

Does Your Dealership Dwell Above or Below the Neck?

by : Dave Anderson

More and more people simply amaze me today. They've become experts at concocting explanations and victim stories to explain away their lack of success. And I'm not talking about the people dwelling at the bottom rungs of the corporate ladder, but the leaders; or should I say, people in positions of authority that have leadership titles.

As a result of meeting, listening to and observing thousands of salespeople, managers and dealers over the years, I've found I can divide the thinking and actions of people into two groups: those who live "above the neck" and those dwelling "below the neck." As you read over the differences between the two, evaluate where you and your team spend your time thinking and working.

Below the neck traits:

Think about what you find below people's necks:

1. Pointing fingers. "Below the neck leaders" embrace the time-honored tradition of professional victims to blame other people for their lack of results: the lousy team, the stupid boss, the weak F&I manager, the has-been used car director, the "incompetents" one is forced to work with, but the blame game doesn't stop there. The list includes parents, teachers, coaches and old girlfriends. One thing is for certain, when you blame someone else you temporarily take the spotlight off yourself, but since you can't change what you don't acknowledge, blaming only perpetuates the misery you seek to resolve.

2. Twiddling thumbs. Since taking action involves risk, below the neck leaders have embraced the mantra that "this indecision is final." They discuss, but never decide; study the race, but never join it; stick their toes in, but never take the plunge. As they sit still and conditions around them worsen, they claim to be a victim of circumstances even while they authored their own demise. I see this every time I hold a 20 group. Most attendees talk big about tightening up and training their team and then return to the dealership and do the same stupid things. They forget that the results they're getting are the results they should be getting and if they want different results they have to change what they're doing. Blowing hot air at a problem only worsens the stench surrounding you. It has never solved anything.

3. Covering behinds. When things turn south the strategy of choice for a society of below the neck leaders has been to blame outside conditions rather than inside decisions. Let's blame the weather, the economy, the war, the time of year, the inventory, the crazy competitor, the rise in interest rates, GM, Ford, or how about the full moon while we're at it? By blaming outside conditions, weak leaders cover their own behinds and make sure there is a stable of scapegoats to take the spotlight off their own inadequate and failed leadership. Quite frankly, there's too much whining and complaining in our business. Too many leaders have become better at belching out the baloney than at bringing home the bacon.

4. Sitting on behinds. In this ultimate bond with denial, below the neck leaders pretend not to see problems and thus absolve themselves from having to do anything about them. They are addicted to a "wait and see" strategy that turns into a sinkhole when possible solutions get stalled behind a dam of inaction. They won't fire the non-performer; they cower in the face of holding everyone more accountable; they can't seem to get serious about training their people for more than a few months before finding it inconvenient and returning to their old school way. By taking no action, these people think they're being optimistic that things are fine when they're simply engaging in wishful thinking. When things collapse, they look and act confused and frantically react to the crises triggered by their own immobility.

5. Kicking the cat. In this phase of "victim hood," below the neck leaders are so deluded by their own incompetence they not only blame others, they fire them. They subscribe to the mistaken notion that putting a fresh rider on a dead horse will be able to move it; an outrageous fantasy as long as the poor leader that created the crisis continues to infect it with his or her failure to step up and take responsibility for its lack of success. Let me be clear: if a manager is surrounded by a team of incompetent, below-average idiots, it's a clear indication that the manager is an incompetent, below-average idiot! Yes, you read that right, but let me rephrase it just in case it's unclear: if your team sucks and your business sucks, it's because you suck. You attract what you are and not what you want. Your team is a direct reflection of you.

6. Constipation. Corporate constipation takes place when the below the neck leaders indulge in a diet of the five points above. Over time, the whole system gets stopped up. People stop growing, results plateau and morale comes to a standstill. What these organizations need is an enema of urgency brought on by an injection of pressure to perform, accountability and leaders that will look the hideous reality that has created their problems in the eye and take massive action to remedy it.

Above the neck traits:

Now think about what you find above the neck:

1. Eyes that focus on reality. "Above the neck" leaders look reality in the eye and make the right and hard decisions to bring vitality to their organization.
2. Ears that listen. Above the neck leaders lead with questions. They don't just tolerate feedback or dissenting opinions, they insist on it. They know that only as they create an organization where the truth is spoken and heard can they make sound decisions and avoid developing blind spots brought about by "yes men" and too much reliance on oneself.
3. A face that looks in the mirror. Above the neck leaders work as hard on themselves as they do on their jobs. They focus on self-improvement, developing self-discipline and holding themselves accountable. They accept that nothing gets better in their business until they do.
4. A mouth that accepts responsibility. Above the neck leaders accept responsibility. They're not afraid to say, "It's my fault" or "I screwed up." But they know that accepting responsibility is more than making confessions. It is taking corrective action boldly and quickly.
5. A brain that thinks of solutions. Above the neck leaders focus on solutions. They focus on facts more than feelings and devote their resources and energies to those things they can control rather than whine about conditions they cannot.
6. A nose that sniffs out opportunity. Above the neck leaders have a nose for opportunity. Since they accept responsibility and don't waste time blaming or looking for scapegoats, their time and energy is freed up to think in terms of playing to win rather than playing not to lose. While below the neck leaders exhaust themselves defending their actions and trying to maintain the status quo, above the neck leaders grab the prize while the whiners rub their eyes.

It's time for leaders living below the neck to step up and stamp out the age of "victim hood" in their dealership, but before you can stop accepting excuses from others you must first stop making them. The best day of your business life is when you renounce excuses and accept responsibility for the results of your leadership. Reality can be ugly, but eventual failure is much more hideous.

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