

Journey to becoming CEO via the sales route

By [Shelley Walters](#)

9 Oct 2019

The age of social media has brought the CEO to the fore. More than ever, high-profile business leaders are associated with the pinnacle of career development and a natural progression for anyone aspiring to run their own company. In the internet age, access to and information about business leaders is at an all-time high.



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It is no surprise, then, that most young people looking to make their way in the corporate world or as entrepreneurs aspire to the top job, rather than simply working to earn a salary. Quite rightly, those looking to shape their careers for the future are looking for opportunities to make their mark, influence ideas, shape the world around them, just as they have seen visionaries like Steve Jobs and Elon Musk do.

But the desire to be in a leadership role, to increase personal influence and business acumen, most young professionals see few paths to that goal other than finance, operations and professional business qualifications. Sales, by contrast, is often shunned as lacking in profile, personal development and status.

Sales is perceived to be a career for specific personality types, for the talkers rather than the doers – essentially, a secondary function for the charismatic rather than an essential skill for the operationally minded. However, a June 2018 LinkedIn report hints at the real truth: sales is the second-most common first-job function as a CEO.

Looking at the career arc of entrepreneurs particularly, it is not difficult to see why. Business development requires a potent mix of communication, sales and strategy, and nobody who makes it past startup phase with their own business has done so without actively engaging with customers, partners and vendors.

Broadly speaking, sales provides access to other business leaders, enabling professional network development. The process of tailoring a sales pitch provides opportunities for problem-solving in product design. It also provides a high degree of autonomy and flexible earnings, and straddles the hard and soft skills required in getting a product from the shelf into a customer's hands.

In short, it takes a lot of knowledge about the business to be able to sell, and this combines financial acumen with several other disciplines required to create a truly well-rounded organisational leader. It should come as no surprise that a role in sales or business development could be a brilliant strategic move for anyone's career. In fact, a successful sales background could be the clinch differentiator between you and a colleague vying for the same CEO role.

In the know

A successful salesperson walks a fine line – one which requires them to serve their clients' needs with knowledge, expertise and integrity. It calls for an understanding of business and people. Charisma is not the defining characteristic of a salesperson. Rather, great salespeople are excellent listeners with outstanding comprehension skills.

Great salespeople also need to know their companies and products inside and out. They need insight into business strategy, objectives and supporting processes. It is this kind of insight which supports the genuine belief in the products and services they represent – thereby equipping them to remain confident and persuasive in robust boardroom-level negotiations.

Lastly, but certainly just as importantly, salespeople need to know themselves – their values, strengths and weaknesses. They need to understand how to lead with no status, negotiate with clients and colleagues, articulate their inner convictions and understand how to make money by brokering their company's solutions to clients who will benefit from them.

Sales is a highly demanding and dignified role. Under the right conditions, sales roles develop formidable business leaders through performing tasks which command every ounce of focus, attention and reserves to deliver a relevant, engaging and effective business professionals through experience. These are the kinds of individuals who become contenders for significant leadership positions.

If young professionals want to know how to become serious CEO contenders, here is some advice:

1. **Learn the science:** Submit yourself to learning the science that lies behind selling. You are going to need more than people skills to succeed in this role.
2. **Be authentic:** Authenticity and integrity go hand in hand, and sincerity is impossible without both.
3. **Become a problem solver:** Develop a positive growth mindset. This will make you an asset to your client and organisation alike.
4. **Work on your issues:** Business problems usually are unresolved personal issues showing up at work. Focus on growing yourself before you consider changing your circumstances.
5. **Stay the distance:** While it is true that we will all outgrow our current roles at some point, too many people cut their lessons short and leave their challenging circumstances before they have learned their lesson. If you want to be a formidable leader and be a well-balanced person, learn to stay when and where you are learning.

Finally, if you find yourself with an opportunity to make money but you do not feel good about what you need to say or do to 'get the deal' – don't do it. Your conscience is not worth it, and you have the right to be an outstanding success in sales and to feel good about what you are contributing to the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shelley Walters is the CEO and founder of The Sales Counsel and started her working life in sales. Her career highlights include speaking at over 430 conferences in 10 countries, winning the Inclusive Leader Category of the Gender Mainstreaming Awards 2019 and presenting at the Women in Sales Awards Europe. Shelley is a sales enabler. She focuses on enabling organisations to upskill their sales teams, through productivity, client engagement, pitch skills and communication leverage. A passionate South African, she believes that sales is a noble profession that not only has the capacity to uplift us out of whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, but to have fun and write our own paycheck, too.

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