



Mastering Technical Sales

2037 Trowbridge Drive

Newtown, PA 18940

Phone +1-215-431-1552

John@masteringtechnicalsales.com

www.masteringtechnicalsales.com

John Care, Managing Director

The Super Senior Sales Engineer

What It Takes To Get To The Top

What sets apart the top 5% of Sales Engineers from the rest? Different organizations may call them Principals, Masters or even Advisory Engineers - but these people are something special and take the Pre-Sales Engineering profession to a higher level. So let's look at what it really takes to rise to the top of the ladder if you don't want to be a people manager - and how you can start preparing for that rise. This is based on a conversation I had, as a former VP of Pre-Sales, with a younger and highly ambitious SE with about 2-3 years of experience.

I should also state right up front that there are at least two ways to get to the top in any but the smallest company - there is the pure technical achievement route, and there is also the more solution or business oriented route. Both are equally valid and you should think of them as the equivalent of a major and minor in college. So not every one of the following points will apply to everyone seeking that top position on the career ladder, but you need to have a majority of them covered.

Revenue Achievement: Whether you like it or not, you do have to live up to the sales part of the Pre-Sales Engineer title. A record of accomplishment of consistently over-achieving by helping sales to close deals and beat out the competition is a solid requirement. Ultimately the most significant measurement in a sales organization is your performance against quota. Now as an SE you may have a team or a regional quota, so it is important that you keep track, personally or through your SFA system, of the magnitude and number of deals you contributed towards. There is nothing like having a printed report going back several years displaying your revenue achievement as an SE to help the promotion process along. It counts at annual review time too!

(Relative) Size of Deal: The best of the best are usually engaged in the largest and most complex deals. Largest can mean largest by revenue, by number of products, by users, integrations, third-part products or partners. However you choose to measure

them, you should be engaged in the top 10% of transactions within the geography you serve, and even a few outside your immediate area. To start with you need to be part of the team, volunteer to help with the deal, and watch what everyone does. Learn from the best, copy their techniques and then personalize them towards your strengths. Software companies often report the number of million dollar or million euro deals when detailing their quarterly financial results. Services and hardware companies typically set the bar higher. Smaller companies may be proud of six-figure deals. The point is that wherever your company sets the bar for a large deal - you need to track your engagement in them.

The Softer Skills: No question about it - you definitely need the soft skills around the classic presales areas of discovery, presentations and demonstrations; or else you need awesome technology skills to make your product do whatever the client needs it to do - and then be able to explain it. It's not just a matter of a great product demo as you now need to extend that skill set to webcasts, whiteboards and face-to-face presentations too. Throw in excellent written skills (even using email) and persuasive oral skills. Being able to write effectively and efficiently is rapidly becoming a long lost business skill, yet it will set you apart as your communications become clearer. Clearer and briefer communications result in better understanding which results in fewer "re-do's".

Relationships: The mark of a truly top-class SE is a truly top-class network. The network needs to be both internal and external to your company. The internal network is necessary to get things done and be tapped into the "live feed" of corporate activities. The external network is what helps provide you with a competitive advantage. Take every opportunity to connect with your customers, prospects, industry pundits and even your competitors. Use email and social media tools such as LinkedIn to maintain those connections. My advice is to maintain Facebook as a personal space, and LinkedIn/Plaxo etc. as a business tool. Remember that as you advance over the next few years within your organization, so will many of your contacts. I now know about a dozen CIOs or senior VPs who were individual contributors or first line managers fifteen years ago.

The other important relationship aspect is to find a mentor or a coach to assist you with advice and guidance as you move up the organization. A mentor is often associated with advancing within the management ranks, but I believe it applies equally to star individuals. Your mentor can be an existing manager within the company, or even a more senior SE. The mentor can be from outside of pre-sales or sales. Your mentor can even be outside the company - what you are really looking for is someone who can help you with a dispassionate view of your career. I'd actually advocate for an internal and an external

mentor. The point being, it's tough to do it all yourself without learning from the successes and failures of others.

Scope and Impact: Look, every good SE works with and has relationships with Product Management and Product Marketing. You probably have go-to people in Technical Support and even in Development - but what have you done beyond that? Some examples would be reaching out to your colleagues around the world and sharing ideas and best practices. How about running local reference or customer upgrade programs? How about enabling partners and third-party consultants? As a technician you could build some new interface or integration around a product, or on the business side you could create an ROI or justification documentation for some novel combination of products or services. You get the idea - do something different. It should be your idea, not something you are told to do.

Leadership: My definition of leadership is that it is more about being an *active* participant in the company than a *passive* one. An active and engaged SE does not wait for salespeople to come to him, she does not wait to be told to fix a problem, does not have to be reminded to conduct follow-up and does not have to be pushed to share information. It may be tough when you are not fully in control of your schedule, yet you need to be proactive by reaching out to others (the network from above) instead of waiting to hear from them.

The days of the prima donna SE who was superb at his job, but was also high maintenance, didn't follow corporate standards and complained about everything are long gone. Leadership means setting an example for others. That is something as mundane as completing your expenses, opportunity updates and timesheets all the way up to teaching and mentoring others. The final thought on this is that although the #1 rule in the military for enlisted soldiers may have been "never volunteer for anything" that doesn't work in the corporate world if you want to advance - in management or as a professional.

Education and Knowledge: Most HR job descriptions for any SE start with "College Business or Technical degree highly preferred." Then they ask for a certain number of years experience (or equivalent in the industry) within a sales organization. The top level positions may even require an MBA. I have to say I am not a big fan of judging people that way. Especially when someone is almost ready to move into that top 5% band, they have an established track record and have proved themselves with results. They are guidelines, not requirements. Moving up should not be a result of tenure - just because someone has been with the company for 10 years does not make automatically make them

a Master Principal Distinguished Architect. Nor should salary implications necessitate a move up the ranks if you really want to keep that top position pure and special.

Subject Matter Expertise: You need to be considered as the expert/guru in your particular area of expertise - whether that is technical or business or a mix of the two. So what does that bland statement actually mean? Here are just a few ideas:

- Write some white papers
- Get published externally
- Be quoted (with corporate approval) in trade magazines
- Run an (approved) blog or Twitter stream.
- Present regularly at User Group meetings, Sales Kickoffs and other conferences
- Roll-out/train the field on new releases (what they really need to know!)
- Represent the company nationally or internationally
- Create or change corporate processes
- Design new sales, marketing or support campaigns
- Drive some new alliance or partnership program

So I have seen people hit the top before the age of 30, while others get there in their 50's. It is a matter of drive, perspective, and even a little bit of luck or timing. Although the really good people always seem to be lucky as well. The major points are that you need to move beyond performing the standard SE job description extremely well, and you need to move beyond over achieving on revenue and start giving back to the greater SE community. After all -that is one of the behaviors that distinguishes the SE profession from Sales.

"Well done is better than well said."

Benjamin Franklin.

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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