

View From The Top

Nicola O'Neill tells **Conor Morris** that winning business from competitors satisfies her inner hunter trait

Nicola O'Neill, managing director of Harvest, leads a team of specialists to create learning solutions for clients. Her expertise is in leadership and strategy development, sales coaching and designing in-house mentoring programmes. O'Neill is currently President of the Irish Institute of Training and Development.

What has been your most memorable job?

Working on overseas assignments, I have had the opportunity to partner with clients on assignments in London, New York, Dubai and Sydney. I really enjoy learning about and experiencing different cultures in a local business context.

What do you enjoy about sales?

A core part of my role is to develop relationships both from a business point of view and from a networking perspective. There are a number of things I enjoy about sales, and building enduring relationships is one. I also enjoy satisfying my inner hunter trait, winning business from competitors or coming through a tough tender process. I love to really immerse myself in the client's business context, so every day is a learning day.

What makes a good high-performance salesperson?

The ability to listen and really hear the client is so crucial. All high-performance sales people are able to turn the client's needs into a bespoke solution that solves their business challenges. The seller must also understand the business context of the client; it is vital that they demonstrate their understanding and speak the client's language.

How have you made Harvest more successful as a sales organisation?

When engaging in the sales process, we invest in getting to know the client's business and who they are. In addition, we have built a strong sales engine in



Nicola O'Neill, Harvest

terms of processes and technical systems. We also like to practise what we preach, so we have a robust sales coaching programme in place for our new business development managers.

How have customers changed in recent years?

People are time-poor, so they haven't time for pushy product selling. Successful companies are engaging in consultative conversations, and we are seeing a slower lead-in time and a number of additional stakeholders involved in the buying decision. Professional buyers are more influenced and sometimes more bound by procurement processes than they were before, so the stakeholder sphere has also increased.

What impact is technology having on sales process and performance?

Our clients can educate themselves in advance of engagement, so that ensures that we stay on top of our game in relation to what we showcase and how we engage with our existing and potential clients. The data that technology presents really assists Harvest

in developing strategies to enhance our client offer and to future-proof the value proposition.

How do you teach your team to sell?

The first thing is to ensure you have a robust sales infrastructure in place and that the new team member understands and feels supported by this. We believe that you need to have a clear and relevant value proposition, a robust client engagement model, and an approach to account retention and acquisition to assist with the client partnering approach. This should be backed up by an on-the-job coaching programme that facilitates constructive feedback, contributing to the achievement of a development plan.

What makes a good sales leader?

A good sales leader needs to have 'some dust from the arena'. Experience can be stronger than knowledge, and it is how they use this experience that is important. Their focus should be on coaching and teaching good practice, as well as minding the numbers by building sales strategies that are relevant and inclusive of the people within the organisation.

Why is Harvest a member of The Sales Institute?

We thoroughly enjoy engaging with like-minded people who are willing to share insights and expertise. The opportunities to network and support each other are really genuine, while the quality of speakers and the event content definitely shortcuts our exposure to best practice.

Conor Morris is Chairman of The Sales Institute of Ireland. See salesinstitute.ie.



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