

TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS:  
A PRACTICAL TOOL FOR TEACHING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN SELLING

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ABSTRACT

Transactional Analysis (TA), the system developed by Eric Berne for understanding the transactions that take place between individuals on both the verbal and non-verbal levels, provides a system for forming a mental image of the emotions and thought process in use by all persons in a situation. This gives a tangible feel to an otherwise intangible environment. The purpose of this paper is to examine basic TA concepts and suggest how they can be easily grasped, yet be of practical use in the classroom, as well as in actual sales situations.

The process of successful selling depends, in a large measure on communication skills--skills that are too often neglected in salesmanship courses. Transactional Analysis (TA) is a system of understanding communication and using that knowledge to move toward successful outcomes in selling situations. Basic TA concepts, taught in the classroom in a relatively short time, are immediately available to the student for practical use.

We live in a world organized largely around the tangible. The academic world is often evaluated in terms of buildings, number of students and faculty, equipment, and dollars in the budget. The business world revolves around assets, products, and personnel. As a result, much of our thinking centers on the tangible. It follows naturally that classroom teaching tends to emphasize the tangible. In salesmanship classes that means giving major attention to product knowledge, prospecting and time management methods, organizing sales territories--all topics that can be made more or less tangible. We can see the products and the brochures describing them; we can see the lists of prospects, the time diary, and the territory maps. And all of these are necessary areas of knowledge and expertise for students who are interested in professional selling careers--careers that form the basic structure of all marketing activities.

But when salespeople find themselves in actual selling situations, the critical skill for the moment is the ability to communicate effectively with the prospect. No amount of product knowledge is useful if the salesperson cannot couch it in terms that the prospect will receive. Which closing technique to choose remains a mystery if the salesperson is unable to discern the prospect's real needs and desires. The ability both to send and to receive messages clearly and effectively is the essential quality that often spells the difference between success and mediocrity in selling. But this is an area

often neglected in the classroom because it is intangible. It is difficult to explain because it cannot be reduced to a notebook or file box; it cannot be pictured in a brochure or held in the hand. One of the most pressing needs, therefore, in every salesmanship course is a method for providing students with dependable techniques for understanding the mental and emotional states of prospects, as well as their own, and then for responding appropriately. Skill in this process enhances the salesperson's ability to discover buying motives, to counter stalls and objections, and to close sales.

TEACHING BASIC TA CONCEPTS

Eric Berne began to develop the TA "language" when he noticed that clients in therapy sessions often seemed to exhibit several ways of reacting to the world--almost as if they became different people in each new situation. These manners of response seemed well established and appeared to operate almost automatically. Berne called these response styles or habits "Ego States." Learning to recognize these Ego States is relatively simple and opens the door to using all of the helpful insights offered by TA. For purposes of the sales course, the introduction to Ego States and other TA language is probably best achieved through a reading assignment [see suggested readings], reserving class time for specific application of the concepts to the sales situation.

The central concepts of TA that are most helpful for salespeople include understanding of ego states, life positions, and transactions. When students can recognize the use of the different ego states in themselves and others, they have a basis for understanding life positions that color all communication. They are also prepared to direct and control their transactions with others and to make communication open and productive.

Ego States

Berne recognized three basic Ego States: the Parent, the Adult and the Child.

The Parent Ego State has its origins in the individual's observations and evaluation of the attitudes, beliefs, values and ways of responding to the world exhibited by parents and other significant adults. Many of these attitudes, beliefs and values are adopted by the individual as the basis of the Parent Ego State. An easy method of getting in touch with the Parent Ego State is pretending to be one's own father or mother and role playing a given situation from

that point of view. One student may role play an insurance sales presentation as he believes his father would make it, while another may be the prospect and respond as he believes his father would. Ask the class to watch for typical Parent language--"should," "ought," "must," "Have to"--and for typical Parent attitudes and body language.

This role-playing exercise can produce a number of interesting variations. The person who plays the salesperson may be a Critical Parent and press hard for a close from an aggressive, authoritarian position; or, on the other hand, the salesperson could be a Nurturing Parent, pressing just as firmly for a close, but from a stance of helping and protecting the prospect.

The possible responses of the "prospect" are also varied. If the prospect is a Critical Parent, the response might be skeptical or even angry. A Nurturing Parent response, however, could be encouraging and kind--while either rejecting or accepting the invitation to the close.

In still other instances, the prospect who imitates a real parent may slip into the Child Ego State because his internal Parent says that he "should" respond as a Child when confronted by a Parent. The Child may be Adapted--rotely accepting what the Parent suggests, or may be Rebellious--automatically rejecting anything the Parent recommends. In this case, attention can be called to the language and body stance that suggests the presence of the Child.

Another experiment that helps students experience all the Ego States is to ask different ones to state the same message from various Ego States. For example, "Be the professor and remind the class that term reports are due on Monday." Responses might be similar to these:

From Parent Ego State: Let me remind you that term reports are due Monday. Don't be late. Most of you couldn't survive a failing grade on this report.

From Adult Ego State: Let me remind you that term reports are due Monday. You may give them to me at class time or place them in my mail box in the department office by 5 p.m.

From Child Ego State: Hey, don't forget that your term reports are due Monday. I'm really looking forward to reading them. I'm excited about what several of you have told me about your topics.

#### Life Positions

As students examine the four basic life positions, they gain two benefits: (1) they learn to recognize the favorite life positions and Ego States of others and to respond appropriately; and (2) they have an opportunity to adopt a more productive life position as their own favorite style.

It is important to understand that any person may temporarily assume any one of the four basic life positions in a given situation. Most people, however, have a favorite position that governs most of their interactions with others. All three Ego States are involved in the choice of a favorite life position, and how the Ego States operate--and when--are, in turn, colored by the life position.

I'm Not OK--You're OK: This is perhaps the most common of all life positions; it is the basic position of the Child. The Child sees others--Parents and Adults--as bigger, more competent, and therefore better. A person who operates most of the time from this position feels insecure and depends upon some Parent or authority figure--parent, spouse, or boss. A salesperson with this life position suffers from call reluctance and fears pushing for a close.

I'm OK--You're Not OK: One who adopts this life position may operate from a large Rebellious Child. Perhaps beginning with the observation that others are bigger and stronger, the Child decides that does not mean others are automatically better. In fact, the Child decides, others are obviously not better; the Child decides to be "bigger" and takes over. One with this life position may also have a strong Parent--either Critical or Nurturing. The Critical Parent may be overbearing and dictatorial, telling others what to do; the Nurturing Parent may take over for others assuming they are obviously weaker and need protection. Salespeople with this life position use the "hard sell." They press for a close, too often overlooking any legitimate questions and ignoring the real needs of the prospect.

I'm Not OK--You're Not OK: This life position is one of defeat and discouragement. People who operate from this position have decided that since everyone is out to get everyone else there is nothing left in life that is worthwhile. The result is bitterness, fear, suspicion, and underhandedness. One who becomes securely locked into this life position is emotionally ill, hating self and the world. The only outlook is one of despair. Obviously, a salesperson with this outlook on life is defeated before beginning.

I'm OK--You're OK: The most productive and successful people live with this favorite life position. Operating from this position allows salespeople to be enthusiastic, optimistic, and successful. They can meet stalls and objections without a sense of rejection because they believe the prospect is honestly looking for more information, and they feel good about giving it. They are able to focus on the prospect's needs and desires and how they can fulfill those needs. They can move easily from one Ego State to another as the need arises.

#### UNDERSTANDING TRANSACTIONS

"Transaction" is the name given by Berne to a single interaction that takes place between two people. Salespeople need to understand three

basic types of transactions if they are to interact effectively with prospects and clients: parallel, complementary, and crossed transactions.

### Parallel Transactions

In a parallel transaction, the two participants are in the same Ego State. Not only are they in the same Ego State, but they also assume the other person to be in that same Ego State and anticipate the type of response that would normally come from it. For example, a prospect and a salesperson may both be in the Critical Parent Ego State:

Prospect: The government is doing such crazy things with taxes that an honest businessman can't make reasonable investment plans.

Salesperson: I couldn't agree with you more. That's why our company designed this particular plan so you can make the investments you want for future financial growth and, at the same time, retain some flexibility that puts you in a good tax position.

In this example, both the prospect and the salesperson were in the Critical Parent Ego State. The arrows on the diagram indicate that they were expecting to share beliefs and opinions. The salesperson used this expectation to good advantage by agreeing with the criticism expressed and then by appealing to the prospect's expressed values with a plan that would thwart the irritating nature of changeable tax laws. Now look at an example of a parallel transaction between two people in the Adult Ego State.

Prospect: I had originally planned to have this software written by our own programmers, but our need has become critical and we can't do it soon enough. Can you give me an idea about how long it will take to adapt your software package and have it operational?

Salesperson: We can make delivery in less than a week, and the system will run immediately on your present hardware. The entry system can be taught to operators in a one-hour session. Any modifications needed will be made by our client systems engineer who will stay with you as long as necessary--we estimate about a month. If you need further help at any time for a full year, the CSE will return at no additional cost.

In this example, the prospect was asking for information, and the salesperson gave answers to his questions. Both were analyzing needs and exploring options.

When two people are operating from parallel Ego States, communication is clear and understanding is likely to be complete. If the Ego States are also appropriate for the business at hand, the transaction achieves its original purpose and can, then be considered effective.

### Complementary Transactions

Complementary transactions occur when one person assumes a particular Ego State, clearly expecting a response from a different and specific Ego State, and the response comes from the expected state. Note that the lines in the illustrations show this exchange. Look at these examples of complementary transactions:

Prospect (from Critical Parent Ego State toward Child of salesperson): You have some nerve expecting me to buy anything from your company after they screwed up delivery on my last order. I lost an important account. I'll never buy from you again!

Salesperson (from Rebellious Child Ego State toward Critical Parent of prospect): Hey, I don't have to take this kind of abuse. I'm here to talk about what you need now--not about what happened before I even came to the company!.

-OR-

Salesperson (from Adapted Child Ego State toward Critical Parent of prospect): Gee, I'm sorry that happened. I didn't know about it. Is there anything I can do to make things right?

When the prospect is operating from the Critical Parent and expects a Child response, either of the above responses would be considered complementary. But the exchange is something less than satisfactory as far as the salesperson is concerned. Neither transaction is likely to produce a sale. There is, however, communication taking place. Each participant knows just what the other is thinking. Perhaps the only real goal reached is the prospect's desire to relieve frustration and vent angry feelings.

Complementary transactions are possible between other Ego States as well. The strong beliefs of the prospect's Parent may be expressed in terms of a request for information from the salesperson's Adult--not for an emotional reaction from the Child. If the salesperson responds appropriately with information rather than emotion, there is real communication. If the prospect's request for information comes from the Child, expressing fear or the need for reassurance and support, the logical response is for the salesperson to assume the Nurturing Parent Ego State and offer factual reassurance in the way of product information or service commitments. The prospect's needs are met, and the sale is closed.

Unfortunately, not all transactions are either parallel or complementary. And herein lies much of the difficulty observed in everyday communication.

### Crossed Transactions

Crossed transactions occur when a message from one Ego State toward an expected Ego State is met by a response from a totally unexpected Ego State. In the diagram below, you will note that the communication lines are crossed. The result

is similar to what occurs when telephone lines become "crossed." Messages are garbled, the purpose of the communication is blocked, and general confusion results.

Prospect (from Critical Parent toward Child): You shouldn't expect full payment on an order this size in just thirty days. You should either give us ninety days or offer at least a 10% discount.

Salesperson (from Critical Parent toward Child): Our price is already rock bottom. You shouldn't expect a discount at this low price. And how can you expect us to carry you ninety days is beyond my understanding. We have to meet our obligations on time; you should expect to pay on time, too.

This type of crossed transaction is an especially unproductive one in which salespeople sometimes become embroiled. The attack/counterattack tactics leave no room for appropriate negotiation. No information is exchanged--only angry demands and feelings. Occasionally, a salesperson may choose to cross a transaction deliberately in an effort to defuse a prospect's hostility by inviting a shift to the Adult Ego State. Here's an example:

Prospect (from Critical Parent toward Child of salesperson): I don't see how you suppliers stay in business. No matter what I need, the quantities available are short or the delivery is late.

Salesperson (from Adult Ego State toward Adult of prospect): I understand your concern. Let's get your Production Manager to meet with us and make a projection of your needs for the entire next quarter. Then I can get a commitment now from my company for delivery of the quantities and on the dates that meet your projection.

In this example, the salesperson responded to the Critical Parent attack of the prospect by offering an Adult response with a suggestion of a logical action they could take together, inviting the prospect to shift to the Adult and to take appropriate action. Of course, this crossing of the transaction does not always work, but it has a better chance of working than an impassioned Child defense or an angry Critical Parent counterattack.

#### USING TA IN ROLE PLAYING

When students have grasped the basic concepts of Ego States, life positions and transactions, one of the best techniques for reinforcing the learning is the use of role play. The use of role playing in training salespeople is not new, but it is gaining in popularity and in effectiveness with the advent of video-tape and disc equipment that enables the replay of role-playing exercises for analysis and discussion. AT&T Information Systems National Training Center in Denver provides a large number of settings especially designed and decorated to simulate

various types of client offices salespeople might expect to encounter in sales. Role-play training in these settings is intensive and rigorous, and also highly practical.[1] Honeywell Information Systems has found that role-play training makes major improvements in the performance of salespeople assigned to trade shows.[2]

Role playing places students in realistic situations and allows them to sell simulated prospects. Careful preparation is necessary to make the exercise meaningful. Each participant is given proper briefing ahead of time. Other class members will observe the acting out of the situation and may or may not be told what instructions were given to participants. The key to gaining benefits from role-playing is careful preparation to make scenarios meaningful, and skillful guidance of discussion periods following the exercises.[3]

When the instructions for role playing include identification of the Ego States to be assumed by participants and discussions include analysis of the effectiveness of each Ego State response and the types of transactions that resulted, students are in a position to learn valuable communication skills as well as technical sales skills.

Knowledge of basic TA principles better prepares students for sales situations in the future. In addition, it immediately enhances their communication abilities in the classroom and in other areas of social contacts. Improvement in communication today means quicker success in future sales activity.

#### REFERENCES

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#### Suggested Readings in Transactional Analysis

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