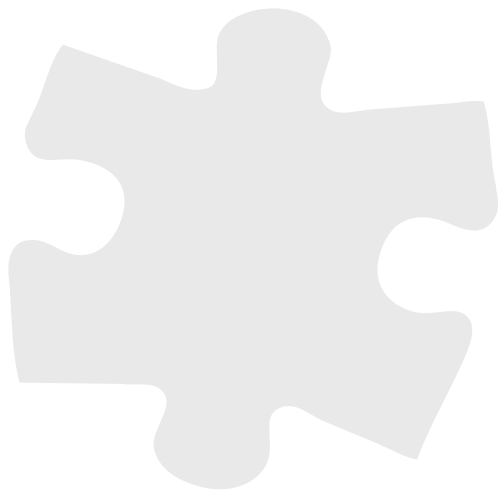


CHAPTER 3



Learning to Say “No”

DUSTIN WELLS, CEO
HEADSPRING SYSTEMS

We first met Dustin Wells in 2007. He resembled (and still does) the typical under-40 Austin entrepreneur—jeans, a loud and loose shirt and flip-flops. Like many young people drawn to Austin, he came here for the music. He actually played in one of the top local bands in his 20s. When we met, he came across as quiet and introspective. Through all of his success over the years, he has remained humble. His posture and expressions have always hinted at a subtle sense of humor.

"Sales is not a place for getting your needs met." —David Sandler

Shortly after starting a family, Dustin realized he needed a gig that could pay the mortgage and leave some extra money for diapers. For better or worse, the Austin music scene wasn't doing that. Dustin took a job as a loan processor in a mortgage company, where he soon identified costly inefficiencies in the operations.

PROBLEM SOLVER

A problem solver by nature, Dustin took it upon himself to study basic computer programming because he knew software could automate several manual tasks at work. He learned basic coding and built a new system for the company. He told us, later on, that this experience gave him a mission: using technology to make business more efficient.

Dustin's first try at starting his own business sprang from his desire to look out for his son, who was in daycare. He opened a company that installed video systems in childcare centers so parents could see their children during the day. He made a sale early on, but then sold only one more system over the next two years. He folded up shop and decided to try his hand at consulting.

Slowly but steadily, he found work. After first year billings of \$18,000, business doubled almost every year until he was doing

several hundred thousand dollars annually by 2007. That was when Dustin and I met.

THE MAN WHO COULDN'T SAY “NO”

Asked why he wanted sales training, Dustin gave several good reasons. He said, “My sales are too difficult to forecast. I can manage most aspects of the business pretty easily, but the sales part is too sporadic. I need to find a way to get sales beyond word of mouth and friends of friends. What if that business goes away? Sales are the lifeblood of this company. If I can’t make sales come through the door, I’m in trouble. I have a process for everything, but not sales.”

In our firm, we always assess someone before we train them. Dustin’s assessment looked terrible. He had a very high need for approval back then, something he readily admits today. In other words, he did not want to rock the boat with prospects because he might upset them and they wouldn’t like him. This limited his willingness and ability to prospect, ask tough questions, go after business and essentially run any sort of sales process effectively. He was too afraid of rejection.

Dustin couldn’t say, “No,” and he never wanted to hear, “No.”

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Dustin also hated to talk about money. It made him anxious. As a result, he avoided any budget conversations. In many cases, he would spend hours designing a \$75,000 solution, only to learn

after the presentation that the potential client only had a \$7,500 budget. That kind of rude awakening would sometimes happen after multiple meetings with a prospect. The Sandler Selling System methodology teaches salespeople to go for the *no* first, and that someone learns to get to *yes* only after they've gotten enough *noes*.

Dustin's aversion to discussing money presented a real problem. Sandler requires sellers to have candid conversations about money early in the qualification process. Otherwise, a salesperson may spend a lot of valuable time and energy with a prospect who doesn't have the money or is unwilling to spend it. We asked ourselves, "How on Earth can this guy possibly get through the training, much less apply it?"

We told Dustin that it was OK if he hired a salesperson. To be honest, we encouraged that route because we knew the change required for him to succeed in sales would be both significant and difficult.

Dustin dug in his heels. "If I'm going to build a strong company, I need to be able to lead by example." He signed up to train with us.

We wondered. Could this guy really make it? Could he pull it off? We didn't see how.

Dustin later told us that he was thinking, "Who the heck are these guys to tell me that I have a need for approval?"

Fortunately for all of us, he did have a need for approval or he would have kicked us out of his office right then and there! In

talking to Dustin about this book, we asked him if he ever identified the root of his high need for approval.

“Yes,” he said. “It goes back to childhood. I grew up in a divorced home with stepparents and stepsiblings, so things were always a little chaotic with switching between my parents’ homes week to week. My strategy was to fit in and not rock the boat. I avoided any conflict and wanted to stay out of the way as much as possible. The result? I didn’t learn to interact with authority figures in any sort of healthy way. As an adult, I couldn’t see myself as their peer.”

He went on, “Interestingly enough, though, this experience as a child taught me to handle multiple challenges at once and to really focus. I learned to tune other things out, no matter how distracting or upsetting.”

THE TURNING POINT

Nine months into Dustin’s training, we announced a “Live Cold-Call Boot Camp” to all of our clients. In these, our trainers make live cold calls on a speakerphone in front of an audience. It’s sales training on a high wire without a net. Dustin, one of our students, asked if he could make some calls during the training session. That had never happened before and hasn’t happened since. We thought to ourselves, “This guy is out of his mind.” But despite his fears, he did it!

Need for approval and the fear of rejection keep most people from doing the work of looking for new business. For those like Dustin who are stubborn enough to push through those feelings,

the struggle is personal. We can still see Dustin sweating in his suit and tie, his hands shaking as he picked up the phone. Nevertheless, a few calls into his session, Dustin made a connection—and proceeded to book an appointment for a very large opportunity.

We later asked Dustin why he had done this. “I needed a deadline. I knew I needed some impending event to force me to do it, to prepare myself to hear, ‘No,’ and move on. I couldn’t walk in there in front of my peers and not do well. This is what pushed me to practice. That helped me so much, putting myself out there. I was sick getting started, but I survived.”

It was this same tenacity, this same unwillingness to quit, that allowed Dustin to push through his issues discussing money. In our time working together, his average sale increased from \$40,000 to \$350,000. He said, “One of the highlights was using the Sandler principles to close my first seven-figure deal!”

FAST COMPANY

How is Dustin’s company doing today? As this book goes to press, the current sales target is \$20 million—and he’s on track to hit it. This growth rate has landed Headspring Systems on the INC 500 list and the *Austin Business Journal*’s “Fast 50” list numerous times.

We asked Dustin, “How did you overcome the enormous internal issues that were holding you back?” His response was a keeper: “Aside from learning and following the Sandler system, I spent a lot of time working on my self-limiting beliefs and

assumptions. For instance, I used to think that if I called prospects, I was bothering them. I rewrote that belief so that I told myself, “There are people who need my help. I should call them to see if they need me.”

Like a lot of Sandler disciples, Dustin used a journal daily to “rescript” beliefs that were counter-productive. David Sandler taught that the use of a journal could show someone how unproductive old beliefs can be. The journaling process usually leads to a breakthrough realization: The things that gave us success in the past may not help get us where we want to go next.

Prior to 2007, Dustin’s selling process consisted of presenting prospects with a blizzard of options. He focused on all the technical aspects of his service and solution, and there were lots from which to choose. He didn’t ask for any commitments, assuming people would buy if they wanted to work with him. While this was a traditional and seemingly straightforward approach, it led to frustratingly unpredictable results. He produced a large number of time-consuming proposals but endured a very low close rate.

He spent time generating proposals rather than selling for three reasons. First, it was all he knew, having never been trained to sell. Second, it fed his need for approval and the desire to have someone tell him how smart he was, which he heard often. Third, he was uncomfortable asking for business because, in his opinion, that might make someone else uncomfortable.

Today his company does far fewer proposals—only one or two each year. Instead, they now have a formal sales process that leads

to a much higher close rate. Not surprisingly, Dustin continues to send his new hires to Sandler for training.

AN ATTITUDE REVOLUTION

When he started out, Dustin did not see himself as a leader or entrepreneur. Now he does, and rightly so. He has come to realize that he is the only thing ever standing in his way. To address this, he does something outside of his comfort zone daily. For example, he might say something out loud that he might not normally say due to his need for approval or to avoid conflict.

Was all of his success due to sales training? Not all of it. It was supported by his willingness to do the necessary behaviors to change the way he thought and ultimately sold. Most importantly, Dustin worked diligently on the “Attitude” point of Sandler’s Behavior/Attitude/Technique (BAT) triangle. He disregarded his assumptions about prospects. Real change takes time, but he was committed to doing the work—day after day, month after month, year after year. He continued to question his beliefs and assumptions when they didn’t lead him to the result he desired. This was not a one-year transformation. Dustin continues to work on his non-productive scripts and beliefs today, seven years later.

Someone really smart once said that the mind is a pain to stretch and grow, but once you stretch it, it never goes back. Or words to that effect. It sounds like a good song lyric. Maybe Dustin will record it one day.