Symbioss
Transforming relationships, unlocking growth

Why expertise alone doesn't win work

Eight findings on trust and client leadership, and four conclusions worth acting on.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

01 Emotional intelligence counts twice as much

At every level, emotional intelligence proved twice as important to top performance as technical skill and IQ.

02 Six trust profiles, Expert tied fifth

Expert 38%, the most common profile by a wide margin
Trust: Doer first, Expert tied fifth, Professor last
Of 72,880 self-assessments, 2008-2015. Vendor data.

03 Handling people separates star leaders

Across 188 organisations, nearly 90% of what separated star senior leaders from average ones came down to emotional intelligence, not intellect.

04 Expertise is one part of the trust equation

Trust rests on being credible, being reliable, being someone a client feels safe opening up to, and putting the client first. Expertise covers only the first.

05 Only three of eight sales styles work

Of around 800 sales professionals observed in live meetings, only three of eight behaviour types worked: Experts, Closers and Consultants, 37% of the sales force.

06 Scene-setting questions cost the sale

Across more than 35,000 sales calls in 23 countries, the more factual scene-setting questions a seller asked, the less likely the call was to succeed. The least experienced sellers asked the most of them.

07 86% of buyers expect a trusted adviser

86% of business buyers say they expect sales representatives to act as trusted advisers. A stated expectation in a vendor survey, not behaviour.

08 Satisfaction isn't the whole story

In a US consumer study, committed customers' future intentions ran through trust and commitment, not satisfaction. Applying that to B2B is reasoning, not proof.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

01 Train client leaders before you promote them

Promotion into a client-facing role is usually a reward for technical work, with no training attached. The cost lands on the client, who gets a less capable relationship than the one they had. Treat client leadership as a skill to be taught, and teach it before you hand the relationship over. Drawn from findings 1, 2 and 3.

02 Credibility secures consideration only

Clients already assume you know your subject, so expertise buys you a hearing and little else. The profile that scores highest on trust pairs reliability with closeness, and closeness doesn't show up in a technical appraisal. Ask where each of your senior people stands on all four parts. Drawn from findings 2, 4 and 7.

03 Polish wins less work than good questions

Most organisations reward the person who presents well, because presenting is visible and diagnosis isn't. Yet most observed sales behaviour doesn't work, and the obvious questions make a meeting less likely to succeed. Look at what your promotion and bonus criteria actually reward. Drawn from findings 5 and 6.

04 What happens between projects decides the next success

A client can rate the work highly and still give the next project to someone else. What decides it is built in the months when nothing is being delivered. Drawn from finding 8.

Sources by finding 01 and 03 Goleman / Hay-McBer, Harvard Business Review (1998) · 02 Trusted Advisor Associates, Think Again (2017), 72,880 Trust Quotient self-assessments 2008-2015, publisher sells the assessment · 04 Maister, Green & Galford, The Trusted Advisor (2000) · 05 Ryals & Davies, Harvard Business Review (2010) · 06 Rackham, SPIN Selling (1988) · 07 Salesforce, State of the Connected Customer, 6th edition (2023), vendor survey · 08 Garbarino & Johnson, Journal of Marketing (1999), US consumer study. July 2026

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