

How to Bend a Negative Performance Trend

After completing my short-term stint with Hershey's Sales Development department, I anxiously awaited my next assignment. I'd invested two years learning everything about the confection business and knew that my new role could be anywhere in the U.S.

The phone rang. "Hi, Preston. This is Dave. We'd like you to become the Giant – Carlisle key account manager and stay in the Hershey area."

My heart began to sink because I'd heard how difficult it was to call on Giant.

Dave continued, "Your role won't be easy at first. As you know, Giant is in our backyard. A majority of our employees shop in Giant's stores. You'll be under a microscope."

Microscope? – I imagined thousands of Hershey employees complaining about something.

"And, our company has a lot of baggage with Giant. Things haven't gone well with them over the past few years. We'll want you to "bend the trend" – restore relationships, turn the business around and deliver results. Are you up to the challenge?"

With a lump in my throat, I quickly processed the opportunity and said, "yes."

Dave said, "Great, and welcome aboard. I've already set up a meeting with Giant's confectionary buyer tomorrow. I'll brief you on the way to the meeting. No better way to do than to begin."

Boy, this will be a quick transition. It'll be sink or swim.

Dave briefed me on Giant and Matt, the candy category buyer, in the car ride to our appointment. He told me that Matt was one of the most stringent buyers in the Northeast. In his opinion, Matt was arrogant, very demanding, and hard to get along with. He was ambitious and only approved innovation or promotions that made him look successful. No one at Hershey had been able to materially breakthrough with him. The most recent Key Account Manager was run over by Matt and was highly ineffective.

The two company's relationship was purely transactional with little hope of developing a strategic one. To complicate matters, our key competitor took advantage of Hershey's challenges with Matt, and he showed a preference for their brands. It didn't look or feel good having our key competitor beating us in our home market.

Dave and I met Matt for lunch. Right off, Matt was defensive and began telling us all of the things that were wrong with Hershey's customer service. He said we had great brands, but we didn't deliver on promises; he'd throw us out if he didn't absolutely need us.

The conversation turned to the "baggage" Dave mentioned. Giant made big plans to promote Hershey brands during last year's Halloween season. However, Hershey couldn't deliver the product due to an untimely SAP data platform conversion; multiple candy truckloads were "lost" in the system and never made it to Giant's warehouses. And as a result, Giant lost millions of dollars in sales. Matt felt burned – he didn't receive an incentive, and he'd lost favor in management's eyes.

After lunch, Matt looked at me and said, "I'm not sure you want this role. I'm not going to be of any help to you or Hershey."

Leaving the meeting, I wasn't fearful; something arose in me,

and I embraced the challenge. I figured if I could somehow breakthrough with Matt, we could turn the two company's relationship and business around.

I began with a series of short sales calls to connect with Matt. I asked him questions about Giant's strategy, operating model, and what mattered to him. I listened to him with an open mind and a solution bent.

After learning what was essential to Giant and Matt, I began proposing promotion or new item opportunities aligned with Giant's strategy. . . . He said "no" to me so many times I lost count, but I kept plugging away.

Matt continued to keep me in the penalty box because of the previous year's Halloween delivery debacle. To prove his point during my first few months working with him, Matt only ordered 10% of his regular Halloween candy order. The small order put our business in a huge hole, and I needed to figure a way out of it.

I decided to take a different approach and win Matt's heart first; then, I'd ask for his hand. I took a risk and invited Matt and his girlfriend to a Washington Redskins football game. Why? Matt told me that he was a huge Redskins fan but hadn't ever been to a football game in D.C.

My wife and I rented a chauffeured limousine, picked up Matt and his girlfriend, and made our way to the stadium. I secured four company tickets in the second row. Matt wore his Redskins jersey; he was like a kid in a candy store (pun intended). He was genuinely excited and seemed to loosen up. I was very intentional not to bring up business during our conversations and wanted to connect with him personally.

Shortly after we arrived at our seats, Matt brought up business. He told me that I'd been in the penalty box too long; "nothing personal," he said. He'd seen how hard I'd tried and really appreciated some of the business

opportunities I'd shared with him. I asked him what it would take to turn our business around and restore the relationship between Giant and Hershey. He told me, "do what you say you'll do."

I responded, "Ok, I'll do everything in my power to deliver. With that in mind, what can I deliver?" We began brainstorming ideas for a game-changing promotion where both companies would benefit. He shared best practices other manufacturers used to help grow Giant's business. I listened to all of his ideas, and we aligned on a plan. I asked him if Hershey delivered on our collaborative concept, would Giant be aligned? Matt answered, "yes."

I went to work with my cross-functional team to develop a "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" movie tie-in and partnership with Coca-Cola. We developed a shopper marketing program before shopper marketing was cool. The program included joint POS, in-store merchandising, an exclusive movie premiere, and supporting radio promotion.

I presented the plan to Matt, and he loved it. I showed him how the plan's execution would grow his business and align with Giant's strategies. The proposal met all of the promotion elements we discussed. Only hitch. . . . The moment of truth. . . . The close. . . .

I took a risk and asked for an unprecedented order. I asked Matt to quadruple his Holiday candy order versus last year. I knew that If Matt did, the order would overcome the Halloween deficit and put Hershey over our annual plan. Matt didn't hesitate and said, "Ok. Write a suggested store level order and have it to me by next week."

"One other thing," he glared and demanded, "you'd better deliver!"

I confidently grinned and replied, "We'll do what we said we're going to do."

And, we did. The promotion was a smashing success. Giant and Hershey both exceeded their annual business plan. It was gratifying to play a role in bending the performance trend and restoring relationships. To boot, my team won Hershey's prestigious "President's Cup" – the highest sales performance in the company versus the prior year. And Matt got promoted.

What about me? Well, that's a story for another time. Let's just say that bending the trend sometimes comes with a price.

If you are faced with the opportunity to drive positive change, I recommend you:

- **Connect with Others.** John Maxwell's *Law of Connection* states, "Leaders touch a heart before they ask for a hand." [1] Begin implementing a change by getting to know the key stakeholders. Find out their interests, ambitions, hopes, dreams, challenges, and fears. Listen intently and be authentic. Make changes based on the feedback you hear. You'll find trust and credibility begin to develop as you make the genuine effort to connect with others.
- **Create Momentum.** Once you know what makes someone tick and understand what they want, help them get it. Secure quick wins that will help you create and build momentum. Work hard and follow-through; deliver on your small commitments, and they'll have the potential to turn into big ones. Create momentum and consistently pursue your goal. You'll eventually experience a breakthrough and go beyond what you thought possible.
- **Be Persistent.** Change doesn't happen overnight. Don't give up. Always be willing to try something new if what you're doing isn't working.

If you'll connect with others, create momentum and be persistent, you'll become a trend bender too.

Want to discover more about becoming a leader others will

gladly follow? Please visit my website, prestonpoore.com, today!

Cheers,

Preston

[1]Maxwell, J. C. (2007). *The 21 irrefutable laws of leadership: follow them, and people will follow you*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.