

When the Sale Becomes the Project ¹

Why account leaders must own the path from commercial win to routine adoption

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Introduction

A purchase order can create a false sense of completion. The customer has said yes, the agreement is in place, and the opportunity may be marked as won. In many complex business-to-business settings, however, that is where the next project begins.

The commercial decision does not create value by itself. Value shows up when the organization can actually use what it bought without constant outside intervention. Depending on the product or service, that may require training end users, teaching staff how to interpret reports, establishing ordering and storage routines, reinforcing handling requirements, clarifying when the product should or should not be used, and helping new users work through the difference between the new process and the old one.

For an account leader, the job is therefore not finished when the customer says yes. The job is finished when the new solution has become normal operating behavior.

The Purchase Order Is a Handoff, Not a Finish Line

After the sale, several workstreams may start at the same time. A clinical team may need education. Supply chain may need an ordering cadence. Materials management may need storage and handling instructions. Managers may need to know how utilization will be monitored. New employees may enter the workflow after the original training is over. If the product changes an established habit, the organization may also need repeated reinforcement before the new behavior becomes routine.

It is easy to look at the commercial milestone and think, "Great, we have the sale. Done deal. See you later." That is usually the wrong finish line. The operational question is not whether the customer owns the product. The operational question is whether the product has become part of the customer's normal way of working.

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What "Done" Actually Looks Like

My practical definition of completion is simple: implementation is done when ordering is continuous, the end users no longer need to be held by the hand, and the product or process has become part of the routine - part of the furniture, so to speak.

That definition matters because installation, first use, and initial training are milestones, not necessarily acceptance criteria. A team can complete all three and still fail to adopt the solution. If staff stop using it after a few weeks, if ordering becomes inconsistent, or if every new employee requires the vendor to restart the process from zero, the implementation is not mature.

A more meaningful finish line is sustained behavior. The organization knows what to order, when to order it, where to store it, how to handle it, when to use it, and how to bring new people into the routine. External support may still be available, but the customer is no longer dependent on it for ordinary use.

A Real Adoption Gap

I saw this firsthand in a healthcare account involving a clinical product. The product had been adopted as part of a broader commercial relationship, and the purchasing decision itself was not in dispute. Later, however, utilization was lower than expected.

The problem was not that the customer had reversed the decision. The product simply had not become embedded in practice. Users needed reinforcement on appropriate use, how the new workflow differed from the prior one, and how ordering, storage, and handling were supposed to work. Existing habits were still stronger than the new routine.

I returned to the account, provided additional staff education, reviewed the practical workflow, reinforced the ordering and storage cadence, and stayed involved until the process began to stick. The point was not to create permanent dependence on me. The point was to help the organization reach the stage where the behavior could continue without me.

Eventually, that is what happened. The customer moved from having the product to actually using it as part of normal operations. That distinction - ownership versus adoption - is where a large part of post-sale project risk lives.

Someone Still Has to Be the Project Owner

The account leader does not have to perform every implementation task. In fact, that would usually be a mistake. Training may belong to one specialist, service to another, logistics to another, and day-to-day use to the customer. The important point is that someone still needs to be the project owner - the person at the head of the process who makes sure the separate pieces actually happen.

In many commercial settings, that person is the sales or account leader because that person has the broadest view of the customer, the original promise, the stakeholders, and the desired outcome. In other settings it may be another designated lead stakeholder. The title matters less than the ownership.

The project owner should be able to answer basic questions: Has the staff been trained? Are new and rotating employees being brought up to speed? Is supply chain ordering correctly? Are the storage and handling requirements understood? Do users know the right situations for use? Has an internal product expert or champion emerged? Are we seeing the utilization and reordering behavior that tells us adoption is real?

If nobody owns those questions, each function can complete its own task while the overall implementation still fails.

Implementation Is a Reinforcement Problem

One reason post-sale execution is easy to underestimate is that organizations change. People rotate. Shifts change. New employees arrive. Managers leave. Competing priorities appear. A training session that was sufficient on day one may not be sufficient three months later.

The implementation plan therefore needs reinforcement, not just launch activity. The account leader should expect some repetition. That may mean follow-up training, utilization checks, short conversations with internal champions, confirmation that ordering has become routine, or an early escalation when the expected behavior does not appear.

This is especially important when a new product asks users to undo an old habit. The technical difference between the old and new solution may be modest, but the behavioral difference can be significant. People naturally fall back to what they already know. Adoption requires enough reinforcement for the new behavior to become easier than the old one.

Five Project-Management Practices for the Account Leader

1. Define the operational finish line before launch

Do not use "PO received" or "training completed" as the final measure. Define what mature adoption will look like in observable terms: repeated use, continuous ordering, trained users, an internal owner, and routine performance without constant external intervention.

2. Put one person at the head of the implementation

Multiple functions can own tasks, but one person should own the overall outcome. That person does not have to do every task; he or she has to make sure the tasks connect and that gaps are not hidden between departments.

3. Treat training, ordering, storage, and workflow as one system

A user can be perfectly trained and still fail if the product is not ordered. Supply chain can order perfectly and still fail if the end users do not know when to use the product. Implementation should be managed as an interconnected system, not as a checklist of isolated handoffs.

4. Build reinforcement into the plan

Assume that people will rotate and habits will drift. Follow-up education and utilization checks should not be interpreted as evidence that the launch failed. They are part of moving the organization from introduction to routine behavior.

5. Develop an internal expert and then reduce dependence

The goal is not permanent hand-holding. A strong implementation creates enough internal knowledge that the customer can sustain the process. The external account leader should gradually become less essential to ordinary use while remaining available for exceptions, expansion, or new problems.

The Commercial Win Creates an Implementation Obligation

This is where account leadership and project management overlap. Sales creates the commitment. Implementation converts that commitment into operating reality. The account leader is often the person who understands both the promise made during the commercial process and the conditions required to make that promise real.

That does not mean every salesperson should become a formal project manager. It means complex account leadership requires project-management discipline: clear ownership, connected workstreams, defined milestones, stakeholder coordination, reinforcement, and an observable finish line.

The most important milestone may be the one that receives the least attention: the moment the customer no longer needs you for normal use.

Conclusion

The sale is not complete when the customer signs, when the product arrives, or when the first training session ends. Those are important milestones, but they do not prove adoption.

The stronger test is whether the customer has built the solution into normal operations. Ordering continues. Users know what to do. New staff can be absorbed into the process. Internal experts reinforce the routine. The organization no longer needs to be held by the hand.

When the solution has become part of the furniture, the implementation has done what the commercial win promised it would do. Until then, the account leader still has a project to finish.

Disclosures and Use of AI

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