

Sales & Status - Business Improvisation at its Best

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Abstract:

Status awareness and manipulation is one of those allusive attributes that people often think a great sales person is 'born with'. Like most value sales skills, some come to them naturally and perform them in an unconsciously competent state of mind. Status awareness and manipulation, your own and how you use it to affect a situation, is a key ingredient in sales and leadership. We are constantly keeping track of our status relative to others. Status is also about pecking order, real or imagined. We hold a mental representation of our status in our minds during interactions and it affects our mental processes. If your target relationship with a client is as a trusted advisor and if your purpose is to obtain an insider position then observing and manipulating status is a critical success factor.

Article:

There are several critical sales skills that that can increase your success with your clients that go beyond the traditional mass produced 'one size fits all' sales training. Skills associated with account strategy, competitive counter tactics, advanced questioning models to reveal value, the neuroscience of change and my personal favorite; status.

Status awareness and manipulation is one of those allusive attributes that people often think a great sales person is 'born with'. Like most value sales skills, some come to them naturally and perform them in an unconsciously competent state of mind. Until I attended an improvisation workshop many years ago with Keith Johnstone I had not experienced status as a learnable skill. Further research led us to incorporate status as a major component in our Collaboration & Influence Model that we include in our workshops. Status awareness and manipulation, your own and how you use it to affect a situation, is a key ingredient in sales and leadership.

Defining status relative to interpersonal or group situations can be a challenge. Our first thought is title, power or social standing, which is only the tip of the behavioral iceberg. In theatre status refers to the relative importance of the characters to each other or objects in a situation. Most comedy is based on the movement of status; a pompous man walks across the street, head held high, owning the world in his mind and he trips and falls into a puddle. We laugh because his status went from high to low, he go his. A low status character, a frail old lady falls into the same puddle and we feel sorry for her. Her status didn't change. A street person, dirty and dressed poorly can strut around like he owns the place, his status very high. A multi millionaire can be shy and unassuming with a low status. Status is a combination of body language, tone of voice, intent, assumptions, observation and reaction. Our status is effected (raised or lowered) by other people, places or things.

"Researchers announced today that people who read articles on the internet are 87% more likely to be happy and successful than their competitors." I just increased your status.

We are constantly keeping track of our status relative to others. Status is also about pecking order, real or imagined. We hold a mental representation of our status in our minds during interactions and it affects our mental processes. In fact research shows that we use the same part of our brain we use for processing numbers. When we feel our status has been increased our bodies release dopamine (associated with pleasure). One study showed that an increase in status was similar to a financial windfall and that being left out of an activity, a status reduction, is perceived by the brain using the same circuitry as pain.

Status in the business world is extremely important and many are consciously unaware of its effects and manipulations. Don't be fooled, status does not equal power. As with all behavioral observation and interaction status is a self-calculated attribute and may be out of whack with reality. Think of the self-important person who thinks they run the company, clearly high status but perhaps not in charge or even an influencer. Or, the CEO who is quiet and humble yet walks into the room and everyone pays attention and notices her, real power, low status.

We manipulate our status and those around us constantly. Let's take a typical sales call; the buyer, let's say the CIO, is talking to you about the value and ROI of the ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning Software) you are selling. It's a multi-million sale and the success is not all based on features and functions. During the conversation the CIO will feel more comfortable if your status is slightly below his. When he talks you listen intently, think about what he says, give it weight, and even if you don't agree with a comment or concern you accept it. When it is your turn to respond, increase your status, sit taller in the chair, take more space. It is important to be perceived as the 'trusted expert' so your answer should be to the point, delivered with confidence. If you portray low status while answering with the correct information it still comes off as un-inspiring. With your next question ask the CIO his opinion of something important to the situation or even personal, this act increases his status. If you keep your status very close to his he will feel comfortable, raise it when you need to be the trusted advisor and lower it again. Amongst friends we decrease each other's status a sign of familiarity, a playful comment about someone's inability to do something. Manipulating the CIO's status in this manner, if appropriate, and getting a chuckle conveys a level of trust you can build on. You may have seen facilitators do this; a quick comment on their inability to do something gets a laugh. The audience likes the comments and in turn does not see the facilitator as a threat. If the facilitator is aware of status she can keep her status high, lots of confidence, control the room, etc. but ever once and awhile have a laugh at her expense to keep her status mobile. It is also a good facilitation strategy to pick the one or two high status individuals in the audience and play with status in order to keep them in line when required.

All of our social interaction is driven by instincts left over from a time when survival depended on our awareness and reaction to a situation. As our first level of processing we evaluate whether the situation is a threat and we avoid it, or if we should approach and hopefully there is an award. Awareness of how our status affects others in this context is critical to meeting your objective on a sales call, in a boardroom or any leadership situation. If you control and manipulate your status you can avoid being perceived as a threat and still be a leader.

Homework; watch a TV sitcom (sorry) with the sound muted and see where the punch lines are by the change in status between characters.

Consider adding status awareness as part of your next sales call. Think about how you are perceived by the client and watch for status variations during the meeting. Try shifting your higher or lower status than a friend during a conversation for practice.

If your target relationship with a client is as a trusted advisor and if your purpose is to obtain an insider position then observing and manipulating status is a critical success factor.

Below are examples high and low status behaviors and how to manipulate them.

High-status behaviors

- When walking, assuming that other people will get out of your path.
- Making eye contact while speaking.
- Not checking the other person's eyes for a reaction to what you said.
- Having no visible reaction to what the other person said.
- Speaking in complete sentences.
- Interrupting before you know what you are going to say.
- Spreading out your body to full comfort. Taking up a lot of space with your body.
- Looking at the other person with your eyes somewhat down (head tilted back a bit to make this work), creating the feeling that you are a parent talking to a child.
- Talking matter-of-factly about things that the other person finds displeasing or offensive.
- Letting your body be vulnerable, exposing your neck and torso to the other person.
- Moving comfortably and gracefully.
- Keeping your hands away from your face.
- Speaking authoritatively, with certainty.
- Making decisions for a group; taking responsibility.
- Giving or withholding permission.
- Evaluating other people's work.
- Speaking cryptically, not adjusting your speech to be easily understood by the other person (except that mumbling does not count).
- Being surrounded by an entourage, especially of people who are physically smaller than you.
- A "high-status specialist" conveys in every word and gesture, "Don't come near me, I bite."

Low-status behaviors

- When walking, moving out of other people's path.
- Looking away from the other person's eyes.
- Briefly checking the other person's eyes to see if they reacted positively to what you said.
- Speaking in halting, incomplete sentences. Trailing off, editing your sentences as you go.
- Sitting or standing uncomfortably in order to adjust to the other person and give them space. Pulling inward to give the other person more room. If you're tall, you

might need to scrunch down a bit to indicate that you're not going to use your height against the other person.

- Looking up toward the other person (head tilted forward a bit to make this work), creating the feeling that you are a child talking to a parent.
- Dancing around your words (beating around the bush) when talking about something that will displease the other person.
- Shouting as an attempt to intimidate the other person. This is low status because it suggests that you expect resistance.
- Crouching your body as if to ward off a blow; protecting your face, neck, and torso.
- Moving awkwardly or jerkily, with unnecessary movements.
- Touching your face or head.
- Avoiding making decisions for the group; avoiding responsibility.
- Needing permission before you can act.
- Adjusting the way you say something to help the other person understand; meeting the other person on their (cognitive) ground; explaining yourself.
- A "low-status specialist" conveys in every word and gesture, "Please don't bite me, I'm not worth the trouble."

Raising another person's status

To raise another person's status is to establish them as high in the pecking order in your group (possibly just the two of you).

- Ask their permission to do something.
- Ask their opinion about something.
- Ask them for advice or help.
- Express gratitude for something they did.
- Apologize to them for something you did.
- Agree that they are right and you were wrong.
- Defer to their judgement without requiring proof.
- Address them with a fancy title or honorific (even "Mr." or "Sir" works very well).
- Downplay your own achievement or attribute in comparison to theirs. "Your wedding cake is so much whiter than mine."
- Do something incompetent in front of them and then apologize for it or act sheepish about it.
- Mention a failure or shortcoming of your own. "I was supposed to go to an audition today, but I was late. They said I was wrong for the part anyway."
- Compliment them in a way that suggests appreciation, not judgement. "Wow, what a beautiful cat you have!"
- Obey them unquestioningly.
- Back down in a conflict.
- Move out of their way, bow to them, lower yourself before them.
- Tip your hat to them.
- Lose to them at something competitive, like a game (or any comparison).
- Wait for them.
- Serve them; do manual labor for them.

Lowering another person's status

To lower another person's status is to attack or discredit their right to be high in the pecking order. Another word for "lowering someone's status" is "humiliating them."

- Criticize something they did.
- Contradict them. Tell them they are wrong. Prove it with facts and logic.
- Correct them.
- Insult them.
- Give them unsolicited advice.
- Approve or disapprove of something they did or some attribute of theirs. "Your cat has both nose and ear points. That is acceptable." Anything that sets you up as the judge lowers their status, even "Nice work on the Milligan account, Joe."
- Shout at them.
- Tell them what to do.
- Ignore what they said and talk about something else, especially when they've said something that requires an answer. E.g. "Have you seen my socks?" "The train leaves in five minutes."
- One-up them. E.g. have a worse problem than the one they described, have a greater past achievement than theirs, have met a more famous celebrity, earn more money, do better than them at something they're good at, etc.
- Win: beat them at something competitive, like a game (or any comparison).
- Announce something good about yourself or something you did. "I went to an audition today, and I got the part!"
- Disregard their opinion. E.g. "You'd better not smoke while pumping gas, it's a fire hazard." Flick, light, puff, puff, pump, pump.
- Talk sarcastically to them.
- Make them wait for you.
- When they've fallen behind you, don't wait for them to catch up, just push on and get further out of sync.
- Disobey them.
- Violate their space.
- Beat them up. Beating them up in front of other people, especially their wife, girlfriend, and/or children, is particularly status-lowering.
- In a conflict, make them back down.
- Taunt them. Tease them.

The basic status-lowering act

Laugh at them. (Not with them.)

The basic status-raising act

Be laughed at by them.

Second to that is laughing with them at someone else.

Randy Sabourin Bio

Randy Sabourin is a principal and founder Anderson-Sabourin Consulting Inc, an organization that delivers consulting and training services focused on helping executives and sales teams elevate performance. His [blog](#) is widely read and his articles on utilizing Business Improvisation have been published in several training and leadership publications. Randy has designed and facilitated Team Building, Situational Leadership, Sales Training, Strategy Creation and Execution Workshops across Canada for companies such as RBC, CIBC Mellon, Rogers Communications, Bell Mobility, TD Canada Trust, BMO and Research In Motion. Randy sits on the board of directors of the Strategic Leadership Forum, The Toronto Fringe Festival and is the Past-President of the Board of Directors of the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of Canada. He has held executive sales and marketing positions in high tech, semiconductor and software organizations over the past 24 years prior to founding ASCI in 2005 with Cameron Anderson. Randy has a degree in Composition and Improvisation from Berklee College of Music and has studied with Loose Moose Theatre Company. He performs regularly with Extant Theatre in *Impro a la Carte*.

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