



Customer Journey

Susan

Susan's journey explores confidence, resilience, navigating organizational change, managing pressure, and leading through uncertainty.

CUSTOMER JOURNEY: SUSAN

Meet "Susan," a biotech sales executive navigating rapid organizational growth, leadership pressure, acquisitions, and team scaling.

Her journey explores confidence, resilience, navigating organizational change, managing pressure, and leading through uncertainty.

Each post explores a real coaching conversation or leadership challenge from that journey.



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From High Performer to Organizational Leader

Just got promoted into a bigger role — more team, more travel, more politics — and wondering if you're actually ready for it?

Susan came to me at an inflection point. She was a high-performing sales leader for a biotech medical device company and was being promoted to oversee sales across EMEA. It would require handling a much bigger team, more travel, and more corporate politics than before. She felt she needed someone she could trust to support her transition.

The challenges evolved quickly over the months that followed. Sales targets everywhere were increased as she stepped into the role. That meant her role expanded and at the same time, the demands increased for everyone on her team.

In her newly expanded areas, she inherited a few low performers that she had to deal with right away to reach the targets.

At the same time, pressure from above intensified. Her boss was erratic and not always supportive of her, but she learned to stay steady regardless of his behavior, focus on her team, and give them what they needed to be successful.

There were also some surprises along the way, requiring adapting to a whole new set of circumstances, another new team, yet more new expectations.

I worked with her for six months, over which time she transformed from a high performer to an organizational leader.

Several lessons emerged over the months that followed, which serve as the themes of this series.

- **Leadership is not about heroics. It's about listening to your team and giving them what they need to be successful.**
- Develop your high performers so they can become leaders and help you grow.
- Your boss's stress is not your stress.
- Prioritize self-care. Take needed breaks to avoid burnout and be fully present when you are at work.

- Take time to self-reflect on what's happening, ideally with a coach, so you can be more strategic and less reactive.

Over the time we worked together, Susan stopped thinking of leadership as pushing harder or carrying more herself. She built a habit of self-reflection which helped her project steady leadership presence and be more strategic. That shift changed not only how she led, but what her team became capable of accomplishing together. She developed other leaders and created alignment across teams under pressure.

Susan's Leadership Values

One of the things I ask coaching clients to do is define their leadership values. Leadership values become a compass during difficult decisions and help leaders consistently show up the way they want to be remembered.

Susan's values evolved as her role evolved. She did a lot right and her values centered around the practices that made her successful throughout her evolution.

- Listen a lot to figure out what others need to be successful.
- When others are stressed, remain calm and give them space to talk it out.
- Alignment is key. Make sure your plan is aligned with company goals.
- Develop your high performers into leaders
- No matter how busy things get, prioritize your mental and physical health and encourage your team to do the same.

What Low Performers Actually Need From Leaders

Inherited a low performer you can't just let go? Here's the question that actually turns them around.

In one of our earliest conversations, we tackled the common challenge of low performers. The conversation below is a version of the conversation, nearly as I remember it. It's a good model of how a coaching conversation turns into insight and direction for action.

Susan inherited a team with two low performers. Both were formerly good performers who were lagging recently due to changes.

Over the course of this conversation, Susan learned what they needed to turn around: a lot of attention and listening, good questions to surface the problems and solve for them, coaching and support for improving outcomes.

Susan herself started as a sales rep and moved quickly into leadership. She was very driven, and even as she rose into the VP level, she crushed sales targets even when she was not fully staffed.

Her team members generally returned ten times their salary in sales.

When I met her, she was just being promoted from N. America to also head up EMEA. It was a daunting challenge, especially because at the same time, headquarters increased sales goals for all regions. She requested coaching to help support her through the transition.

The first question I asked her was: **What's your biggest problem right now?**

She said, "low performers. When things are tight, everyone counts."

We broke them down:

Fredrick was based in Germany. Susan inherited him when she took over the Europe team. He was formerly a high performing sales leader but had recently been lagging. He had been demoted to sales rep, but the boss believed he

was valuable, so she had to keep him.

Mark worked under Fredrick, now they are peers. He was way behind. He spent two quarters selling one unit. She needed him to sell four units per quarter to be successful.

Mark got in his own way. He was insulted if Susan made good suggestions. Recently, he made an offer to someone and forgot to follow up. The customer bought a competitor's device. He had been successful before because Fredrick had been handing him very good warm sales leads. Now they have a product launch, and Susan needed him to get up to speed and even upsell.

I asked: **What do they need to be successful?**

Susan reflected for a moment then answered: Training didn't work. They don't apply it and think they are above it. They need strong marketing support, so they get the leads they need. Once they have the leads, I can be on top of them to close.

Once Susan was clear about what they needed, she was ready with an action plan: "I can talk them through generating leads and doing proper follow-ups. I'll set up weekly 1:1s with them and we'll work through it together."

That was the turning point for her.

She stopped focusing on what she needed from them and started focusing on what they needed from her.

She gave them what they needed and started consistent 1:1s to manage small issues early and work through them. Their performance turned around and they started hitting targets again.

Your Boss's Stress Is Not Your Stress

Your boss says things under pressure that don't add up — and you're left wondering if it's you. It's not.

"I don't know how to handle my boss," Susan said. "He's putting so much pressure on me that it's distracting from my work."

This is a classic moment during inflection points. At senior levels, people often feel freer to express pressure openly. All you need to do is listen. They trust that the people around them know what they are going through. The key is to listen without absorbing the stress yourself.

But for someone who is rising into the upper ranks, it can be disconcerting and disorienting. People who normally exude leadership presence and executive ease start revealing their vulnerabilities.

At that level, experienced executives often help each other manage stress by listening, validating the stakes, and talking their way back to steadiness. When someone reacts openly to the stress, it's a sign of trust, but you have to read the signs well in order to avoid emotional contagion. If you, too, panic, you can lose credibility.

During this time, Susan came to our session with a story of how her boss had called her the previous weekend, late on Saturday, to tell her she just had to hustle more. He went on for about ten minutes, telling her how this is the most important quarter for sales they had ever had.

She listened, trying to understand what he meant, but he just kept repeating the word hustle.

Susan interrupted her story to say, "Sales at this level have nothing to do with hustling and he has no idea how the sales process works."

Then she finished her story: "And then, get this, after a ten-minute rant, he says, 'I don't have time for this. I'm at a wedding.' And he hung up."

There was a short silence, then Susan said, "It doesn't make any sense."

I said, "You're right, it doesn't make sense logically, but it does make sense emotionally. When people are stressed, they say all kinds of things that they don't mean literally."

"Stress responses usually fall into the classic fight, flight, or freeze patterns. In this case, it was fight. He was aggressive. Did you feel that?"

"Yes," she said.

"That's what he wanted you to feel," I said. "The urgency, the aggression, the need for action. He wanted you to know how important it is for you to succeed. Does that make more sense?"

"Yes," she said. "If I step back, I can see it as a stress reaction. I don't know what he's stressed about though. We're on track to hit our targets."

"This is the thing about stress, it spreads. You don't need to know where the stress comes from, you just need to protect your boundaries and his. He's taking it out on you, but you don't have to take the stress on."

"The main thing to remember is this: your boss's stress is not your stress."

"In any leadership position, you need to be aware of stress. When people are reacting in ways that don't make sense, stress is likely to be the cause of it," I explained.

I continued. "If you can identify it as a fight, flight, or freeze response, the best thing to do is step back and try to get some perspective. Protect your emotional boundaries and don't get caught up in other people's stress."

Then I said, "Just by listening and validating how people feel, you help them calm them down and be more rational. They will generally be grateful for your steadiness during a tough moment."

"I get it, and you're right. My boss's stress is not my stress."

Susan learned that in those moments, her job was not to absorb the panic. Her job was to stay grounded, protect her perspective, and keep leading her team steadily through the pressure.

Leading at Scale

Do you need to stop people from competing and get them to start working together?

After Susan's team hit crazy numbers for Q3 and Q4, her CEO announced that the company had been acquired.

This was great news, and now she understood the source of her boss's stress over the last year. He was grateful for her work, praised her leadership and her team, and promised to keep her on.

At this point, the pressure didn't stop. It changed.

Now she had to navigate performing well while staying on top of politics and bringing more people into the loop.

She planned a big territory strategy presentation for the CEO.

As she started planning for the meeting, I asked: "What is the goal of this meeting?"

Susan said, **"If I do this right, we come away from this meeting as one team, working peer-to-peer to support each other's success."**

She wanted to develop a team mindset where the sales reps of both companies integrate as one team and stop seeing each other as competitors.

She invited all the salespeople to participate in preparation.

To demonstrate good will and team spirit, she invited her dotted line manager and his people to the meeting preparation process, so everyone felt included and could contribute.

During the two weeks of prep, they had to synthesize a lot of information about the new company, what the goals were, and figure out

together how to apply it.

To handle more sales reps in the room, **she encouraged more peer-to-peer communication and support.**

I said: "People remember what you repeat. What is the one message you want them to walk away with?"

Her message was very clear: "We are one team, and we need to have each other's backs." That became the mantra she returned to throughout the preparation process and during the meeting itself.

During the presentation, she gave the mic to each rep and invited others to speak. Again, she encouraged them all to execute as a team of peers.

The CEO got the mic after the presentation and he was pleased. He asked everyone to give themselves a round of applause for coming together so quickly.

By defining them as one team, giving them common strategic goals, inviting everyone in and looking for everyone's contributions, she helped everyone feel heard and important. They stopped looking at each other as competitors and started figuring out how they could help each other.

Instead of taking more responsibility herself, she worked to develop leadership across the whole team.

Build Leadership Success From the Foundation Up

Leadership keeps piling on new priorities while your headcount stays flat — and you're the one who has to make it work?

As Susan started to see the scope of what the new company wanted from her, new challenges arose for her team.

Susan had to learn how to manage goals and demands from above while protecting her team's boundaries and maintaining performance.

First, she was asked to take on sales of another product. It was a competitor's product that had been acquired about the same time. The new product had six sales in the last seven years, and now in the new company, they set a target of 18 sales this year. They believed Susan could do it.

The product had promise but it lacked the data to support it. In Susan's opinion, it was a hard sell.

It was projected to account for 10% of revenue, but the company asked her to spend 50% of her team's time on it.

I asked, "why would they want to prioritize a product with so little revenue?"

Susan reflected and then realized that this product push was more about a power struggle between the former CEO of that company and the former CEO of her company.

That realization helped her devise a strategy that achieved the goals she wanted. She worked with her team to increase sales of the new product without sabotaging sales of the product they brought to the merger.

It was a fine line, but small improvements for the new line seemed to satisfy them, and she kept her team focused on the bigger prize in terms of sales and revenue.

She knew that **protecting the revenue protected her team**. She gave the organization enough visible support for the new product line while quietly keeping her team focused on the larger revenue priorities.

Two other products were added to her sales team targets, and she asked for six more salespeople.

She said, "My team members bring in ten times their salary so it's worth it to them to hire more." But after a hard push, she was approved for just three more salespeople.

I asked: "How can you leverage what you know to

get your team selling more?"

She said: "**The fundamentals of good sales are always the fundamentals.** If everyone applies them and works hard, they will do ok."

She learned to scale the fundamentals.

She hired good people with great track records. Personality is a big part of sales.

Everyone had to practice their pitches. She scheduled regular peer-reviewed pitch practice sessions for feedback and mentoring.

She spotted high performers to develop and manage the next team of sales managers. Her message to them was: "**Make your team feel safe and supported so they can take risks and grow.**"

She set up a system of 1:1s so everyone had a chance to be heard. High performers learned to listen and lead. All leaders were to prioritize giving the team what they need to succeed.

Sticking with the fundamentals and making them work at scale helped her break through some organizational barriers she was hitting just months ago.

She was able to promote a few people with full support from the CEO. She had three managers reporting directly to her, and two of them were part-time sales, part-time managers.

I asked, "what accounts for your rapid success?"

She said: "the reason I succeed is that I take care of myself. I run 5 days a week and have a rowing club for fun on the weekends."

That insight led her to start prioritizing self-care not just for herself, but for her team as well. She started to emphasize that the key to succeeding long term is to integrate the work into your lifestyle and ensure you have what you need to take care of your own need for health and breaks.

She worked to get the message out to the team: "**Get your rest, get some exercise, take your vacations, and when you're at work, be fully present.**"

What Susan Ultimately Learned About Leadership Growth

If you've been in survival mode for months, here's what it actually looks like to come out the other side as a stronger leader.

Over the six months that I worked with her, Susan faced two inflection points at once, taking responsibility for a global team and managing a merger. Almost every week, there was a new leadership challenge she had never seen before.

Relying on good foundational skills, Susan successfully transitioned from regional sales leader to global team leader and organizational stabilizer able to integrate and leverage growth on her expanded team.

It was a huge amount of growth in a short time, and through it all, she stayed emotionally steady and relied on listening to find out what she needed to do next.

Instead of focusing solely on sales numbers, she focused her attention on taking care of her team. The more she took care of her team, the more the team responded and took care of sales numbers. That was as true for managing up as it was for managing down.

She saw the best in everyone and helped everyone grow to be the best they could be.

Five Best Practices for Leadership

Here are five best practices from Susan's story that anyone can apply to help navigate their own inflection points.

1. Leadership is not about the leader but about the team.

Stop thinking about what you need from people and start thinking more about what they need from you to be successful.

2. When in doubt, listen.

When conversations get tense, listen to project

leadership presence. Whether your boss is on a rant, a new colleague is skeptical, or a team member is having trouble, listening earns trust so that people calm down and return to getting things done.

3. Develop leadership skills in others.

Give your best performers leadership opportunities to mentor and develop a network of peer support to help your team grow.

4. Prioritize self-care.

Take care of yourself and encourage your team to rest, exercise, and take breaks so they can be fully present when at work.

5. Self-reflection promotes self-growth.

Take an hour once a week to stop and reflect on what is going right, what is going wrong, and set strategic intentions for moving forward.

By taking time to self-reflect, analyze, and see the situation clearly, Susan navigated the transitions with uncommon grace, maturity, and steadiness.

In the end, her boss and other leaders saw her less as a product leader and increasingly part of the strategic team helping drive sales across teams.

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*I help people learn how to use
what they already have.*



Key Leadership Lessons

Susan's journey illustrates what it takes to lead through rapid change without losing yourself or your team.

- Stop focusing on what you need from your team and start focusing on what they need from you.
- Your boss's stress is not your stress — protect your emotional boundaries.
- Leading at scale means developing leadership in others, not carrying more yourself.
- Self-care is a leadership strategy, not a luxury once things calm down.
- Self-reflection builds strategic clarity that looks calm — even when nothing around you is.

Continue Learning

- **The Leadership Framework** — Confidence, empathy, and trust: the three foundations behind every client breakthrough.
- **Fight, Flight, or Freeze** — How to recognize stress responses and stay grounded under pressure.

If any of this sounds familiar, you don't have to figure it out alone.

If Susan's story resonates with you, you may be navigating a similar leadership challenge.

I'm here to help. Book a quick call. No pitch, no pressure — just a conversation about where you are and whether coaching might help.

[Book your call here](#)

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