

# SALES PROFESSIONAL

INSPIRED SALES MANAGEMENT FOR AUSTRALIAN BUSINESS

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# Selling In

## THE ZONE

*Forward-thinking sales leaders are calling on sports psychologists to help sales teams reach elite level performance.*

*By Shane Conroy & Brad Monaghan.*



Illustration: Michael Austin



Most organisations will just run everyone through a sales training program, cross their fingers and hope that's going to deliver a change in sales behaviour and performance. We're not prepared to leave that to chance.

Global Head of Sales Effectiveness - Global Markets at ANZ.

**L**awrence Taylor is perhaps the most feared man to have ever stepped onto an American football field. A Hall-of-Fame linebacker for the New York Giants, he was a dreaded enforcer in a world of indestructible brutes.

Yet despite playing his way into living legend status over a long, celebrated career, Taylor admits that he only reached his best in a handful of games.

"There were probably about five games in my career where everything was moving in slow motion and I could be out there all day, totally in the zone," he has said. "You don't even know where you are on the field, everything is just totally blocked out."

Elite athletes often speak about the power the 'zone' wields in unlocking their untapped potential, and sports psychologists have made a science out of helping sportspeople achieve permanent residency in this mysterious mental space.

According to Dr Stan Rodski, a leading Australian sports psychologist and neuroscientist, the mental preparation used by elite athletes is a learned behaviour and has just as much potential application on the sales floor as it does on the sporting field.

Rodski has helped the elite players at Essendon (AFL), Melbourne Storm (NRL) and Western Force (Rugby Union) football clubs achieve their optimal performance through applying neuroscience techniques to their field of endeavour. Now, he's bringing his expertise to the corporate world and helping shift sales behaviour.

"I'm using the exact same techniques now with the ANZ sales team," he says. "ANZ are working towards a 30 per cent uplift in sales for its global sales team, which is huge. When people put targets onto sales teams, it has always intrigued me as a psychologist, what exactly they're planning to do to get those increases."

Essentially, Rodski and ANZ plan to use the neuroscience techniques of sports psychology to lift its sales team into the 'zone', and boost overall performance.

But what is this so-called 'zone' and how can it be translated from making tackles to closing deals? The

answer, explains Rodski, lies in identifying it as a mental homeostasis between urgency and strategic thinking.

That is, when we operate under stress, adrenaline is released into the body. A certain level of adrenaline is needed to maintain stimulation, however a build up can negatively affect our decision-making process.

On the flipside, when stress is relieved, pleasure-giving dopamine is released which helps to regulate our emotional responses and allows us to make more objective decisions. And be more in control of our choices.

A person is said to be 'in the zone' when they have achieved a balance between stimulating adrenaline and calming dopamine. Moreover, Rodski claims that top-level athletes – and salespeople – can learn to slip in and out of both states as the situation demands.

"My job is one of helping people understand that they shouldn't operate all day at one pace," he says. "Instead, we make sure they know how to bring themselves back into homeostasis so they can swing back into high performance when it is required."

"They're not just running on high adrenalin all day, but drop into the 'zone' where they feel like the pressure's off for a moment or two before they put their head around what they need to do next."

"We don't want to take away the urgency of their world because that's where they perform at their best. What we want to do is teach them to drop out of that for a minute and truly relax, get their system back into homeostasis, and then jump back into it. That's an incredibly powerful tool for salespeople."

Rodski has spent the last several months working with the ANZ sales team; measuring the reactions of sales staff and coaching individuals intelligently so they learn how to drop in and out of the 'zone' as required.

"The sales executives are taught how to recognise when the pressure's on, and what they need to do to give themselves breathing space in order to get more use out of their brains," he says. "If they know that something particularly important is coming up they need to drop back into the zone, get ready and then spring board in."



“The message is that you’re selling well now and you’re going to sell even more, but how will your mental state be in 10 years or 20 years time? We’re very aware now of the effects [operating under neurological] pressure has over time. It does lead to dementia, it does lead to Parkinson’s.”

Craig Taplin is Global Head of Sales Effectiveness at ANZ. Working first hand with Rodski and leading the program, he couldn’t agree more.

“In the sports world, instead of applying a one-size-fits-all approach, they look at each player, their particular needs, the data around their individual performance, and they come up with a plan for each player to make sure they’re performing at their best in the context of the role they need to provide for the team,” he says. “We’re applying that principle to sales performance improvement.”

At ANZ, says Taplin, each participating salesperson is hooked up to a monitor once every two weeks. Then neuro-coaching sessions, based on the data collected about their neurological state, are centred around their resilience, learning agility and ability to perform under pressure.

“We measure sales staff at a psychological level to assess their motivations and psychological traits; we measure them at a competence level in terms of their behavioural and technical competencies; and now we measure them at a neurological level,” he says.

“Most organisations will just run everyone through a sales training program, cross their fingers and hope that’s going to deliver a change in sales behaviour and performance. We’re not prepared to leave that to chance.”



#### SALES TALENT SPECIALISTS

Building a truly ‘world class’ sales force is largely dependent on the calibre of the individuals in the team.

The CSE knows that this is no easy task. Often Sales Managers, or HR, are given this responsibility with little to benchmark ‘the exceptional’. **Recruit the wrong talent and the consequences could be long lasting.**

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*We test the gap between exceptional and average*



People shouldn’t operate all day at one pace. Instead, we make sure they know how to bring themselves back into homeostasis so they can swing into high performance when it is required.

Dr Stan Rodski, Peak Performance Psychologist and neuroscientist.

For Taplin, the neurological data he’s collecting is proving to be a powerful tool for increasing sales effectiveness. While it’s too early to assess whether the program will achieve the 30 per cent performance increase that is its end goal, Taplin can already see its impact at work on the sales floor.

“We’re not suggesting that our sales people should be half asleep,” he explains. “What we want them to do is cope with pressure more effectively because when they’re able to keep their neurological system in homeostasis – that is, keep a balance between dopamine and adrenaline – they’re able to problem solve more effectively, they’re able to think strategically, and they’re able to more effectively negotiate their way through challenging conversations without damaging relationships.”

He now has proof of something he had long suspected: “An overly urgent sales floor can end up creating activity for activity’s sake, rather than [achieving] a targeted outcome.”

However, both Rodski and Taplin recognise that neuroscience is not a cure-all for poor performers. The program is voluntary for sales staff at ANZ, and Taplin notes a more enthusiastic uptake from the top end of his team.

“Our typically high performers are embracing it because they see it as an opportunity to perform even better,” he says. “There are those who are skeptical about the program and it’s going to take them getting into the program a little deeper to see the high impact of it.”

Indeed, while neurological techniques can turn a good performer into a great performer, they will not necessarily transform a poor performer into your sales star. Rather, it’s much more about unlocking the human potential that already exists within each individual.

“If they’re a C-grade player, I don’t make them A-grade,” says Rodski. “To get from C-grade to A-grade they need specialist skills coaches who will develop them if they have the capability. But once they’re in A-grade, neurological performance comes to the fore. It’s as sharp in winning a tackle as it is in winning a deal. And you’ve got to be at the sharp end.”

## Measuring Success at ANZ

# coaching in



## Craig Taplin explains the R.A.I.T. program...

### HOW DO YOU MEASURE COACHING EFFECTIVENESS?

We use Dr Stan Rodski’s RAIT tool. It gives us a degree of certainty around the incidence and the effectiveness of sales coaching and ensures that our sales managers understand what it takes to be an effective coach.

### WHAT IS R.A.I.T.?

It’s the Rodski Assessment and Impact of Training tool. There are 3 different versions: one is designed for face-to-face training, one is for e-learning, one is designed for coaching. Stan [as a neuroscientist] has created it through his long-term research into the way in which the brain processes learning.

### WHAT DOES IT DO FOR COACHING ON THE FRONTLINE?

It identifies [team members’] neurological learning preferences, their preferred coaching style and what factors most influence the effectiveness of coaching with them specifically. And those preferences have been proven to have a significant impact on

learning effectiveness. Twenty of those factors relate to the style, approach and content of a learning intervention, and 10 relate to environmental factors.

### HOW DOES IT RELATE TO YOUR ZONE PROGRAM?

In order for someone to learn effectively, they really need to be as close to being in homeostasis – that’s the ideal state in which someone can learn and perform. If they’ve got too much adrenalin buzzing around in their systems, which is triggering all sorts of other hormones, that will reduce their ability to learn, to absorb new information.

So by training someone to bring themselves into homeostasis, and ensuring they’re in that state before they go into a learning intervention, whether that be a training program or a coaching session, will increase the effectiveness of that learning significantly.

What the coach does and how they approach that session will have a significant impact once they’re in homeostasis.

### WHICH RESULTS ARE ANALYSED?

At ANZ there was a lack of fundamental sales disciplines at work, so coaching for us is about helping salespeople to understand the importance of those disciplines, learn how to build their skill in analysing the impact of those disciplines on their level of achievement, then diagnosing through that process what skill or activity is letting them down. And so we focus most of our sales coaching work around their sales pipeline.

We use analytics in the pipeline to deconstruct what are the drivers of success and failure, then individually diagnose the gaps for that individual and then we focus in on the specific capabilities they need to build to bridge those gaps.

It’s competency-based but only in the context of the particular attribute of performance that we want them to improve, so it’s highly targeted to the individual as opposed to being ‘we want everyone to learn how to do a better account plan’.