

Fearless Thinkers, Episode 14
"Developing tomorrow's top revenue leaders"
with Barbara Adey

Masami Cookson: Welcome to "Fearless Thinkers," the BTS podcast. My name is Masami Cookson and our host is Rick Cheatham, head of marketing at BTS.

Today, Rick sits down with Barbara Adey, who heads our Sales and Marketing Center of Expertise for North America. Barbara has unique expertise in optimizing the entire customer experience, from marketing through customer success. Prior to joining BTS, Barbara had key commercial roles in several of the world's leading technology companies.

Hey, Rick!

Rick Cheatham: Hey, Masami, how's it going?

Masami: You know, I couldn't be better. Fall is my favorite season, and it is 100% upon us in New York.

Rick: Oh, we're still in the crazy temperature swing time of year where it's like 65 one day and 90 the next. So, have a wonderful fall.

Masami: I don't envy you.

Rick: It's not terrible. But hey, on today's show, as you said, we've got Barbara. The punchline here is thinking about our go-to-market leadership differently.

Masami: Can't wait to hear more.

Rick: Let's jump in. Hey, Barbara, welcome to the show.

Barbara: Thank you, Rick, how are you?

Rick: I am fantastic. What's been going on in your world?

Barbara: Well, the usual, you know, hikes on the weekend, work during the week.

The irony of this conversation is that I am a

complete visual learner, whether it's electronic or printed word. So this is a new experience for me.

Rick:

Between the two of us, we'd actually be a whole person, because I cannot consume anything visually. I can only learn by listening. So, for our audience, I'm sure they'll be happy to hear your wisdom over the airwaves, so to speak.

So, Barbara, I know you see different clients from different industries all the time. I'm curious why focusing on go-to-market leaders is so critical right now.

Barbara:

What makes it critical, Rick, is... It's a part of the larger strategy of driving revenue and profitability through go-to-market effectiveness. This is a level in the organization, that Vice President level, which is often overlooked. There's a lotta focus on the C-level, and there's a lotta focus on frontline sellers. But somehow, it's just assumed that vice president-level of management can absorb whatever's required of them.

And especially, you know, since the pandemic, those folks have been overlooked even more than normal. These are people that have incredibly important organizational memory and history.

So, it's becoming time-critical for companies to think about how to develop that level of leadership.

Rick:

What are you seeing these days in the world of sales leadership?

Barbara:

So, the thing we're seeing is that the term sales leadership is too narrow. In fact, often, the leaders that we work with also have responsibility aside from sales: for customer success, or for marketing. So, they have a much broader functional leadership for which they're responsible.

So, and this is manifested in a number of ways. We see that people who are shopping – whether they're consumers or business buyers – they're spending a lot of time on the internet learning about a product or an offer before they encounter a live salesperson.

So, that means that marketing is even more important. One of the interesting things, too, is,

the most senior role in companies is less and less Chief Sales Officer. It might be the Chief of Revenue Operations. And that person is overseeing both the, you know, in-person conversations with buyers and partners but also the whole internet mechanism.

Rick:

Makes a ton of sense, and it's actually kinda refreshing. I mean, we've both been in the world of sales and marketing for a while, and the drumbeat forever was the gap between sales and marketing or the gap between sales and service.

So, given this new reality, what are some things that you're seeing that these leaders either need to do differently or need support in order to be successful?

Barbara:

We're seeing people coming from a supply chain or a manufacturing background who are coming into responsibility for a commercial operation.

So, they don't have some of the functional skills, like forecasting, for example, that you would naturally expect someone who came up through sales to understand.

People are promoted through a sales organization because they're great sellers. Well, that doesn't necessarily mean that they're great coaches or great developers of people.

Rick:

What are some of the things that those people need to do differently?

Barbara:

So, the biggest jump that people need to make is to be able to really articulate... What are the outcomes that they're looking for and what's the strategy? What's the context?

It's important, once you're in a more senior role, in a Vice President or more senior role, that you can't just lay out for people what to do, and you can't be inspecting every week what they do. You really have to trust your team. And so, that transmission mechanism of the strategy is one of the more important skills that senior go-to-market leaders need to have.

Rick: If I'm getting you right, how do I more effectively communicate the potential "hows" and "whys" behind the strategy, but also give the leaders on my team enough space to basically run their show and be effective?

Barbara: What you just said, Rick, about having space is really important. As a senior go-to-market leader is working with their team, it's interesting how, sometimes, the way that they interact with – the way that they develop each of the directors or VPs on their team – might be very different based on the particular way that those people think and act. And so, even at that most senior level, a big part of what we need to see from go-to-market leaders is that agility of emotional intelligence, of working with people in the moment.

Rick: There's also that reality that, for so many of them coming up – to be an effective leader, to have credibility with those folks on an executive team, I'd also have to show up with more of a holistic view of the world, but more of an enterprise mindset.

Barbara: Everyone needs a different amount of context. Everyone needs different frequency of feedback and types of feedback. And some of those rules learned as a first-line manager continue to serve a senior leader well.

Rick: Yeah, that makes all the sense in the world.

There aren't a lotta commercial leaders that have a super high tolerance for going to training and being told what to do. So, what is your best advice for kind of upskilling commercial leaders?

Barbara: So best advice is to not use the word training. We have been really successful in bringing go-to-market leaders together. They can learn so much from each other, and comparing notes, than they could possibly in a lecture type of situation. And so, you can call it a roundtable, you can call it development, leadership program. Just don't call it training.

Rick: Very, very fair. And I heard something in there too that I think is really, really important: the whole concept that it isn't somebody dropping out of the sky, saying, "I'm gonna tell you how to do this."

But it's, "I'm gonna give you the opportunity to learn from your peers and to share what you know." Which I would say would bring leaders together in a radically different mindset.

Barbara: Peer learning really reinforces things that are observed; good ideas that are generated and shared.

I think too, though, there's real value in having the most senior commercial leaders in the company to be a part of this experience – to be delivering the strategy, delivering the latest on what's going on operationally in the company.

So, I would absolutely recommend including, to the greatest extent possible, the senior leader team. But really, that sense of getting together with peers – not just as one-off, but as something that's ongoing through the year, through several years – has real power with this audience.

Rick: That, of course, makes great sense, and it's that – it's probably that concept that it's, "I'll act on my beliefs. I'll tolerate what you say," or, "I'll tolerate what you say, but I'll act on my own beliefs."

And the greatest shift in belief comes in those moments where I get to solve problems with peers. How do organizations start to grow their sales leadership bench in an effective way?

Barbara: My experience with our clients is that they take a very deliberate approach to assessing their population of leaders and making sure that they have succession planned. And so, there's an emphasis on just tracking the leadership, but there are also formal processes, like assessment, that go on, that mean that they can have a set of, you know, high-potential directors that they're planning to evolve into VPs.

Rick: Very cool. And I would think that those types of assessments would probably allow those organizations to identify, "Well gosh, this person (as you mentioned earlier) is gonna need some forecasting skills..."

Barbara: It's really important to, in the context of the whole set of skills and behaviors that are needed...

It's important to recognize that some people bring a strong facility in some of those skills, and you really should focus the development time on the areas where they have less experience.

Rick: So, it's that whole concept that we're all gonna get better at this, and – I've got my thing that I'm getting better at at the same time.

Barbara: That's right.

Rick: So I guess, as you think about this new world of commercial leaders, what are the areas that organizations should be focused on?

Barbara: So, when we put together a program for our clients, we ask them to look at four areas of skills that may be emphasized or de-emphasized, depending on their population. Certainly, go-to-market strategy and the go-to-market strategy of the client is typically something that is constantly evolving.

We also focus on line-of-business management. So, often, as we're developing these leaders, they're coming for the first time into responsibility for profit and loss. **Leadership skills are always applicable.** And so, that's typically a part of most of our programs. Creating a vision, communicating the vision, coaching, developing talent – those sorts of skills are part of leadership.

And then finally, we do develop on specific functional skills of go-to-market. So that might include something like forecasting or developing a pipeline. For the more junior leaders at the director level, digital skills and being able to apply all that analytics and artificial intelligence start to enable us to do in go-to-market.

So, those are the four key areas.

Rick: Very cool. So, I guess I'm sitting here thinking... Again, if I'm one of our listeners out there that maybe doesn't have ultimate span of control, what are some things that I can do to just get started?

Barbara: So, it's important to think about this as a journey. And more than a journey, as something that's an annual cycle. If you can frame it in those terms,

then it becomes just a part of how we work, rather than some special large budget item that needs to be approved.

Rick: I really, really love your advice on, this is just what we do. It isn't some big crazy thing that everybody's gotta stop what they're doing and run over here and we're gonna send everybody away for a week, but... As part of our annual strategy kickoff cycle or whatever processes that you have, we go through these gates, so to speak, to make sure that we are able to not only continue to execute this year, but... Continue to get better for tomorrow and the next day.

Barbara: The other piece too is, it's really important to have executive sponsorship. And so, it may be that your sponsorship comes from a less than obvious place, you know. One of the regions of the world where people have more control... The most senior leader of that region really sees the value in developing the cross-functional skills of the leaders on their team.

Leaders, go-to-market leaders of like-sized regions, to get together as a peer group – that is something that is just invaluable.

Rick: Well, hey, Barbara, as always, it is a pleasure getting to hang out with you a bit. So thank you so much.

Barbara: Thanks, Rick, we'll talk to you soon.

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