Communication Competence in International B2B and Leadership to Improve Sales Performance

Phong Cao

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Author(s)
Phong Cao

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The increasing need for international sales personnel requires a better understanding of interpersonal communication and sales skills. As a result, this study looks into the selling process, its different stages, and the emotional intelligence demands of business-to-business (B2B) salespeople when it comes to interpersonal communication ability within the team.

The theory part starts by discussing the seven stages of the sales process using literature sources, then to social selling and emotional competence requirements in sales leadership and team communication. In the sales process, the author will focus more on sales encounters, prospecting, first impression, sales presentation, handling objections, and closing the deal. Social selling holds the benefits of social media presence and how it increases the opportunities for higher sales for a sales rep.
Excellent performance at work is a product of emotional competence, therefore, it can be learned through emotional intelligence, so the author will study their links to leadership and team communication and will conduct an interview with B2B sales professionals who has managerial experience regarding components of emotional intelligence.
In the methodology part, the selected data collection method will be justified and explained why the author thought a semi-structured interview to be the most suitable for this study.

The author had already received job offers in those fields. However, he had agreed with the company that he would turn down the request for now until he had graduated and would get back to them after he was done with his graduation, therefore this would be an excellent opportunity for him to start the project of learning more about B2B field. It is sales communication aspects to gain higher competence over his possible peer applicants. This would also be beneficial for the company to hire a fresh graduate with new knowledge of the given field who is motivated to apply the thesis learnings into action. Therefore, in that sense, it makes it an essential topic for sales-oriented people eager to push toward successful sales.

Keywords
B2B, sales stages, sales representative, social selling, SPIN selling, Emotional intelligence, Emotional competence, Leadership, Team communication

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1 Introduction

This is a project-type of bachelor's thesis for the Degree Programme in International Business at the Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. This thesis aims to understand the psychology and required hard and soft skills for the international sales field in the relationship between customer and sales teams' interaction. As communication competence plays a central role in team dynamics and buyer-seller interaction, which can significantly contribute to sales success, this thesis will focus on those interested in aiming their career in business-to-business B2B sales. In this thesis, the author presents an overview of B2B sales stages in the CRM software industry. Then the author will continue to examine the value of social selling – presence in social media with customer interaction and how to successfully gain a wide network that potentially increases sales reps' success. After discussing about the sales process and ways to gain wide network with social selling, the author will then discuss the role and importance of emotional competence learned through emotional intelligence on a leaders' and team communication perspective to improve sales performance. Lastly, after theoretical study, the author will include data from interviewing sales reps with managerial experience to gain a better understanding of what kind of emotional competencies is required to build and maintain a high-performing B2B sales team. B2B sales reps are represented in all industries and service sectors. However, increasing demands for international selling are calling for a better understanding of the interpersonal communication competence required of sales reps. For this topic, the author decided to focus on sales reps working in the CRM software industry as it continues to grow at a tremendous rate, therefore, now CRM software has become the heart of every growing business. According to Mark Taylor (2021), accessibility is one of the primary drivers of CRM development since businesses need real-time access to customer data, with mobile and cloud solutions setting the pace. In international B2B selling, sales reps aim to build appropriate solutions in long-term customer relationships with key customers and achieve profitable sales via successful collaborative sales processes (Koponen, Julkunen & Asai 2019). In B2B sales and marketing, buyers seek connection, trust, and advocacy. It does not matter how good the sales rep's product or service is if they do not know how to sell it to a modern-day buyer. Therefore, refining the entire sales process is crucial, and a sales rep must start with the bottom line by establishing a solid connection with the customer.

The reason for the decision to make a theoretical part of sales management is to provide for anyone who has plans to make a transition in their career to the B2B field. Therefore, this topic will support one's learning and preparation before leaping to the B2B world.

2 B2B sales process of CRM software & sales communication competence

The following chapter will introduce the theoretical framework for B2B sales stages of the sales process in the CRM software industry and discusses the sales process step by step, with the aim of outlining useful operating models for the sales rep for each step of the process and then the role of emotional intelligence in customer relationships and internal sales team communication. Sales representatives use a set of cyclical processes known as sales process to guide potential customers from the early stages of awareness to a closed transaction. Simply put, the sales process is a customer's journey typically consisting of 5-7 stages from realizing they need a product/service to make an actual purchase (**prospecting, preparation, approach, presentation, handling objections, closing and follow-up**). Having a solid base knowledge of the sales cycle from prospecting to ending the case of the sale is not enough for a sales rep to understand but also needs to understand the advantages of personal branding as it provides sales reps opportunity to connect with customers, become more visible in their industry, increase their reputation, and leave a lasting impression during online and in-person networking, which enables them to sell more to target prospects (Richmond 2010). Emotionally competent sales rep perform better than their non-emotionally intelligent peers, therefore, there are five aspects of emotional intelligence that affects sales performance that is beneficial for sales reps to acquire; self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills, empathy, and motivation (Goleman 2006, 43). No matter how skilled they are in presenting the solutions to the problem for the customer, however often they get distracted or derailed by their emotions in the sales process, which can lead them to leave value on the table, presenting off-target solutions, but not asking the right questions which as an outcome can be detrimental and failing to position themselves as a trusted advisor. Acquiring the aspects of emotional intelligence allows sales reps to understand the buyer and effectively apply the ability of their own emotions during interactions with the buyer to improve the sales cycle rather than derail them (Richardson 2022). Continuous renewal, demands for innovation, self-management, and building and maintaining trust inside companies are thought to be the major difficulties in management, therefore companies need a good leader who knows how to inspire, inspire and innovate. Effective leadership starts with oneself. When a leader is emotionally intelligent, e.g., aware of their own emotions, it also makes it easier to get along with others and enables them to lead a team of individuals to work together effectively towards common goals (Sydänmaanlakka 2013). Working actively to promote and train emotional intelligence inside of teams help to boost productivity and motivation inside the team. Emotionally intelligent teams are more productive, better at collaboration, and better at communicating, which acts as the building blocks towards common goals and for overall successful sales performance (Goleman 2019).

2.1 B2B Sales Process

Sales are about value creation and developing customers' business. The customer buys solutions to overcome challenges or to develop their own business, from the point of view of the seller, it is essential to offer something where the customer sees value when using it for their own business. A business customer does not buy a solution for its own sake, but for the value, it produces for the customer's business. For this reason, it is not enough that the sales rep knows the features of the solution they offer, the sales rep must be able to turn these features into a benefit for the customer. In order for the sales rep to be able to identify what kind of value the customer wants, the sales rep must know the customer's business, the customer's earning logic, and the market situation in which the customer's company operates. In addition, the sales rep must understand the customer's own customers' purchasing behavior. When the sales rep is genuinely interested in helping the customer succeed in their business and in the market, the customer's trust towards the sales rep also increases, in this case, the sales reps do not only pursue their own interest but also the value is formed for both parties (Hänti 2016). The customer's problems are what a sales rep must consistently keep in mind when crafting their product or service, sales pitch, and overall strategy to target their buyer persona. When the sales rep does not take care of the sales process, it can lead to poor conversion rates, delayed responses, and failure to close deals. The B2B sales process is made up of certain activities that occur in a particular order. Once the sales rep understands the stages, they can influence and move their prospects through them to close deals faster. The exact number of stages in the sales process will depend on the industry and sales organization, but the B2B sales process is typically a 5- to 7-stage sales cycle (Beyond Business Groups 2018).

Figure 1. B2B sales process (Adapted from Beyond Business Groups 2018).

2.1.1 Prospecting & Preparation

The sales process starts with the identification of potential customers and their meeting in sales negotiations, which in desirable outcome can lead to the deal which is referred to buying-decision and nurturing the relationships (Hänti 2016). The first stage of the sales process is networking and creating leads with people who may be interested in the goods or services the sales rep is selling in order to identify who are potential customers. In prospecting, sales reps are determining whether there is a fit and mutually beneficial relationship that's worth pursuing as it may lead to an opportunity to deliver value and earn a buying commitment. This stage aims to qualify leads and cultivate

customers through the sales funnel. Typically, this has been done by cold calling or emailing the prospects. However, companies need to invest in a B2B lead generation strategy that contains several components, especially during the digital age, one of which is social media. It is time for companies to realize that their customers are on social media. This is why including social networking in the B2B lead-generating strategy is so crucial (Demandscience 2020).

Often, the selling process begins by forming a solid foundation for customer and product knowledge. From this, any sales rep can better understand their prospect's business before beginning the approach to the customer. In the digital age all the prospect's information is easily found on websites, social media, and other platforms. By investing in the groundwork and trying to understand the prospect's products/services and their needs/pain points before contacting them for the first time, the sales rep will be better prepared and be able to provide the prospect with the solutions. This research stage prepares the sales rep for sales discovery calls and acts as an essential part of what kind of first impression the sales rep will give to the prospect (Spiller 2021). As said, the preparation stage depends on a combination of the sales reps' deep product and prospect knowledge. Having detailed knowledge and experience about the prospect's problems plays a crucial role, however, the sales rep also has to research who is the decision-maker in the company. To understand the buyers, the sales rep must first understand their preferences and motives. Therefore, when researching potential customers, the sales rep should be asking themselves:

- ***Who and where are my buyers?***
- ***What communication channels do my prospects prefer?***
- ***How do these organizations buy software?***
- ***What is their motivation to buy my product? (Kosoglow, Altschuler & Medina 2019).***

Ideal Prospect persona

It is all about flooding sales pipelines with the best opportunities in the most efficient way. Even when sales reps approach the right companies, they fail to engage with the right people at the beginning of the process. There are techniques for leveraging an Ideal Prospect Persona (IPP) that will result in more qualified leads and more deals. Moreover, finding and selling to the right person, to begin with, is the most critical renewal driver for a recurring revenue business. The approach to persona development is designed to achieve actionable insight that facilitates messaging prospects most effectively and ensures a shared understanding across a sales rep's company about the profile of the ideal buyer (Tyler & Donovan 2016).

Job title

Job titles are the most commonly leveraged piece of B2B buyer demographic information because they encapsulate both job level and job function. A job title is an ideal prospect persona since it is used for general targeting, therefore, those can be found on e.g., LinkedIn to help build rapport during specific opportunities. Concerning job function, it is particularly valuable if sales reps are familiar with the language and the common variations of job titles that prospects use to describe or differentiate themselves (Tyler & Donovan 2016).

Professional Objectives

Objectives are one of the most valuable components of a persona, and sales reps should pay close attention to their prospects' goals. They can be called many things, including goals, critical initiatives, and key performance indicators (KPIs). Sales reps should be aware of every major activity that consumes their prospects' time, money, and effort. They should also be aware of the challenges their prospects face in achieving those objectives, regardless of what they are selling. With Ideal Prospect Persona research, sales reps now have a general idea of what will be most relevant to a person before a one-to-one conversation. While it is important to note that buyer persona research does not replace sales discovery, this research allows a sales rep to go into a discovery call with an understanding of the buyer's pains, how they measure success, and what they value. In addition to these qualities, persona research enables sales teams to tailor their communication efforts based on individual preferences (Kosoglow, Altschuler & Medina 2019).

2.1.2 Approach & Presentation

Crafting effective messaging is essential for authenticity, starting with initial contact to explore common interests and continuing through product implementation, delivery, and finally post-sale engagement and satisfaction. This stage is critical for the sales rep's first approach to a prospect. In this approach stage, the sales rep will contact a prospect by reaching out, introducing themselves, and starting a conversation. This might happen via phone call, email, approaching via social media, or in person. The approach stage's purpose is to understand the prospect's needs better. With that information, the sales rep can move to the next stage. This stage involves understanding what the prospect wants and needs by talking with them. A sales rep must ask the right questions and listen openly. To add value in this stage, they must be active listeners (Hubspot 2020). Figure 2. Illustrates six different stages of purchase intent in the customer buying cycle from Tyler & Donovan (2016) to better understand the prospects' needs and therefore craft an effective messaging when executing the approach stage.

Figure 2. Customers' problem identification cycle (Adapted from Tyler & Donovan 2016).

- In the first stage, prospects do not realize that a problem stands between them and the ability to increase profit, save time, reduce effort, or bolster their reputation. Moreover, at this stage, the prospects are unaware of your company or products.
- In the second stage, the prospects are aware of the problem and the company's products but have no interest in buying sales reps' offerings.
- In the third stage, prospective clients are interested in the possibility of doing business with a sales rep, and they begin to grasp the size of the sales rep's potential market.
- At the end of the evaluating stage, potential customers are investigating the magnitude of the opportunity, as well as the sales reps' ability to help them realize it. They are also learning about their other options at this point, so the sales rep needs to address some of the prospect's concerns and questions during the interaction. The evaluating stage can end with the prospect's decision to do nothing, to build, or to buy. This stage's result will define whether the customer buying cycle will continue to the next steps, however, if it continues to buying decision, then the cycle can proceed to the fifth stage.
- In the fifth stage, the prospect is persuaded to make a purchase, thereby becoming a customer.
- In the last stage of the customer buying cycle, prospects seek information after the purchase to ensure they gain the highest return on their investment, which can help them make future purchasing decisions.

Four stages of a sales meeting

In the book, SPIN Selling, Neil Rackham explains that there are four stages of sales meetings that apply to any size of the sale, from the simplest to the most sophisticated, which goes through these four stages.

Figure 3. The four stages of the sales meeting (Adapted from Rackham 1988).

Preliminaries

This warming-up event occurs before moving to the serious selling phase. It is about giving the first good impression to the prospect, including the way how the sales rep introduces themselves and explains the agenda of the meeting. In the book, Spin Selling, Neil Rackham says that several very successful sales reps confidently told him that the first 2 minutes of a meeting with the prospect form crucial initial impressions that will have a significant influence on the rest of the sale (Rackham 1988).

Investigating

Investigating has become the most important of all selling skills and is particularly crucial in more significant sales. Almost every sale involves finding something out by asking questions and collecting a prospect's data. It is about uncovering their needs or understanding the prospect better and their organizations. An inexperienced sales rep often starts the product presentation too early without first clarifying the customer's situation and needs. When the customer's values, expectations, wishes, and purchase situation are clear, the sales rep knows better how to offer a suitable solution to the customer's purchase problem. The sales rep can think and practice questions before meeting the customer, especially if the sales rep is going to meet the customer for the first time. They must think in advance about what information is needed about the customer. Some of the information can be obtained in advance, but some things must be found out during the meeting, for example, the following things are of interest to the sales rep:

- ***What is the customer's current situation. E.g. how they are operating and what kind of changes are planned?***
- ***What kind of system/platform the customer is using to record all the customer data?***
- ***Who is using the system currently?***
- ***How satisfied the customer is currently with their way to operate or the systems they're using?***
- ***How would the purchase proceed? Who in the company would participate in buying-decision?***
- ***When the procurement would be relevant?***
- ***What kind of budget the customer has and how important is it for them to have the new solution?***
- ***What are the things that are significantly important during the procurement and what kind of buying criteria the customer is using?***
- ***What kind of expectations, special conditions or requirements customer has regarding e.g. delivery conditions or additional services? (Rackham 1988).***

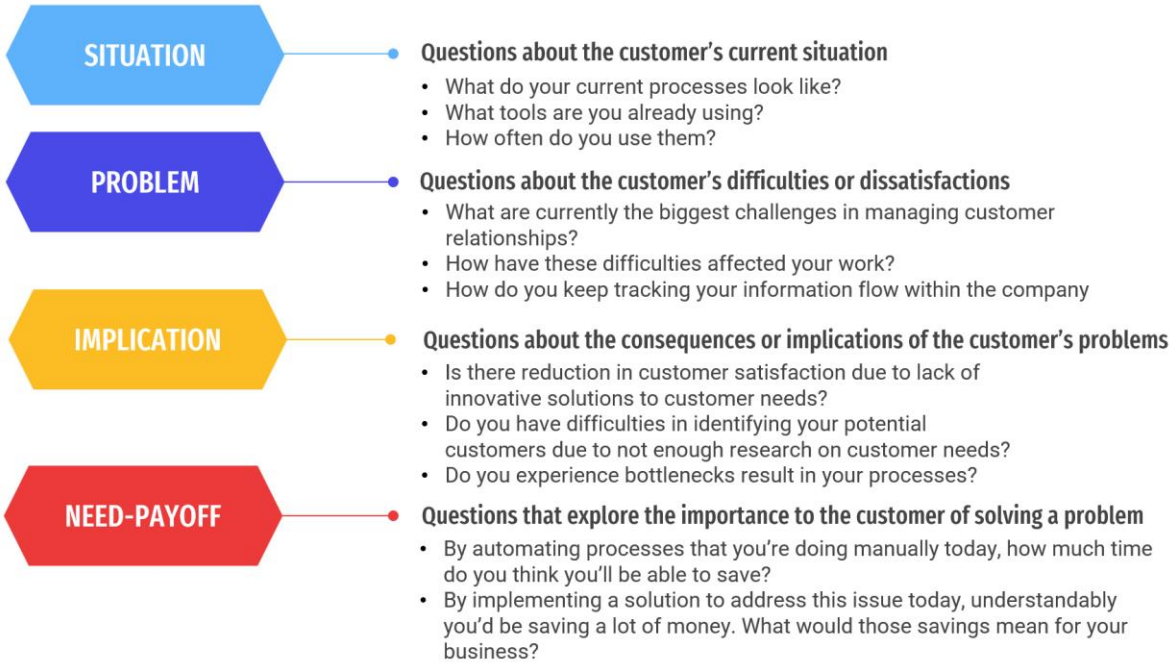
According to research, a sales rep who asks questions is successful because they are able to find out what the customer, they are dealing with is like and what their needs and selection criteria are. The customer feels that the sales rep is genuinely interested in the customer and in finding the best possible solution for the customer's situation and does not just present the exact same rehearsed sales pitch to everyone, but only asking questions is not enough, the sales rep must also listen to the customer's answer and understand what kind of need and situation the customers has regarding their answers. Often the customer themselves has not fully internalized the root cause of their challenges. This may be due to the fact that the customer has insufficient information about the solutions on offer. With the help of experienced questioning skills, the sales rep helps the customer to clarify also for themselves what the situation actually is (Hänti 2016).

Even though the investigation part of the sales plays a crucial role in selling, there also lies common mistakes that sales reps can fall into, which can be detrimental to the whole deal if they lack empathy and interest towards the customer. The common mistakes:

- Asking questions but not actually listening
- Assuming something, but the sales rep does not ask or re-check
- Not using open questions
- With the questions asked, the sales rep shows that they have not done the "homework" (HubSpot 2022).

Spin Selling

To avoid these possible pitfalls, use the SPIN technique, which is a sequence of questions that the sales rep asks during a sales meeting. It's about asking open questions that encourage the customer to answer broadly and freely and therefore openly talk about their situation, wishes, and values. Open questions often start with the words **how, why,** and **when** (Hänti 2016). The SPIN technique has been used since the 1970s and is still even on this day, SPIN selling has proven to be the most effective way to improve sales success and deliver bottom-line results. The SPIN technique aims to get more information about the customer's needs and motivations, so the sales rep can craft an effective solution that meets those needs and strengthens their relationship with the customer, which can lead to a closing of a deal (Rackham 1988). Below, Figure 4. presents an illustration of the SPIN selling technique that is built around four types of key sales questions that each are fulfilling crucial roles within a CRM sales process:



-	The S in SPIN: Sales reps should ask questions to understand the nature of the prospect's business and their key objectives. These are questions a sales rep could not have gotten answers to through preliminary research.
-	The P in SPIN: Prospects' pain points and frustrations are elicited through problem questions. These are asked during the investigation stage. Implication questions allow the prospect to relate their frustrations with the previous stage's problems.
-	The I in SPIN: In the implication phase, the sales rep asks questions designed to make prospects see that their problems are more significant than they thought.
-	The N in SPIN: Finally, in the need-payoff phase, the sales rep shifts to a positive, solution-focused approach to get the customer to express a clear need. For example, "How would you find this solution useful in addressing your explicit need?" (Tyler & Donovan 2016).

Figure 4. The SPIN technique (Adapted from Rackham 1988).

As Hänti (2016) recommends at the beginning of having a dialogue with the customer to start with open questions how, why, and when. Question types should be kept as open questions, as they create more discussion, and the answers will become more extensive. It is therefore good to start the information acquisition by mapping the general view of needs assessment and move on at leisure for the acquisition of more detailed information. A sales rep can begin to unravel the customer's situation using the funneling technique presented below in Figure 5. In the funneling model, the sales rep leads the conversation and leads it in the right direction, and finally proceeds to present the decision.

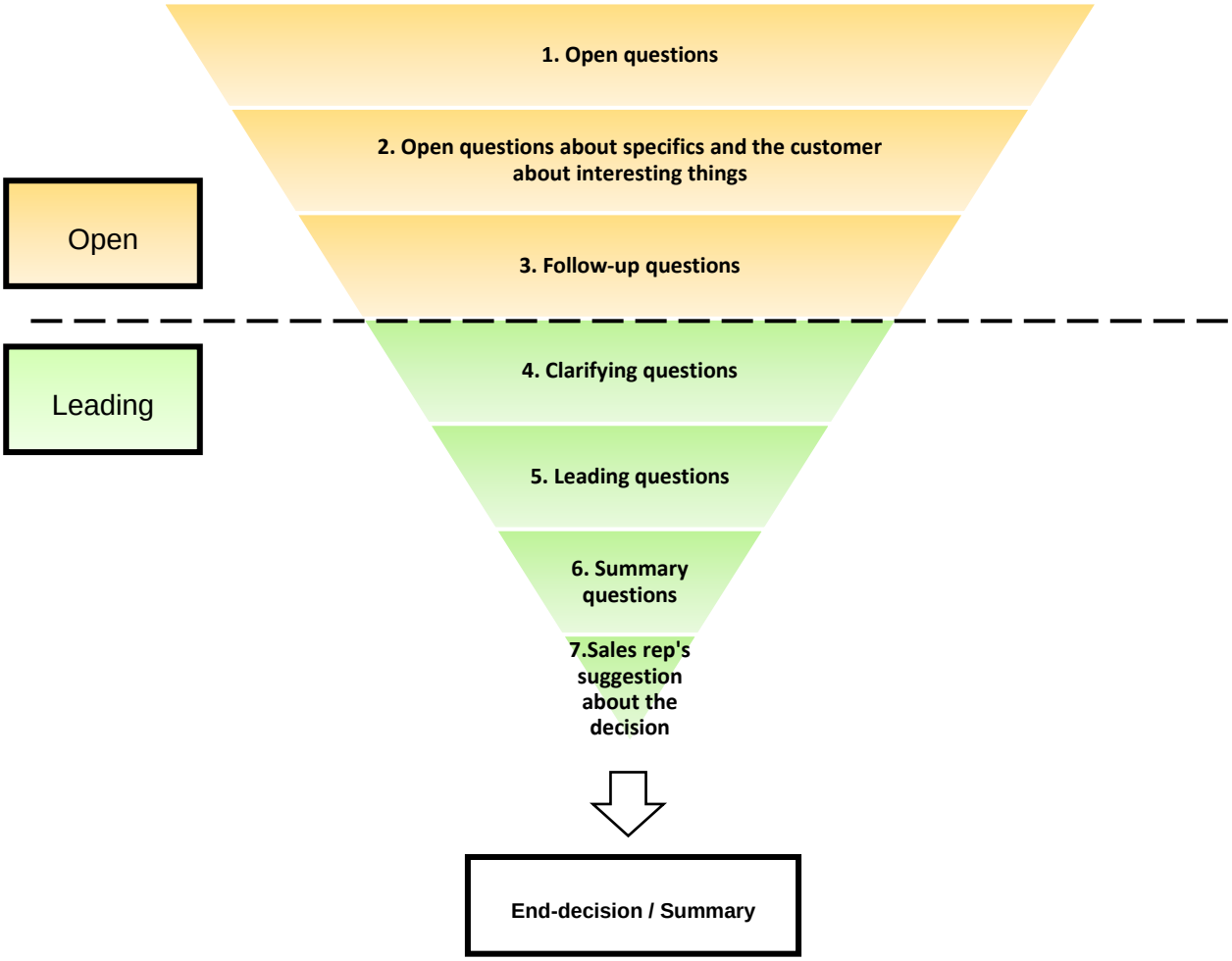


Figure 5. Question funneling model (Adapted from Alanen, Mälkiä, Sell 2005).

Especially the customer who uses competing products should be made to talk about their satisfaction and operational shortcomings and problems of their current solutions therefore, the questions related to problems must be asked delicately as the customer does not necessarily want to immediately tell the sales rep about the difficulties in their business. A sales rep can present clarifying questions for driving the conclusion to the needs assessment: “ Did I understand correctly, that…”

or “Was it so that…”. Needs-assessment questions have to be presented throughout the sales meeting, not only at the beginning of discussions. That is how a sales rep will be able to identify customers’ opinions and possible objections (Bergström & Leppänen 2021). Below, Table 1. will present what kind of different open questions for needs assessment is recommended to use to lead the sales conversation to the desired outcome.

Table 1. Different needs-assessment questions (Adapted from Bergström & Leppänen 2021).

Question Type	Use	Example
Open questions	Needs assessment when customers cannot reply **yes** or **no**	Could you explain… Could you tell me what kind of…
Direct questions	Is used to obtain more detailed information during the conversation	How many… What... Who… For whom… What kind of… Why… When…
Leading questions	Is used to lead a conversation on a specific topic	You just mentioned that…, therefore As discussed,…, is it so that…
Clarifying questions	Is used for obtaining specific information and clarifying opinions	Did I understand correctly, that… Is it so that… So do you think that…
Repeated questions	Repeating the customer’s last word or sentence as a question. Is used e.g., when objections are raised	Customer: Our current solution is good enough. Sales rep: In what way the current solution is good?
Contrast questions	Is used when a sales rep wants the customer's opinion about competing products/solution	What good features are there in… compared to…
Summary questions	Is used in a specific phase or after the end of the whole conversation	We have talked about… and agreed… Would it still be…

Demonstrating Capability

In most meetings, the sales rep will need to demonstrate to customers what value they have to offer after taking notes from the customer's answers by using the SPIN technique to spark interest in the prospect. In a nutshell, selling the solution to the problems. In this third stage of the meeting, sales reps have to show the prospect what kind of a solution they are offering and what kind of valuable contribution it brings to aid solve their problems. A formal presentation can demonstrate the solution, sometimes by showing the product in action and sometimes by describing some potential benefits. The main goal of demonstrating capabilities is the sales rep's work of convincing the prospect that they have got something to offer (Rackham 1988).

Obtaining commitment

The last stage of the sales meeting is *Obtaining commitment*. It means that the sales meeting will potentially end with some commitment from the customer. In more minor sales, the commitment is usually in the form of a purchase, but in more extensive sales, there may be a whole range of other commitments sales reps have to obtain before they reach the order stage. The meeting objective may, for example, be to get the customer's agreement to attend a product demonstration, to test new material, or to give them access to a higher level of the decision maker, and in none of these cases is the commitment and order (Rackham 1988).

2.1.3 Handling objections

Regardless of how good the product presentation was, the buyer can always present a dissenting opinion or so-called objection. Objection handling is another aspect of value selling and is an essential part of selling conversations. During the selling conversation, often buyer tries to dodge the given value points and raise questions that may cause any conflict or disagreement with the need to negotiate to achieve the outcome of a mutually satisfactory sale. Therefore, a sales rep should be prepared beforehand for possible objections during the groundwork stage to successfully manage any conflict that may arise and move to the closing stage (Spiller 2021). Every sales rep has to try to find the reasoning behind the objections by asking why the buyer has different opinions: Has the sales rep left out something worth mentioning about the service/product? Is the buyer suspicious about the product/service longevity? Or can the buyer afford to buy the product/service? Although, when a buyer raises objections, it does not mean that they would doubt the quality of the offering or its fit, therefore it may be seen as a purchase intention. With the questions and objections, the buyer wants to obtain more information and certainty of purchase and possibly bargain the price (Bergström & Leppänen 2021).

According to Hubspot's (2021) article, typical sales objection falls into four categories:

-	Lack of budget, such as price objections, is common because all purchases carry some level of risk, therefore sales reps should during the groundwork consider the positioning of their product or service to demonstrate that value. This turns the conversation into one about risk versus reward. By providing value and explaining where the solution will take the buyer, they can be convinced that the reward is worth taking on some level of risk.
-	Lack of need might seem like an objective, but it also exists an opportunity to provide information to prospects and gather information from them in return. Open-ended and layered questions can be used to qualify the prospect, evaluate their needs, and determine if there is a fit between the organization and the buyer.
-	Lack of trust is an occasion when a buyer may never have heard of the sales rep's organization, or they might be likely already familiar with the organization. Either way, at this point, the sales rep can overcome the objection by refreshing their memory and emphasizing the organization's authority in the market.
-	Lack of urgency is when the buyer thinks it is not important right now, whereas, for the sales rep, the goal is to determine whether the timing is an issue or if the buyer is brushing them off. Asking the customer to explain on why timing is not crucial and what other concerns are now capturing his attention is one technique to achieve this. If a prospect's response to the sales pitch is vague, the sales rep has to listen closely to determine whether the delay is due to a concrete timing issue or ambiguous excuses. If possible, schedule an appointment for later to explore the topic further would come in the place. It does not matter what service/product is sold, who the customers are, or what industry sales rep is selling into. Below, the author will present Table 1. which discusses the types of objections and how to deal with them.

Table 2. Four categories of objections (Adapted from Hubspot 2021).

OBJECTIONS	WHAT TO DO	HOW
Lack of budget *"It is too expensive."* *"I do not have the cash right now. "*	• Focus on value. • Offer flexible options. • Split the price.	• Help the prospect what they gain from the product/service • Break down the offerings into bundles to make them less expensive. • Instead of presenting the price in one big chunk, split them into weeks/months.
Lack of need *"I do not see how your product can help me."* *"I do not think you can help me. "*	• Educate more about the offering	• Prospect is not educated enough on your product and does not know what problems it can solve. This allows giving the buyer to get more information, as well as get more information from the prospect.
Lack of trust *"I have never heard of your company. "* *"I do not know whether your product or service is worth my money. "*	• Emphasize the authority the organization has in the market and double down the value with an elevator pitch	• Deal with a lack of trust objection by saying: "No problem! Many of our loyal customers had not heard of us before signing up. Does it make sense for me to explain the value that we can bring to your business? "
Lack of urgency *"This *problem* is not important to me right now."* *"Sounds fantastic! However, solving *the problem* is not our priority right now.*	• Remind them about the pain • Stress the intended output	• Reminding them about their pain points by using their own words. • Use numbers, data, and potential income to show the product's value.

2.1.4 Closing

Closing the deal is a critical moment for the business. When approaching the closing stage, the sales rep should have already encountered both questions and objections from the prospect. They successfully answered each question and overcame any objections to continue and earn the buyer's trust. Earning trust during the handling objections stage is needed to achieve the buyer's commitment to buy. The sales rep's most important tasks are to guide the sales discussion so that the customer ends up saying what they think about the offered solution and whether they are ready to buy it (Bergström & Leppänen 2021). However, when selling complex solutions, it is important that the sales rep does not pressure the customer into decision-making too quickly. Premature pressure on the customer can limit the sales rep's opportunities to make a deal at a point when the customer would be ready for it. If the buyer is not ready to buy, the sales rep must go back a few steps and look into potential causes (Hänti 2016). The sales rep's task is to convince the customer that the present purchase will best solve the customer's problems. This goal is reached when the customer has already been persuaded to participate in the negotiation during the sales negotiation, therefore making sure that they have understood the advantages and benefits offered by the solution.

The purchase situation is always a risk for the customer because when they end up with one option, they have to reject a whole bunch of other good options at the same time. The important task of the sales rep is to try to reduce the risk of the customer experiencing uncertainty by repeating the most relevant benefits of the solution to the customer, which have already been discussed during the sales negotiation. The customer's uncertainty can be further removed, for example, by presenting the reference customers' achieved benefits or additional services included in the solution, such as a warranty and post-delivery support. In removing the feeling of risk, it is important to convince the customer that they will not be disappointed with their purchase (Hänti 2016). It is good to remember that the buyer can also make a buying decision afterward, as it may depend on a lack of information therefore it is important that the sales rep should inquire how can they be of help in the future.

WAYS TO CLOSE THE DEAL

Direct question	Summarizing benefits	Comparison method	Proving	Choice of options
•Can we accept the agreement? •Do I mark the delivery date for 1.1. or 10.10.?	•Reminding the customer of the most relevant benefits of the solution which have already been discussed during the sales negotiation.	•Listing benefits of purchase-decision > the disadvantages of delaying the purchase-decision •The pros and cons in the decision of purhcasing or not purchasing.	•"If I can solve the problem that you are having, can we keep the deal agreed?"	•Recapping and bringing other options, but limited only to few.

Figure 6. Ways to close the deal (Adapted from Hänti 2016).

2.1.5 Follow-up

The role of sales reps in the follow-up stage includes overseeing order processing and fulfillment to ensure orders are processed accurately and on time. In addition, sales reps must continue to strengthen relationships with clients through personalized follow-up communications. Following up after completing the initial order can uncover new needs the client may have, which may result in the customer entering the sales funnel again. In addition, there may be upsell or cross-sell opportunities during the follow-up stage. Upselling encourages the purchase of anything that would make the primary purchase more expensive e.g., an upgrade, add-on, or premium product, and cross-selling promotes purchasing anything in conjunction with the primary product (Paschen, Wilson, Ferreira 2020). Follow-up analysis is also essential to ensure that the initiatives have actually delivered the value that customers are seeking. Talking with customers would bring more insights and understanding of their experience by conducting follow-up interviews to learn more about their requirements, satisfaction, irritation, and the concessions they make when utilizing the goods and services. It's important to map out who is on the buying team, who affects it, and the various priorities and sources of value for each as many individuals might be engaged in purchasing decisions, especially at bigger companies (Harvard Business Review 2018). Interviews are also valuable for obtaining customer references as it acts as part of customer relationships and the related value-creation activities that a company leverages externally or internally in its marketing efforts, which can boost sales and opportunities in sales negotiations even more in the future.

2.2 Value in personal branding for sales representative

The sales and marketing process of identifying prospects and converting them into customers has drastically changed with the arrival of social media. Customers are making more educated buying decisions. They are doing their research online, thereby being influenced by peers, brands, and total strangers and much of that influence is happening across social media channels (Belew S. 2014). According to Schaub (2014) sales reps who are not active social media users are significantly missing out on an important opportunity to connect and network. People prefer to buy from those they know and trust. Due to the fact that peer interactions are now taking place on social media, sales reps who are selling high-impact goods or services must recreate their networking technique online. In the world of B2B sales, “social selling” is referred to by Belew (2014) as “un-selling” in which she refers to enjoying online conversations with prospects, joining online communities, creating relationships, and listening to people in conversations about their wants and needs. Unlike traditional advertising, social media marketing lets the sales rep engage with online prospects and customers. With “un-selling” Belew (2014) means identification, targeting, and reaching out to prospective and existing customers through social media channels and social communities in an effort to engage them in conversations that result in a potentially mutually beneficial relationship. Social selling is a method of deals in which digital and social media channels are used to create more sales opportunities, deepen relationships with current customers, and build trust with potential customer candidates along with the stages of the sales process. If an organization wants to grow sales, reaching new customers is critical to its success. That means social media will become increasingly important to the organization. There are currently over one billion people active on the top social networks, including LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram (Leino & Kenner 2020, 184). Social selling is long-term relationship building based on establishing trust and offering value. For most sales reps, this should be good news. After all, the traditional sales process is about just nurturing relationships. For many marketers, this should also be welcome information because social selling is based on building brand trust, and it is only a matter of extending those concepts to a new platform of social media. Social selling activity can look and behave very differently depending on the goals and operating models. The goal for some is to increase awareness and underline expertise in the key target group by utilizing content and actively sharing expertise content. For others, the goal may be more strongly related to prospecting on social media and arranging meetings with potential decision-makers (Belew 2014).

When sales reps select the social media platforms where they want to establish an online presence. Belew S (2014) is sharing tips and the different strengths and weaknesses of each social media platform:

LinkedIn (200-million-member social network for professionals)

- Create strong LinkedIn profile with a nice head-shot photo
- Add recommendations and endorsements from your customers and other online parties
- Build the network by sending connection invitations to all of your contacts
- LinkedIn can be useful for building awareness of your product/solution and can help potential customers during the "evaluation stages of the sales process".

Twitter (Popular "microblogging" website registers 400 million tweets daily)

- Tweeting is an effective platform for introducing yourself to a vast online community.
- With Twitter, you can engage strangers and friends online by reacting to their tweets or retweeting their messages.
- Never be overly commercial with your tweets. Publish tweets that entertains or educate.

Facebook, Google+ and online communities

- Facebook is valuable for the "purchasing" stage of a sale whereas Google+ works best during the "post-purchase stage".
- Technorati Media reports that blogs and Facebook influence more purchases than any other social media entities.
- Consumers rate Facebook, Google+ and Youtube as the most popular of all platforms.
- These outlets enables to connect with an impressive number of people and active online communities.

YouTube

- YouTube fans spend four billion hours each month watching online videos.
- Keep the content of videos short and to the point.

Blogs

- Look for appropriate communities: people with similar interests congregate and communicate.
- Blogs are often used to help people who seek answers to their questions.

Figure 7. Tips, pros, and cons of each social media platform (Adapted from Belew 2014).

5 Elements of Social selling

On the next page, Leino and Kenner (2020) present the various elements and key goals of social selling from the point of view of sales reps or those taking measures to increase sales opportunities in a new era of sales.

Figure 8. Five Elements of social selling (Adapted from Leino & Kenner 2020).

Social Listening

The goal of social listening is to utilize the search function of social channels and stay up to date on the events and changes of the target groups, as well as to support prospecting by finding the right decision-makers and background influencers in the ocean of social networks.

- ***Who are the decision-makers and the background influencers sales reps should know and commit to the sales process?***
- ***To whom and at what point the sales rep's should target the message to ease up customers buying decision process?***
- ***What are the key topics the customers are discussing that would make contacting them easier? (Leino & Kenner 2020, 195).***

The purpose of social listening is to obtain the answers to sales rep's questions like:

Personal brand

Building a personal brand as a sales rep means promoting expertise in one's subject area, which ensures that one appears to the networks and potential customers as a credible expert. Practically, this means unlocking one's expertise by building professional and up-to-date profiles and actively participating in discussions on one's professional topic in professional social media channels. Sales reps should put themselves in a customer's position and ask themselves if their social media presence such that it inspires trust and lowers the threshold for customers to contact them.

To highlight the sales rep's personal brand, its purpose is to answer the questions like:

- ***Does the sales rep seem to have enough expertise in their own field for the recipients based on their profiles?***
- ***Does the sales rep's activities in social media support the increase of their professional reputation?***
- ***Does the social media presence seem humane, and does it lower the threshold for contacting?***
- ***Will the recipient be able to understand the field of expertise of the sales rep when they take a glance at their profiles? (Leino & Kenner 2020, 195).***

Utilizing content

The customer's purchase process begins regardless of the industry, in more and more cases, independently online, customers compare options by an ever-growing decision-making committee, and content received online, recommendations from contacts in the network, or professional social media groups act as decision-making support during the comparison phase. Therefore, the first "seller" that the customer will face is more often a search engine, website or social media profile, or digital content. The main goal of utilizing the content for professional followers and key target groups is to provide valuable content for them and to keep them interested. With the help of content, the company could add more value and awareness and provide answers to the customer's thoughts that they might have in their mind regarding the product to help the customers during their buying process. This information could be provided in the content form of articles, guides, webinars, or e-books.

The goal of utilizing the contents should answer the questions:

- ***What kind of content could be more attractive to our customers?***
- ***With what kind of systematic content production could we stay on top of mind within our target customers or the people in the relevant field of a profession?***
- ***What kind of content should we produce for our target group to help them further and ease their procurement decision and would lead them forward to the buying process? (Leino & Kenner 2020, 197).***

Nurturing relationships

The goal of nurturing relationships is to maintain and deepen the already existing relationships and develop recently obtained new ones by staying in contact with them and having an active dialog with the new connections. To maintain relationships with the networks by sending them direct messages by taking part in conversations, the contacting will get more accessible, and the threshold for commercial discussions will decrease by being actively present. In the social selling context, nurturing relationships is usually done by actively contacting existing customers on social media platforms. Taking relationships to a deeper level is one of the most critical ways that separates modern customer-centric sales reps from average sales reps. Average sales reps only contact customers in commercial or business-related matters but need to focus properly on getting to know the customer as a person and deepening relationships on a personal level. Never treat a network member

as numbers or tend to talk about them as opportunities but get to know the person behind the profile.

Nurturing relationships main goal is to answer the questions:

- ***What social media channels should we use to stay relevant and enable us to dialog with each other individually with the target group decision makers and with the influencers in the same industry?***
- ***Are we genuinely interested in our networks, or are we just collecting the contacts like business cards?***
- ***How could we develop a more personal and humane relationship with our customers through social media instead of only business-related affairs? (Leino & Kenner 2020, 199).***

Reinforcing networks

The goal of growing the network is to expand one's network of experts to strengthen it. By increasing the network, the company can monitor and network with relevant influencers and decision-makers so that they have as wide a circle of influence as possible from the various client companies.

Reinforcing networks aim to answer questions:

- ***Who are the decision-makers and influencers we know now from our target group?***
- ***How and which one of us should communicate to and approach the potential customers in different channels?***
- ***How can we keep contacting our customers between the sales processes? (Leino & Kenner 2020, 200).***

2.3 The role of emotional intelligence in sales team leadership

In this chapter, the author will be introducing the five components of emotional intelligence by Goleman (2005) which are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. The first three components of emotional intelligence self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation are all self-management skills. The last two are empathy and social skill regarding on a person's ability to manage relationships with others. However, this chapter's aim is to study emotional intelligence and its social competence requirements for a sales team leader and high-performing teams in order to achieve teams and the company's overall success, therefore from Goleman's five components only empathy and social skills are chosen to be more deeply studied. In the following chapter, the sales team leader is referred also to as the sales manager.

According to Goleman (2005), while a person's emotional intelligence determines their potential for learning the fundamentals of self-mastery, how much of that potential they have mastered in ways that transfer into practical talents on the job is shown by their emotional competence. A capacity for emotional intelligence principles, notably social awareness and relationship management, is necessary for emotional competence in teamwork. However, emotional competencies are taught skills. Possessing social awareness or relationship management expertise does not imply that a person has mastered the extra knowledge necessary to manage a team effectively or to resolve a disagreement. One has the potential to become skilled at these competencies. Excellent performance at work is a product of emotional competence, a learned skill based on emotional intelligence. Altogether Goleman lists 25 competencies divided into personal -and social competencies. Personal competencies cover the emotional intelligence elements of self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation, whereas social competencies relate more to empathy and social skills. Therefore, based on Goleman's emotional competence framework that he presents (Goleman 1998, 26-27), the author has compiled Figure 9. which illustrates the elements of emotional intelligence and the competencies that are linked to each component.

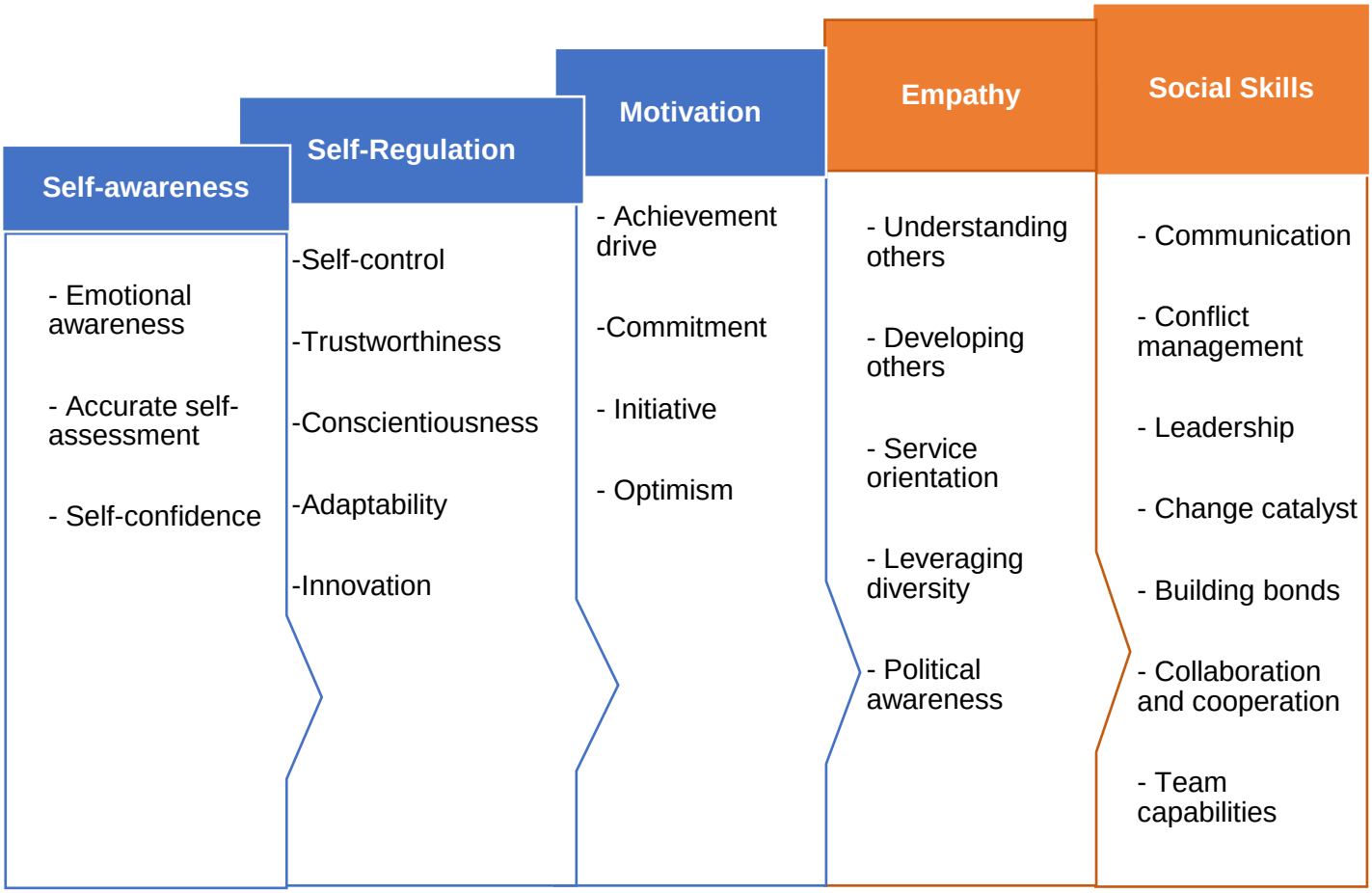


Figure 9. The elements of emotional intelligence and the competencies linked to each component (adapted from Goleman 2005).

Rubanovitsch & Aalto (2008) defines sales manager duties as in the addition of bringing revenue to the company's success, they are responsible for the performance, development, and well-being of their employees. Management is only part of the sales manager's task field, therefore sales manager has to divide his time between leading the sales team, selling, and other tasks.

According to Goleman (1998), emotional competence is a learned ability based on emotional intelligence that is resulted in an outstanding performance at work. Emotional competence is particularly central to leadership, a role whose essence is getting others to do their jobs more effectively. A lack of interpersonal skills in leaders lowers everyone's performance, therefore team leaders' strengths or weaknesses in emotional competence can be measured in the gain or loss to the company of the fullest talents of those they manage.

Working in sales can be challenging both mentally and emotionally. The team leader's task is to help the individuals in the team and see the whole of the organization and help the employees succeed while maintaining their performance (Hyppänen 2013). However, the company's success is built on the back of every employee. While there are successes when the whole team feels like celebrating, there will be low points where every path leads to a dead end. Any sales team requires

an emotionally intelligent leader with their natural ability to read emotions to be supportive and empathetic when team members are stressed or feeling pressured, and they know how to help people who might struggle with workplace stress or mental health issues that the sales environment might bring (Passmore 2010). Characteristics that emotionally intelligent leaders often display:

Characteristics of emotionally intelligent leaders:

- They cope proactively with life's demands and pressures without caving in.
- They build and leverage cooperative, effective, and rewarding relationships with others.
- They set and achieve personal and professional goals in a manner that is compatible with what is best for them and others.
- They seek first to understand, and then to be understood.
- They are sufficiently assertive to act with authority in making difficult and courageous decisions when the need arises.
- They are typically positive and lead by example.
- They are realistically optimistic about maximizing their potential and ability to get the most out of others.

Figure 10. Characteristics of emotionally intelligent leaders (Adapted from Passmore 2010).

Five components of Emotional Intelligence: Empathy

Relating to one of the essential characteristics of a team leader, as explained by Goleman (1998), empathy is critical for better performance wherever the job focus is on people. Being able to pick up on such emotional clues is important in situations where people hide their genuine emotions. Empathy requires being able to read another's emotions at a higher level, as it involves sensing and responding to a person's unspoken concerns and feelings. How he describes it is that it is our social radar. Before identifying and understanding others' feelings, managers need to identify and understand the feeling in general, starting with their own feelings. As empathy is an automatic response to our environment, it depends on how well we use it and how much we practice it. Goleman (1998) presents in Figure 11. empathy's foundation skills for all the social competencies that are important for work which the author will illustrate below and then explore more deeply each one of them:

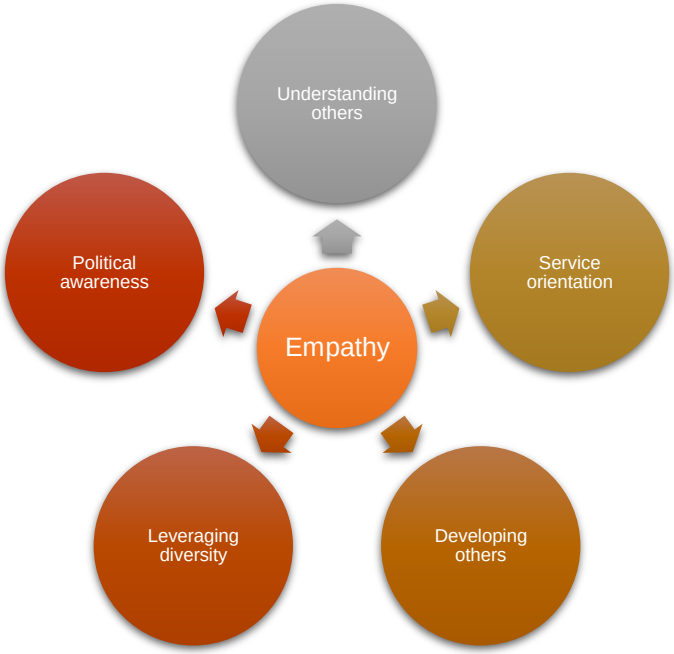


Figure 11. Empathy's foundation skills for all the social competencies that are important for work (Adapted from Goleman 1998).

Understanding others	Detecting employees' feelings and perspectives and taking an active interest in their concerns
Service orientation	Anticipating, identifying, and meeting employees' needs
Developing others	Detecting their development needs and strengthening their skills
Leveraging diversity	Generating opportunities through diverse people
Political awareness	Reading a group's emotions and relationships of power

Understanding others

Listening is at the heart of this principle. Alternatively, active listening. The ability to understand people cannot be advanced without listening. Actually, people will close themselves when they face a poor listener. Like in sales, to draw a quick conclusion from chapter 2.1. B2B sales stage, for effective selling, it was emphasized that one of the most important abilities that sales reps need throughout the selling process is the ability to listen actively and understand what the customer needs and then find a way to meet those needs. If they fail in active listening, proceeding in the sales process will be more challenging for the sales rep. Quoting Goleman (1998), listening is an art, and a finely tuned ear is at the heart of empathy. Just like in a sales environment, listening well

is essential also for workplace success. From the point of view of the workplace, managers are encouraged to give the sense that one is open to listening in the first place and therefore appears to be easily approachable and an “active listener” which by its definition means to listen well and to ask questions and restating one’s own words to make sure they understand what was said. Leaders possessing empathy are good listeners. They are capable of recognizing their employees' feelings. They are able to retain great employees and avoid the significant expense of turnover because of their ability to connect with and relate to their people. (Stanley C. 2020).

People with the competence of understanding others:

- Are aware of emotional signs and have good listening skills
- Show sensitivity and understand other’s perspectives
- Help out based on understanding other people’s needs and feelings (Goleman 1998).

Service Orientation

Goleman (1998) refers to service orientation in practice as a sense of service to the customer, but service orientation is more than just for the customer, as it can also happen internally in the company. The same as caring about serving customers, managers also watch about others, and how to support their employees, therefore their tasks may contribute to the team’s or company’s goal also.

Like in sales meetings, to be successful in the sales process, sales reps need to monitor the satisfaction of customers, not waiting to hear more objections, but freely offering more information that might be helpful without self-interest motivating gestures. This is the way to lay the groundwork for forming a trusting relationship where the customer or employee will start to see the manager as a source of reliable and helpful information (Goleman 1998).

People with the competence of service orientation:

- Understand the needs and match them to services or products.
- Seeks ways how to increase satisfaction and loyalty
- Offer appropriate assistance and have an authentic desire to help
- Has the ability to get into the shoes of the other person to serve them better (Goleman 1998).

Developing others

This practice is about helping others to grow. it starts with feedback for the employees to identify their areas for improvement and then it continues with mentoring and coaching. The key factor of becoming a successful coach is one who shows genuine personal interest in those they guide and have empathy for their employees. The helpful coach gives concrete information about what went wrong and combines it with constructive feedback and a positive expectation of the person's ability to improve. This feedback-giving structure coaching will help employees to perform better, enhances loyalty and job satisfaction, and leads to promotions (Goleman 1998).
To maintain job satisfaction and develop the competence of the employees, managers should be able to provide development opportunities by giving them suitable challenging task that supports their confidence. If the employee is interested in the development and new challenges, the manager's task is to support them and help them find new opportunities within the company. In this way, it is possible to avoid the fact that the employee goes to seek challenges from outside the company (Hyppänen 2013).

People with the competence of developing others:

- Acknowledge and reward people's strengths and achievements
- Offer constructive feedback and identify people's needs for further growth
- Propose and deliver regular mentoring, and offer assignments that challenge and foster a person's skills (Goleman 1998).

Leveraging diversity

According to Goleman (2000), in addition to the ability to manage oneself, effective leaders must also have a strong ability to manage others. They must be able to help and understand others, work with individuals from different backgrounds, and to be able to continuously develop others' potential, which are necessary elements of becoming effective leaders.
To be successful in this, people need to feel they belong there and are accepted and valued, therefore leveraging diversity aims to develop opportunities through people with different backgrounds identifying that they have something different to bring to the same table. Leveraging diversity does necessarily mean treating everyone the same way but being able to be adaptive in the way how does one interact with others to fit with their feelings and needs. People with this skill respect and come along with everyone regardless of their background. Overall, they see diversity as an opportunity and understand that diverse teams work better (Goleman 1998).

People with the competence of leveraging diversity:

- Comes along with people from varied backgrounds
- Understand the diverse point of view and cultural backgrounds of different groups around the world
- Sees diversity as an opportunity
- Challenge bias and intolerance (Goleman 1998).

Political awareness

With political awareness, Goleman (1998) means one's capability to grasp the emotional climate and culture of a company. Skill in reading the currents that influence real decision-makers depends on the ability to empathize on a company level, not just an interpersonal one. People who maintain rich personal networks in the company typically realize what is going on and this social intelligence extends to understanding the larger realities that affect the company. Outstanding performers usually have this ability to read situations objectively and see things from different perspectives without being blindfolded by their biases or own assumptions.

People with the competence of political awareness:

- Read key power relationships
- Detect crucial social networks
- Understand what shapes thinking and acting for customers or competitors
- See through organizational and external realities (Goleman 1998).

2.4 Emotional intelligence in sales team communication

Sydänmaanlakka (2013) defines a high-performing team as a group of individuals with complementary skills. The individuals are committed to common and measurable goals, which are systematically monitored. They have a common culture and operating methods that they develop together, they are dependent on each other and are able to take responsibility.

These complementary skills can be summed up in the following seven fundamentals of high-performing teamwork by Sydänmaanlakka (2013):

Purpose	The team's purpose and goals are defined and communicated clearly. One has their own dedicated responsibilities, and everyone is aware of them.
Commitment	Individuals have committed to common goals. Commitment will be easier if the whole team has been included in the goal setting.
Mutual support	Everyone cares for each other and provides enough support. The environment is open and constructive. Individuals are treated respectfully and fairly.
Motivation	Individuals are motivated and excited about their tasks. They enjoy the job, and it can be seen in the results.
Innovation	Individuals' performances are constantly improved. Creativity and innovation are established systematically.
Diversity	Diversity is valued and seen as a team's resource rather than as a threat, which can generate creative solutions.

Five components of Emotional Intelligence: Social skills

In order to achieve a high-performing team level, one's communication skills play a crucial role in how well e.g., the above-mentioned seven fundamentals are communicated within the team. As we have learned from the previous chapter about empathy which relates to detecting others' emotions, in turn, social skills are more about how to interact with others to reach our goals. Social skills are the emotional intelligence skill to manage others' emotions, to connect, interact and work with others (Goleman 1998). Below Figure 12**,** social skills represent the foundation for communication competence in a team.

Figure 12. Social skills' foundation for communication competence in a team (Adapted from Goleman 1998).

Communication	Listening open-mindly and delivering a clear message
Influence	Guiding the others smoothly towards a direction that is valuable also for them
Conflict management	Resolving disagreements and negotiating to prevent conflicts
Leadership	Inspiring and guiding people
Change catalyst	Initiating or managing change
Building bonds	Nurturing relationships
Collaboration & coopera-tion	Working with others toward a common goal

Communication

Connecting with people in a team and establishing the best possible relationships with them depends on effective communication which is a keystone of all social skills. Like one of the aspects of empathy, active listening was pointed out as being crucial to competence in communicating as those who are being open-minded, understanding, not interrupting, and seeking questions are effective communicators.

People with competence in communication:
- Recognize emotional cues and tune their message accordingly - Deals with difficult issues e.g. conflicts straightforwardly - Listens actively to understand, not only to answer, and seeks common understanding - Promotes open communication and welcomes all good or bad news (Goleman 1998).

Influence

For wielding influence, it requires the capacity to read emotional cues, which begins by building a bond or highlighting a commonality with the people. Then, integrating the emotional drivers to make people move. People who have influence have a number of competencies such as; they are skilled at winning people over.

People with competence in influence:
- Encourage sympathy and trust in others - Using indirect influence to build consensus and support - Leverage the people’s motivation drivers to guide them in the right direction (Goleman 1998).

Conflict management

A prerequisite of this practice is to control own emotions in stressful conditions and to read the emotions of others. Handling conflicts is also done through calming down, tuning into one's feelings and expressions, showing a willingness to work things out, using neutral language to tell points, and working together to find resolve. In other words, diplomacy, negotiation skills, cooperation, not forcing, consensus, and creativity are so important in handling conflicts when working with a group of individuals.

People with competence in conflict management:

- Handle difficult people and tense situations with diplomacy
- Encourages debates and open discussions
- Facilitate win-win solutions (Goleman 1998).

Leadership

Leadership competencies are important for teams' growth and development since it is about generating internal motivation. Goleman (1998) noted that successful leaders exhibit a high level of positive energy that spreads throughout the team. They are usually creating an atmosphere of openness that makes it easier for communication to take place. People with leadership competencies do not hesitate to take charge whenever it is required, and in addition, the most effective ones are more positive, outgoing, emotionally expressive, warmer, sociable, appreciative, and trustful.

People with competence in leadership:

- Increases enthusiasm and building motivation through shared vision and mission
- Steps forward to lead when needed
- Supports and develops others
- Lead by example (Goleman 1998).

Change catalyst

The acceleration of change is happening everywhere, and it never stops. Therefore, more and more companies are putting more emphasis on finding people who can lead through change. Those individuals who have the quality to help the companies to transform their business and who rather take it as a passionate mission than just a job.

People with competence in change catalyst:

- Recognize the need for change and remove barriers
- Identify and manage actions to support the change
- Being a role model for a change that needs to happen (Goleman 1998).

Building bonds

Building bonds are as crucial for social selling was already studied in chapter 2.2. as within a team. As collaboration within a team multiplies efficiency, in the sales aspect, each member of the network is an immediately open extension for knowledge, expertise, and potentially more. Individuals who are building bonds well also have an immense time advantage over those who have to use more general sources to find information.

People with competence in building bonds:
- Cultivate and maintain extensive and informal networks - Seek and grow networks that are mutually beneficial - Form and maintain personal friendships among colleagues (Goleman 1998).

Collaboration and cooperation

Emotional intelligence is not just for individuals but also to team and company levels. A team that enjoys working together has the emotional capital not just to excel in good times but also to get through hard times together, whereas a team who does not share the same emotional bond is more likely to become paralyzed or dysfunctional under pressure.

People with competence in collaboration and cooperation:
- Balance between the focus of the task and preserving relationships - Collaborate in sharing information, effort, and resources - Promote a friendly and cooperative atmosphere - Recognizing and nurturing new opportunities for collaboration (Goleman 1998).

3 Key findings of the literature review

Theme	Author	Year	Key points & findings
B2B SALES	Koponen, Julkunen & Asai	2019	B2B selling aims to build appropriate solutions in long-term customer relationships with key customers and achieve profitable sales via successful collaborative sales processes.
	Hänti S.	2016	• *A business customer buys a solution only for the value it produces for the customer's business. When the sales rep is genuinely interested in helping the customer succeed, the customer's trust in the sales rep increases, which means the sales rep does not only pursue their own interest but also the value is formed for both parties.* • *Sales are about value creation and developing customers' business. The customer buys solutions to overcome challenges or to develop their own business*
	Richmond K.	2010	• *Having a solid base knowledge of the sales cycle from prospecting to ending the case of the sale is not enough for a sales rep to understand but also needs to understand the advantages of personal selling* • *Personal selling is the foundation for forming trustful relationships between the sales rep and the customer.*
B2B SALES PROCESS	Kosoglow, Altschuler & Medina	2019	By investing in the groundwork and trying to understand the prospect's products/services and their needs/pain points before contacting them for the first time, the sales rep will be better prepared and be able to provide the prospect with the solutions.
	Tyler & Donovan	2016	Often, sales reps fail to engage with the right people at the beginning of the process. Finding and selling to the right person is the most critical renewal driver for a recurring revenue business.
	Rackham N.	1988	The SPIN technique aims to get more information about the customer's needs and motivations through open questions. Open questions often start with the words **how, why,** and **when.**
	Spiller L.	2021	A sales rep should be prepared beforehand for possible objections during the groundwork stage to successfully manage any conflict that may arise and move to the closing stage.

	Paschen, Wilson & Ferreira	2020	Following up after completing the initial order can uncover new needs the client may have, which may result in the customer entering the sales funnel again.
SOCIAL SELLING	Leino & Kenner	2020	Social selling is a method of deals in which digital and social media channels are used to create more sales opportunities, deepen relationships with current customers, and build trust with potential customer candidates along with the stages of the sales process.
	Belew S.	2014	By having a presence on social media, the goal for some is to increase awareness and underline expertise in the key target group by utilizing content and actively sharing expertise content. For others, the goal may be more strongly related to prospecting and arranging meetings with potential decision-makers.
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN LEADERSHIP AND TEAMS COMMUNICATION	Stanley C.	2020	Emotionally intelligent leaders are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, which is a building pillar for creating psychological safety that makes sales teams like and trust these leaders because they have no problem quickly admitting mistakes.
	Passmore J.	2010	Any sales team requires an emotionally intelligent leader with their natural ability to read emotions to be supportive and empathetic when team members are stressed or feeling pressured, and they know how to help people who might struggle with workplace stress or mental health issues that the sales environment might bring.
	Goleman D.	1998	Emotional competence is a learned ability based on emotional intelligence that is resulted in an outstanding performance at work. It is particularly central to leadership, a role whose essence is getting others to do their jobs more effectively.
	Syd-änmaan-lakka	2013	• In high-performing teams individuals feels a sense of purpose and have common goals and are committed to their task. • Everyone supports each other and forms a motivational atmosphere. • Diversity is seen as a team's resource rather than as a threat
	Goleman D.	1998	Leaders who excel in social awareness practice empathy. They strive to understand their colleagues' feelings and perspectives, which enables them to communicate and collaborate more effectively with their peers.

4 Methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study because the author particularly wanted to explore the connection between the research's theoretical constructs. The goal was to understand the researched topic from the point of view of the interviewees. Meaning that in the research, the author was interested in the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of the interviewees who have more than 2 years of experience in B2B sales and management. In qualitative research, the acquisition of material is usually carried out as an individual interview, group interview, collection of documentary material, or observation (Juuti & Puusa 2020). With qualitative research, the desired goals were achieved, and detailed information was obtained from the research. In addition, the data collection method of qualitative research provided a more comprehensive overview of the research, because the experiences and thoughts of the interviewees were discussed comprehensively.

4.1 Data Collection

The author collected the empirical data for this study by conducting one-on-one, interviews in semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews use pre-planned interview questions as a guide, but they also allow for adjustments based on what stands out as interesting or notable throughout the interview (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Execution for interviews was selected because for studying this topic, it is difficult to set yes and no or agree/disagree type questionnaires as answer options. The interview itself as a method was selected because it enables broader and deeper answers related to the theme. Interviews can also be carried out flexibly remotely or on-site at a separately agreed location, and since there were 4 interviewees, it did not involve large costs or much temporal inconvenience. In the interview, the interviewer was also able to guide the answers and keep the topic within the frame of reference, but also to get broad answers regarding the research topic. However, the functionality of the interview could be exposed to risk because of the author's inexperience with interview situations and the answers given by the interviewees could turn the author to the favoring side. However, the biggest advantages of an interview are flexibility and the possibility to ask additional questions if necessary.

The theme of interviews consisted of 12 questions regarding components of emotional intelligence

- Personal competencies (Self-awareness, self-regulation & motivation)
- Social competencies (Empathy & social skills)

in the sales team which the author will divide into two categories:

4.2 Findings

This subchapter discusses the research results obtained in the interview study regarding the researched topic. The interviews included questions concerning all five emotional intelligence

components, but not all 25 individual competencies were reflected in the thoughts that the interviewees expressed. These competencies are highlighted in a B2B sales or managerial setting, in which the focus would be on analyzing the relationships and interactions between colleagues and customers during sales calls.

The interviewees' background in B2B sales

The background of the interviewees verifies their expertise in B2B sales teamwork. Interviewees are defined by industry, job title, and according to years of experience in B2B sales work. B2B sales experts from different industries were selected for the interview.

Table 3. The interviewee's background in B2B sales.

INTERVIEWEE	INDUSTRY	JOB TITLE	EXPERIENCE IN B2B SALES
A	TECHNOLOGY	EXPORT ACCOUNT MANAGER	~ 8 years
B	DIGITAL MARKETING SERVICE PROVIDER	KEY ACCOUNT MANAGER	~ 4 years
C	BUSINESS CONSULTING	CO-FOUNDER / SALES MANAGER	~ 5 years
D	HEALTH CARE	CEO / SALES MANAGER	~ 7 years

The study interviewed four people who are active in B2B sales and work in various roles. The interviewees' years of experience vary between 4 and 8 years. All interviewees do B2B sales work on a daily basis. Below, in each chapter, the interview questions were assorted by the components of emotional intelligence which the author will summarize the results altogether from the four interviewees.

4.2.1 Personal competencies

Self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation

1. How aware you are of your changes in moods such as anger, frustration, stress, or anxiety during sales conversations?

2. How do you control negative emotions when conducting sales negotiations or communicating with the team?

3. How do you bounce back from disappointments/rejections?

4. How do you regulate your own stress?

5. How do you maintain your motivation in difficult times?

1. Surprisingly, all the interviewees point out and highlight that they are fortunate to have previous work experience in the customer service industry before jumping into B2B sales as it has grown them a “thick skin” not to take anyone’s emotional outburst personally. The experience of interacting with customers and dealing with disappointments has taught them to be more empathetic and not take it personally e.g., when someone rejects an offer or is rude to them, they are not taking it personally but start thinking that maybe that person has something going on in their own life which is the reason they act abnormally. These sales professionals see being rejected as another opportunity to take responsibility and reflect on what went wrong and what should be done better next time.

“It would be good if many would have the opportunity to experience customer service in a less-valued industry as it teaches one to get in the core of humanity and how to interact with people”

- *Person A*

“Being disappointed in something is always a new opportunity for growth. It enables one to take responsibility in own actions, reflect, and adjust to the next time.”

- *Person B*

2. Controlling one’s emotions in team settings e.g., in a situation of argument when someone has different opinions. In this kind of setting, both parties believe so much in their own views and it’ll lead to “my way or the highway” thinking which can be detrimental to the team’s atmosphere, one’s growth as an employee, or a whole team’s. A team or a leader cannot ever perform optimally if the way of thinking is always dictatorial. Everyone that is in the same team, works towards common goals. The will to understand the other’s point of view was emphasized because as well there can be a solution to the problem. One cannot absolutely think that their thoughts or ideas are the best, therefore one has to remain humble which is essential in any interaction with people.

“Being humble is the most essential feature of a person when interacting with a customer or a colleague. Treat others like you would like others to treat you. – Be genuinely willing to hear others’ views if you want yourself to be heard.”

- *Person B*

3.-4. Regarding to regulating own stress, person A, does not regularly feel stressed regardless of traveling to other countries which might bring factors that lift stress levels like traveling to different time zones, representation meetings, long days, and less time for sleep. Therefore, person A is preventing stress levels increase by taking care of basic needs, eating well, and sleeping enough. In addition, stress increase brought by traveling, person A working on projects, and producing events, has its own toll with stress as those areas involve many different influencing parts, so person A thinks it's nonsense to feel stress about something in advance that has not happened yet. Person A thinks, that the way how she regulates her stress is coming from previous experiences and by that, she is self-aware enough to understand that things sometimes do not go as expected but most importantly in those situations when you know you have given your everything counts. Taking into consideration the overall rest of the interviewees' answers regarding what factors cause stress; a feeling such as a sense of not being able to personally contribute to some event that is happening, uncertainty and inactivity, meaning if the problem is there, but no one is doing anything to solve the problem.

"Always take care of your basic needs; optimize your rest, eating, and exercise habits. If they are not in your control, it will control you."

- *Person A*

"To keep things moving and problems solved, keep people involved and consistently communicate the "why", so everyone understands the importance of getting the job done."

- *Person C*

5. The people that interviewees were working with were the resource for their motivation during difficult times. People and the common successes. For some, far-reaching results motivated them, and some were motivated of participating in events that enabled them to network with other people. The idea of starting from small with networks around the world and eventually noticing that the relationships have become fruitful.

"Sometimes when I face challenging times, I think that this shall pass too and remind myself why I am doing this. Just showing up and doing our part is also just enough."

- *Person A*

4.2.2 Social competencies

Empathy & Social skills

1. When you see your teammate stressed out or concerned, how do you deal with that?

2. How do you embrace failure within the team?

3. What attributes/skills does it require for sales reps to excel at prospecting and maintaining a large, connected network that draws in sales opportunities?

4. Do you prefer to communicate much as possible or just enough?

5. Should there be a hierarchy between the leader and teammates in order to reach success?

6. How often do you schedule a regular meeting with the team to ask them how they are doing? how often do you give feedback?

7. Do you think that a leader who can manage positive and negative emotions would have a beneficial impact on the team?

1. Person A and person B often work on project-based tasks that require working overtime which potentially can “cut the camel’s back” at some point. Both A and B describe that in project-based tasks there are clear beginnings and clear endings, in which everyone has to work at full throttle and try to hang in there until the end when it’s time for debriefing and feedback session for everyone. Usually, in project-based tasks like events, there have to be done quick decisions.
When there have been situations in which a colleague starts cracking under the pressure, the situation is being handled by being empathetic towards the other one and clearly communicating that the job has to be done no matter what, we are all in this together, you are not alone, everything is going to go accordingly, and we’ll get back to this when the project is over. Person A highlights that it can be detrimental to maintain an individual’s motivation to finish their task by being overly empathetic when acknowledging their feelings on the spot. Most likely the individual cannot reach the same level of execution.

> *“Bombproof thing is that when it is a high-level stress situation and feeding the burning situation with gas by overly empathetic actions – You are not able to lift the person back to a high performing mode anymore, which is an essential task for a leader to keep the ball rolling.”*
>
> - *Person A*

2. The common conclusion from the interviewees' answers, was that they wanted to highlight openness within the teams. To discuss failures openly without fear of being punished. Discussing openly failures are a way how everyone can learn from each other, and the team can brainstorm together on how to prevent those failures in the future and can promote togetherness and a circle of safety in the work environment. Always discuss failures within a team, but never in front of a customer.

"There are no failures, there are only lessons and by talking about them openly, it can help the whole team to improve as well."

- *Person D*

3. According to the interviewees' listening skills were highly valued for the sales rep's success. A sales rep does not have to be the best in talking or in anything else, but to be genuinely interested in other people and is able to show it by listening and asking good questions. It's at the center of everything when it comes to interacting with people as B2B sales refer mainly to human-to-human interaction. It might be that the sales rep warms up slowly or quickly with customers or networks, but the sales rep has to be able to settle into that rhythm by themselves. Depending on the industry a sales rep can be a "wolf of wallstreet" kind of a person that sells aggressively and chasing for instant hits which might work in a particular industry, but it does not guarantee healthy long-term relationships.

"A good sales rep's feature is that they are genuinely interested in others, listens to understand, not to reply."

- *Person C*

"A decent sales rep likes to take the conversations to a deeper level e.g., interested in networks family, hobbies, etc. because it brings more value in a deeper connection, rather than just talking about business-related stuff."

- *Person D*

4. Based on the interviewees' experiences, communication should be sufficient as too much consumes efficiency, meaning that the shared information loses its value if in some situations there's important information, it will go past easier. Not all information should go to everyone.

"The one who's communicating a message has to know for which ones the message will be more relevant."

- *Person D*

5. All of the interviewees commented that there has to be some hierarchy structure but is it a flat hierarchy or a pyramid hierarchy. Depends on the industry, but both works. For example, pyramid hierarchy is used in health care industries where an executive doctor has to do the decisions of how the patients will be taken care of – not everyone can make those decisions. Based on the answers given by the interviewees', their teams were conducting a flat hierarchy system where everyone was included in the decision-making. However, person A would choose a valued and respected individual over hierarchy. As a valued and respected individual, she refers to a person who leads by example. The leader is usually a senior, that masters the expertise and in a sense is a mentor for the team.

> *"Power of leading by example through respect, the leader is able to be successful, liked and will achieve the teams' goals throughout the well-being of a team."*
>
> - *Person A*

6. Interviews revealed a downside in feedback sessions that it has a bad reputation in some working cultures. It is often seen as a flood of more negative than positive feedback. However, interviewees find it essential to have an opportunity for a feedback session. It was commonly agreed that if an employee does not receive feedback from the job, they do not have enough tools to develop themselves. Therefore, feedback sessions should be held at least 1-2 times per year to discuss of what went well and in which areas to improve. Person C sees it as a great opportunity for both parties to form a platform for growth to operate better in the future and promote innovation.

Another downside was shed light that some companies stumble in management is setting too high and unreachable targets and therefore it's not motivating, because it's impossible to receive appreciation for the job. Person D thinks that it should be stronger branded as a well-being and development conversation because it is not only about following the development of a company, but also in employees perspective that enables one to grow and develop as an employee and achieve the goals and show the support by being proactive about these kinds of feedback sessions.

> *"Feedback sessions provide an opportunity to give both parties intimate communication, constructive feedback, and appreciation. Those recognitions are crucial as in basic human nature involves being seen and heard."*
>
> - *Person C*

7. A leader that has the ability to manage both positive and negative emotions was in favor of all the interviewees' answers. As leading by example is one of the leadership features, it was emphasized that leading by example does not happen if one lacks self-reflection, favors particular individuals, or cannot control their temper. Especially in the working environment, whoever is capable of showing negative feelings should know that it also comes across others. Leaders show constant gratitude -and feedback with concrete examples.

"A leader cannot demand the individuals to control their emotions if leader themselves cannot their own emotions."

- *Person A*

"Leaders job is to build a positive environment around. Three things a leader must focus on: Take care of your feelings, create a safe environment for the team and be an example."

- *Person D*

5 Summarizing the project and reflecting on learning

The research of this thesis was to provide a guide for people who has no previous experience of business-to-business sales but are interested to direct their career toward it, learning the fundamentals of selling techniques, interested in advancing in the company to managerial duties, and uncovering the emotional intelligence that has been considered as an essential influence for success and remarkable performance in working life.

When opening the sales process, it was looked at its many different stages. However, it is important to understand that the sales process is always an individual event that is tailored to each customer's condition. Not all of these steps are always implemented, but the goal of the sales process is always the same; to make a deal. The sales process is preparing the customer to close the deal, and therefore one of the most important points in the sales process is a product presentation. The sales reps' must arouse their customer's desire to buy, and that is why the time in the planning of sales presentation should be invested. It is clear, however, that each stage of the sales process supports the other, and, for example, when preparing for a product presentation, carefully completing a needs survey helps the seller to personalize their sales pitch (Bergström & Leppänen 2013). However, just having knowledge of the sales process does not necessarily mean success in sales. Organizations that want to constantly grow sales and reaching to new customers are critical to success and usually, people prefer to buy from those sales reps they know and trust (Schaub 2014). Therefore, it means a sales rep is recommended to have a presence and be active on digital platforms which is a way to build one's personal brand by "social selling" as it refers to increasing one's reputation, providing opportunities to connect with customers and form long-term relationships based on establishing trust and offering value which potentially enables the sales reps to include the customers to the sales funnel (Leino & Kenner 2020). As pointed out, the B2B sales process was about studying the “hard skills” in addition to building one’s own personal brand to create more opportunities with potential customers. These both require sales reps to possess some level of emotional intelligence (soft skills) as the sales process and building one’s personal brand is interacting with people and mainly B2B sales refer mainly to human-to-human interaction (Person D). Therefore, a sales rep’s emotional intelligence is at the center of overall success. Acquiring the aspects of emotional intelligence allows sales reps to understand the customer and effectively apply the ability of their own emotions during interactions with the buyer to improve the sales process (Richardson 2022). Goleman (1998) has classified emotional intelligence into five different elements: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills and each of them contains 25 emotional competencies. These altogether reflect one’s emotional intelligence on a practical level and are considered to be the result of excellent performance in sales success and in the workplace. Considering everything regarding emotional intelligence, research has shown that

emotional intelligence plays an essential role in the big picture of B2B sales, customer relationship management, and teamwork. Therefore, it is essential to study the ways in which emotional intelligence is contributed to sales reps' behavior during the sales process and working within a team. The findings of this study provided deeper insight into the topic through interviews and supported the theoretical part that the fundamental purpose of displaying emotional intelligence is to build trust among the customers and also within a team.

5.1 Reflecting on learning

The thesis whole writing process felt challenging as I still regard myself as a poor academic writer. Another challenge was in the first-place time wise as I had set a wide time range (6 months) from starting to finishing the thesis project. The bad side of it was that it allowed me to be too relaxed towards the thesis project schedule which I took other projects under the execution and had a job on the side at the same time until I realized that the time for submitting the thesis was eventually running out and I was still working on the other projects. What did I learn through writing the thesis is that for an individual who's having challenges in overall focus and suddenly has to execute under time pressure; the outcome may not be as expected. Regarding myself being also a poor planner, the wide time mirror that I set for the thesis project allowed me to take long breaks from writing, so whenever I returned to writing, I forgot where I have left it the last time, therefore losing the "red thread" in my consistency became my extreme challenge and from which I had to learn by hard.

Regarding motivation, I was struggling in the beginning to come up with any topic that I would've wanted to study. Even though I majored in marketing, eventually B2B sales and leadership became my interest, therefore I wanted to write my thesis from both which would also personally maintain my motivation. However, during my studies, I obtained just a scratch of the surface of B2B sales and leadership knowledge so this thesis project felt like studying something and building the knowledge from almost zero. Through writing the thesis I was definitely having struggling moments with motivation, therefore had to constantly remind myself of the purpose of why I had to finish it. The reasons behind my motivation were that I've been in negotiations of starting a new job immediately when I graduated and therefore through the thesis topic, I wanted to prepare myself for the offered job by studying B2B and its fundamentals, and to provide hopefully useful B2B guide for someone who would be in the same situation as I am now.

Regardless of the challenges and studying the topic from almost zero, compiling the theory part from the sources and interviewing sales professionals helped me to outline and understand the topics and what areas I need to keep personally developing. I gained a lot of new in-depth knowledge of what successful B2B sales and leadership requires, in which I value the importance

and usefulness of the theory part in this work, and whenever I need to, I can go back and see what for example, the sales process or the leadership features include. A summary and key points made out of the theory will be helpful because it allows me to see the main points of the theory in a condensed form.

Things I learned but most definitely value from this thesis project overall is that it helped me to realize that in the future I have to put more emphasis on developing my project management skills, prioritizing, and time management skills to maintain consistency in my work. I believe that this thesis project has prepared me for the new upcoming challenges in the B2B field which elevates my confidence of having a good advantage in the labor market as a cooperative emotionally competent sales professional.

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7 Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview outline

SELF-AWARENESS	1. How aware you are of your changes in moods such as anger, frustration, stress, or anxiety during sales conversations? 2. How do you control negative emotions when conducting sales negotiations or communicating with the team? 3. How do you bounce back from disappointments/rejections?
SELF-REGULATION	4. How do you regulate your own stress?
MOTIVATION	5. How do you maintain your own motivation in difficult times?
EMPATHY	6. When you see your teammate stressed out or concerned, how do you deal with that? 7. How do you embrace failure within the team?
SOCIAL SKILLS	8. What attributes/skills does it require for sales reps to excel at prospecting and maintaining a large, connected network that draws in sales opportunities? 9. Do you think you are communicating enough within the team, or do you think you should do it more or less? 10. Should there be a hierarchy between the leader and teammates in order to reach success? 11. How often do you schedule a regular meeting with the team to ask them how they are doing? how often do you give feedback?
EXTRA QUESTION	12. Do you think that a leader who can manage positive and negative emotions would have a beneficial impact on the team? If so, why?