EXCELLENCE AT WORK
Podcast by Brandon Hall Group

Executive Interview

Sales Kickoffs Can Turn Leadership Intent Into Seller Behavior

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bts



Melia Coury
Associate Director
BTS



Rachel Cooke
Chief Operating Officer
and Principal HCM Analyst
Brandon Hall Group™

About BTS

BTS is a global management consulting and professional services firm that helps organizations execute strategy through people. Founded in 1986 and publicly listed on the Nasdaq Stockholm exchange, BTS specializes in experiential learning, business simulations, leadership development and digital transformation. The firm works with Fortune 500 companies across industries including retail, consumer goods, electronics, financial services, healthcare and technology to build organizational capabilities, align leadership teams and drive measurable business results. BTS has offices worldwide and has spent four decades designing consequence-rich, hands-on learning experiences that accelerate strategy execution and organizational change.

About Melia Coury

Melia Coury is Associate Director at BTS and product owner for Commercial Kickoffs, Meetings and Summits. She has led global leadership transformation and sales enablement programs combining business simulations, AI-enabled practice and coaching. She co-leads BTS's Women's Employee Resource Group, and her background in acting and improvisation informs her approach to authentic communication.

Host: Rachel Cooke

Today's conversation is moderated by **Rachel Cooke**, Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst at Brandon Hall Group™. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 20+ years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research and Performance Improvement industries.

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HCM Excellence Awards®

	Gold	Silver	Bronze
Learning and Development	23	6	1
Leadership Development	18	9	6
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	1		2
Sales Performance	2		1
Talent Acquisition	1		1
Talent Management	1		1
Future of Work		1	

The Buyer Arrives Informed

Q Rachel

AI has changed how buyers prepare for a sales conversation. What does that mean for the seller's job?

A Melia

Buyers have more information than ever before. If you think back to the earliest days of selling, a salesperson might have been the only place to get answers. Then the internet made research readily available. Now people use AI tools to explore choices and frame decisions in their personal and professional lives. A buyer may arrive with a fairly sophisticated understanding of the problem and a hypothesis about the solution they need.

That changes the seller's role. You are not necessarily opening the buyer's eyes to a problem they have never considered. You may be validating their research, or appropriately challenging it. You also have to help them navigate a more complex decision. When an organization is considering an AI-enabled product, for example, technical stakeholders and operational stakeholders may need to agree on how it will work. The seller helps the champions understand one another and move through that process. It is a much more strategic, collaborative role than simply presenting a product and trying to persuade one person.

Guide the Decision

AI is changing the seller's role. Sellers must validate research, challenge assumptions and help technical and operational stakeholders reach a shared decision.

Q Rachel

How does a seller help multiple stakeholders reach a decision rather than simply persuade an individual buyer?

Equip the Customer's Champions

A Melia

It becomes more conversational and more co-created. The distinction between the external seller and the customer's internal team starts to blur, in a productive way. You are working with the customer to shape a solution, and you are also helping that customer build the case with colleagues who may never be in a meeting with you.

That means developing champions who can explain the value, answer objections and carry the conversation forward when the seller is not in the room. In a sense, you are equipping someone else to do part of your job, but you are doing it in partnership. The most useful seller is not necessarily the one with the most persuasive presentation. It is the one who helps a complex group make sense of the options and move toward a decision together.

Q Rachel

What does it take to uncover the buyer's real challenge, particularly when AI is part of the proposed solution?

Discover the Real Barrier

Effective discovery explores technology, operations and people. The obstacle holding a customer back may be an unaligned process or a team that is not ready for change.

A Melia

You have to look at the problem from several perspectives. It is easy to focus on the technical question: Can this tool do what we want? But there is also an operational question: How would it fit into the way the business works? And there is the people question: What is getting in the way of change?

Those perspectives can point to very different barriers. Sometimes the technology is not the problem at all. The organization may not have aligned its processes, or its people may not yet be ready to adopt a different way of working. Sellers need the curiosity and discovery skills to explore all three dimensions before deciding where to lean in.

Build Beyond the Kickoff

Otherwise, they risk solving the most visible problem rather than the one that is actually holding the customer back.

Q Rachel

When does a sales kickoff become a meaningful business event rather than an energizing week on the calendar?

A Melia

When it is more than that one week. I think of a kickoff as a catalytic event. It can create momentum, but the real question is what you are doing before, during and after the gathering. How are you preparing people to execute what they experience at the kickoff? How will leaders reinforce it when everyone is back in the field? And how will the plan evolve as the strategy meets reality?

Design for Lasting Change

A kickoff creates momentum when preparation, practice and leader reinforcement connect. Plan for how people will work differently long after the event ends.

Change does not stop when the event ends. Your business strategy, your customers and your products continue to evolve. A kickoff has to be part of a longer process that helps people adapt. If the event generates excitement but does not change how people work, it has not achieved the result you really need. You want to design for execution from the beginning, not treat follow-up as something to figure out once the stage has been dismantled.

Q Rachel

You've said that some apparent sales-team problems are actually leadership problems. What do you mean?

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Great Sellers Need Leadership Skills

A Melia

Sales leaders are often promoted because they were outstanding sellers. They consistently met or exceeded quota, and the next step was to lead a team. But being a strong individual contributor does not automatically prepare someone to coach other people, guide change or translate strategy into everyday decisions. Organizations are asking more of those leaders than they did before.

That is why I see leadership as a powerful place to start. If you prepare managers to coach, ask better questions and support their people through uncertainty, they can help the team respond to a wide range of selling challenges. Instead of treating every performance issue as a problem to fix directly with the sellers, ask whether the leaders have the skills and support to address it. Strengthening that capability can have a much wider effect than another message delivered from the front of the room.

Q Rachel

Why do senior leaders and frontline sellers sometimes have very different views of what is happening?

Listen Across the Layers

Leaders and frontline sellers can see different realities. Candid feedback reveals those gaps and creates space for teams to help shape the way forward.

A Melia

Senior leaders may be two or three layers away from the customer conversations. They are not necessarily hearing what the frontline team is experiencing, and sometimes people do not feel comfortable passing difficult information upward. On some projects, we conduct 20 or 30 individual interviews at the outset. We keep responses anonymous, and that creates room for people to say things they might not say in a meeting with their leadership team.

Then we gather the leadership perspective and look for the differences. Those points of disagreement are incredibly valuable. They show us where a kickoff agenda needs to create space for a

Participation Builds Ownership

real conversation. If leadership simply announces what everyone must do differently, without inviting the team to help shape the way forward, it is much harder to create ownership. We can instead use the tension constructively: bring the perspectives together, explore what is getting in the way and let people participate in developing the response.

Q Rachel

What should managers do after the kickoff to keep the change alive?

A Melia

I had just finished a debrief with a client before this conversation. We had delivered a five-city kickoff series, and the leaders came together for an hour to review the data from the different locations. They could challenge our hypotheses, add examples from their own experience and help interpret what we were seeing. That was not just a report-out. It made them participants in the change.

Make Coaching Part of Work

Keep change alive through practical conversations within existing routines. Clear guides and useful prompts help managers reinforce new behaviors without overwhelming their schedules.

We also equipped them with a 90-day guide designed to fit into work they were already doing. For a one-on-one meeting that was already on the calendar, for example, there might be a five-minute coaching conversation to have with an employee. We provided prompts that managers could copy into the AI tools available to them, helping them prepare for the conversation, engage with the person and follow up afterward. The point is to remove friction, not pile another initiative onto an already crowded schedule.

Manager follow-up is one of the most important elements of behavior change. If leaders ask about the new behavior, coach it and return to it consistently, the kickoff has a much better chance of producing a lasting difference. Without that reinforcement, even a terrific event can lose momentum.

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Reflect, Adjust, Resume

Q Rachel

What happens when a manager falls behind on that 90-day follow-up plan?

A Melia

I tell managers not to treat the schedule as a test of perfection. Work happens. Something urgent comes up, and a planned conversation gets missed. The useful question is, "What got in the way?" Was the prompt unclear? Did another priority crowd it out? What could you change next time to make the follow-up easier?

That moment of reflection is itself part of learning to lead change. You acknowledge what did not happen, identify the barrier and decide how to improve. We ask sellers to reflect on customer interactions and refine their approach; leaders should be willing to do the same with their own coaching habits. Consistency matters, but so does the ability to recover when the process is imperfect.

Make Room for Doing

An energizing presentation can build awareness. Changing seller behavior also requires time to practice, reflect and improve before returning to real customer conversations.

Q Rachel

What separates a kickoff that creates awareness from one that actually changes seller behavior?

A Melia

One of my first indicators is how much time people spend listening versus doing. If most of the experience is stadium-style seating with speaker after speaker on stage, people may leave informed and excited. But they have had very little opportunity to practice behaving differently.

Rehearse the Change

Compare that with an experience where a leader introduces an idea and participants then try it in a psychologically safe environment. They can test an approach, make a mistake, receive feedback and try again. I think about learning as a sequence: see, experience, reflect and refine. That structure gives people a much stronger foundation for taking a new behavior back to work.

It also draws on the expertise already in the room. Sales teams can work through real customer tensions with colleagues from other functions, or an intact team can practice how it will handle a difficult situation together. The time spent reflecting may feel slower than racing through another presentation, but it can accelerate what happens after the event because people have actually rehearsed the change.

Build the Agenda Around Action

Start with what sellers need to do when they leave. Protect time to try new approaches, receive feedback and work through realistic customer challenges together.

Q Rachel

Why do organizations still devote so much kickoff time to presentations when they know practice matters?

A Melia

Often the agenda begins as a list of everything the organization wants to tell people. A vice president needs a speaking slot, a new product is launching, another leader wants to explain the strategy. Before long, you have a two-and-a-half-day event with perhaps 90 minutes or two hours set aside for practice and the rest devoted to information delivery.

I encourage clients to reverse that question. Instead of starting with "What do we need to tell our people?" start with "What do our people need to do when they leave?" That simple change can reshape the entire agenda. Some information can be shared before or after the event, or provided when sellers actually need it. A five-minute product demonstration may be enough to introduce a capability. Rather than spending the next 55 minutes explaining

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Curiosity Creates Ownership

every detail, let people experience it, practice talking about it with a customer or explore the risks of putting it into practice.

When people participate, they develop curiosity and ownership. The mindset can shift from "I have to learn this" to "I want to learn more because I can see how it will help me." That is a very different starting point for behavior change.

Q Rachel

How can busy leaders reinforce learning during the kickoff without adding another burden?

A Melia

Leaders Must Participate

Prepare leaders to coach, ask deeper questions and listen to frontline thinking. Their involvement should support learning while preserving the safety people need to speak candidly.

First, they need to be present. If a senior leader gives the opening keynote and disappears, that sends a message. Leaders should not be spectators at an event designed to change how their teams operate. They can coach at tables, ask questions that take a discussion one level deeper and help people work through the implications of a new strategy.

Preparation matters. Sometimes we hold a manager day before the event; sometimes we meet virtually one, two or three weeks ahead of time. We give managers practical guides and discuss what we need them to do in the room. We may go through the agenda item by item and decide where frontline managers, directors, vice presidents or C-suite leaders should participate.

There are also times when a leader should not be in the room. If people will not speak candidly in a particular discussion because of the culture or power dynamics, psychological safety has to come first. In other settings, I have coached senior executives to circulate while teams work, ask probing questions and invite a 60-second explanation of what the group is tackling. That gives leaders visibility into frontline thinking and helps close the gap between what executives believe is happening and what employees actually experience.

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Define Success Before the Event

Q Rachel

How can revenue leaders tell several months later whether the kickoff worked?

A Melia

Measurement starts before the event. Be clear about what you want people to do differently, then work backward to determine what evidence would show progress. That may include business KPIs, observable behaviors, surveys or assessments. Establish a baseline so you know where people are starting.

Then return to those measures after 30, 60, 90 or more days. Do people describe the experience differently? Are they approaching customer conversations in a new way? Can managers observe the behaviors you wanted to develop? Are the indicators that matter to the business moving in the intended direction?

Track What Changes at Work

Establish a baseline, then revisit behaviors and business indicators over time. Connect measurement with manager reinforcement to understand whether the kickoff produced lasting change.

You also have to examine the reinforcement. What were leaders supposed to do after the kickoff, and did they do it? A post-event satisfaction score tells you whether people enjoyed the experience. It does not, on its own, tell you whether the organization changed. The measurement plan and the sustainment plan need to be connected from the start.

Q Rachel

If a revenue leader could take only one principle into planning the next kickoff, what should it be?

Start With the Desired Change

A Melia

Ask, "What do we want our teams to do or think differently when they leave?" Answer that before you build the agenda. If you plan the experience around that outcome, you have a much better chance of achieving it.

And if an organization is preparing to run the exact same kickoff it ran last year, I would ask one more question: "What has changed in your business?" Whatever has changed should be reflected in the kickoff. Your customers, your products and your people are not standing still. Your event should not stand still either.

People Make Adoption Happen

Technology becomes useful when people understand its purpose, practice new behaviors and receive leadership support. Build the kickoff around helping people change how they work.

Q Rachel

We have talked about AI throughout this discussion, but so much of your advice comes back to people. Why is that?

A Melia

Because the constant in all of this is human behavior: how people think, feel, learn and change. You can put an AI tool in someone's hands, or introduce an AI-enabled product at a kickoff, but that does not mean people will use it effectively.

If you want technology adoption, start by helping people understand the purpose, practice the new behaviors and receive support from their leaders. The human factors are not separate from the technology strategy; they are what allow that strategy to become real. That is why I keep coming back to the experience before, during and after the kickoff. You are not simply introducing information. You are helping people change how they work.

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