



COACHING THE COACHES: FIVE LESSONS FOR TRAINING FRONT-LINE SALES MANAGERS

INTRODUCTION

On the front lines of every successful sales organization are highly trained and firmly supported sales managers.

Preparing your sales managers for success is an important job, because your sales managers play one of the most critical roles in the overall success of their organizations. If you think about it, a manager's number one job is to develop people. Sales managers are on the front lines of your sales team, leading sellers through the trenches. You can't scale your organization if you don't develop and train your sales managers, so they, in turn, can develop and train each and every seller on their team.

Yet too often sales managers aren't trained for their important roles. While they were promoted to management because they were excellent at sales, they are often unproven and underdeveloped as sales team managers. It's important for sales leaders to step up and coach their managers on how to lead their sales teams to success. These managers' sales leaders aren't stepping up to coach them.

There's a long-established term for organizations that advance people to the point of their incompetence - it's called the Peter Principle. In a Harvard Business Review article, "The Peter Principle problem arises when the skills that make someone successful at one job level don't translate to success at the next level."¹

HBR decided to test the Peter Principle by examining salespeople and managers from 214 firms. The study found that the skills that make a great seller don't always translate to the ability to coach others to be successful sellers. A new sales manager who comes in as a former "rock star" seller will need to make a notable shift in focus - away from being an individual performer and towards becoming a leader of women and men.

If this sounds like your sales organization, don't despair. The good news is that if you recognize the issue and know what to do about it, you can train your sales managers to teach, coach and lead others to success. Here are five lessons for training your front-line sales managers to drive success with their sales teams.



LESSON NO. 1

SALES MANAGERS SHOULD BE EXCELLENT TEACHERS AND COACHES

“ Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others. – Jack Welch

There's no harder job in an organization than front-line sales manager, and that's saying a lot, because there are a lot of hard jobs. In most sales organizations, great performance as a rock star seller correlates with future promotion to a sales management position. But unfortunately, here's how that scenario often plays out in sales.

Your top seller gets promoted to sales manager. But the skills that made him a great seller don't translate to his ability to coach others to be successful sellers. As a result, their less-than-stellar performance in their new role as sales manager affects their team's ability to close deals and make quota.

A new front-line sales manager, who was a rock star, an MVP, as an individual seller, is now being asked to coach a whole new crop of sellers to become a high performing team. It's a challenging assignment, to say the least.

Sales managers are expected to become great offensive coordinators and skills coaches. They must be able to call the right plays. The biggest burden many sales managers face is the ability to coach the game, but not play it.

So how do the great sales managers lead their teams?

The best sales managers bring value to their teams by doing two things exceptionally well. They *voraciously qualify deals* with their sales reps and *maniacally coach skills* that will move those deals – and many more future deals – forward.

Sales reps don't need managers who sit behind a desk checking an Excel spreadsheet or grouching about not making their numbers. They don't need managers who swoop in, take over a deal and close that deal themselves. They need a sales manager who will provide not just the what, but the how.

Sales reps need managers who can teach them something, impart lasting guidance that will impact not just one deal but all the deals that follow.

It comes down to this: The number one job of sales managers is to teach their reps critical skills that they can and will use over and over.

So how do great sales managers become great?

They have great role models – specifically the sales leaders above them, the regional vice presidents, the heads of sales, the leaders of leaders. The number one job of a sales manager's boss is to be a mentor for the sales manager and to teach them how to teach others. Contrary to popular belief, it is not to hold the quarterly sales call and beat up sales managers who then beat up their teams for not making their quota.

The best sales leaders and managers distinguish themselves by pulling everyone up, getting them back on track and out there to fight another day. They might have been all-star sellers, but now it's up to sales managers to teach, coach and make sure nobody's riding the bench.

LESSON NO. 2

SALES LEADERS SHOULD INVEST IN TRAINING THEIR SALES MANAGERS TO LEAD

The average tenure for a front-line sales manager is 18 - 24 months. Sales managers might have been rock star sellers, but leading is a whole different ballgame.

Sales managers are not necessarily natural born leaders. They become leaders. Not by accident or luck, and not because they were good sellers.

They become leaders when they are trained to rise to the occasion. They become leaders when there is open dialogue at their companies about what it means to be professional sellers. And perhaps most of all, they become leaders when the leaders above them – the regional vice presidents and the heads of sales – take the time to train them and be role models for them.

The executive sales leaders – the leaders of leaders – set the tone of the entire organization. Leadership is not about what you do on stage, it's about what you do every day after that. What a leader focuses on is where their team will focus. That's why organizations do best when there's consistent focus on learning, development, improvement and mastery of skills.

The most important thing that top-level sales leaders can do to set the tone is to establish what's called the Management Operating Rhythm – and to communicate it regularly and abide by it consistently. The operating rhythm focuses your teams on the high-value sales activities that will help your sales organization drive desired results.

So if you are the head of sales, the vice president of sales for the Americas or chief revenue officer of your company, it's your behavior that all of your sales managers are going to look at and model themselves after and stick around for. If all you do is continue to have forecast updates and ask why deals aren't closing, none of your initiatives will work and nothing will change. Take time to define your Management Operating Rhythm and you'll give managers and sales teams direction on where to focus their efforts and time.

As a sales leader, you have to make sure that all of your sales managers know what's expected of them. Consider that adage about not training your people for fear that they will leave. Instead, think about what will happen if you don't train them and they decide to stay?

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Train people well enough so they can leave, treat them well enough so they don't want to.

– Richard Branson

LESSON NO. 3

SALES LEADERS SHOULD GIVE THEIR MANAGERS A STRONG SALES OPERATING RHYTHM

“ *We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then is not an act, but a habit.* – Aristotle

For sales leaders and sales organizations, the management operating rhythm is important. The operating rhythm is a major way that organizations support their sales managers. It drives the accountability that ensures your front-line sales managers focus on the activities necessary for repeatable success, and that they perform them consistently and at a high level.

Unfortunately, most companies don't have a Management Operating Rhythm to make sure that their sales managers and their sales teams can be successful – and that's a huge gap. The operating rhythm is a dedicated, concerted effort. It's important to consciously create an operating rhythm for yourself and all of the managers who lead a team of sellers.

A great sales operating rhythm should address three main areas:

- 1 CORPORATE VISIBILITY** This is what's on the minds of the leaders at the very top and how it cascades through managers and their teams. The operating rhythm is essential for defining how expectations will be communicated so that everyone is working toward a common goal.
- 2 TALENT MANAGEMENT** This is important, because hiring, onboarding and developing talent is how successful organizations scale their business. The operating rhythm is critical for leaders, managers and employees to know what is expected of them in terms of hiring to the right success profile and teaching and leading themselves and others.
- 3 SALES PLANNING AND EXECUTION** Managers need to be able to do a great job helping their sales reps with the entire business and competitive landscape – territory planning, account planning and opportunity execution. The operating rhythm is the guidepost for what is expected, for both opportunities and challenges. It provides the plan of attack.

BOTTOM LINE: The Management Operating Rhythm is a framework of activities, guidelines, tools, and success measures that helps sales leaders and managers focus on the most important aspects of their job - hiring the right team, driving consistent sales planning and execution and providing visibility both up and down the organization.

The MOR creates a cadence around the critical management activities that have the greatest impact on the bottom line. It contains an inventory of the tools, developed to assist managers in successfully completing these activities. Sales teams that operate within this cadence remain committed to elevating performance and driving sales revenue.

LESSON NO. 4

SALES MANAGERS SHOULD POSSESS THE ABILITY TO PARTNER, SERVE, PROTECT & COACH

“ *Someone is sitting in the shade today, because someone planted a tree a long time ago.* – Warren Buffett

Great sales managers understand the difference between their number one goal and their number one job. While their number one goal may be to make the revenue number, their number one job is to develop people. To truly develop a team of people, managers have to be great at performing **four distinct elements of a sales management role**:

1. PARTNER

A great sales manager is a partner who builds up a team and builds trust within the team. Partnering means offering help when needed and asking of others only what you would ask of yourself. It means being willing to do the job with the team, not for the team. And if there is an aspect of the work that you as the manager are not an expert in, it means identifying the expert who can help the team.

2. SERVE

A great sales manager serves the team collectively and individually. It means giving credit for deals to the appropriate team members, rather than claiming that victory yourself.

It also means meeting people where they are. For example, if you tell a sales rep they are really good at closing deals, you don't send them to a workshop on how to close deals. Maybe they need help negotiating better deals, so you find an opportunity that addresses developing that particular skill.



3. PROTECT

A great manager protects people and resources. This involves removing distractions and owning team performance. If you have a team that is not making quota, you don't want to single out individuals who aren't making quota. As a sales manager, you own not just the team's performance, but the motivation and coaching of every team member.

4. COACH

A great manager coaches and mentors team members. This is probably the biggest weakness in managers and undoubtedly the biggest opportunity for greatness. Some managers will forgo coaching because they don't know how or don't think they have the time. And they will instead rely on the rock star sellers. Perhaps they see a bit of themselves in these go-getters.

CONSIDER THIS EXAMPLE: A manager has five sales reps, including one overachiever and one who is falling well short of his monthly or quarterly quota. To ensure that the entire team – and the manager – make quota, the sales manager takes a deal from the underachiever and assigns it to the overachiever, saying, “Hey, close this deal. I need it now.”

This is short-sighted. For starters, you might be sacrificing what could have been a bigger deal if longer negotiations had been allowed. More importantly, you are giving up the opportunity to coach a seller, who could apply your training to each and every future deal.

Great managers will invest the time to coach each member of their sales team, meeting each team member where they are. They focus on personal development plans, customized training and maniacal coaching. This is the value only excellent sales managers can deliver.

Great managers are great coaches. They're taking the long view. They understand the team is the strongest when everyone is playing their best game. One disappointing quarter can provide the motivation to train everyone to do better the next quarter and the next one after that. Great managers know every team member can be better with some coaching. They might just end up coaching the next great sales managers, too.

LESSON NO. 5

ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD MEASURE THEIR SUCCESS IN DEVELOPING SALES MANAGERS

“ You can’t manage what you can’t measure. – Peter Drucker

You know you need to better train and support your sales managers, so you’ve put some key elements in place. You’ve defined your management operating rhythm, so your sales managers know what is expected of them and their teams. They understand a defined sales cadence that directs who should do what and when. Your sales leaders have invested time and energy into being coaches, role models and leaders of leaders. Your sales managers feel supported and equipped to do their jobs.

Is it all working as planned? How will you know if your organization truly is supporting front-line sales managers and helping them be successful?

You measure your efforts.

For sales managers and leaders, a critical metric to focus on is participation rate. How many sellers on a manager’s team are performing at or above their quota - every month, every quarter, every year? Say a sales leader has 20 managers and eight sales reps under each manager. What percentage consistently hits their number? Participation numbers for your team are the primary indicator of whether you have the right sellers in the right roles and a consistent operating rhythm that yields results.

Your participation rate is more meaningful than merely hitting your quota attainment numbers, because it shows whether or not your team has deep bench strength. You want a balanced, consistent line-up versus one slugger who hits all the home runs.

Another important metric, of course, is retention. Are your sales managers staying onboard for longer than 18-24 months? If they are, you might want to find out why. We bet they feel supported and empowered. We bet they feel like leaders.

SUMMARY

A great management team is the foundation that enables your entire sales organization for success. Organizations with executive sales leaders who invest in the training and education of their sales managers will be rewarded with highly enabled sales teams, more robust sales pipelines, bigger and better deals, faster closings and higher-than-projected revenue and earnings.

If your sales managers know how to coach others to sell, your organization will have a huge edge in the marketplace. When you see an entire sales team that is enabled and empowered, their performance is always supported by a group of highly skilled and successful sales managers, whose primary role is leading others to success.

¹ Alan Benson, Danielle Li and Kelly Shue, “Research: Do People Really Get Promoted to The Level of Incompetence?,” Harvard Business Review, March 8, 2018.

Find Out More About Training Sales Managers to be Great Coaches

Start coaching your sales managers to be the leaders your organization needs. Remember, you can't scale your business if you don't support and train your sales managers to be great coaches.

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