioners find reliable personal Decision style profiles that can be used to improve their decision-making in different situations.⁶

⁶ Driver, 1999; Driver & Streufert, 1969; Lewis & Ream, 2012

Decision Dynamics three-step approach to selling with style

We have developed three steps for better understanding our own and our customers' Decision styles, thereby improving communication and interpersonal chemistry to engage customers more. Engagement has become the strongest performance factor for broad ranges of outcomes, such as work efforts, quality, productivity, retention, and profitability, as well as customer service and customer loyalty.⁷ We have found Decision styles being strongly related to both engagement and sales performance.⁸

Thus, there is hardly anything more valuable than to engage oneself and others more. If you think about your best versus worst customer meetings, one common pattern is that the best meetings were much more mutually engaging than the worse ones. So how can sales people communicate better to engage their customers more?

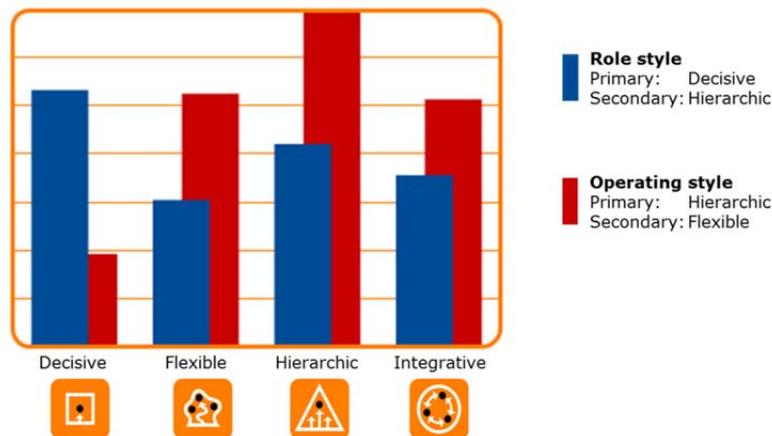
1. Learn more about your own Decision styles

First, know thyself. This is a sound basis of much personal development, including sales training with Decision styles. Invest 20 minutes or so answering the *StyleView™* questionnaire and you will get your own full Decision style profile as illustrated below.



Figure 3. StyleView™ Decision Style Profile

> Example: Susan Sample



Instead of placing you in just one of the Decision style boxes, the *StyleView™* profile shows eight scores, which include all of the four Decision styles in two major types of situations. The first is called *Role style*, which represents how we make decisions together with people we find important. This is the most self-aware style where we try to make a good impression by acting in accordance with our view of how to decide and interact well. It can be seen as the style we use in our “front-office” when we meet our manager, customers, or make a presentation to a group.

⁷ Kowske, 2012; Larsson & Kling, 2013

⁸ Larsson & Duval Thomsen, 2013; Brousseau, 1987

We also use our Decision styles in other, less self-aware situations that can be seen as our “back-office”. These are our *Operating styles* shown by the red bars. We use them when we are working alone, or being so immersed in the task at hand that we forget about other people being present. They also come into play when we work with people we know well and therefore do not worry about what kind impression we make.

The higher a blue bar is, the more the person tends to use this style in front-office situations. In the case of Susan Sample, her primary Role style is Decisive and secondary Role style Hierarchic, making up a clearly unifocus Role style profile. Similarly, the higher a red bar is, the more she uses this style in back-office situations. Here, Susan mainly uses her Hierarchic and Flexible Operating styles.

The Role styles are by far the most important for understanding and improving sales interaction. Both the seller and the customers are very likely to be in their front-office mode during sales meetings and phone calls. It is still important to note, however, that most people behave differently after such Role style interaction when both sides think about the meeting using their Operating styles.

2. Estimate the customers’ Decision styles

Knowing thy customers in terms of estimating their various Decision styles is the next essential step to turn customer blind spots into more engaging communication. This is typically done through observations. What style indicators should you look for?

Ideally, we would be able to learn about both the Role styles of our customers and their underlying Operating styles to better understand how they will make decisions after sales meetings. Since we very rarely have access to back-office observations of customers, we focus here on estimating the customers’ Role styles.

The first set of style clues can be found in the first Decision style matrix in terms of the two dimensions and four sets of attributes describing each of the four styles in Figure 1. The faster the customers tend to act, the more likely they have one of the two satisficing styles. The longer the customers stick to a certain issue, solution or alternative, the more likely they have one of the two unifocus styles. Shifting a lot between various alternatives instead points toward one of the two multifocus styles.

Decisive customers are focused on fast, efficient action to achieve desired results. They prefer clear and concise communication, sticking to established routines, and reliably delivering on commitments.

Flexible customers also act fast, but do this in clearly more varied ways. They quickly get bored if the discussion gets stuck on one topic. They prefer frequent changes of topics, varied humor, more options to choose from, and socializing with many different people.

Hierarchic customers tend to be much more analytic and are oriented towards long-term planning, detailed control, and quality focus. They are serious, complex, and logical thinkers and communicators.

Integrative customers are even more complex in terms of wanting not only to use a lot of information, but they also like to keep many alternatives open for as long as possible.

They are great listeners, creative thinkers, have broad interests, and love participative teamwork.

You can also enlist your own gut feelings in the customer style-sensing process by looking at the customer blind spot matrix in Figure 2. Pick the row of your own primary Role style and compare the four different views of customers on this row with how you see the customer you are trying to size up. Which of the four alternatives seems to be the closest? This can give you another piece of the customer style puzzle.

In addition we list a number of other behavioral and office indicators of customer styles in Figure 4 below.⁹ Decisives are typically concerned about time including being strictly punctual, often looking at their watches, and disliking others being late. They can delegate tasks to people they trust to get them done on time. In contrast Hierarchics have trouble delegating tasks since it is not only about when these tasks done but also about how well they are executed. Nobody knows better how things should be done with the highest quality than the Hierarchics themselves.



Figure 4. Behavioral and Office Clues of Customer Styles

 <p>Decisive customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Being punctual > Often looks at clock > Loyal to brand and supplier > Very hard to repair broken trust > Clean desk > Minimal amount of documents > Few personal items 	 <p>Hierarchic customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Asking difficult questions about inconsistencies, details, etc > Loyal to brand and supplier > Long-term orientation > Very many documents > Well-structured order, such as archives, binders, indices, etc
 <p>Flexible customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Easily bored without changes > Likes varied humor > Often a "selling" personality > Do not like lack of options > Fairly clean desk > Little amount of documents > Many personal, humorous items 	 <p>Integrative customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Switches often between many simultaneous thoughts when talking > Often late, but can also go on longer > Like inclusive participation in teams > Very many documents & various stuff > Many less orderly piles > Many personal items

Both Decisives and Hierarchics tend to be loyal to their brands and suppliers. Decisives can choose what to buy faster than Hierarchics, who typically requires more time to be convinced. If Decisives, however, feel that their loyalty is being betrayed, it is very hard to mend those relationships. In contrast, you may be more able to rescue failed Hierarchic customer relationships if you provide a very good, logical reason for why it failed and an even better reason for why it will never fail again.

Hierarchic customers often ask sales people difficult questions. This is not done maliciously, but instead out of concern for consistency, logic, details, and long-term aspects. Flexible sellers in particular view Hierarchics to be the most difficult customers to convince. This is partly due to that Hierarchic customers often suspect that the Flexible sales persons are not as serious and knowledgeable about the products and their situations as they would have liked them to be.

⁹ Mainly from Driver, Brousseau & Hunsaker, 1993; and Perrault & Brousseau, 1989.

Flexible customers like informal, fluid, and fun social interaction, while not getting stuck on a particular issue. They prefer agreement over disagreement and avoid most conflicts as being a waste of time. While they can be inspired by a new solution, they dislike making lengthy commitments that will limit future options.

Integrative customers are also very open to new alternatives and do not want to close doors but they are typically much more patient than the faster Flexibles. Integratives can listen for long periods, go into details and spend time on trying to find even better solutions. They involve other stakeholders and try to build consensus. They are the least concerned about being punctual when starting and ending meetings. The complex thinking of Integratives often results in interrupting themselves with new thoughts in midsentence, which can be viewed as unclear by others.

If you are able to visit the customers' *offices*, this is a good source of many more style observations. Try to check also their colleagues' offices, however. You may be seeing general office rules that limit the customers' own style expressions. Decisives see a clean desk as the most efficient workspace, while other customer styles add more documents and/or personal items. Flexibles tend to keep their offices more informal, personal, and fun, while Hierarchics store as much work-related and well-ordered information as possible. Integratives often have the most extensive and varied "stuff" in their offices. Others may view this as cluttered and disorganized even though the Integratives themselves often find what they are looking for straight away.

Do not be discouraged if you find that some customer style clues point in different directions. Like yourself, your customers do not use one Decision style only. When you are trying to size up a customer's style, think more about what can be their primary and secondary combination versus their least likely style to get a better sense of their probable whole Decision style profiles.

3. Attune your communication to better fit the customers' Decision styles

This is the step where we can turn disengaging customer blind spots into more engaging customer relationships. Based on both your better knowledge of your own Decision styles and your estimation of the Decision styles of the customer in question it is possible to adapt your communication to improve your interpersonal chemistry.

The basic style matching logic of the recommendations in Figure 5 below is to communicate as much information and as many alternatives that suit the probable customer Decision style.¹⁰ This means providing less and simpler information to satisficers and more complex information to maximizers as well as focusing on one alternative with unifocus customers while offering many options to multifocus customers.

Decisive customers are more engaged by being punctual and to the point. Avoid chit chat, jokes or details that they are likely to find distracting. Clarity is essential by confidently focusing on their main problem with one clear recommended solution based

¹⁰ This style-matching is in line with Pink's (2012:70) attunement as a key component of his new ABC of selling and otherwise moving people. Attunement includes taking the perspectives of others through a more accommodating stance ("increasing your power by reducing it") and strategic mimicry. Style-matching is an effective attunement approach of subtle mimicry that avoids communicating in ways that disengage others.

Figure 5. How to Communicate with Different Styles in Engaging Ways

 <p>Decisive customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Be punctual > Minimize chit chat > Get to the point > Be positive and confident > Make clear recommendations > Stress bottom-line benefits > Avoid unnecessary details > Answer questions directly 	 <p>Hierarchic customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Do your homework > Use their input > Show your reasoning > Use clear logic > Never "win the debate" > Expect to be "corrected" > Listen well > Allow "mull over" time
 <p>Flexible customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Keep things informal > Keep an open mind > Use humor > Be willing to shift topics > Stress options and choices > Don't require lengthy commitment > Don't overkill a topic 	 <p>Integrative customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Share information from varied sources > Solicit their ideas, > Invite participation > Communicate hunches > Look at positives & negatives > Be willing to modify ideas > Avoid absolutes

on bottom-line efficiency. Answer questions directly, simply, and honestly. Give as clear, practical, and positive impression as possible instead of creating doubts around various alternatives, trade-offs, complexities, and other risks of confusion.

While also liking fast action, Flexible customers become more engaged by keeping things informal, humorous, varied, and moving. Be open-minded and willing to shift topics because Flexibles get easily bored by sticking to the same topic. If there is one alternative that you really would like to sell to a Flexible, do not start with it! Whatever you start with, the Flexible will soon want to shift to another topic in their continuous search for variety. It is better to save the most desirable solution towards the end of the sales meeting when the Flexible customer can agree to try something quite different.

Flexible customers often frustrate unifocus sellers, who would like nothing more than "corner" the elusive Flexibles with their preferred solution. Such focused attempts to "capture" Flexible customers are more likely to be resisted. You are better off enticing Flexibles with freedom to choose between many options without lengthy commitments.

In sharp contrast, Hierarchic customers are engaged by knowledgeable, detailed, and thoroughly documented presentations. You need to have done your homework. If you come across as not knowing what you are talking about, they will disregard you as being ignorant and not worth spending their time on. The key currency for Hierarchics is durable high quality that is, preferably, scientifically proven. If you are more knowledgeable than the Hierarchic, however, it is important that you don't try to win the discussion by proving the Hierarchic customer wrong. It is better to make a "95% presentation" where you leave out a couple of the last pieces of the puzzle and let the Hierarchics come up with the final complete solution themselves. This typically requires a lot of serious listening, logical reasoning, and giving them time to mull over and plan how your product could be implemented for long-term benefits.

Finally, Integrative customers are also engaged by analyzing complex information, but have more open participation and creativity as their main currencies. You may have an inspiring first meeting with them given their likely interest in more or less everything you

propose. Such first sales meetings are typically followed by inaction, though. Integratives tend to be more interested in learning about new options and meeting new people. A follow-up meeting may also result in pleasant discussions, especially if they introduce more possibilities, but it rarely leads to an order. This would mean selecting and acting upon one alternative instead of keeping many doors open as long as possible.

Getting Integratives to commit to buying something often involves trying to find situations when they are more pressed to act rather than merely collect information and generate options. This can involve having other people participating, who can be more focused and/or action-oriented, such as their bosses.

You are typically most comfortable in the type of communication that matches your own primary Role style. Here is also where you are most likely to find most of your best customers. You can also learn to “stretch” to be able to handle one or even both of the two adjacent Decision styles. This can be done relatively easily by either communicating more or less information or offering more or fewer alternatives.

Your toughest type of communication will be the diagonally opposite style of your own primary Role style, where you probably have most of your worst customers. It may be a better solution to give these “toxic” customers to other sellers that have a better Role style fit. This would reduce the risk of you having to learn to “bend over backwards” by adopting your hardest Decision style or being viewed as “doubly stupid” by these customers. Perhaps you can “trade” them with your colleague’s worst customers.

Practice and develop your ability to further improve your sales performance

These three steps will enable you to improve sales communication by learning about the Decision styles of yourself and your customers so as to adapt the amount of information and number of alternatives to better suit more customers. The best way to make use of this knowledge is to start practicing the three steps. While each step can be challenging initially you will find that with practice they will soon become increasingly useful habits to apply in sales and other communication activities.

Jim Collins (2001) suggests that “good is the enemy of great” to encourage us not to settle for what is working well today. Work relentlessly on improving your customer chemistry and you will find that this will increase the number of customer decisions going your way to enhance your sales performance greatly.

There are several additional ways that the Decision Style Model™ can help to engage customers even further as you have become comfortable using the basic steps above. One opportunity is to address more of the whole customer buying process¹¹ which is the context for the personal sales interaction that we have focused on above. This includes what happens after the sales meetings when the customers make decisions in their back-office. The Operating styles of your customer contacts are likely to use then are much harder to observe but there are still other indicators to look for.

There is also the possibility of engaging the customers’ interest in their own decision-making. Coaches, consultants, IT, and other service providers can sometimes build in

¹¹ Such as exploring and developing customer needs through methods like SPIN selling (eg, Rackham, 1995)

Decision style profiling into their services and thereby get the best available measurement of how the customers make decisions in both their front- and back-offices.

Furthermore, Decision Dynamics has researched and practiced how the recruitment, assignment, and training of sales people can be greatly improved through sales performance profiling with Decision styles.¹² For example, we helped a large American company to identify a success profile that was able to explain as much as 89% of the variance in sales performance between different sellers and predict 75% of the best sales persons in the following year. This success profile also assisted better division of who should sell which products to which customers and guided personalized sales training.

We plan to write follow-up reports on how you can develop even greater selling by elaborating on these further steps. Please follow our website www.decisiondynamics.eu or check with us via email info@decisiondynamics.se for the status of these future additional "Good to great selling" reports.

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¹² Brousseau, 1987; Brousseau, Driver, Hourihan & Larsson, 2006