



What is Sales Enablement? Not What You Think

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Ask ten people in your organization what sales enablement does, and you'll get ten different answers. Product management will tell you it's how the field learns about new releases. Marketing will say it's content distribution. Sales leadership will describe onboarding and SKO planning. The enablement team itself will point to their platform metrics — completions, certifications, content engagement scores.

They're all wrong. Or more precisely, they're all describing what enablement has *become* — not what it should be.

And as a mea culpa — when we first defined sales enablement at IDC in 2006, we got it wrong too. We defined it as "the right information at the right time at the right place in the right format to help salespeople sell better." It's not that. Sales enablement is — or should be — focused on behavior modification: helping salespeople to interact more effectively with customers and prospects so that customers achieve their strategic business goals.

Here's the uncomfortable truth: most sales enablement functions have been given the wrong charter. And the people who gave them that charter — sales leaders, product leaders, founders — don't realize it.

And here's why it matters: while enablement is busy pushing product knowledge, your buyers aren't making decisions based on information. They have more information than they know what to do with. Research behind *The JOLT Effect* confirms what many of us have suspected — the biggest competitive threat isn't a competitor, it's "no decision." Buyers are overwhelmed, afraid of making the wrong choice, and paralyzed by risk. They don't need more data. They need help navigating the decision. They need sellers who can reduce anxiety, build confidence, and guide them through the process. And your enablement infrastructure is oriented almost entirely around giving sellers more content to push, when the problem was never a content gap in the first place.

The Wrong Charter

A typical tech company spends \$8,000 to \$12,000 per rep per year on sales enablement. That's real money. The trouble is that most of it flows toward product knowledge: feature training, competitive battlecards, content libraries, platform rollouts, certification programs. The enablement function executes this charter faithfully. Content gets created. Platforms get deployed. Completions get tracked. Seismic visits get counted.

And nobody can tell you whether any of it changed a single selling behavior.

The typical enablement function spends roughly 80% of its resources on product knowledge and 20% on buyer engagement skills. The result? Research from Objective Management Group shows that fewer than 20% of technology sellers score proficient in consultative selling. Read that again. Eighty percent of the investment goes to product training, and eighty percent of the sales force can't hold a consultative conversation. The investment and the outcome are directly connected — just not in the way anyone intended.

I'll give you an example of what this looks like in practice — at scale, at a company that should know better.

I was part of a small global sales enablement team at a Fortune 10 tech company. My managing director — the person running global enablement — stood up at a leadership meeting and celebrated the fact that we'd hit one million downloads on our sales enablement platform. One million. He was thrilled. The room applauded.

I sat there thinking: *we have no idea what that number means*. Was it one rep in Des Moines clicking a million times because she couldn't find what she needed? Or ten thousand reps each finding something valuable? We had no way to know because there was zero connection between the enablement platform and actual sales activity. No link to pipeline. No link to Salesforce. No link to anything that would tell you whether a single one of those downloads influenced a single customer conversation.

But the metric looked great on a slide. So it got celebrated. Activity in, activity out — and nobody asking whether any of it connected to revenue.

And almost nobody in the room questioned it — and those of us who did weren't heard — because the entire organization shared the same assumption about what enablement was for.

I've also seen the opposite. At another Fortune 100 tech company, we had a strong sales enablement charter. We worked alongside sales leaders to ensure that every enablement initiative connected to revenue impact. We earned enough trust — enough relationship bank account — that sales leaders regularly gave us room to run programs we believed would work, even when they weren't entirely sure themselves. When we identified a critical skill gap, we didn't wait for permission. We built the plan, executed it, and showed the results. And the

results were real: value selling skills increased many sellers' average deal size by three to five times, while substantially improving deal velocity and pipeline quality. That's what a chartered enablement function looks like: a team that's earned the right to lead, not just the obligation to take orders. The difference wasn't talent or budget. It was the charter — and leadership's willingness to back it. Though even there, when our executive sponsor eventually moved on, the support we'd built on relationships alone was vulnerable. You need the charter *and* the relationships. Either one without the other won't survive.

That's how deep the problem runs. This isn't an enablement execution problem. It's a charter problem. And the charter comes from an unspoken corporate belief system that says: *our stuff is the best, and the salesperson's job is to make the customer understand that*. So enablement builds missionaries for the product. Training reinforces features. SKOs revolve around competitive positioning. The sales conversation becomes a pitch.

Meanwhile, your buyers have already done the product research. They've read the G2 reviews. They've asked ChatGPT. They're drowning in data. What they actually need is someone who can help them think — help them make decisions and minimize risk. And your enablement infrastructure is spending its budget on content consumption metrics instead of building sellers who can do that.

Enablement Is Not a Programming Challenge

There's a prevailing belief in the enablement community that if we just get the right content in front of the right salesperson at exactly the right moment in the sales cycle, deals will magically move forward. As if enterprise selling were nothing more than a Pavlovian parlor trick — ring the bell, consume the content, advance the opportunity. Think about what that assumption really says. It says the salesperson is an intermediary between a content library and a customer — and if we just program the intermediary correctly, revenue happens. If that's the model, why bother with people at all? Let's skip the middleman and point the content directly at buyers.

The reason that doesn't work is the same reason content-push enablement doesn't work: passively consuming information is not how adults learn and retain. You can't learn to ride a bike by watching a YouTube video and passing a certification test. The research on this is settled — Peter Brown's *Make It Stick* demonstrates that curiosity and active intellectual inquiry drive successful learning, not sitting and reading. Yet that's exactly what most enablement programs ask sellers to do: consume content, complete a certification, check the box. Nobody remembers it two weeks later because the learning model is wrong.

We need sellers who live in a culture of curiosity, who research their customers obsessively, develop hypotheses about business value, and co-create a path forward with buyers rather than deliver presentations. That doesn't come from a content library — no matter how well-curated, how AI-powered, or how elegantly integrated into the sales tech stack. AI itself can be a huge distraction and time sink for individual salespeople — or it can be a tool that helps them better prepare for engagement with prospects through research, conversation practice, and

role play. The difference is whether AI serves the old charter or the new one. Either way, the foundation is preparation discipline, coached practice, and a charter that values buyer engagement over product fluency.

What Enablement Should Actually Build

Research from Bain & Company identifies a pyramid of value elements in B2B purchasing decisions. At the base sit functional values — price, speed, features. Table stakes. Every competitor plays there. The differentiators that actually close deals sit at the top: anxiety reduction, reputational assurance, confidence, hope. Data from the B2B Institute confirms that emotional connection is dramatically more effective than rational messaging for long-term growth and market share.

Product-focused enablement addresses the base of that pyramid. Value-focused enablement addresses the top — where deals are won and lost, and where "no decision" lives. If you're wondering why you keep losing to "no decision," look at your enablement charter. You're arming sellers for a fight that's happening at the bottom of the pyramid while the real battle is at the top.

In deal review after deal review over the past couple of years, I've watched the same pattern: enterprise buyers who are simply stuck. The risk of sticking with the status quo feels lower than making a transformative change. Even substantial discounts won't unstick them — they're not weighing price, they're weighing risk and the complexity of implementation. These aren't bad deals with bad sellers. They're qualified opportunities where nobody on the selling side was equipped to help the buyer navigate the fear.

So what should enablement actually build? Four capabilities.

Preparation discipline. Pre-call preparation is the distinguishing characteristic of high-performing sellers, yet 70 to 90 percent still don't prepare consistently. Not because they're lazy — because nobody has built it into the operating rhythm. Enablement should build the muscle of research, business value hypothesis development, and influence mapping as a daily discipline — not a best practice poster on the wall.

Discovery skills. Only 13% of sellers take a problem-focused approach to discovery. The other 87% lead with product. When sellers and buyers align on the problem first, win rates improve by 38%. That's not a marginal gain — that's a structural advantage. But here's what most people get wrong about discovery: they think it's a set of twenty questions designed to help shape the proposal. Buyers feel exactly the same way — and they're guarded with their answers accordingly. Real discovery isn't an interrogation. It's a process of co-creation — literally discovering what is possible together, exploring new ways of achieving results that neither side would have arrived at alone. When that happens, the buyer has ownership of the conclusions. They helped build them. And a buyer who helped build the path forward is far more likely to act on it than one who was presented to.

Value articulation. The rep who walks in saying "we can help you reduce onboarding time by 30%, which at your current hiring rate means recovering \$2M in productivity" is having a fundamentally different conversation than the rep who opens a deck. Sellers need to connect capabilities to business outcomes with a specific business value hypothesis for each buyer — not a generic value prop that sounds like everyone else's.

Deliberate practice. Knowledge doesn't transfer to performance without coached repetition. Yet most enablement programs treat training as an event — annual SKO workshops that fade from memory within weeks. Sellers need ongoing practice on real scenarios: preparation reviews, discovery role-plays, deal strategy sessions. One of my clients ran improv sessions at their SKO — not as entertainment, but as skill-building. Listening, reacting in the moment, building on what the other person gives you instead of retreating to a script. That's closer to what a real buyer conversation demands than any product certification ever will be. If your athletes practiced as little as your sellers do, you'd fire the coach.

You Need a Charter. A Real One.

Here's the thing: most organizations don't have the wrong charter. They don't have *any* charter. There is no map. No agreed-upon definition of what enablement exists to do, who it serves, how success is measured, or what it will *not* do. I've written about this separately — enablement groups without a charter are like travelers setting off cross-country with no map and no ability to describe their destination. They can't ask for help along the way. They won't arrive efficiently. They'll keep busy doing things that occur to them along the road. Sound familiar?

Without a charter, enablement becomes the corporate project drop-off site — the team that does whatever anyone with a title asks them to do. Product wants launch training. Marketing wants content. The CEO wants a new deck for the board meeting. Every request is urgent. Every request is sponsored by someone powerful. Every request consumes capacity that should have gone to building the capabilities that actually move pipeline. The function becomes reactive, overextended, and — eventually — disbanded.

A real Sales Enablement Charter is a strategic roadmap that ensures the impact and effectiveness of the enablement function. It defines what the function exists to do — and equally important, what it does *not* do. It establishes the mission in terms of outcomes, not activities. It specifies who you serve and how you measure success. It creates governance — an enablement board for strategy and budget, a council for tactical alignment, an advocate team for internal champions. And critically, it protects the long game: enablement's impact unfolds over quarters, not weeks, and without a charter your work will be consumed by executives who think in 90-day cycles. The charter gives you the single most powerful sentence in enablement: *"What are the trade-offs? What stops if this starts?"*

This won't be easy. You may be the only person in the room who sees it. But the data is on your side, and the charter gives you the standing to make the case.

Sales leaders, this is where you come in. The charter doesn't work without you. You are its sponsor, its enforcer, and its most important beneficiary. When you sign off on a charter that ties enablement to revenue impact — not content production — you're giving your enablement team the air cover to build what your sellers actually need. And you're giving yourself a mechanism to hold the investment accountable. Without your signature on that charter, enablement will keep getting pulled in ten directions by ten stakeholders, and you'll keep wondering why the \$8-12K per rep isn't showing up in your pipeline.

When the CEO demands more product training because a competitor made noise, a chartered enablement leader — backed by a sales leader who owns the charter — doesn't say no. They say: *"I agree the team needs to understand the new capabilities. Instead of a product-focused session, let me run a customer-problem session. We'll cover the features, but anchored to specific customer problems they solve. That way the knowledge translates to pipeline."* You're not refusing. You're reframing through an outcome lens. And you can do that because you have a charter — co-owned by sales leadership — that says your job is revenue impact, not content production.

Inspection Creates Demand. Enablement Provides Supply.

The real change happens when leadership and enablement align around a common operating standard. The manager's inspection strategy creates demand — what are we actually looking for in deal reviews and coaching conversations? Enablement provides the supply — the skills, tools, and practice that equip reps to meet that standard. If the manager is inspecting for quantified business impact, enablement must supply the frameworks and the skill drills. If the manager is inspecting influence maps, enablement must provide the templates and the coaching on how to identify an economic buyer.

When inspection and enablement are disconnected — and in most organizations, they are — you get random acts of content that nobody uses and nobody measures against results. You get a content warehouse when what you need is a supply chain.

Sales enablement isn't content distribution. It isn't a technology platform. It certainly isn't a programming challenge. It's the systematic development of your sellers' ability to connect with buyers on their terms, understand their world, and guide them toward decisions they can defend internally.

Get the charter right — together — and everything else follows.

Because the purpose of selling is not selling. It's not even helping customers to buy. The purpose of selling is to help customers achieve their goals. Everything else — the content libraries, the certification counts, the platform metrics, the million downloads on a slide — is, at most, incidental. Or less politely, bullshit.

Ready to recharter your enablement function? [Download the Sales Enablement Charter framework](#) and start the conversation with your sales leadership team.

If you'd like help building or pressure-testing your charter, [schedule a complimentary one-hour review](#) — whether you're starting from scratch or reworking what you have.

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