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Build an Environment That Amplifies Seller Productivity

Sales leaders are constantly working to boost seller productivity. They pour resources into sales enablement, develop detailed playbooks, refine processes, and embed technology into sellers’ workflows. But creating an environment that drives seller productivity is harder than ever before.

The combination of changing buying dynamics and market uncertainty is making the traditional methods to boost seller productivity less effective. The playbooks, processes, and tools sellers lean on are failing to keep pace with how buyers make decisions and the shifting commercial landscape. Today’s buying groups are larger, and they struggle to navigate a landscape full of increasingly complex solutions. As a result, groupwide consensus on deciding what to buy is taking longer. Additionally, market uncertainty has led to more deal scrutiny with smaller deals requiring senior executive approval. For sales teams, this often means a CFO getting involved late in the process who stops, resets, or undoes the buying group’s progress.

The result is more risk-averse buyers getting bogged down in internal debates and sellers struggling to get them back on track.

CEOs are feeling the impact. In Q3 2023, a staggering 69% of CEOs reported seller productivity had either stalled or declined compared to the previous quarter. Productivity challenges are particularly concerning given escalating growth projections, with three-quarters of CEOs anticipating accelerations of growth in 2024.¹

It’s time for sales leaders to rethink how they support sellers. The old approach built around supplying prescriptive support, detailed playbooks, and step-by-step processes isn’t working as well as it used to. The key to unlocking sales productivity lies in understanding how the most successful sellers approach buyer engagements and creating an environment that supports those motions.

To better understand what drives seller productivity, our survey targeted 325 participants, including B2B sales reps, sales development reps (SDRs), and sales managers across industries.² Our research identified four sales approaches, each significantly impacting cycle time, deal size, and productivity:

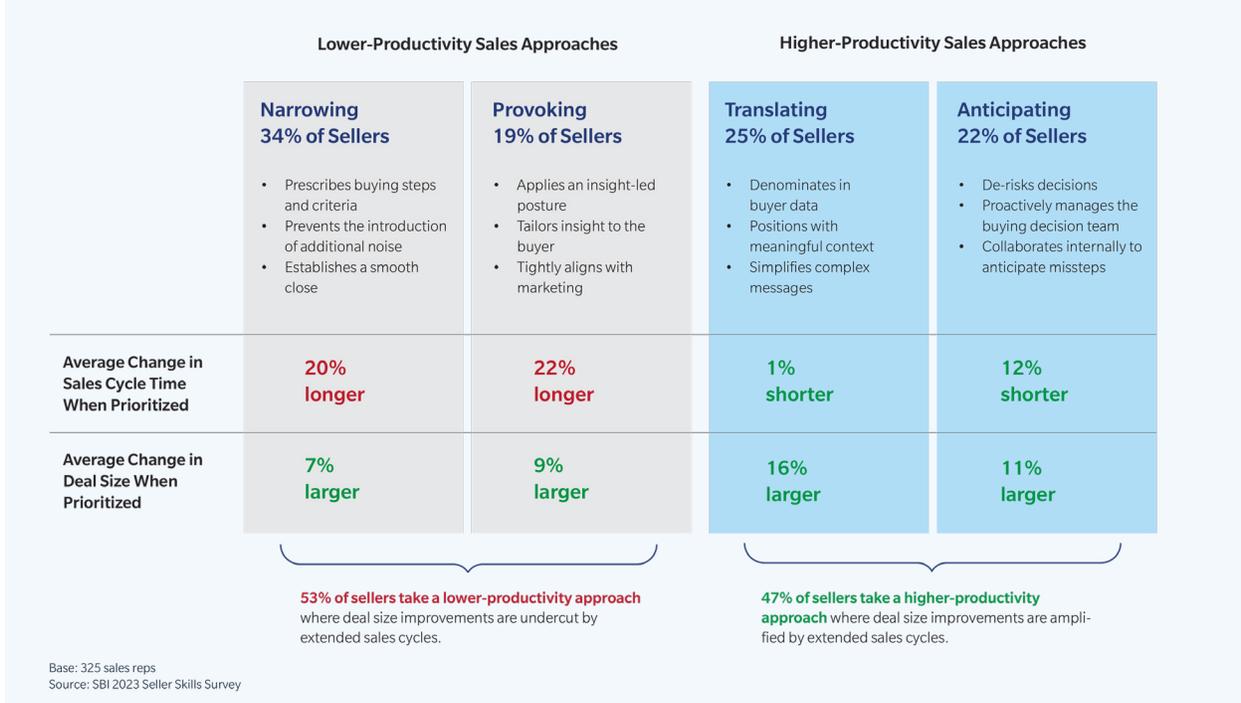


While all approaches have their time and place, the Translating and Anticipating approaches combine larger deals with shorter cycle times to amplify seller productivity.³ This is contrasted with the Narrowing and Provoking approaches, which on average see longer cycle times, undercutting deal size improvements and hurting productivity (see Figure 1).

How can sales leaders encourage and support sellers to adopt the higher-productivity Translating and Anticipating approaches?

¹ Source: [CEO Value Creation Pulse Q3 2023](#).
² For more information on the different approaches, and our supporting research, see "[Delivering Sales Velocity in Today's Market](#)."
³ In some settings, such as more transactional sales or when dealing with standardized products and uniformed buying journeys, the Narrowing and Provoking approaches may be preferable.

Figure 1: Seller Approach Impact on Cycle Time and Deal Size



Our research led to the following question: How can sales leaders encourage and support sellers to adopt the higher-productivity Translating and Anticipating approaches? We looked at a wide variety of levers that leadership teams often pull. Broadly, these include:

- Sales manager coaching
- Sales tools
- Sales process optimization
- Skill development
- Leadership guidance and support
- Peer collaboration
- Sales technologies
- Sales incentives and goals

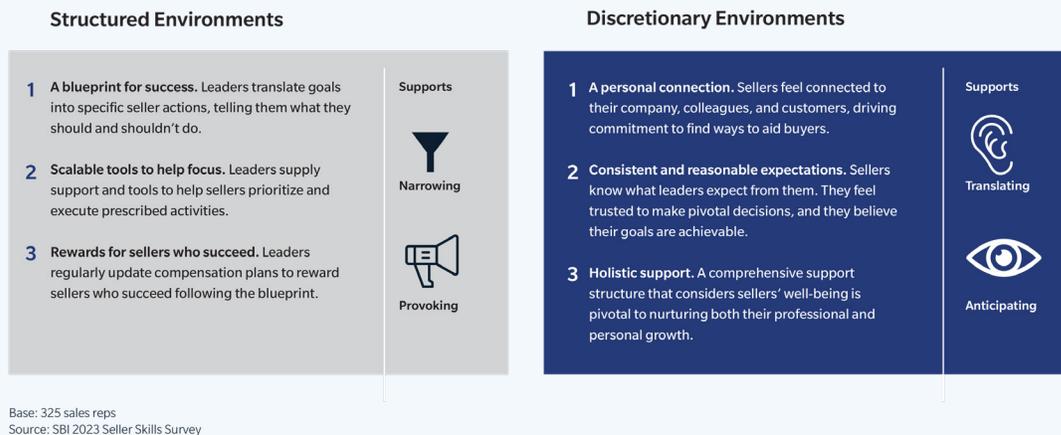
The Importance of the Sales Organization Environment

Our analysis found that these levers group together into two distinct sales environments, which we refer to as structured and discretionary environments. Importantly, we also found that while sellers have natural tendencies, their environment has a significant impact on their approach (see Figure 2):

- **Structured environments encourage lower-productivity Narrowing and Provoking approaches.** These environments are defined by pointing sellers to specific actions, supplying tools for execution, and rewarding sellers who follow the plan.
- **Discretionary environments foster higher-productivity Translating and Anticipating approaches.** These environments are built around creating a personal connection to the work, setting consistent and reasonable expectations, and ensuring sellers receive holistic support.

Simply put, discretionary environments amplify seller productivity (see Figure 3). In a discretionary environment, sellers are 55% more likely to show strong Anticipating characteristics, and 32% more likely to show successful Translating characteristics. This shortens cycle times and results in a more productive and commercially successful sales team.

Figure 2: Structured and Discretionary Sales Environments



Compare this with structured environments, where support for Narrowing (50%) and Provoking (37%) approaches result in longer sales cycles hampering productivity gains. Making matters worse, structured environments have little to no impact on the higher productivity Translating and Anticipating approaches. Sales leaders who want their sellers to apply the highest productivity sales approaches need to invest more in establishing a true discretionary environment.

Understanding how environments shape a seller's approach enables sales leaders to break through existing productivity barriers, shorten cycle times, and increase commercial success.

Why Structured Environments Hurt Productivity

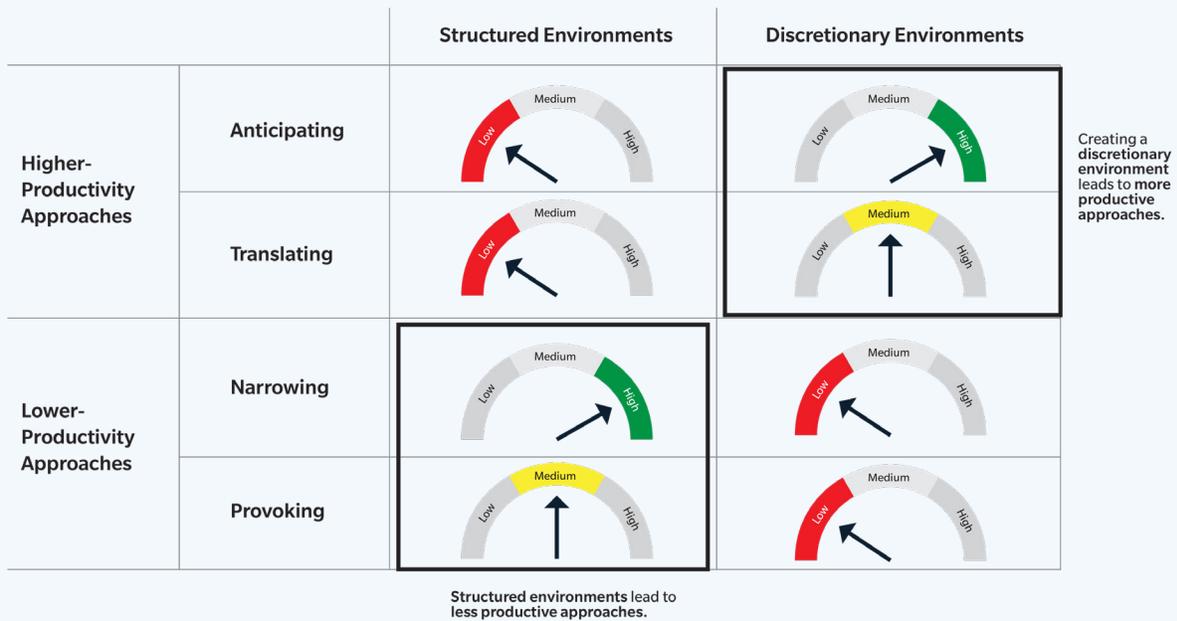
Structured sales environments are process-oriented. They aim to put sellers on the best path to success and reward those who follow through. Structured environments provide:

- 1 A blueprint for success.** Leaders translate goals into specific seller actions, telling them what they should and shouldn't do.
- 2 Scalable tools to help focus.** Leaders supply support and tools to help sellers prioritize and execute prescribed activities.
- 3 Rewards for sellers who succeed.** Leaders regularly update compensation plans to reward sellers who succeed by following the blueprint.

This method makes intuitive sense: Tell sellers where to focus, give them the tools they need, and reward those who succeed. It gives sellers, especially less tenured ones, a blueprint to serve customers and close deals. This works well for the Narrowing and Provoking approaches that rely on following prescribed steps, using premade playbooks and delivering talking points:

- **Structured environments provide the relevant steps for the Narrowing approach.** By being given qualification criteria and deal stages, sellers will know how to create a straightforward path that buyers can follow. Unfortunately, sellers who default to pushing buyers toward a specific path risk eroding trust if that track ignores or downplays buyers' legitimate concerns.
- **Structured environments supply pre-made insights for the Provoking approach.** Getting customers to rethink their needs or business situation is hard. Sellers in structured environments lean on premade insights to reframe how buyers think about their problems. Equipping sellers with pre-made insights makes it easier to reframe customers, but it also risks overwhelming buyers and slowing down their decision-making.

Figure 3: The Impact of Different Environments on Seller Adoption of Sales Approaches



Base: 325 sales reps
Source: SBI 2023 Seller Skills Survey

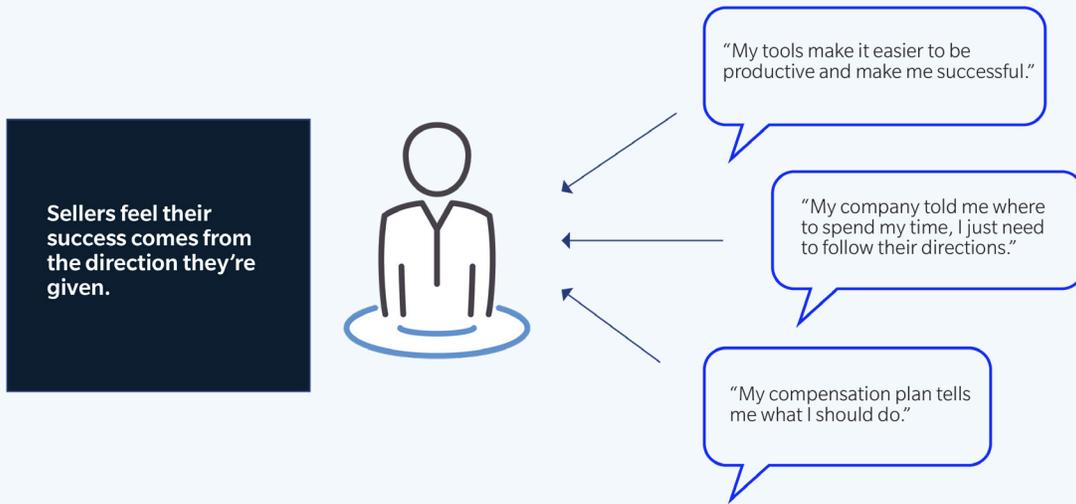
It isn't that structured environments are wrong. They supply helpful guidance to sellers, and variable compensation is a time-tested way to shift behavior.

The reason structured environments hurt productivity is they inadvertently cause sellers to think their success is driven primarily by following external guidance. This mindset, centered on merely “following the blueprint,” encourages sellers to adhere to predetermined steps and, potentially, wrongly force buyers to follow them, without considering whether it is the best course for a specific buying decision team.

When sellers behave as if their success is determined by external guidance, it removes a key benefit of a professional sales force: their capacity to adapt and respond to buyers’ unique needs. Sellers who are focused on following a prescribed set of steps either don't see or don't take advantage of opportunities where a different tactic could drastically increase the probability of closing a deal. Structured environments inadvertently stifle higher-productivity approaches that depend on critical thinking and problem-solving by creating preset paths to follow instead of encouraging sellers to create a tailored experience. Sellers in structured environments still close deals, but those deals are smaller and often take longer to close than they should.

One way of thinking about this is that a structured environment is a foundational set of tools and incentives that will lead sellers to more foundational sales behaviors and approaches. It provides a critical starting point, but something more is needed to drive sellers toward the somewhat harder but ultimately more rewarding, higher-productivity sales approaches. Sales leaders can find that something more in the discretionary environment.

Figure 4: Structured Environments: Success Comes from Following External Guidance



How Discretionary Environments Enable Sellers to Thrive

Discretionary environments prioritize seller autonomy, with their individual skills being the key to winning deals. Processes, playbooks, and variable compensation all still exist, but what makes a discretionary environment unique is that it gives sellers permission to deviate from prescribed processes when it is in the buyer's and supplier's mutual interest. Discretionary environments are defined by providing:

- 1 A personal connection.** Sellers feel connected to their company, colleagues, and customers, driving commitment to find ways to aid buyers.
- 2 Consistent and reasonable expectations.** Sellers know what leaders expect from them. They feel trusted to make pivotal decisions, and they believe their goals are achievable.
- 3 Holistic support.** A comprehensive support structure that considers sellers' well-being is pivotal to nurturing both their professional and personal growth.

Discretionary environments amplify what makes sellers unique: their ability to diagnose buyers' needs and find ways to deliver value.

Combined, these elements create an environment that's not only flexible but also transformative. Sellers are given a north star to follow, instead of specific steps to adhere to. This empowers sellers to deliver a high-quality experience based on buyers' unique needs, promoting a feeling of personal investment in the success that'll follow for the organizations of both the buyer and seller. Discretionary environments foster approaches where sellers are able to think critically about what a buying decision team needs and then implement creative solutions to help them overcome any obstacles.

- **Discretionary environments empower sellers to create trust by translating complex information.** Sellers in discretionary environments are more effective at the Translating approach. They understand buyers' unique needs and present information and solutions tailored to their challenges. This builds credibility and trust with buyers, leading to larger and faster deals.
- **Discretionary environments give sellers permission to stay a step ahead and anticipate buyer's needs.** Sellers in a discretionary environment feel a personal connection with their buyers, helping them anticipate and remove potential obstacles before buyers notice them. It's about collaborative foresight and demonstrating commitment to the buyer's broader vision to maintain momentum.

Discretionary environments amplify what makes sellers unique: their ability to diagnose buyers' needs and find ways to deliver value. Sales leaders foster this environment by demonstrating how sellers are the linchpin for success, rather than mere executors of processes and playbooks. This communicates that the source of success is internal, allowing sellers to feel that their destiny (and their quota) is in their own hands.

Figure 5: Discretionary Environments: Success Comes from Following Internal Motivations



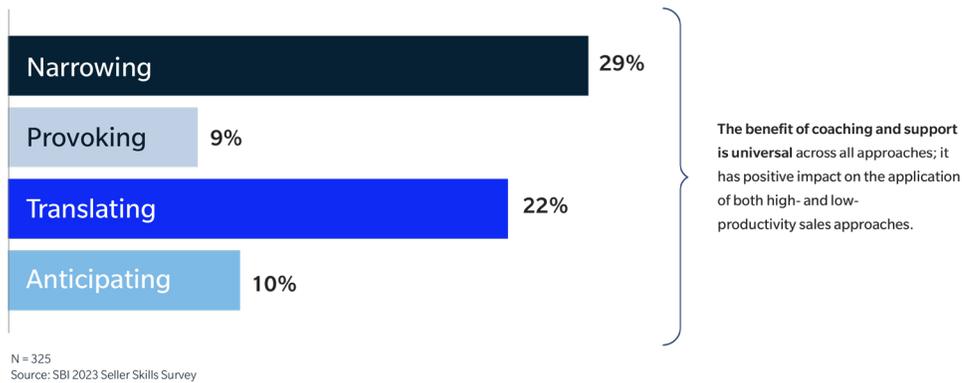
What About Coaching and Other Forms of Support?

Coaching is often considered the most direct productivity lever. When we looked at its impact, we found that it helps sellers across all four approaches (see Figure 6). This reinforces the common belief that no matter their approach, sellers need to understand their customers and develop the skills necessary to support them on their buying journey. Sellers across all approaches see a benefit from:

- Good data and intelligence about customers and prospects.
- Regular coaching from their manager and/or other sales leaders to improve their skills.
- An emphasis on seller skill development over the past 12 - 18 months.

While the benefits of coaching and support are universal, they are used differently in structured and discretionary environments. Structured environments are more likely to deploy support to fuel ready-made plays and coaching to help sellers execute prescriptive steps. Discretionary environments turn to support to aid creative problem-solving, helping sellers find and deploy buyer-centric solutions.

Figure 6: Change in Likelihood of Showing Strong Profile Characteristics



Building Discretionary Environments: A Path to Increased Productivity

Successful sales leaders create discretionary environments that empower sellers to use their unique insights in support of helping customers progress and complete purchases. To establish such environments, it’s essential for sales leaders, including sales enablement and sales operations teams, to take the following steps:

- Foster a personal connection by showing sellers how their work impacts the company, their colleagues, and customers.
- Ensure goals are seen as consistent and reasonable by building a foundation of mutual trust.
- Provide holistic support by arming managers with the information and support they need to have coaching discussions that cover not just deal progress but also professional development and personal well-being.

Figure 7: The Actions Required to Establish a Discretionary Environment



Foster A Personal Connection by Showcasing Real-World Impact

Sellers who feel a personal connection to their company, colleagues, and customers find new ways to help each party succeed. Sales leaders should build these personal connections by showcasing real-world examples of sellers' impact. Ways to do this include:

- 1 Look beyond revenue impact.** For example, highlight how sellers' efforts are advancing the company's strategic goals and environment, social, and governance (ESG) priorities.
- 2 Integrate customer stories and testimonials into internal sales communications.** This puts on display sellers' positive impact, pointing out how their efforts improve client's lives and careers.
- 3 Create collaborative learning hubs.** This allows sellers to interact with their peers in a way that promotes collective learning, where they're able to swap ideas and share the learning that's behind common best practices.

Ensure Goals Are Seen as Consistent and Reasonable by Building a Foundation of Mutual Trust

Leaders and managers should spend time with their teams engaging in open dialogue. The goal is to ensure sellers know how market forces, growth projections, and territory adjustments affect their goals for the year. Sellers are more likely to perceive their goals as reasonable and achievable when they understand how they were created.

Exercise caution when it comes to collaborative goal setting. Be sure to communicate that transparent communications do not translate to the goal-setting process now becoming a collaborative one. Sellers rarely advocate for higher goals, and getting seller feedback and not acting on it can undermine their sense of trust and fairness. This is why communicating how goals are set, instead of asking what sellers would like to see, is preferred.

Provide Holistic Support in Manager Coaching Discussions

Finally, sales leaders can build discretionary environments by integrating holistic support into coaching conversations. Effective coaching conversations go beyond analyzing sales pipelines and strategizing over stalled deals. They also help sellers understand the intersection of their professional and personal goals. Guiding managers to recognize and discuss this relationship underscores the importance of supporting the whole seller, and it proves the company's commitment to their growth.

Amplifying Seller Productivity

B2B buying is unlikely to become less complex, and economic uncertainty isn't going away. Sales leaders must empower their most flexible and adaptable assets — their sellers — to help customers find creative ways to buy amidst complexity and uncertainty. This means creating an environment where they feel trusted to use their discretion to help buyers. This discretionary environment is key to amplifying seller productivity.

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About this study

SBI surveyed 325 sales professionals across industries. Roughly 25% of respondents came from organizations with less than \$1 billion in annual revenue, and 75% came from organizations with more than \$1 billion in annual revenue. There was a similar split of private-equity-sponsored and venture-backed or public companies. The survey was fielded in March 2023.