

How to Shift the Sales Culture in Your Company

By John Kuypers, author, collaborative leadership & organizational change expert.

When I was vice-president of sales in the soft-drink industry, I tackled something that was akin to catching a tiger by the tail. I shifted the culture. The back-lash was swift and the personal stress was astronomic. I fired my most senior regional sales manager after he refused to take a lateral shift to a sales operations position. I restructured a sales region in order to remove key account responsibilities from an old school manager. He quit and later wrote threatening letters. I shifted the way we did business with our largest bottler, who respected the shift, but was bleeding red ink. His goal was to bleed us as dry as he was. My new boss was a thirty-year veteran who was crawling the walls at my new approach, yet biting his tongue with remarkable restraint. When I blacked out on the living room floor after a fancy schmooze trip to Paris and Monte-Carlo, I realized the personal stress had gone over the limit for me. I was thirty-four. A year later, I left the company, exhausted by the battle and worried about my inability to handle the heavy stress.

Seventeen years later, I get it. I only wish I knew then what I know now. Sure, I got the bit about being forceful as I shifted towards being more analytical and less schmoozy. Hey, sales were plummeting -35% per month! That was the surface reality. I wanted us to *earn* our business based on ROI and customer self-interest, not based just on being best buddies on golf trips. That shift didn't land well. My sales managers saw me as over-reacting to a temporary blip in the market caused by the sudden rise of private label products. I didn't see it that way. I saw a permanent shift in the marketplace, which later proved to be correct. Underneath the surface clash of analyzing our business, tracking our in-store performance and equipping our sales managers with mini-P&Ls, was a huge power shift. I was both drawing power to the top while also downloading greater financial decision-making power. Some of my sales managers didn't like it one bit.

What I wish I knew then was a concept called Time Frame. It explains the role of each level in the organization. I adapted it from the work of Elliott Jaques of Requisite Organization fame. Time frame helps everyone get that this is the way successful organizations function, and what it means for each level's role in building a high-functioning team. The underlying premise is that higher levels are looking further out in time, causing the lower levels to have to align or else risk sinking the ship. The cultural resistance arises when lower levels think they ought to control higher level decisions, and vice versa.

Today, leaders need to engage employees and that means teaching everyone what it means to work together as a collaborative team within a hierarchical structure. Leaders at all levels need to know how to shift and share decision-making power up and down the organization. It is a skill and any leader who manages people needs to learn it or face severe consequences in the 21st century, as Egypt's leaders are painfully discovering. Command and control is dying and collaboration is the new leadership style.

John Kuypers is the author of the newly published, [Who's the Driver Anyway? Making the Shift To A Collaborative Team Culture](#), available at [Chapters-Indigo](#). John is a collaborative leadership and productivity expert. He helps leaders shift the way things get done. Learn more at www.performanceshift.com and www.whothedriveranyway.com