



Lyle Spencer PhD

Want to Double Your Sales? Hire Stars

[by Shel Horowitz](#)

"Star salespeople sell twice the average. If you're trying to hire people, look at the characteristics of your stars. Look for people who've got the right stuff."

The speaker is psychologist and entrepreneur Lyle Spencer, who shared his research with the University of Massachusetts Family Business Center. His talk was entitled, "Competence, Motivation, and Emotional Intelligence Cross-Cultural Predictors of Entrepreneurial Success."

The higher up the competency ladder--the more skilled the job--the more the stars excel compared with "average" workers. In jobs with low competency requirements, the best may be 19 percent better than the average, but in higher-skill positions such as sales and management, the difference--and this translates directly into dollars--may be much, much higher. Factoring in a company's ability to leverage the productivity of its star workers, the revenue gain can reach as high as 8800 percent in some industries.

And if you set yourself an agenda of moving the curve forward, those high achievers can change the corporate culture and increase the efficiency the entire company. "Jack Welch gets rid of the bottom 10-15% every year." This, of course, upshifts the overall performance curve.

What drives success, in Spencer's view, are motivations toward achievement and toward power. And these drives are independent of culture and time; he has studied numerous societies from 900 BC to the present.

How can you determine the achievement motivation of some long-vanished civilization on another continent? "You score the speeches of the politicians. You can code the funeral oration of Pericles for achievement motivation. You code the literature--ancient Greek playwrights or today's rock lyricists. They are either setting or reflecting the motivation."

You can also measure outcomes through such factors as radius of trade; Phoenician amphoric jugs have been found all the way to Scotland. "When achievement motivation is high, the radius is maximized. When the barbarians conquer, all you have is 18 inches of ashes in the capital city."

Spencer defines achievement motivation as "doing better against self-imposed standards of excellence." Those who are driven to achieve are "usually unhappy; they immediately notch the bar up. They always think about how to do things innovatively. They take personal responsibility, are obsessed with feedback, take calculated risks. Achievers are cautious; they're not dumb enough to get sucked in by anything new. They get in just before the inflection point. They wait until it's been tested, they're horizon scanners, and they know the next big thing before the mob, enjoy the ride and then get out."

And the results reflect continuous improvement and innovation—results that can help nimble family businesses willing to chase down the data. "Ask for war stories: your greatest success, greatest failure. Then go through and code it based on hard before-and-after outcomes. We know where all this stuff is in the brain and we know the psychopharmacology. We can measure this empirically, show the dollar value added, teach it or performance manage to it.

"What's the point of sending a depressed sales person to training? Titrate your brain to look as much like the stars as possible, then train in the competencies and then do the organizational stuff that reinforces competencies, high performance, and peak mental activity. Detect [trends] early, figure out what it means, decide to act before the competition knows."

This, he says, is how Bill Gates wiped out the market share of then-leaders WordPerfect and Lotus 1-2-3, when he took the concepts of powerful word processing and spreadsheets running on Intel/IBM machines and joined them with the much friendlier user interface pioneered by Apple.

Spencer noted that the lag between the rise of achievement motivation and productivity has shrunk from about two generations down to ten years. Mass communication has helped spread innovation; when Jackie Kennedy wore a miniskirt and was photographed in Time and Newsweek, miniskirts were suddenly no longer seen as deviant.

Achievement motivation should be a key factor in hiring and training decisions. Spencer cited a 1979 study that compared a \$287,500 program to train 100 minority entrepreneurs with a control group. Those who went through the training generated 32% more jobs, paid \$1,067,300 in additional taxes within two years, and took less than ten months to generate a positive ROI.

While Spencer issues a caution not to train those who will take their new skills and found their own companies, he does note, "You can train a turkey to climb a tree, but it's easier to hire a squirrel. Hire the people who are already good at achievement motivation and then train them in the technical skills."