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excerpts

Trust creates true collaboration between Cisco and IBM account teams

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To learn what IBM and Cisco did to resolve their trust issues for collaboration, please refer to the spring issue of SAMA's biannual Focus: Teams *newsletter, available in print and online at www.strategicaccounts.org for members as well as attendees of the 44th Annual Conference.*

From large enterprises to small businesses, alignment with strategic partners is critical for survival in most organizations today. But unless the relationship is founded on mutual trust, successful collaboration can be nearly impossible. Trust – or lack of it – between partners (especially between account team members) can make or break the relationship and potentially cost organizations up to a 40-percent loss in account team productivity.

Creating joint account plans

Several years ago IBM Corp. and Cisco Systems Inc. announced a global strategic alliance to leverage each company's shared strategy of integrated solutions, technologies and products that would help our joint customers increase productivity, improve business resilience and enhance overall business objectives. Our two companies then began to work closely together to create specific joint account plans and identify 10 major customers to kick off what we called our "touchdown" initiative. To assist our teams in quickly gaining traction with these critical accounts, we conducted separate account planning workshops for each account. The workshops aimed at helping the account teams evolve their already proven successful sales methodologies toward a joint solution sales approach.

Each workshop was segmented into three parts. The first focused on getting a clear picture of the identified account; the second identified account team responsibilities, timelines and action items; and the third centered on the actual account planning activities. With everything in place, we started the workshop series and eagerly looked forward to the positive results sure to come. However, it wasn't that easy. Early on, it became apparent to us that things were not going as smoothly as we had anticipated.

Astrid Gollwitzer, a Cisco account manager within financial services and sales/channels, was involved in one of those initial workshops and also noticed a problem.

"Although Cisco and IBM already had a very good relationship," she says, "for some reason it seemed that the account teams weren't coming together as well as we had hoped on these joint accounts."

We suspected that the issue might be a lack of trust, most likely resulting from the partners' dissimilar organizational cultures and very different sales methodologies. Therefore, before moving on to the next workshop in the series, we brought in an outside expert on account management to assist us in digging beneath the surface so our account teams could find that elusive common ground.

Developing trust

Ernst Neumann, a consultant with MCI Consulting, has worked with many account teams and understands account team dynamics. He helped us recognize the critical nature of trust and how it can impact collaborative account management. He defines the four dimensions (or "bricks of trust") as competence, openness, integrity and reliability. Without a solid foundation in each dimension and basic understanding of how each affects the account teams' perceptions of themselves and their partner, trust cannot be formed, and the account teams will never be able to collaborate effectively.

We then distributed a pre-workshop survey that would provide us with a 360-degree picture of the situation by asking account team members to self-assess their own performance on each brick, then rate their partner's performance on each. They were then asked to rate the importance level of every brick. When the survey results were presented to us, they confirmed what we already suspected. The problem was not a value proposition or technology issue. Both the Cisco and IBM teams had a very high level of respect for each other on those topics. However, while the survey indicated the trust issues most likely stemmed from the vastly different sales approach of each partner, what surprised us was the severity of the problem. 🙰