7 Ways to Drive Your Sales Coaching Culture

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Whether you believe great-performing sales reps are born or made, it is clear that the ability of your sales managers to coach reps and the reps’ willingness and ability to make the best use of that coaching can make a huge difference to your bottom line.

Implementing a formalized approach to sales coaching – a sales coaching culture – is proven to drive up sales performance. According to CSO Insights’ 2013 Sales Management Optimization Report 18% more reps make quota in companies with a formalized coaching approach (compared to companies without a formal approach).

You won’t grow your business if you don’t grow your people.

Improving coaching ability of your managers, hand-in-hand with receptive sales reps, is a powerful combination guaranteed to elevate your sales beyond that of your competitors. By necessity, successful sales managers have plans that address business goals, but they also foster a coaching culture for the development of their salespeople.

“Coachability,” wrote author and international management consultant Timothy R. Clark, “is the willingness to be corrected and to act on that correction. It means recognizing we can learn from others and can accept straightforward feedback on our performance.”

A strategy that begins with the hiring process and incorporates regular, consistent reinforcement of the will and skills of your sales reps is essential, both for strong and effective sales management leadership and your reps’ improvement and production. With that in mind, this paper identifies 7 key optics for a sales coaching culture.

I. Hire Proactively

The most effective coachability strategy is to identify sales rep candidates with the right will to learn and to make time to coach their skills. This starts by asking job candidates:

- To talk about a recent example of feedback they received and what they did with that advice.
- To share their personal goals and see if “continued improvement” is part of the mix.
- To describe a challenge they undertook in their current or former job and what they learned from it.

Why is it so important to identify “coachable” reps at the hiring level? Instilling a successful sales coaching culture usually is tied to such personality traits as a rep’s willingness to change, openness to feedback and ideas from others, acceptance of constructive criticism, interest in
continued improvement, and the motivation to succeed and constantly strive for new challenges and results.

It’s unlikely your managers’ coaching efforts will bear lasting fruit absent these kinds of traits. So you’ll first have to communicate your company’s expectation to applicants that their willingness to be coached is just as critical for long-term success in your company as their sales skills.

Once hired, managers should instruct new reps to ask for coaching when he/she needs it. Since your goal is to speed up the development of each salesperson, you want to foster more coaching moments. That means don’t limit coaching to only when managers want to provide it. Teach your salespeople, and especially new hires, that they should be comfortable asking for coaching whenever they are unsure or simply want help thinking through their strategies.

II. Are Your Sales Managers Thinking Like Leaders?

The greater success a person had as a salesperson, the more difficulty the transition to sales manager will present. Successful sales reps-turned-managers have a very hard time giving up the things that made them successful in their original sales job. Clearly, the transition from salesperson to sales manager is one of the biggest challenges in the sales profession. This is why providing your sales managers with training on sales coaching and leadership skills can generate such a significant ROI.

Here are 5 common mistakes every sales manager needs to avoid in order to coach effectively on a daily basis:

1. **Thinking more like a buddy than a boss** – Transitioning from good guy to bad guy trips up many a new sales manager. Whereas a buddy is a friend during good and bad times, a good boss praises positive achievers and reprimands negative performance.

   Keep reminding managers that they are there to be a leader, not a cheerleader. Be upfront in explaining the reasons for the management decisions being made - and learn to live with decisions that are not popular with the team. Be clear about and enforce the consequences if sales people do not comply with company standards.

2. **Following instincts and continuing to sell (which prevents team development)** – A new sales manager who keeps selling rather than focusing on teaching others how to sell hampers sales teams from measuring up to expectations. In a vicious cycle, the manager gets more pressure from above to increase sales and interprets that as a calling to do even more personal selling. That demoralizes salespeople who think they’re not good enough in management’s eyes. And customers think the rep calling on them must not be very good if the manager has to keep stepping in. Sales decline further.
The message to your sales managers ought to be - If you notice a sales rep making a mistake in a meeting with a customer, bite your tongue. What should matter most to you is NOT how effective your salespeople are when you’re working with them, but how effective they are when they are working on their own. Resist the temptation to step in, play hero, and save the day. Instead, figure out how to develop the reps’ skills so they avoid making the same mistakes.

3. **Overly trusting of reps’ sales forecasts** – As a former peak performing salesperson, managers enjoyed making or exceeding most of their personal sales forecasts. Now as a sales manager, it’s not uncommon for managers to be overly optimistic and highly trusting of reps’ sales forecasts.

   To recognize forecasting problems earlier, managers should ask more probing questions of salespeople about their important sales opportunities. Timely intervention by the sales coach is crucial for getting important sales opportunities back on track. Try asking probing questions, such as: “What actions has this customer taken which have led you to your forecast of this deal?”

4. **Being a reactive fire-fighter** – Sales managers often perform the role of an administrative assistant to the sales team in which salespeople rush to hand over their problem(s) to them. This reverse delegation feeds into the take-charge mentality possessed by sales managers, leading them to get involved in many problems and fires that can and should be resolved by others.

   The next time one of your salespeople says, “Hey boss, we have a problem I need to share with you.” You say simply: “So….what do you think you should do about it?”

   Then, encourage active problem-solving, engage in role-playing activities and promote team collaboration to help them understand the best way to attack their problem. When you improve your sales team’s ability to solve problems on their own, you increase self-confidence and motivate them towards achieving even more.

5. **Underestimating the negative impact of poor performance issues** – If managers back off of dealing with a poor performer, a common occurrence, they send a message that poor performance is acceptable. That’s a message everyone on the team will hear. Resist the temptation to give underperformers the benefit of the doubt. One of our axioms of effective sales management is: What you don’t confront – you condone.

   When managers watch salespeople in action, a good rule of thumb is to apply the “iceberg theory.” Like what you can see of an iceberg, there’s much more to sales performance problems than is visible on the surface. Keep in mind that the sooner managers address a poor performance situation, the less negative emotion will be involved in fixing it. Dealing with performance issues NOW gives the under-
performer a chance to correct the situation before it becomes so bad that their job is on the line. A bad month can be tolerated, but a bad year cannot.

III. Motivate Your Sales Reps

Many sales managers believe that motivation comes solely from within, not from external factors. They consider motivation to be just one aspect of a sales rep’s internal makeup and therefore don’t see motivating reps as part of their job description.

This, frankly, is a disconnect. Managers who think this way discount their own impact on revving motivation and how it can improve performance. While there certainly is a large internal component to motivation, external factors play a major role — money, achievement, recognition, and responsibility, for example. These are all factors that sales managers can influence with effective sales coaching skills.

Even the most pervasive, addictive and engrained behaviors can be changed; the main problem is that most people are unwilling to do what it takes to change. Even in accepting critical and honest feedback and understanding the advantages of changing, the will to change is not there. Without it, not even the best coaches will be able to make a difference.

As the old joke goes, it takes only one psychologist to change a light bulb, so long as the light bulb really wants to change. This is why motivation is a critical ingredient of any coaching program. But what motivation really means is "self-motivation" — as the great Dale Carnegie once noted, "the only way to get someone to do something is to get that person to want to do something." Coachable people are more likely to want to change.

It also is true that sales reps’ personal goals often get overlooked in the quest to reach sales quotas. Help them to connect the dots between what they achieve on the job and what they can achieve in life and they will be more likely to create stretch goals — and believe they can attain those goals.

IV. Daily Techniques for Nourishing Your Sales Coaching Culture

Sales managers from a large company who had completed our Sales Coaching & Leadership Workshop were asked in a webinar: “What is the most significant change you’ve made in your sales management style in the last 60 days?” Their responses followed two daily themes:

1. Starting and ending every day with coaching.

Coaching salespeople should be a manager’s No. 1 priority. Trouble is, sales managers who stay busy responding to emails, answering calls and texts and addressing unexpected problems struggle to find time to coach. It’s not easy to break out of that cycle – in part because they’ve trained people to expect quick responses from them on any issue thrown their way.
What made the difference for the sales managers in this company was asking themselves a key question: Are there any of those busy work activities that – if I did them effectively and consistently – would significantly improve my team’s sales results?

The answer was no. All those things may feel important or urgent in the moment, but none of them have a lasting impact on how well your team performs.

How do you tell the difference between an urgent timewaster and a truly important task? Consider who initiates the activity. Timewasters are almost always initiated by someone else, and in responding to them, you are automatically in a reactive mode. Rather than fighting every fire alarm, fight the impulse to answer every email, every text, every call that comes your way.

If managers become very deliberate about how they respond to tasks that others would have them do, they’d have more time to do coaching at the start and end of every day.

2. **Diagnosing a rep’s sales performance problem by looking at two different factors: skill deficiencies and will deficiencies.**

Skill deficiencies are easier to correct, by teaching and showing. Deficiencies in will – reps’ attitude and mental approach to the job – are much more difficult to solve. That may be why they frequently get overlooked, but the managers who participated in our Sales Coaching & Leadership Workshop realized they had to try because of the negative impact on the team if they didn’t change. They recognized that one person with a bad attitude can negatively impact everyone on the team and that ignoring it won’t make the problem go away.

When dealing with will/attitude problems, the action steps had to be tailored to the specific situation of the rep.

Suppose, for example, the sales rep who used to do a lot of prospecting but whose activity level has declined. Clearly he or she has the skill because they’ve done prospecting successfully before. To help you find a solution:

- Start by asking the rep why he or she is not making as many calls. Don’t sound accusatory. Probe the issue. Maybe the rep has reached a comfort zone in terms of income, making enough money to pay the bills. Or maybe there are some issues at home interfering with the rep’s concentration. There could be countless reasons.
- Then tie the intervention plan to the source of the lack of will. For example, if the problem is a lack of prospecting linked to income complacency, make it clear just how much more could be earned by finding just one or two more sales each month.
- Next, get the rep to think about what could be done with that extra income — say a new house, exotic vacation, child’s education or new car. What someone can do with money is usually more motivating than the amount of money itself.
3. Focus on early-pipeline coaching.

In their concern about “what is closing this month,” sales managers often don’t initiate pipeline conversations with their sales reps until a deal is in later stages of the sales funnel. But the size of the deal and the probability of success largely were determined in the earlier stages. What’s even worse is that the “coaching” isn’t really perceived by salespeople as coaching; it’s perceived as criticism.

The failure of the coaching effort, in turn, can have a demotivating impact on sales rep success. To win a sale that is downstream in the pipeline, sales reps have to master the upstream steps — such as identifying multiple customer needs, reaching multiple decision makers, understanding the competition and tying your solution to the customer’s priority requirements. Work with reps when their sales opportunities are still young and coaching efforts will have a bigger effect.

V. Pursue Coachability: Recognizing Those Who Can Coach Well

So, what exactly is coachability? As discussed in the section on proactive hiring, just because a salesperson seems to have an agreeable and receptive nature doesn’t mean they are coachable.

At one level, determining coachability is simple: if a sales rep changes what they are doing based on feedback and management’s constructive suggestions, then they are coachable. If they smile and nod and say “thanks” for the great advice but don’t subsequently make any changes, they aren’t coachable.

However, as identified early in this paper, coachability so often is tied to a rep’s personality traits that it can be easy – too easy, perhaps – to assume a rep isn’t coachable. That shortcut in thinking may be short-sighted, perhaps overlooking the fact you are a poor coach. Maybe it’s your coaching ability or the absence of a true sales coaching culture that is at fault.

What do you think it takes to be a good sales coach? Let’s look at five areas:

- **Observation & Diagnosis.** A good coach who takes the time to observe players both on and off the field looks not just at results but also at the methods the player uses to get results. That coach uses those observations to diagnose specific issues for each player and to look for patterns that indicate root causes.

- **Questioning.** The most effective coaches don’t just teach new skills to a player; they help players get better at learning how to improve. They don’t provide all the answers; they help steer a player towards the right answers through questioning. Players will remember insights they discover on their own (well, maybe with a lot of guidance) much longer than lessons imparted from someone else.

- **Priority and goal setting.** A good coach also helps a player define specific improvement goals and set priorities. What areas of improvement will most help a particular player achieve more?
• **Skill-building.** A coach’s role is to help the player perform better on the field, and that takes skills – which must be practiced before game time. In a sales office, skill-building practice might include role-plays with the coach.

• **Follow up.** Even the most diligent players are unlikely to bother with changes if they think no one is paying attention. So an effective coach must hold players accountable for implementing changes. You need to look for sustained behavior changes, not short-term efforts that fall flat after a week or two.

**VI. Deliver Critical Feedback**

We established earlier that fitting into a sales coaching culture reflects a rep’s openness to accept and incorporate feedback and the ideas of others. Feedback is the clearest path to change; without it sales reps are less likely to make significant adjustments necessary for improved results. That’s why asking job candidates for a recent example of feedback they received and what they did with that advice should be standard practice. However, in any case for such an essential element in fostering positive change, feedback is beset by a host of natural and artificial barriers.

Negative feedback, no matter how well presented, challenges our self-image. Frankly, it can hurt. It means facing up to performance weaknesses and acknowledging that sometimes our knowledge falls short of our expectations. If we are willing to allow it, however, it can raise our self-awareness and our self-knowledge.

In his book Practice Perfect, Doug Lemov points out that listening to feedback does not mean actually hearing it. And even hearing it doesn’t mean you actually apply it to get better. “Ultimately, how well you hear and apply feedback determines whether or not you are ‘coachable.’”

Role-playing is a valuable means of determining a sales rep’s coachability and capacity to accept and employ feedback positively. A rep who can accept criticism often is willing to risk success or failure in the role-play situation.

**VII. Last but not Least – How Coachable Are You?**

Remember Timothy R. Clark’s definition of Coachability “is the willingness to be corrected and to act on that correction. It means recognizing we can learn from others and can accept straightforward feedback on our performance.”

So, what type of feedback are you getting from your sales team? Here are three questions for your managers to ask of each rep on their team:

1. What are you getting from me that you find most helpful?
2. What am I doing that doesn’t help you at all?
3. What could I start doing to help you more? Why would that help?
And here, in conclusion, we arrive at the key component of a successful sales coaching culture..... It must be a two-way street. You cannot ask your salespeople to accept and act upon the feedback you provide them if you don’t learn from them about things that you can do better – and then act upon them.

About TopLine Leadership’s “Sales Coaching & Leadership” program

TopLine’s program provides sales managers with the skills and tools needed to drive sales team performance. Program components include a live workshop, eLearning refresher modules, and live online reinforcement. We also offer a Train-the-Trainer program. For more info including our detailed program agenda, contact dale@toplineleadership.com