



# THE SCIENCE OF COACHING SALES PEOPLE

What Every Sales Leader Needs To Know

## Synopsis

In this white paper, David Hoffeld writes about how a powerful scientific principle called Social Facilitation can significantly enhance a sales leader's ability to coach and train sales people. David begins by explaining the scientific construct of Social Facilitation. He then clarifies why Social Facilitation is the basis for how athletes, firefighters, police officers and soldiers are trained and how that relates to the coaching and training of sales people. The paper concludes with a practical analysis of how sales leaders can leverage Social Facilitation to more accurately evaluate their sales people.

## About the Author

David Hoffeld is CEO of the Hoffeld Group, a research based sales training, coaching and consulting firm that is the leader in the integration of proven science and sales. The Hoffeld Group takes the proven science of influence out of the laboratory and academic journals and applies it to selling. For a deeper look at the Hoffeld Group's groundbreaking research and innovative sales strategies visit [HoffeldGroup.com](http://HoffeldGroup.com).

## The Science of Social Facilitation

In 1897 Norman Triplett, who is considered to be one of the first social psychologists, observed a strange phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Triplett noticed that when competing with others, some cyclists responded with heightened levels of performance. In contrast, other cyclists would respond with a decrease in speed, in comparison to their pace when only racing against the clock. Triplett was puzzled by this and began to investigate why the presence of others would affect a cyclist's performance. After conducting numerous experiments and analyzing the results, Triplett came to a conclusion which would become the foundation for the scientific principle of Social Facilitation.

Triplett's study was ahead of its time because it was not until 1965 that behavioral scientist Robert Zajonc revisited Triplett's research and probed for a deeper explanation as to why the performance of a task is influenced by the presence of others.<sup>2</sup> Zajonc's investigation led him to the conclusion of Social Facilitation. Social Facilitation is the scientific construct which affirms that the presence of others will improve performance on well-mastered behaviors and hinder performance on unmastered tasks. The divergence in ability is triggered by the psychological arousal that is caused by performing an activity in the presence of others. This arousal produces the individual's dominant response, which is the most authentic representation of the learned behavior.



Social Facilitation has evolved into a well-established scientific model that has been studied through hundreds of research studies involving over 25,000 participants.<sup>3 4</sup> One such study was led by social psychologist James Michaels who conducted numerous experiments examining how the presence of observers influenced the proficiency of billiard players.<sup>5</sup> Michaels and his colleagues would first evaluate billiard players without the players being aware of the fact that they were being watched. Then after assessing a player's skill level, the researchers would approach the player and openly observe him or her. What occurred was that the presence of the spectators prompted those who had already been rated as being an accomplished billiard player to increase their shot-making ability from 71% to 80%. In contrast, when the less skillful billiard players were observed they experienced a drop in their shot-making ratio from 36% to 25%.

1. N. Triplett. "The dynamogenic factors in pacemaking and competition." *American Journal of Psychology*, 9, 1897 – 1898. p. 507 – 533.

2. R. B. Zajonc. "Social facilitation," *Science*, 149, 1965. p. 269-274.

3. C.F. Bond and L. Titus. "Social facilitation: A meta-analysis of 241 studies." *Psychological Bulletin*, 94, 1983. p. 265 – 292.

4. B. Guerin. *Social Facilitation*. (Paris: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

5. J. Michaels, J. Blommel, R. Bracato, R. Linkous and J. Rowe. "Social facilitation and inhibition in a natural setting." *Replications in Social Psychology*, 2, 1982. p. 21 – 24.

The effects of Social Facilitation have been proven to influence the execution of not only physical activities, but also cognitive and social tasks.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, social scientists have also confirmed that the effect of psychological arousal caused by the presence of others is amplified when one is in the presence of others who are evaluating his or her performance.<sup>7 8 9</sup>

The concept of Social Facilitation is not merely ivory tower thinking. To the contrary, within the context of selling, it is indispensable in its practical application. Social Facilitation is particularly relevant in the understanding of how to successfully coach and train sales people. In fact, without an awareness of Social Facilitation, sales leaders will be limited in their capacity to effectively develop their sales people. Yet, as significant as this powerful concept is, few sales leaders have ever heard of it.

## Develop Sales People Through Social Facilitation

Though there are numerous ways that Social Facilitation can be applied to the coaching and training of sales people, the following are two of the most important applications.

**Social Facilitation Application #1:** Social Facilitation deals with the necessity for sales people to receive ongoing coaching and training. It is only through continual development that a sales person's dominant response will be conditioned to be one of competence.

A sales person's dominant response is the predisposition that will influence how that sales person interacts with prospects. This is demonstrated by the fact that Social Facilitation is the basis for how athletes, firefighters, soldiers and police officers are trained to respond in stressful situations. These professionals undergo persistent coaching and training so that when it matters most, their dominant response is a visual demonstration of the fact that they have mastered the task at hand. Behavioral scientists Kassir, Fein and Markus comment on this pragmatic function of Social Facilitation when they write:

It is because of the effects of social facilitation that firefighters, police officers, military personnel, and others must train so much to be ready to make split-second decisions under highly arousing situations. They may seem to practice scenarios to the point of overtraining, but it is only through such repetition that their dominant response can be assured to typically be the correct one. When in the midst of a raging fire or military firefight, careful deliberation is often impossible, and arousal will tend to elicit their dominant responses.<sup>10</sup>

6. S. Thomas, L. Skitka, S. Christen, M. Jurgena. "Social facilitation and impression formation." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 24, 2002. p. 67 – 70.

7. R.G. Green. "Social Motivation." *Annual Review of Psychology*, 42, 1991. p. 377 – 399.

8. T. Henchy and D. Glass. "Evaluation apprehension and the social facilitation of dominant and subordinate responses." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 10, 1968. p. 446 – 454.

9. J. Seta, J. Crisson, C. Seta and M. Wang. "Task performance and perceptions of anxiety: Averaging and summation in an evaluative setting." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, 1989. p. 387 – 389.

10. Saul Kassir, Steven Fein & Hazel Rose Markus. *Social Psychology*: 7<sup>th</sup> Edition. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2008). p. 261.

In today's hyper-competitive marketplace if sales people are not improving, they are falling behind. Continuous improvement is no longer a luxury; it has become a survival skill. Sales people produce the revenue which keeps businesses alive. Therefore, the health of a business is directly related to the effectiveness of its sales people.

This is why a mission critical endeavor for all sales leaders is the development of their sales people.

- Management expert Peter Drucker commented on the imperative of improvement when he wrote, "It is also management's job to enable the enterprise and each of its members to grow and develop as needs and opportunities change. This means that every enterprise is a learning and teaching institution. Training and development must be built into it on all levels – training and development that never stops."<sup>11</sup>
- David Mayer and Herbert Greenberg echo the importance of training sales people in their article "What Makes a Good Salesman" which was published in the *Harvard Business Review*. Mayer and Greenberg stated, "The role of training is clear. It is vital. In today's highly competitive market it is most important to bring every employee up to his maximum potential of productivity."<sup>12</sup> Mayer and Greenberg further comment in the article that their research has demonstrated that, "Without sound training, even A-level salesmen are seriously limited."

## Reinforcement vs. Continued Development

Far too often, after new hire training, the development of sales people is largely ignored. This is not only an unprofitable business practice, but it also ignores proven principles of social science. Sales people need regular coaching and training that guides them in cultivating new knowledge and skills.

This is not merely the reinforcement of current behaviors.

Contrary to popular belief, reinforcement is not enough. The focus on reinforcement and not continuous development is a problematic trend in modern sales training. This is not semantics, but a key differentiation in the theory and practice of how sales people are developed. Though mastery of current behaviors is vital, true advancement comes through coaching and training that is focused upon enhancing a sales person's knowledge and skill.

This also highlights an important disparity between mediocre and leading sales producers. Mediocre sales people reinforce their current behaviors. Whereas, top sales people strive to increase the effectiveness of their dominant response.

Without a deliberate emphasis upon expanding a sales person's ability, any success will be short-lived.

---

11. Peter F. Drucker. "Management and the World's Work." *Harvard Business Review*, September-October, 1988.

12. David Mayer and Herbert Greenberg. "What Makes a Good Salesman?" *Harvard Business Review*, July – August, 2006.

This has even been proven through numerous scientific studies.

- Behavioral scientists Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Romer investigated how people achieve superior high levels of performance across a variety of disciplines. The research revealed that an overarching theme among the elite performers was that they did not focus upon the “execution or repetition of already attained skills but repeated attempts to reach beyond one’s current level.”<sup>13</sup>
- Numerous other scientific studies have also concluded that those who rise to the highest echelon of a profession do so through a relentless drive to continually improve their performance.

## Accurately Evaluate a Sales Person Through Social Facilitation

**Social Facilitation Application #2:** A second important application of Social Facilitation is that within a productive sales coaching and training session there will be a dialogue that will prompt a sales person to demonstrate adeptness in executing a behavior or comprehension of a principle. It will not take a leader long to notice that some sales people perform well during these interactions, while others respond poorly.

In response to a weak demonstration of skill or knowledge sales people will often retort, “I normally do better with a prospect. You just make me nervous.” I cannot even attempt to estimate the vast number of times I have been told this over the years. Nevertheless, is it true? This question matters because when sales people state that they are not accurately representing their capability, not only is the sales person attempting to shirk responsibility, but even more concerning is that he or she is attempting to skew the sales leader’s perception of reality. A leader’s awareness of reality is tremendously important because their capacity to correctly discern what is really going on will guide them in both equipping sales people and making wise decisions. As one of my professors at Harvard Business School, Dr. Frank Cespedes said, “The difference between success and failure in sales management is understanding reality.”

Before you as a sales leader begin to despise your sales people for attempting to mislead you, it is important to realize that most sales people are not attempting to deceive their manager, coach or trainer. Much of the time, they believe what they are saying about their competency level is true. This is due to the fact that surveys have overwhelmingly demonstrated that people in general have exaggerated beliefs about their own ability.<sup>14</sup>

- David Dunning, Professor of Psychology at Cornell, addressed this in his book, *In Self-Insight:*

13. K. Anders Ericsson, Roy W. Roring and Kiruthiga Nandagopal. “Giftedness and evidence for reproducibly superior performance: an account based on the expert performance framework.” *High Ability Studies*, 18, No. 1, (2007), 18.

14. D. Dunning, C. Health and J.M. Suls. “Flawed self-assessment: Implications for health, education, and the workplace.” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5, 2004. p. 69 – 106.

*Roadblocks and Detours on the Path to Knowing Thyself* when he summarized, “A large number of studies from many corners of psychology research suggest that, as a general rule, people’s impressions of their abilities- whether arrogant or humble – are not anchored very closely to their actual level of skill.”<sup>15</sup>

- A survey found that ninety-four percent of college professors believe that their work is above average.<sup>16</sup>
- Jay Conger writes in the *Harvard Business Review* that most business people grossly overestimate their skill level.<sup>17</sup>
- Research published in the journal *Psychological Science* has also revealed that people regularly overrate their effectiveness in presenting to an audience.<sup>18</sup>
- To further muddy the waters, research published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* has shown that the lowest performers exaggerate their level of ability more than other more productive colleagues.<sup>19</sup>

Psychologists Kruger and Dunning explain that the reason people routinely struggle with being aware of their incompetence is because the knowledge and skill that they lack is what is necessary to recognize competence.<sup>20</sup> Charles Darwin aptly summarized this type of assertive obliviousness when he wrote, “Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge.”<sup>21</sup>

Due to this distortion of reality, sales leaders are often at a loss regarding how to respond to a sales person who performs poorly in a coaching or training session, but boldly proclaims that they are adept when selling to prospects. Despite the fact that a sales person’s knowledge of their skill may be skewed, how can sales leaders objectively gauge if a sales person’s assessment is accurate or not? This question is vital to answer correctly. The evaluation of sales people is a mission critical endeavor because without an assessment, sales leaders will be unable to provide constructive feedback and without feedback the development of sales people will be limited.

This is why understanding Social Facilitation is so essential. It cuts through the guesswork and provides sales leaders proven science to base their evaluations of sales people upon.

When sales people attempt to demonstrate their knowledge or skill, you know that what you are witnessing is Social Facilitation at work. The sales person is experiencing psychological arousal because

15. David Dunning. *In Self-Insight: Roadblocks and Detours on the Path to Knowing Thyself*. (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005). p. 3.

16. David Dunning, C. Health and J.M. Suls. “Flawed self-assessment: Implications for health, education, and the workplace.” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5, 2004. p. 69 – 106.

17. Jay Conger. “The Necessary Art of Persuasion.” *Harvard Business Review Onpoint*, Fall 2010. p. 50.

18. B. Keysar and A.S. Henly. “Speakers’ overestimation of their effectiveness.” *Psychological Science*, 13, 2002. p. 207 – 2112.

19. J. Kruger and D. Dunning, “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Competence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, no. 6, 1999. p. 1121 – 1134.

20. Justin Kruger and David Dunning. “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77 (6), 1999.

21. Charles Darwin. *The Descent of Man*. (London: John Murray, 1871). p. 3.

of the sales leader's presence and therefore what that sales person is exhibiting is his or her dominant response.

Regardless of the fideistic declarations that a sales person may express, the scientifically proven reality is that the behavior the sales person is demonstrating is the truest, most authentic, accurate representation of his or her competency level. In short, this is the exact view of the sales person that you, as a sales leader, want to see. The sales leader is not seeing the sales person at their best or worst. Instead, you are witnessing the sales person's dominant response, which is the most authentic declaration of their ability.

I can recall many times when I have been coaching or training sales people and they performed poorly when attempting to execute a behavior. Though they may proclaim that they normally do better when working with a prospect, I know that because of the proven science of Social Facilitation, what I am seeing is their dominant response. In fact, numerous times after a coaching or training session, unbeknownst to the sales person, I have overheard him or her presenting to a prospect. What I always witness is the same level of proficiency that I observed during the coaching or training session.

## Summary

Through applying the scientific principle of Social Facilitation, sales leaders will be equipped to accurately evaluate the competency levels of their sales people. This awareness will significantly enhance their effectiveness in coaching and training sales people. Consequently, Social Facilitation is a scientific principle that every sales leader needs to know and utilize.