

MY ARTICLES · SE LEADERSHIP · BY BILL HYATT

The Modern Sales Engineering Team

What separates great SE teams from good ones? It starts with humanity — and ends with results that take care of themselves.

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“We start our days as people. We go home at the end of the day to our people — our families, our friends. Why aren’t we people during the day?”

What are the ingredients of a modern Sales Engineering team?

Technical aptitude? Sure. Discovery skills? Absolutely. Solution design? Critical. Presentation and communication? Without question. We could go on and on — and all of those ingredients would be correct, in varying proportions.

But what about the human side? What about the personal traits that no job description ever captures? What about the environment in which the team operates? And most importantly — what about the leader responsible for creating that environment?

This is not a list of best practices. This is a playbook. One that has produced a **95% annual team retention rate** and sustained quota attainment north of **110%** — not by demanding performance, but by building the conditions in which performance becomes inevitable.

The Secret Ingredient: People

Well, that is the “secret” recipe I have used for the past decade, and the results are remarkable. I look at each person’s humanity first, and their role-specific skills second. Then I find the uniqueness in each individual — the union of their personal humanity and their professional potential.

What makes them who they are? What makes them happy? What do they gravitate toward? What gets them out of bed in the morning? What would they do without ever being asked?

Then I couple that with their unique professional skills. What are they already good at? What could they excel at with a small stretch? What skills, if developed and trained, would both suit them personally and elevate them professionally?

The intersection of those two answers — who they are as a person and what they are capable of as a professional — is where extraordinary performance lives. That is the zone I am always trying to find for every person on my team.

“Find the uniqueness in each individual — the union of their personal identity and their professional potential. That intersection is where extraordinary performance lives.”

What Great Looks Like: The Human Differentiators

The technical skills get you a seat at the table. The human traits determine whether you stay there — and whether the client invites you back.

Colleagues and customers alike consistently point to the same qualities when describing the Sales Engineers who make the greatest impact:

→ **Preparation that borders on obsession.** The best SEs research the client’s business, their industry trends, their competitors, and their internal initiatives before a single slide is built.

They know their prospective customer “like the back of their hand.”

- **Tailored solutioning, every time.** There is no such thing as a generic demo in the playbook of a great SE. Each engagement reflects the client’s specific language, use cases, and goals. The client should feel that the solution was built specifically for them — because it was.
- **The crawl/walk/run mindset.** Great SEs understand that overwhelming a client with capability is as dangerous as underselling. A phased, progressive approach builds trust, manages risk, and creates the foundation for a long-term partnership.
- **Reliability under pressure.** The best SEs are available. They respond quickly. They show up prepared, even on short notice. They never make a colleague or a client feel like an inconvenience.
- **Mentorship as a default setting.** The highest-performing SEs don’t just close deals — they make everyone around them better. They share knowledge freely, coach new hires without being asked, and build institutional knowledge that outlasts any individual.

The Art of Listening: The Most Underrated Skill in Sales Engineering

Here is where many technically gifted SEs stumble. The impulse to demonstrate — to open the laptop and “show” the answer the moment a question arises — can actually undermine trust.

The most powerful thing a Sales Engineer can do is listen. Not politely wait to speak. *Actually listen.*

Understand the client’s business challenges fully before reaching for a solution. Let them feel heard. Let them feel understood. Good IQ knows the answer. Good EQ knows when to give it — and when to simply say “yes.”

Sometimes a client asks a question and all they need to hear is: “Yes, we do that.” Not a demo. Not a feature walkthrough. Not three use cases and a reference slide. Just: “Yes.”

The discipline to know the difference — to hold back when holding back is more powerful — is what separates a great SE from a good one. It is a skill built through curiosity, empathy, and hundreds of conversations. It cannot be trained in a classroom. It is earned through the commitment to understand people first.

“Listen more than you talk. Understand the client’s business challenges — and don’t immediately jump to the solution. Let them feel heard and understood.”

The Six-Part Playbook for Building a High-Impact SE Team

Understanding the philosophy is the starting point. Executing it consistently is the work. Here are six disciplines that, taken together, define what it means to lead a world-class Sales Engineering organization.

01 The Discovery Process

HOW DO YOU ACTUALLY FIND OUT WHO SOMEONE IS?

Most leaders skip this step entirely. They inherit a team, read the resumes, review the quota numbers, and assume they know who they have. They don’t.

Real discovery takes intentional conversations — not performance reviews and not one-on-ones about pipeline. Set aside dedicated time, early in the relationship, to ask questions that have nothing to do with the job. Ask about their path — not the professional summary version, the real one. Ask what they are proud of outside of work. Ask what kind of work energizes them versus what drains them. Ask what they would do differently if they could design their own role.

Then listen without an agenda. You are not looking for answers that fit your org chart. You are looking for the truth of who this person is — so you can deploy them in a way that matches their nature, not just their job description.

In practice: Within the first 30 days, have one conversation per team member that is explicitly not about work. Call it a “Who Are You” conversation. Take notes. Refer back to them. What you learn will change how you coach, assign, and develop that person for years.

02

The Union Framework

PERSONAL IDENTITY + PROFESSIONAL SKILLS = UNIQUE DEPLOYMENT

Once you know who someone is — what lights them up, what they gravitate toward, what they would do unprompted — map that against what they are professionally capable of. The goal is to find the overlap: the work that feels natural to them and produces high-impact results for the organization.

This is not about putting people in boxes. It is about releasing people from boxes they were never meant to be in. Some SEs are natural storytellers who should be leading executive briefings. Others are deep technical thinkers who should be architecting complex POCs. Others are coaches at heart who belong in an enablement-adjacent role. Most leaders never find this out because they never ask.

When you deploy people in their zone of natural strength, you stop managing performance. You start witnessing it.

In practice: For each team member, draw two circles. One: their personal identity — what they love, what energizes them, who they are. Two: their professional strengths — what they are already good at, what they could grow into. The overlap is their deployment zone. Build their role around that intersection as much as the business allows.

03

Hiring for the Right Ingredients

WHAT TO LOOK FOR BEFORE THE SKILLS CONVERSATION BEGINS

Technical competency can be developed. Curiosity, humility, and genuine care for people cannot be trained into someone who doesn't already have them. When hiring for a Sales Engineering team, the human qualities come first.

Look for candidates who can explain complex things simply — not to show off their knowledge, but because they genuinely want the other person to understand. Look for people who ask questions before giving answers. Look for candidates who talk about their teammates' wins as readily as their own. Look for the person who, when asked about a lost deal, talks about what they learned rather than who was to blame.

In interviews, ask: *"Tell me about a time you held back information that you knew, because the moment wasn't right."* The candidate who understands that question — and has a real answer — has the EQ you need. Ask: *"What is something a colleague taught you recently?"* The candidate who answers with genuine enthusiasm is still curious. That matters more than their certification list.

In practice: Build your interview scorecard in two equal halves. The first evaluates technical and functional competency. The second evaluates human qualities: curiosity, humility, listening, coachability, and genuine care. If a candidate is a 10 on technical and a 3 on human, keep looking.

04

The Plus-One Principle

1% BETTER EVERY DAY. THE MATH IS STAGGERING.

Most people aim for transformation. Transformation is overwhelming, unsustainable, and usually abandoned by February. The Plus-One Principle asks for something different: commit to being just 1% better today than you were yesterday. One better question asked in discovery. One tighter demo transition. One more minute of preparation before a call.

The mathematics of compounding are humbling. Improve 1% every day for a year, and you are not 365% better. You are **37 times better**. That is not motivational math — that is exponential reality. A team that commits to the Plus-One Principle does not need a transformation initiative. They become one.

The role of the leader is to make the 1% visible. Call it out when you see it. Celebrate the small win before the big one. Build a culture where incremental progress is recognized — because it is the engine of everything else.

In practice: At the end of every team meeting, ask one question: *“What is one thing you will do 1% better this week than last week?”* Write it down. Follow up. When someone reports back that they tried it and it worked — that story becomes the team’s culture in real time.

05

The Deal Retrospective

WIN OR LOSE, THERE IS ALWAYS A LESSON. FIND IT EVERY TIME.

Most teams celebrate wins and quietly move past losses. Both are mistakes. The win teaches you what to repeat. The loss teaches you what to never do again. Both require a deliberate conversation — not a blame session, not a post-mortem, but a genuine learning ritual.

After every significant deal — closed won or closed lost — gather the SE and AE together within 48 hours. Ask four questions: *What did we do well? What would we do differently? What did we learn about the customer that we didn’t know going in? What is the one thing we will take into the next deal?*

The fourth question is the most important. It converts the retrospective from reflection into action. Something specific must carry forward — a new discovery question, a tightened demo sequence, a better way to handle a technical objection. The deal is over. The lesson is not.

In practice: Create a shared “Win/Loss Library” — a living document where every deal retrospective is logged with the four answers. Over time, this becomes one of the most valuable assets your team owns. New hires learn faster. Patterns become visible. The team stops making the same mistake twice.

06

The Cost of Getting It Wrong

WHAT THE TEAM LOOKS LIKE WHEN NONE OF THIS HAPPENS

It is worth naming, plainly, what the alternative looks like. Because most SE organizations are living it right now — and have normalized it as simply “how things are.”

When leaders don't see people first, they get compliance without commitment. SEs show up, do the demo, file the notes, and disengage the moment they find a leader who actually sees them. Attrition climbs. Institutional knowledge walks out the door. The next hire takes six months to ramp and another six to become effective — and then leaves for the same reason the last person did.

When there is no discovery process, talent is misdeployed. The natural storyteller is buried in technical documentation. The deep architect is put in front of executive audiences where they struggle. Both underperform — not because they lack capability, but because nobody took the time to find out who they actually were.

When there is no retrospective culture, the team repeats its mistakes at scale. The same demo falls flat in the same way against the same objection — twelve months in a row — because nobody ever stopped to ask why.

The contrast: A team built on these six disciplines doesn't just perform better — it feels different. To the people on it, to the customers they serve, and to the organization that depends on them. Performance becomes a byproduct of culture. And culture, once built well, is the most durable competitive advantage a sales organization can have.

The Bottom Line

The modern Sales Engineering team is not defined by its technology stack or its demo environment. It is defined by the people inside it — their humanity, their humility, their hunger to solve real problems for real people.

See the people. Find the union. Hire for character. Compound the small wins. Learn from every deal. And never mistake compliance for commitment.

Do those six things — consistently, with genuine care — and the quota will take care of itself.

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