

# Quorum

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## Listening and the Three Surprises - *An Introduction to a New Contact Sport*

Selling evokes images of the aggressively successful sales manager in Glengarry Glen Ross, Arthur Miller's Willy Loman, flashy used car salesmen, or door to door salesmen in loud plaid jackets. The use of the words "selling," "sales," or "sell" creates deep anxiety for most people. We do not appreciate how much "selling" we do in a given day. In reality, we are all "selling" all the time. At work, we "sell" our ideas, and we "sell" the value of teamwork, new projects, products, investments and most of all the value we bring to our company.

Yet, I hear someone saying, "That's not selling; that's negotiating, or influencing or getting consensus, but it is not selling! Yuck!" Why is this? I suggest this is because, when we use the word sales, we feel we are talking about an end that is obtained by some form of clever trickery, not about honestly meeting a need with an effective product or service.

Over the course of a number of years I have developed a great respect for my friend and professional colleague, Kathleen Reilly, president and owner of Consultative Resources Corporation ([www.consultativesellingprocess.com](http://www.consultativesellingprocess.com)). Kate and her company specialize in very high level sales training with a particular focus on consultative skills. Over the years Kate and I have engaged in a long dialogue about many of the skills she teaches. I would like to share some insights I have learned from Kate.

Kate teaches sales people ways to connect with people who might have a use for their products or services. However, having taught thousands of professional sales people over the years, Kate has found that people are so focused on "selling" that they don't give themselves the chance to determine if there is a real "need." To Kate, the word *need* is a special term.

Needs encompass the full spectrum of personal and professional reasons why individuals do what they do and makes the choices they make. Kate teaches how to learn and really understand those needs. It is only with this understanding that a sales person can determine if their product or service truly and honestly meets those needs. Kate also teaches that there are deeper needs, needs that are usually not shared at first, (sometimes because the client can't even articulate them) but are often more important than those that are stated. Now I hear you saying, that's fine, but how does one get people to share those deeper needs? You do that through listening.

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Over the years I have come to realize that listening is a full contact sport, no gloves, no pads. That's right, it's hard, it's demanding, and very few people, in my experience, really know how to do it. It is not a soft skill, but a hard discipline. Listening has rules and if you violate them, you go right to the penalty box. I have come to call this: The Three Surprises.

Surprise Number One: Nobody listens until they have been heard. This is not some Taoist saying from an ancient manuscript. It is real and stands in the way of most communication like a brick wall. Remember, full contact, no gloves, no pads.

Surprise Number Two: I can tell you what I *heard* you say, not what you *said*. You can tell me what you *said*, not what I *heard*. Most people listen from their respective corners of the ring. To really listen they need to engage in hard give and take. Most conversations require at least three rounds. Important conversations take longer.

Surprise Number Three: what is *not said* is usually very important. The more important the issue, the more likely it will not be said. No opponent is going to tell you they have a wicked left hook or that their right knee needs surgery. But if you are in the ring with them, you sure want to know this information. Let me illustrate these surprises with a story.

Quorum was approached about helping a client develop a line of business. I took this opportunity to try an experiment. It was designed to help my colleagues establish a basis for an open exchange of information with a potential client and allow them the ability to demonstrate their knowledge and credibility. I went to two people in the office and asked them if they would help develop this new business.

I told them they were not going to call anyone for business. Instead they were to continue research I had begun on the line of business and to spend the next week reading and collecting as much information as possible. I suggested they organize the research along four dimensions; product, people, problems and players.

I now asked them to contact six senior executives actively involved in the particular business and ask for a meeting. But there was an important condition: at no time during this meeting were they to engage in *selling*. I told them that when they called for the appointment they were to explicitly state that *they were not calling to sell or solicit business*. I told them they were to ask for ten minutes of their time in order to share some observations and conclusions they had reached based on research they have been doing about the business and get the views of individuals who are intimately involved in the market. They were then to repeat that they were not calling to pitch or solicit business in any way. Lastly, the two of them were to go on all appointments together as a team. So, the two began to call and make appointments.

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As they left for their first appointment, I reminded them that when they walk in to the appointment, they must immediately repeat the promise and purpose of the meeting. They must also have a copy of their research with them. With this final instruction, they went to their meetings.

They came back from their meetings separately and the first to come back was very excited. Slowly reviewing exactly what happened, she timidly confessed to always feeling real anxiety whenever going on a sales call. And when she walked into the room and shook hands with the executive, she clearly felt a tension in the room. However, when she repeated the promise and the purpose of the meeting, she felt tension actually evaporate.

Though the initial request was for ten minutes, the executive ended up spending an hour and a half and towards the end of the conversation asked “Who are you guys, high level consultants? I deal with headhunters all the time, they never know this much about my business or ask such good questions.” Then the executive volunteered the names and phone numbers of five other people to speak to and gave permission for his name to be used.

At the end of our debriefing, she speculated that her colleague would probably have a completely different view of the meeting as “he is a real salesman.” When he arrived, also excited and enthused, he, too, confessed feeling real anxiety walking to the meeting, he too felt the tension in the room when they entered and felt it vanish when they reconfirmed the purpose of the meeting. He too was amazed with what the executive said about their research and other “headhunters.” And he was surprised at the willing offer of people to call.

Are you confused now? Let’s review the experience of my colleagues, with the Three Surprises in mind. They found the project a challenge for a number of reasons. First, it required they do something new (always difficult) and they found it hard to keep their focus on what I said to them (because it was new). Until they were certain that I understood their feelings and concerns, they were not going to be able to hear what I was asking them to do. Surprise Number One.

When we debriefed the meeting collectively, what became apparent was that each had heard the conversation slightly differently or missed important points or comments. That is, they could each state what they had *heard* with certainty, but could not say what the executive had *said* with certainty. Surprise Number Two.

Lastly, during the de-briefing, both of my colleagues commented repeatedly about how amazed they were at the reaction the executive had to their research and the questions. What they did not say was that their anxiety on the way to the meeting was because they were afraid of looking ignorant or foolish and that they usually feel this way when they go to a meeting or on a sales call. Surprise Number Three.

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On the basis of this experiment, Quorum changed all its processes and procedures with respect to developing business, understanding assignments, cultivating candidates, and serving clients. We took the “sales out of search.” We changed conversation to consultation and made listening the basis of understanding. We provide service only when we can clearly confirm a need for service. When clients willingly engage with us in the middle of the ring, the results can transform their business.

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To learn more about Consultative Resources Corporation (CRC) and what Kate Reilly does, visit their web site at: [www.consultativesellingprocess.com](http://www.consultativesellingprocess.com)

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