

HOW GOOD ARE YOU AS A SALES COACH?

The 9 Skills to Coaching Success

by Tony Cole, CEO & Co-Owner of Anthony Cole Training Group

If you are in charge of managing a sales team to reach sales goals, you must ask yourself this critical question, *“Am I an effective sales coach?”* Much like a good sports coach, a good sales coach gets involved in all aspects of the job, including both the selling skills and the mental state of his or her salespeople. Certainly, the Coach trains, develops and mentors their salespeople to become better at the role of selling. But, the most important role of the sales coach is to help their salespeople achieve their personal goals. To achieve their goals, salespeople need both skill and knowledge – and someone to coach them to excellence. How good are you at coaching your salespeople to be their very best?

Here are the 9 skills to master to become a great sales coach:

#1 Coaching Skill: Debriefs Effectively

An effective and pro-active coach is in a constant state of debriefing their people. Whether their salespeople are engaged in a phone campaign, returning from an initial appointment with a new client, presenting a solution to a new client or renewing a current relationship, a coach must constantly have real-time intel as to how the salesperson is performing. The essence of the debriefing process is not focused on performance mastery (focusing on the numbers). It is focused on looking and listening to *how* the sales process was executed rather than *was* it executed.

An effective sales coach has regularly scheduled debriefing times in their ideal week calendar. A coach might have a debriefing time slot every M, W and F at 2 pm. And from week to week, the sales coach may not know exactly what they will be debriefing, but they will have the time scheduled, in advance, to do this activity and thus make it routine and easy to schedule time with salespeople to debrief their sales activities and meetings.

During the sessions, the effective sales coach will be armed with great questions to find out what happened, how things happened and why they happened. This process of asking questions creates dialog between the sales coach and the salesperson which maintains focus on the most critical areas of selling. This helps salespeople sell more business. Questions about the prospect’s compelling reason to take action, their willingness to invest, their ability to make a change from a current provider and the decision making process are the questions that must be asked in addition to the technical aspect of the sale relative to product and service offerings.

Based on the answers, the sales coach must begin to develop insight as to where the choke points are in a salesperson’s approach. Typically, if a salesperson fails to get a commitment for investment of time, money or resources, this is a mistake that they repeatedly make, not just once in a while. An effective sales coach is looking for insights about those items that would keep this specific sale from happening, as well as insights as for the long-term development and training opportunities for the salesperson.

After the sales coach has listened and digested what they have heard, they must pause and reflect before providing feedback. They must be nurturing and preface their comments with something like: *“Now maybe I didn’t get the entire picture, but based on what I thought I heard, there seems to be some choke points here. Let me ask you a couple of questions so that we can figure out what happened and what we need to do to fix these issues for this opportunity and for future ones as well.”*

And finally, in the debriefing process, it is important to stay clinically detached. A sales coach must be patient and “other” focused. They do not get frustrated or act in a parental mode. This could sound like, *“How come you keep....”* It will be more effective if you comment, *“Help me understand what it is that seems to keep you from asking your prospect for this information...”* If the sales manager begins to attack the salesperson, the salesperson will shut down and not be open to these coaching discussions in the future.

#2 Coaching Skill: Is Effective on Joint Calls

Normally, when managers attend a sales call with a salesperson, it is at time of capabilities presentation or closing presentation. Though attending these meetings can be helpful, they will do little to help salespeople close more business more quickly at higher margins. It’s like a baseball manager managing a baseball team by looking at the box score instead of watching the game. The manager knows the outcome based on the data, but does not know *how* it happened. Knowing *how* things happen is the key to effective coaching and why observing salespeople in action is so important.

There are critical components of effectively observed sales calls. First, sales coaches should schedule these with their salespeople and not wait for them to schedule, as it may not happen. Be proactive, be the one to select the calls to join.

Secondly, while on the call, there are roles for everyone. That is why doing pre-call meetings (before the meetings) are so important. The sales coach has to make sure that his salesperson is prepared to conduct the perfect sales meeting because the sales manager is not there to do that for them. The coach’s role is to be defined as supportive in nature, not the main character. This means that when the coach is on the call and the sales professional is making mistakes, the coach must let them. An effective coach will not rescue them as they understand that is how the salespeople will learn. Now, let’s make this clear. A good coach will not let them blow the sale of a life-time. But, they will not bail them out and rescue them when they forget to ask a critical question. If a sales coach thinks it is important to help them along, they should address the salesperson with a question. As an example, if the salesperson has forgotten to get clarity on the decision-making process, the sales coach would direct that question to the salesperson, not the prospect. It would sound something like, *“Mary, I must have missed this somewhere in the conversation – what was the decision-making process again?”*

Once the call is over, the sales coach conducts the post-call debrief with the salesperson. The effective coach will first ask their salesperson to tell them how they thought it went. Listen. Take notes. The coach can then compare comments made to their own observations and, from that, share their insights as to how well the sales professional performed. Depending on the outcome, a 1-on-1 session should be scheduled with a specific plan of action and commitment to execute by the sales person.

#3 Coaching Skill: Asks Quality Questions

Having a conversation with someone is much more pleasant than going through an interrogation. This is important for the effective coach to remember if they are focused on asking questions. After two or so questions, the salesperson is going to feel like the coach is picking on them rather than coaching them to improve. Great coaches are great at asking questions. Great football coaches ask questions. *“Bill, how did that linebacker get past you?”* If the coach tells Bill that he can’t let the linebacker pass him, it doesn’t help Bill learn. He already knows he shouldn’t let that happen to him. But, by asking a question and by going over the game film with Bill, he will have to analyze his behavior and actions to discover what he failed to do. Also note that the coaching question above is open-ended. Asking yes or no

questions is not effective in the sales process nor is it effective when working with and coaching salespeople.

Let's say that a salesperson has a tendency to miss finding out about the competition. The coach could ask them, "Did you find out about the competition?" or they could ask, "When you asked them how they were going to undo the current relationship, how did they respond?" Which question is going to give better insight as to how the salesperson is executing on their sales system? Open-ended questions tend to make coaching sessions more conversational, which is one of the objectives here. The open-ended questions will help the salesperson identify the gaps between what is expected and what is getting done. Once the the gaps in execution are uncovered, the next step involves gaining agreement that there is a gap in expected execution and actual execution. Based on that conversation, the coach and salesperson now must identify specific objectives to be met in order to improve performance. The key here is to identify objectives that are learning and developing objectives, not just data or results-based.

An example of a learning objective would be improving the percentage of contacts to appointments. If this improves, that would indicate that skill is improving. Improving the quality of initial calls would also be a measurable objective because, if improvement took place on initial calls, then there would be a corresponding improvement or increase in opportunities created. These objectives must be stated, documented, agreed-to and have actionable items in order to improve probability of success.

#4 Coaching Skill: Understands Impact of Major Performance Factors

Major Performance Factors in selling are those hidden root causes for failure to execute or failure to obtain desired results. It is extremely important to understand that a salesperson can have tremendous passion and unquestioned commitment, but if they have issues in major performance factors, they will still have a tendency to fail to execute until the root cause is addressed. An effective sales coach must recognize the symptoms of each one of these issues and the impact that they have on sales success. The coaching skill of asking great questions is the best way to help someone discover the root cause of a problem. The coach must gain the salesperson's agreement that the root cause is a contributing factor to their result and, if the results continue, they won't achieve their personal goals and that that is simply not acceptable. Only then can the coach begin the process of helping the salesperson uncover the solution to the problem.

Here is a quick guide to understanding the symptoms of the Major Performance Factors:

Need for approval - won't ask the "tough" questions, takes put-offs and stalls

Rejection issues – won't ask for the appointment, the order or introductions

Record collection – when they fail to execute a process or technique in their selling system, they reply with "I don't believe...". Understand that we all have a set of records in our heads when it comes to selling and managing. Some of those thoughts enhance our effectiveness; other hinder.

Money issues are present when budget isn't uncovered up front or the salesperson acts differently on larger sales. They are uncomfortable talking about money.

Buy cycle – First, understand that we all have a buy cycle (how we buy stuff). If your salesperson takes put-offs, competitive shopping and sacrifices margin in order to get a sale, it is likely that they buy in the same manner and it's getting in the way of their selling.

#5 Coaching Skill: Demonstrates Effective Selling System

A great coach of ideas and concepts can (and will) demonstrate or, at a minimum, discuss how the concepts apply via stories, analogies and metaphors. In other words, it would not be expected that an athletic coach *physically* demonstrate everything they expect the athlete to do. However, in some way, they must “show” the athlete what they expect.

In sales coaching, a great sales coach really knows their sales process and selling system. They know it so well that they *own* the content and process. The sales leader exhibits the sales skills expected of the sales team in everything they do. They ask open-ended questions. They help people discover the issues. They make sure that the other person wants to fix the problem. They check for the ability to invest time to fix the problem, and finally, they get commitment. An effective sales coach must demonstrate what they expect. They *must* be able to demonstrate the 8-step phone process with an effective USA elevator opening. They *must* demonstrate an effective initial call starting with “What would make this meeting a great use of your time?” The sales coach’s *inability* to be able to demonstrate these will inhibit their sales team’s ability to execute their sales system. This mastery of the system is what then allows the coach to identify incorrect behavior when they observe their salespeople in a prospecting situation or role-playing session with peers. If the sales coach does not know, then you can’t possibly expect their salespeople to know.

In order to get salespeople to know and own an effective selling system, the sales coach must also be able to teach the theory of the sales system which includes the dynamics of the buying and selling process; why traditional phone approaches are ineffective; how a salesperson should not look, act or sound like everyone else; how to effectively ask questions; how to get commitment to make a decision prior to presenting. Ultimately, the coach must teach the theory behind why asking for referrals, having a full pipeline, executing on a success formula and participating in huddles; all add to a salesperson’s potential success.

And, most importantly, the sales coach must coach their salespeople. They must *tell* them what they are going to tell them. Then they must *show* them how it is done. Then *remind* them about what they’ve told them and demonstrated for them. And then, *execute* the coaching practices of drill for skill, role-play and strategy development.

#6 Coaching Skill: Is Effective at Getting Commitments

Gaining commitment is a key to the on-going development and improvement in a sales team. Even with top producers, a sales coach must gain their commitment to execute at high levels and discuss with them their personal goals and their commitment to attain those goals through committing to the required sales activities.

Salespeople commit to what is important to them. It may be important to salespeople that shareholder value increases, but as a sales coach, don’t count on that. What motivates most salespeople are their own set of personal objectives, goals and ambitions. The coach’s job is to help them discover the goals they are committed to and then help them discover their current state. And when there is a gap, (such as their current sales pipeline and closing ratio will not help them buy that new house they were hoping for), then an effective coach helps them discover the “pain” of the eventual outcome of their current state. This is done with a series of questions that “drills down” on the issues and is part of getting a salesperson to commit to their own personally desired outcomes.

Once the sales coach has gone through the initial discovery and drill down process, they will arrive at the salesperson's ultimate outcome. In the case of someone that is underperforming or failing to execute effort or skills, the sales coach must get the salesperson to agree that failure to achieve their desired outcome is not an acceptable option. Take note: the salesperson MUST verbalize this. The sales coach should not say or ask, "Now you don't want that to happen, do you?" Instead the sales coach must ask, "Is that a problem? Are you sure? Is it compelling enough for you to make changes?" Then and only then can the sales coach get the salesperson to now agree to some form of disciplined structure around changing their sales activity and coaching them.

Once a coach has the salesperson's commitment to fix a problem, they should then get them to agree that they are willing to do everything possible to succeed. You can then implement a sales development program that can help them do that. The disciplined development program will probably be harder on the sales coach than it is on the salesperson because the coach is going to have to inspect what they expect them to do. Example: If the disciplined program for filling the pipeline includes making phone calls every Thursday morning at ten o'clock, the coach will have to be there to inspect that it is getting done. If the coach expects them to ask for introductions every day, then that means every day the coach must be available at the end of the day, so that the salesperson can report their results. Asking for their commitment and then not committing to them will result in failure for both coach and salesperson.

#7 Coaching Skill: Consistently Coaches Skills & Behaviors

Most sales coaches do not understand the difference between performance mastery (the sales activities, i.e. the numbers) and coaching (how the activities are being executed). Coaching focuses on *how* someone did what they did. Coaching is not about the numbers.

Every sales leader's calendar should have consistent scheduled times for coaching their people. As an example, Julie the Sales Coach should have scheduled coaching sessions every Tuesday from 2 to 4. Julie may not know exactly who she is coaching or what sales skill she is coaching, but she knows that on Tuesdays, she has to put on her coach's hat which is different than any other hat she wears. Also, Julie's salespeople know that Tuesday is coaching day and they can count on being invited to a coaching session or have the ability to come to Julie for coaching. Regularly scheduled coaching hours sends a message to a sales coach's people – *"I am here to coach you and help you succeed and during this time. I am not just here to collect data and remind you when you are failing to execute."*

Effective coaching focuses on skills and behaviors - the *how* of what people do. Sales coaching should include the following: asking questions, drilling down on those answers, getting commitments, helping salespeople overcome their own objections and helping salespeople with their own performance issues. Coaching is not about informing on how to structure a deal. That is teaching. Coaching is rolling up the sleeves and getting into the art and science of the sale, rather than the mechanics of the product and service design of the offering.

A sales coach can measure their coaching success by the improvement in their salespeople's sales behavioral ratios. For example, if more of their first calls turn into opportunities or if their closing ratio improves, they are improving. It is this data that tells a coach if they are effective at coaching. In addition to the numbers, a coach will know their people are improving because they *consistently* demonstrate better in the field and in the classroom.

#8 Coaching Skill: Understands Impact of Crucial Elements

There are four crucial elements for sales and sales management success and these include: desire, commitment, strong outlook and taking responsibility. Without these, a salesperson or sales manager will not reach their sales potential. (Source: Objective Management Group, Inc.)

Desire starts with personal goals. Establishing personal goals will help your salespeople succeed in any economy, fight through all the issues that could impact a salesperson's outlook and help to eliminate excuse making. It all starts with goal setting. It is the responsibility of every sales coach to create an environment for their team where they can achieve their personal goals and objectives. When salespeople are given the opportunity to dream and then plan how to achieve those dreams, then their passion for success rises. This is an awesome responsibility that coaches have. If a sales coach has not taken their team through a personal goal setting session, then they should not be surprised if the salesperson does not have extraordinary desire. If a sales coach knows what stirs the hearts of their people, they can effectively coach them.

Commitment is not a gray concept. People who are committed to success in selling do everything possible to succeed. (This, of course, does not imply anything immoral, illegal and unethical.) Those salespeople with commitment are willing to learn, change, risk and try every possible thing they can think of to succeed. Every sales coach should evaluate if that describes their team, person by person, and, if not, why? Commitment isn't something you can make a salesperson have. A sales leader can describe to their team what it means, they can tell them that it is an expectation of theirs, but they can't make them committed. The ultimate commitment scorecard for a salesperson is have they done everything possible to succeed?

Outlook impacts how people approach their day to day personal lives and business. It is their view of the world. It may be one of the toughest things to deal with as a coach because it is very personal. Anything can take a salesperson from flying high to feeling low. Your job as a coach is to sense this and help them recover and help them understand that in their lives they are 10's and that failures in their roles are just that, role failures. These failures aren't final. There isn't an expectation that as a sales coach, you must be a certified psychologist, but there is an element of a coach's role that requires they help people with their frame of mind and self-image. Consider about how important it is for someone to feel good in order to execute well. If this isn't part of a coach's responsibility, then whose is it?

Responsibility is more than just not making excuses; it is about finding solutions to problems that confront us every day. And coaches must make sure that their salespeople accept this responsibility. This is critical because a sales team will not grow as long as excuses are allowed. Here is a tool for all sales coaches to use. When an excuse is given by a salesperson, the coach must always respond with; *"If I didn't let you use that as an excuse, what would you have done differently?"*

#9 Coaching Skill: Effectively On-boards New Hires

Upgrading the sales force is an ongoing process. It certainly starts with selection but, unfortunately, most sales leaders think that the upgrading stops with the hire of the next superstar. But on-boarding is critical in that it will determine both the immediate and long-term success of new hires. As a sales leader responsible for successful on-boarding of talent, here are three critical on-boarding steps:

1. The sales coach must communicate their vision, objectives and expectations to the extent that, if the salesperson was asked, they could repeat without hesitation and in great detail.
2. The sales coach must schedule weekly coaching sessions with their new hires to help them create and execute on their success formula as well as learn, implement and inspect their effective selling process. A new salesperson must participate and understand the value of huddles, how they can have immediate impact on pipeline and why huddles will help them improve their sales approach and skills.
3. An effective coach can use their huddle data, pipeline growth and notes from pre- and post-call debriefing sessions to see if their new hire is exceeding activity and behavior expectations. From that critical early data, they can begin to identify and teach and coach to the salesperson's choke points.

There can be no misunderstanding as to the importance of on-boarding of new hires as part of the coach's role. It is certainly one of the most important roles a sales coach lives every day. Finding, hiring and coaching good salespeople are the primary challenges and most important roles for every sales coach.

You can access Tony's audio clips on the 9 Sales Coaching Skills at the url below:

<http://blog.anthonycollection.com/sales-coaching-skills>



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