

Why Sales Superstars Shouldn't Be Sales Leaders

Individual sales people seldom make great sales leaders. What are the root causes of this trend and how can business leaders work to change it?



Spend any time with a sales organization and you're bound to hear a story about a great sales representative who failed in their transition to sales manager. Let's consider this story about Austin, a hypothetical character that will help us explore this phenomenon further.

Austin joined the organization fresh out of school and wasted no time demonstrating a true knack for sales. He was charming, charismatic and ambitious, and he quickly parlayed this trifecta into performance that was nothing short of remarkable. Austin was top 10 percent in his territory in his first year on the job and top 5 percent in the region the next year. What's more, he was the first sales rep in the company to make its "President's Club" in every year of his tenure. Austin's reputation quickly spread, and it wasn't long before he caught the attention of the company's chief sales officer.

Sales was developing a pilot program based on high-performance sellers, and Austin seemed perfect to lead a team of successful sales reps.

Initially, things couldn't have gone better. His accounts continued to flourish and his team simply adored him. The CSO constantly recounted the exploits of this up-and-coming protégé. It was hard to say what went wrong first. There were whispers of discontent among Austin's team. There were tales of a heavy-handed approach and a leader too quick to push other sellers aside to manage the account the way he thought was needed. The whispers then grew to grumblings and sales started to soften and then decline. Three of Austin's reps were recruited by a competitor. Five more resigned within a month of each other. Exit interviews flagged

a heavy-handed leadership style and too much stealing of the spotlight. Austin took it all in stride with the charm, charisma and panache that was the foundation of his success as a seller.

Why is the story of failure so common and pervasive in sales organizations? There are a lot of reasons, but a major one is the belief that “talent” in one area automatically transfers to another. The root cause is that no salesperson worth their salt wants to work for a manager who hasn’t “carried a bag.” But, it leads to the common and mistaken belief that you can’t lead a sales team unless you carried a bag. This is a belief that is compounded by the equally flawed assumption that a great seller must equal a great leader.

This myth that great sellers make for great managers persists even though a cursory examination of the data quickly reveals its flaws. In my role at sales advisory firm GrowthPlay my colleagues and I assess hundreds of thousands of candidates for sales and sales management roles and we do this in a way that lets us empirically assess a person’s fit to both roles.

What we found is more than a bit counter-intuitive. First, only about 1-in-6 candidates that are a strong fit for a sales role are also a strong fit for a sales management role. Perhaps equally surprisingly, as many as 5-in-7 candidates that are poor fits for sales roles are strong fits for sales manager roles.

Although the data is clear about trends that doesn’t mean there won’t be exceptions. In analytics, the exceptions don’t prove the rule, and if leaders want to optimize their talent decisions they will play the odds. And, when it comes to sales management at least, the odds are strongly against great salespeople transforming into great sales managers.

So why is it bad to move top sales reps into sales management?

Ultimately, it’s because success in sales is about me while success in sales management is about my team. If I’m driven to prove my personal ability, I find it hard to step back and let others take the spotlight. Watching others succeed just doesn’t do it. Achievement is all about personal success.

Where great salespeople are driven by a need to achieve, great leaders are driven by a need to influence, to have an impact on the world. Most important, influence doesn’t equal personal success. In fact, whereas a great salesperson can only accomplish what they’re personally able to get done, a great sales leader can inspire, train and motivate legions of salespeople and have an influence far beyond what any one person can accomplish on their own. Achievement points with great pride to what the person, individually, has accomplished. Influence points with equal pride to what others have accomplished.

Each of us has some amount of both motives. And the motives aren’t mutually exclusive. There are people who have little of either, people who have a lot of both and people who have a lot of one and less of the other. When thinking about a given person’s fit for a particular role, what’s important is the relative proportion of achievement and influence. It’s only a slight over-simplification to say that a modest amount of achievement and a whole lot of drive to influence is the hallmark of successful managers, while an overabundance of drive to achieve coupled with some but not much influence drive is what makes a successful salesperson.

Leaders who want to get a sense of what drives a given person should ask them to look back over their career and talk about their proudest accomplishment. Achievement will tell you a story that starts, “Well, I was faced with a challenge” and then goes on to recount the things they did to triumph. Influence will tell you a story that starts with, “The thing I’m proudest about isn’t even really about me, it’s about Marilyn. You see, Marilyn was struggling...” and then goes on to tell how they helped Marilyn with her challenge and took pride in her individual accomplishments.

What’s the bottom-line of this single failed attempt to transform a great salesperson into a great sales manager? The organization lost an up-and-coming great salesperson and lost eight other strong reps. Counting lost sales, opportunities, clients and goodwill, the organization took several steps backward in revenue.

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