

I'll Scratch Your Back . . .

Why it pays to see the business through the other guy's eyes.

I spent the first years of my career on the finance end of business—first in accounting and later as the controller then CFO of a high-tech medical device company. While working with finance and administrative people, I learned that most of them viewed sales as the lucky few traveling around the country on expense accounts, eating fancy meals and partying. Operations, on the other hand, were viewed as those who struggle to do easy tasks such as managing costs and optimizing efficiency.

After outliving my usefulness in finance, I was “promoted” to VP of operations. It was then that I learned most operations people shared finance’s negative views of sales. In addition, operations will tell you that sales people make reckless and ill-informed promises to customers and leave operations in the position of having to pick up the pieces.

And lest you finance people feel some sort of anti-sales kindred spirit with operations, they view you as the people who are really good at pointing out problems—after it’s too late to do anything about them.

How do I know all this? I was an ops guy, convinced that if only given the opportunity to manage sales, I could do better.

Begin the next chapter: COO. Finally, responsibility for finance, operations and... sales.

Once on the inside of the sales team I got a first-hand impression of how they viewed

operations and put customer relationships at risk. The hard part, for sales, is closing the deal. Once the purchase order is received, the “easy” work of filling it is all that’s left.

Finance, sales sees you as petty, with nothing better to do than nitpick minor issues like errors in expense reports.

Memo to Finance and Operations: Get over your hang-ups with sales. Sales is all about expense accounts, fancy meals and partying? OK, sometimes it can be. But you have no idea what it’s like to make 50 calls and get 49 rude hang ups. For every challenging order that sales turns over, there were three he thought he was going to get and didn’t. Rearranging your week’s schedule to smooth over a relationship with a customer whose order was screwed up is no fun either. White knuckles through snowstorms, missing your child’s school event for a sales trip, lonely hotel rooms and tons of rejection are all parts of the job you never see.

Memo to Operations and Sales: You might want to thank finance. You take for granted that your paycheck gets cut, your suppliers get paid and the company maintains its line of credit. You have no idea what it’s like to be the last person to lock up the office for weeks on end when it’s budget time or the auditors are coming. If you’ve never had to decide which supplier got paid, and never woke up at 3 a.m. sweating a payroll, count yourself lucky.

Memo to Sales and Finance: Give operations a break. Running an order when nobody defined what a quality part was, working on a Sunday to ship what the sales guy promised, working 24 hr straight

Focus more on the value each of you add to the business rather than blaming each other for your problems.

operations and finance. Ready? Sales sees operations as those who make senseless errors that ir-

ritate customers and put customer relationships at risk. The hard part, for sales, is closing the deal. Once the purchase order is received, the “easy” work of filling it is all that’s left.

Memo to All: Cut each other some slack and focus more on the value each of you add to the business rather than blaming each other for your problems. The alternative is to be pummeled by your competitor who has found a way to work as a team. ■

MATTHEW KIRCHNER CEO, American Finishing Resources, LLC
mkirchner@afnow.com

