



Resource Library



The 6 Pillars of Sales Management: Pillar #4—Professional Development

In a previous article, we introduced the 6 Pillars of Sales Management, what comprised them and why they were critical to performance. Here is a quick review of the pillars:

- Talent Identification and Acquisition
- Sales Methodology and Skill Development
- Analytics and Performance Tracking
- Professional Development
- Compensation/Recognition/Rewards
- Planning

Pillar #4 – Professional Development

Identifying and coaching toward sales career goals and objectives for each member of the sales team, in order to increase their sales productivity, loyalty, and overall contribution to the sales department

As part of the 6 Pillars of Sales Management, professional development is one of the most important but also one of the most difficult pillars to execute because it is so individualized. Effective professional development requires an in-depth understanding of each of your sales reps – their needs, goals and how to help them achieve them. To do this, you can't just create a process that works for everyone. Rather you have to learn and plan for each individual. This takes time, but is worth the effort because effective professional development is closely tied to increased rep motivation. Indeed, EcSELL Institute research shows a strong correlation between sales reps who say their manager motivates them to sell more and sales reps who rate their manager as "very strong" at helping them with their career development. This tie between effective career development and increased rep motivation shows us just how important this pillar truly is.

At EcSELL Institute, we define professional development as identifying and coaching toward career goals and objectives for each member of the sales team to increase their productivity, loyalty and overall contribution to the sales department. Essentially, professional development is focused on creating an environment of growth for each rep to meet the dual purpose of helping them accomplish their own career goals and increasing their effectiveness so they can help accomplish the sales teams' goals. To this end, professional development activities are focused around (1) ongoing education, (2) clear feedback, and (3) consistent motivation.

Ongoing Education

The first key element of supporting reps' professional development is to ensure they are consistently exposed to information and ideas that will help them improve their skills, both in relation to their current sales roles, as well as their long-term career trajectory. Our recommended strategy for providing this ongoing education is to leverage sales team meetings, both on a weekly basis, as well as longer team retreats on at least a bi-annual basis. In your weekly sales team meetings, have at least one educational topic a week, such as new information on products, market, competitors, sales skills and leadership. Also consider having at least one of your reps share a best practice that they'd employed recently with customers or prospects. You can rotate which rep is responsible for sharing a best practice each week. Your topics for your longer sales retreats would be similar, but use this opportunity to have more in-depth discussions. Also, be sure to bring in relevant individuals from your company, such as leaders from marketing or product development, as well as third parties who can create valuable learning experiences for your sales team. Lastly, consider holding these retreats off-site so reps have a chance to truly focus on their learning and development, rather than becoming distracted by the issues of the day.

Clear Feedback

The second key element of ensuring professional development for your reps is to provide them with clear and consistent feedback regarding their career. In its simplest definition, this means to provide your reps with an annual review of their performance. However, effective performance reviews need to move beyond just simply filling out the form handed to you by your human resources department. These standard corporate forms often are too generic to give really valuable feedback. They also focus too much on identifying and addressing performance issues. While this type of remedial feedback can be valuable, it is also feedback that should be done immediately as issues occur and never delayed until an annual performance review.

In contrast to standard form, truly valuable performance reviews help your reps understand what they've done well and, most importantly, how they can further develop in order to accomplish their professional goals. There is much more time talking about the future than the past and when past performance is discussed, it is in the context of what gaps the rep needs to close to advance toward their career goals. Overall, if you only use a standard performance review form, it is recommended that you also have an additional career discussion where you (1) learn their professional goals, both for the following year and a few years down the road, (2) identify any areas where they will have to improve in order to advance toward their career goals, and (3) partner with them to create a plan to help them develop these necessary abilities.

Consistent Motivation

As stated above, EcSELL Institute research has shown a strong correlation between reps who report higher degrees of motivation and those who receive effective career development from their manager. The simple acts of coaching your reps to improve their skills and advance toward their career goals makes them more engaged in their work and, therefore, more likely to perform at a high level. In addition to investing in your reps' skill and career development as a way to drive motivation, it is also important to provide them with recognition for successes they've earned. Indeed, being recognized for a job well done is the one thing for which reps consistently rely on their managers, regardless of their tenure with the organization. Indeed, even the most tenured reps find recognition from their manager to be nearly as important as new reps do. Therefore, you are encouraged to find ways to recognize rep successes whenever possible. Always conclude individual and team meetings with a review of the previous week's wins. Take the time to personalize recognition with a hand-written note or by sending a letter to a rep's family about their success. The best recognition is often free, but is certainly essential to keeping your reps engaged in their current role and advancing toward their next one.

In summary, effective professional development is essential to helping your reps perform better. Not only does it build their skills for their current role and build their abilities for future ones, but it is also essential to their motivation. The above recommended best practices can help ensure you have reps who feel engaged, valued and developed to be successful this year and beyond.