



The

**Sales
Manager's**

Guide

to

Greatness

**10 Essential Strategies for
Leading Your Team to the Top**

Kevin F. Davis

Advance Praise

“I’m always excited about books that help managers become true leaders—and *The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* is one of those books. In it, Kevin Davis describes the full range of skills and mindsets needed to be an effective leader and coach. Read this book and learn how to lead your team to the top!”

—**Ken Blanchard**, Coauthor, *The New One Minute Manager*[®]
and *Collaboration Begins with You*

“This really is an excellent piece of work. I like very much the way Kevin has created a one-step-at-a-time plan, guiding both novice and experienced sales managers alike through a program of self-improvement. This ensures that managers are not overwhelmed by attempting to implement too much, too quickly. This should be a must-read for all managers who have an ambition to develop into genuine leaders.”

—**Linda Richardson**, Founder of Richardson;
Best-selling Author; Consultant;
Faculty, Wharton Graduate School

“I’ve seen firsthand the positive impact that Kevin Davis’ approach can have on sales management teams. The *Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* provides a practical sales coaching system that can be immediately implemented by sales management at all levels to create greater success.”

—**Roy Chestnutt**, Executive Vice President &
Chief Strategy Officer, Verizon Communications

“Adapting to the changing demands of buyers is forcing the evolution of the sales manager. In *The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness*, Kevin Davis shows us how to integrate traditional performance management with new strategies for developmental coaching. That’s the best way to equip our teams to win.”

—**Joe Galvin**, Chief Strategy Officer, Vistage Worldwide

“*The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* is a highly valuable book for sales managers and those who develop them. The book’s formal integration of the buyers’ perspective into the sales process is especially useful, and its strategies for developing a consistent and formal coaching process are top-notch. Both of these pillars have to be in place to improve sales performance consistently, according to our research at CSO Insights.”

—**Tamara Schenk**, Research Director, CSO Insights:
Research Division of Miller Heiman Group

“Frontline sales managers are the most important lever for leading change in a sales organization—yet most companies still don’t adequately prepare them. In *The Sales Managers Guide to Greatness*, Kevin Davis provides practical, actionable, and proven-effective content to help you prepare and enable your sales managers to be the proactive, productive leaders and sales coaches they need to be, to get the results you want from your sales force.”

—**Mike Kunkle**, Senior Director of
Sales Readiness Consulting, Brainshark

“*The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* provides a powerful message for any leader whose success is determined by their team’s sales performance. We’ve measured not only an improvement in our sales managers’ skills but, more importantly, a positive impact on our sales force and bottom-line results.”

—**Jim Ferguson**,
VP of Sales, Holland Transportation

“This fast-moving, practical book shows you how to immediately boost the performance and productivity of every salesperson. It will make you look like a genius!”

—**Brian Tracy**, Author,
The Psychology of Selling

“Everyone knows that the effectiveness of a sales manager is the biggest factor determining a team’s success. In *The Sales Manager’s Guide To Greatness*, Kevin Davis describes 10 practical strategies that sales managers can use to elevate their own game—and create a champion team.”

—**Mark O’Leary**, VP of Enterprise,
Western Division, Comcast Business

“We all accept—at least I hope we do—that the sales management function in every company is now pivotal to the overall success of the organization. The sales team is the offense and if they are not scoring consistently then the team has a very bleak future. However, in order to maintain optimum performance levels the team needs a strong leader and coach. Therein lies the challenge, because we believe that 80% of managers lack that capability. *The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* provides a superb route map, which is easy to follow and implement. This is not a book to be read just once and put on the bookshelf; rather, it is genuinely a guide which should be referred to daily until the skills are fully adopted.”

—**Jonathan Farrington**,
CEO, Top Sales World;
Executive Editor, *Top Sales Magazine*

“If your sales force isn’t producing the results you need them to, it isn’t likely that it’s because they are poor performers. It’s more likely that they need to be better led. The coaching section in *The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* alone will help you remedy this problem—and faster than you’d believe. Read it now, and implement it immediately.”

—**Anthony Iannarino**, Author,
The Only Sales Guide You’ll Ever Need

“*The Sales Manager’s Guide to Greatness* debunks the myths surrounding what it takes to be a great sales manager once and for all and offers clear solutions and takeaways. This is more than a book—it’s your map to success.”

—**Mark Hunter**, author of *High-Profit Prospecting*

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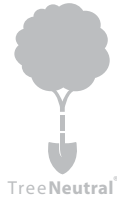
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Commit to Consistent Coaching

Think about a great coach in your past. Do you have that special person in mind? What did he or she do that was so great?

I've heard many different answers to this question, including "she cared about my success," "he made me feel important," "she had high expectations of me," "he always listened to me," "she inspired me to get better," and "he was a great teacher."

What these answers all have in common is one thing: A rep's favorite coach was someone truly **committed** to their success. People don't remember a coach so much for the step-by-step coaching process that person used (though they probably had one). They remember coaches more for how those managers interacted and communicated and the effort they put into connecting with their team.

The analogy that always occurs to me when I explain the need for this commitment is an experience I had when I lived in a dry, hot California town for many years. My next-door neighbor had a good-sized front yard. During the summer, he would wait until the lawn was sickly looking and then put out his portable Rain Bird™ sprinkler and let it spew water for two hours. Clearly that water was either evaporating or running off because his lawn remained brown. My yard, by contrast, had a built-in sprinkler system that would pop up

every day and water my lawn for maybe five minutes. I used less water than my neighbor but had a much greener lawn.

I think about coaching the same way. All too often we delay a coaching conversation until the sales rep produces a bad result. Then we plant what I've come to think of as a portable "rain bird of coaching" next to the rep, crank it on full blast, drench them in "advice" (likely interpreted as criticism), and expect them to flourish. I once had a client admit that his company does a lot of rain bird coaching. And he recognized that if you are a rain bird coach, it's like telling a rep, "If you're bad enough, I'll coach you!" Waiting until problems are severe then drowning your salesperson in a flood of feedback isn't helpful. That's not how people learn or improve.

This "rain bird of coaching" metaphor seems to help managers remember why they should provide more consistent coaching. But it raises another question in their minds: "How can I also be more consistent in my approach to coaching so the outcome is better results?" The answer to that question is using a model that reminds you of the sequential steps for having more meaningful and effective conversations with your reps. My version of such a model is called C.O.A.C.H., and it is the topic of the rest of this chapter.

The C.O.A.C.H. Model

C.O.A.C.H. stands for **C**ommit, **O**bserve, **A**ssess, **C**onsult, and **H**elp (Figure 18). I'll walk through each of these components next, but the key thing to notice is that the coaching conversation with a sales rep comes in the fourth step (Consult)—after you have gathered sufficient information to fully understand what the rep needs.

Figure 18: The C.O.A.C.H. Model



C.O.A.C.H. = Commit

I can tell that a sales manager is truly committed to helping their sales reps improve if their *behavior* is consistent with their *intent*. That is, they commit themselves to teaching reps to get better. They actively manage their time and priorities (as discussed in Chapter 2) so that they can spend more time on developmental coaching.

Every time you allow yourself to become distracted, to do a task that someone else can (and should) do, you prevent the accomplishment of something only you can do. Check your calendar for the past month and think about how you've spent your time. Did you devote sufficient time to developmental coaching so that all members of your team are better today than they were 30 days ago? If not, what do you need to do differently so your commitment to the development of your team is reflected in how you spend your time? I want you to commit to managing your calendar so you can coach every day. Not every other day. Not

once a week. Every day. When you commit to teaching, and you follow through, every aspect of your coaching will improve.

The salesperson's commitment

A successful coaching relationship takes both a coach and a coach-ee. It does no good to spend your time on someone who isn't going to listen, learn, or change. A salesperson's commitment to the coaching process is tied to personality traits such as openness to feedback, acceptance of constructive criticism, interest in continued improvement, and motivation to succeed and constantly strive for new challenges and results—in brief, their coachability, which I addressed in Chapter 4.

C.O.A.C.H. = Observe

One of the sales instincts that sales managers have the hardest time overcoming is the urge to be a player (p.19) and instead embracing the role of an observer. As Yogi Berra once said, “You can observe a lot just by watching.”

I once had a sales manager, for example, who noticed that I wasn't getting enough high-value appointments and then sat in on some prospecting calls to help me figure out why. In other words, he took the time to observe what I was doing (or, as it turned out, not doing)—which is a great example of the importance of early-cycle coaching. (See sidebar, p. 135.)

Yet too many sales managers go into a coaching conversation without spending enough time watching what a sales rep does. As

a consequence, they can only offer superficial insights and general advice, neither of which is particularly helpful to a rep.

Early sales-cycle intervention

As it turned out, the mistake I was making occurred *in the first or second phone call with prospects*. And fortunately, I had a sales manager who didn't just get involved in big deals that were nearing a close. He paid attention to what his reps were doing throughout the full sales cycle. That way, he had a much bigger impact on my success (and that of the rest of our team). Without that early intervention, I never would have solved my problem. I'll talk more about the importance of early-cycle sales coaching in Chapter 9.

The experience with my former manager shows why acting on your commitment to coaching has to start by observing your salespeople in action, such as in meetings with customers (either outside sales or inside sales) or in your sales team meetings. You can also “observe” the metrics of their work efforts in your CRM system.

While making any observation, you want to gather data in the form of notes on the following:

1. What people do
2. What they *don't* do
3. Their body language and/or tone of voice

When I was a sales manager, I found it helpful to have tools and checklists that would help me perform assessments like this and

make sure I didn't miss anything important. You'll see an example of an observation checklist in Figure 19. The format I use guides me to look at three categories (general sales skills and wills, sales process skills, and preparation); you may have other categories in your own version. I would take this kind of form with me when I was doing a ride-along (or call-along) with a rep and enter my ratings as the day progressed.

Reminder: Observe, don't conclude!

One warning: There is a very natural human temptation to leap to conclusions when you observe someone. This is another instinct you have to fight as a sales manager.

When I work with sales managers, I ask them to give me some examples of observations they've made of a sales rep. What almost always happens is that they tell me about their *interpretations* of the rep's behavior—a conclusion they've reached about the rep's attitude (like Column 1 of Table I).

Jumping to conclusions will hinder your ability to provide effective coaching because you'll never know if your interpretations are right or wrong. And your reps will see you as judgmental and critical if you tackle them with interpretations instead of facts. In contrast, *observations* are clearer and more specific about an event, with no interpretation attached until you have a conversation with the rep about what is going on.

In observing your reps, you need to take notes on *what they actually do* (like the examples in Column 2 of Table I), not your interpretation of why they are doing it. You must be able to **describe specific behaviors** (or the lack of behaviors) to your sales reps. Do not use statements that could be considered judgmental. And be sure to catch the right as well as the wrong. (See sidebar, p. 138.)

Figure 19

Name:

Manager:

Date:

*Rating Scale: 5-Very Strong 4-Strong 3-Good/Average
2-Needs Improvement 1-High-Priority Improvement*

	Skill/Will Area	Rating	Comments
General skills & wills	Defines and achieves customer go-forward commitment		
	Engages customer		
	Presentation/demo skills		
	Identifies and contacts multiple decision makers		
	Listening skills		
	Makes changes based on previous feedback (coachability)		
Ability to move customer through their buying process	Identifies customer's current buying step		
	Identifies needs/problems		
	Identifies/shapes customer buying criteria		
	Matches customer needs and buying criteria to strengths of your products/services		
	Repackages weaknesses		
	Resolves customer concerns/objections		
	Negotiates and closes		
Preparation (work ethic)	Knowledge of customer/prospect business		
	Knowledge of your products/services		
	Knowledge of competition		
	Overall professionalism and organizational skills		

Comments/Action Plans:

Table I: Conclusions vs. Observations

1. Conclusion	2. Observation
Fred doesn't support the company.	Fred doesn't complete the weekly updates of our CRM tool.
Allison has a bad attitude.	Allison arrives late for meetings, doesn't contribute, and rolls her eyes frequently.

Catch the right, not just the wrong

One tip when observing your salespeople is to make sure you note things the person does right, not just what they do wrong. This is harder than it sounds! In their book *Managing Major Sales*,²⁵ Neil Rackham and Richard Ruff describe an experiment they conducted. They made a video of a sales call that was specially designed to have an even balance of both good and bad points. They then asked experienced sales managers to watch the video and pick out any points about selling that struck them as worthy of comment, either good or bad.

If the managers were unbiased, you would expect to see an approximate 50/50 split of good and bad behaviors as comments. But after the experiment, Rackham and Ruff found that 82 percent of the sales managers' comments were about bad points!

25 Neil Rackham and Richard Ruff, *Managing Major Sales: Practical Strategies for Improving Sales Effectiveness* (HarperBusiness, 1991).

Lesson: We sales managers focus a lot more on what's going wrong than on what's going right. Our proficiency at pointing out what's ineffective can play out in a coaching style that is perceived by salespeople as negative and condescending. So as Ken Blanchard, author of *The One Minute Manager*, says, "Catch them doing something right."

C.O.A.C.H. = Assess

Prescription without diagnosis is malpractice. This statement applies as much to sales coaching as it does to medicine. Assessing a coaching opportunity means thinking about the potential causes of what you observed and developing a preliminary solution. If you are unable to diagnose the reason for the sales performance problem, then the solution you offer to your sales rep won't work.

To help you perform this assessment, refer back to the Success Profile discussion in Chapter 3. Having a document that describes what skills and wills are characteristic of greatness will give you a clear picture in your mind of what behaviors and attitudes you want to see in a rep. You can then compare what you have observed with what you would like or expect to see in terms of sales results, activity, account development expectations, team member responsibilities, time management, sales skills, and attitudes.

As you make this comparison, think about what could be causing the problems you see and what actions may be required of the sales rep. (These are the topics you'll discuss with the rep in the next step, Consult.)

If you think the problem relates to a skill, the cause is usually a lack of experience or inadequate training or mentoring—either the person never learned the skills in the first place or was unable to translate classroom (or book) learning into action. The solution

is to make sure your training programs are highly interactive and practical. Include one-on-one or small group teaching as needed, plus role-playing and perhaps mentoring to help the person learn the necessary tactics and steps.

If you think that poor will is at the root of the problem, consider that willingness problems often arise from one of two sources:

- **A lack of confidence.** One cause for a lack of confidence is unrealistic expectations. If a professional baseball player expected to get a base hit in every at bat, he would be disappointed most of the time. Though this expectation is unrealistic, the player could think they're failing if they don't bat 1.000. So if you run into a rep who seems discouraged, start by asking, "What is your expectation here?" If it is unrealistic, help the rep develop a more realistic understanding of what is possible given their stage of professional development. Going forward, be sure to praise their effort as well as results until their confidence has been restored. If their expectation is realistic, the underlying cause may actually be a skill issue (they aren't confident in their ability to be successful with a skill) or an experience issue (perhaps they tried and failed in the past). More training, mentoring, or role-playing might solve those kinds of confidence issues.
- **A lack of motivation.** You will see a lack of motivation either in a new or inexperienced rep who fails to improve or in an experienced rep who has "lost the fire" (that is, they were good producers in the past but no longer are). Such salespeople either never had or have lost sight of their personal goals. More specifically, the link between their behaviors and their personal goals/sales results is now broken. Because motivational issues are one of the most common and challenging coaching situations for managers, I've devoted the next chapter to this topic.

Focus, focus, focus

Most of us only have the capacity to improve one or two things at any given time. Learning—and especially skill development—occurs little by little over time, not all at once. What typically happens, however, is that a sales manager will give a sales rep a laundry list of things they need to improve. The rep feels overwhelmed, which undermines their self-confidence and is unlikely to result in meaningful change.

That's why my advice for dealing with these issues comes from two sources. First, there is my favorite golf pro. When I take a swing, he sees at least a half dozen flaws. But then he gives me just one suggestion, and that one suggestion solves many of my flaws. This is a great model for coaching, one that I advise for any sales manager.

Second is Andy Grove, former CEO of Intel. In his book *High Output Management*,²⁶ Grove advises us to write down both good and bad points about an employee and look for patterns among the items. You would, for example, make a complete list of a sales rep's strengths and developmental needs. Then you would look at the whole thing and try to **pick out the common thread** so you can ideally solve multiple problems with the same prescription. (See sidebar below.)

Finding a common thread

Suppose a sales rep's strength is a high amount of prospecting activity. Weaknesses include a low lead conversion rate and a low quote-to-close rate. What is a common link between those issues? Here's a hint: Think about high prospecting activity as a warning sign of the rep's inability to make appointments. When viewed that way, I can think of at least four possible

26 Andrew S. Grove, *High Output Management* (Vintage, 1995, 2nd ed.).

common threads between high prospecting and low conversions:

- The sales rep isn't asking second- or third-level diagnostic questions.
- The sales rep spends too much time talking about the exciting capabilities of your product/service, rather than focusing on underlying customer needs, problems, and solution requirements.
- The salesperson lacks the self-confidence to engage C-level prospects in a thought-provoking way.
- The salesperson lacks basic business acumen and is unable to connect with customers around their operational, strategic, or performance issues.

Once you have diagnosed the issue, look to the options I discussed for solutions: education or training to improve a skill, carefully constructed conversations to work on will, or role-playing to improve confidence.

Focusing on one or two areas that create multiple problems will have a higher payoff than trying to attack any single weakness alone. Coaching the symptoms of a problem instead of addressing the underlying causes can do more harm than good. So the next time you have a development discussion with a rep, think like my golf pro and Andy Grove. Pick out one or two of the most important things you want a salesperson to work on.

C.O.A.C.H. = Consult

Finally! The step where you get to share your wisdom with the sales rep. But not so fast. As you'll see, there are two substeps here: **inquire** then **advise**. It may sound odd to start off a Consult step by listening instead of talking, so let me explain.

Inquire

You've no doubt heard the catch phrase, "Telling is not selling." Well, *telling* is not *coaching* either. You have to engage people in their own development, which you can do by listening to their ideas first.

There are many ways to approach this inquiry. One is to paraphrase back to the salesperson what you heard them say and ask their opinion on how well it worked. For example, *what specific action did you want the prospect to take at the end of the meeting and was that agreed to? Why do you think that did [or did not] happen?*

Another alternative is to ask one or two general questions such as *what do you think went well? What are one or two things that you could improve on?*

Or, if you want the person to focus on a specific area, you can target your questions to that area:

- [Preparation] How did you prepare going into the meeting? Do you think you were prepared enough? What would you do differently the next time around?
- [Inquiry] How well do you think you did in asking questions of the customer?
- [Listening] How well did you listen to the prospect's answers? Do you think that the customer thought you were listening to them?
- [Structure] Did you keep and build interest?

- [Recovery after problems] Is there anything you could have done during the meeting to get it back on track?
- [Improvement] How and when can you get back in there, do it better, and get this opportunity moving again?

Starting off the Consult phase by asking questions does five things:

1. It engages the rep in the process of their own improvement.
2. It demonstrates your interest in hearing their thoughts and ideas.
3. It allows you to focus the rep's attention on skill or will issues you've identified as needing improvement.
4. It helps you evaluate their level of self-awareness.
5. It serves as a model of questioning that reps can use to coach themselves when you're not there. That speeds up their cycle of learning and helps them get better faster.

Listening is not just for Millennials

There's a lot of talk these days about how Millennials expect their workplaces to be highly participative. For example, they expect to be listened to and expect their ideas to be taken seriously.

I have no doubts this is true, but I think you'd do well to treat all sales reps with that level of respect.

Advise

After you've gotten the sales rep to think through some of the issues on their own by asking them directed questions, it's time to share your ideas and perspective with them. Tell them what you think they did well and one or two things you think they could improve (remember my golf pro and Andy Grove from the previous section). The "one thing" might be something like this:

- Doing a better job at developing the need
- Improving negotiation skills
- Understanding how to better position your offering(s) against the competition
- Being more enthusiastic about solving customer problems
- Supporting others on the team as they deal with changes
- Being willing to become a positive role model for the team

One more thing to keep in mind: When you deliver coaching in a more timely manner, the consequences of a salesperson's mistakes will often not yet be apparent. If the person made a mistake in the first few steps of selling, the impact may not be felt for weeks or months—not until the prospect balks at a price, haggles on details, or just stops communicating, for example. So it's important for you as the coach to make those connections clear. To wrap up the conversation, therefore, you need to **get buy-in on why a skill or strategy is important**. Challenge the rep to think through the consequences of what they have done or not done with an implied *why this is important* message buried in the question: *I noticed that you didn't ask about the prospect's decision criteria, but you went ahead and scheduled your demonstration for next week. How do you plan to organize your presentation to meet their needs?*

This discussion of why is especially important for Millennials (you may hear them ask “why should I do that?”). Their question is not a sign of resistance toward you; they just recognize that knowing the why helps them put their new learning in context.

C.O.A.C.H. = Help

Were you to stop the C.O.A.C.H. process after that second “C” (Consult), you would be leaving your reps to sink or swim on their own based solely on the insights you shared with them. That’s a recipe for failure. To learn and change, your reps need and deserve whatever help you can offer them.

This lesson was brought home to me by the experience of an incredibly successful sales professional who was promoted into management. When Caroline became a manager, the idea of offering help to her sales reps didn’t occur to her because she thought much of the job came naturally, as it had for her. If you asked her what made her successful, she couldn’t explain it because she didn’t have good self-awareness of what she was doing. She just didn’t get why some of her reps struggled so much and wasn’t curious enough to find out. As a result, she was quick to point out problems to her team but never offered them concrete help to improve. She was seen as a critic not a coach, and her reps were not improving. Needless to say, her team struggled to generate results.

What Caroline didn’t realize is that when she became a sales manager, a crucial part of her job was teaching others how to do what she did.

When we make the transition from rep to manager, we have to be able to break down our skills into teachable chunks and explain them to our sales reps in a way that they can hear and learn the right lesson. Great sales managers know that everyone has strengths and weaknesses, that people learn in different ways, and that every salesperson needs customized help and support to get better. You and your

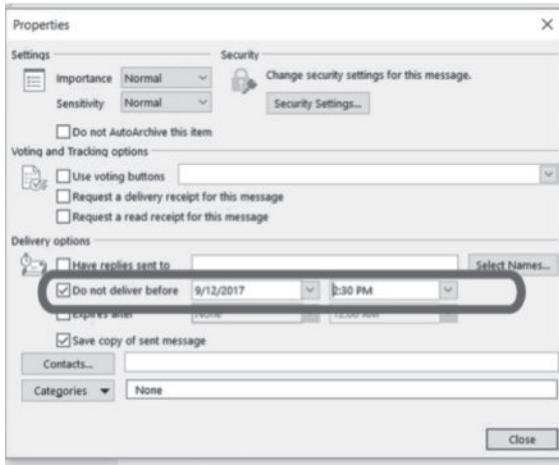
salesperson need to agree on an action plan to improve the situation. You will need to raise the ideas you developed in the Assess phase (such as role-playing, training, goal setting, etc.), modified by any insights gained during the Consult conversation. Making these ideas a reality is what the Help step is all about. That help can come in one or more of the following three forms:

1. **Teaching:** Direct the rep to the appropriate training courses on a needed skill, or provide other instruction on how to perform a task or skill. Or demonstrate a skill, and then role-play with the student.
2. **Motivation:** If the problem is with wills and attitudes, the solution often has to include work to improve the rep's motivation, which requires in-depth one-on-one conversations. The next chapter provides different examples of how to coach willingness issues, but the basic points to discuss include why what you're requesting is important to you and your company, how to connect the desired change to their personal goals, and what will happen if the person fails to show improvement.
3. **Follow-up:** You've got to "inspect what you expect." Follow-up breeds accountability in your team. It sends the message that you want a sales rep to actually implement the results of your coaching conversation and make the changes that the two of you have agreed on. A sales manager who does not follow up sends a message to the salesperson that the coaching really wasn't all that important! So schedule specific follow-up sessions in your calendar (see sidebar, p. 148, for a tip). Be sure to check in with reps around intermediate milestones, not just for a desired final outcome. Provide regular feedback to the person by mentioning progress you've seen (or not seen) or asking them what they are struggling with.

A follow-up tip

How can you remember to follow up on every coaching conversation? Simple: Use the “Delay Sending Message” feature in Microsoft Outlook or a similar feature in the email system your business uses. Immediately after the coaching conversation, while it’s fresh in your mind, compose an email to the sales rep following up on their commitment. Then select the “Delay Sending Message” feature in Outlook to schedule the next check-in point. Be sure to “cc” yourself as a reminder that you followed up!

Figure 20: Delay Sending Message



A Model of Consistent Coaching

One question I ask in all my seminars is “what is ineffective coaching?” People have no trouble coming up with examples. They talk about managers who wait too long before addressing a problem, those who do all the talking and no listening, and those who do not attempt to gain buy-in for needed changes.

And those answers are just the tip of the iceberg. There are sales coaches who focus on the wrong things because they haven't spent enough time diagnosing their team's skill or will deficiencies, or who don't know how to frame the issues in a way that illustrates the importance of doing a task a particular way (or not doing something the rep naturally does). Perhaps the rep doesn't act on the advice given, or the coach doesn't provide the right kind of follow up (to ensure the rep gets training, for example). And sometimes we sales managers forget the necessary components of a good coaching process.

While I've seen all of these problems in action, I was fortunate enough to have a sales manager early in my career who was the epitome of what to do right. I mentioned him earlier in this chapter concerning a mistake I was making in my initial contact with prospects. How that mistake got noticed and corrected is a good example of a consistent coach with a consistent approach.

At that time, I'd already established myself as a top sales producer. So when I sat down with my boss for a monthly one-on-one meeting, I had the smugness of a top dog. But he had reviewed my activity reports and commented that I just wasn't getting the same number of high-quality appointments that I'd gotten in the past. His plan, he said, was to sit in on some calls and provide me with specific feedback.

Today, as I look back on the mistakes I was making in my telephone approach—mistakes I was unaware of—I realize that I was likely suffering from “self-serving bias.” A well-known principle in psychology, self-serving bias is the tendency for someone to see themselves as being more effective than they actually are. You see it when, for example, a sales rep who has a great month attributes their success

to a strong work ethic and top-notch skills. But when that same rep has a bad month, they blame external factors, such as lousy leads from marketing. Sound familiar?

My manager was able to protect me from my self-serving bias in part because of what he *didn't* do. He didn't wait until my sales numbers started to fall off. He didn't just urge me to make more calls. He didn't tell me to try harder. He didn't step in and take over on my calls. He didn't wait until I thought a deal was nearing the close so he could ride in like a white knight and rescue the deal.

Above all, he didn't wait for me to *ask* for coaching. People with a self-serving bias don't ask for coaching, because they are unaware of the mistakes they are making. In my case, I would have kept losing deals I could have won, and kept blaming everything but my own approach for those losses.

You are the most talented sales professional on your team. However, your sales *management* success will ultimately be determined by how effective you are at instilling your greatness as a sales rep into the hearts and minds of your team members. The essence of coaching is helping your salespeople to learn what they don't already know—the skills and attitudes they need to maximize their success—and remind them of their skills when necessary. Because of the pervasive existence of the self-serving bias among sales teams, you are the *only* person who can accomplish this. Be a proactive sales coach. Take your coaching to your people.

About Kevin F. Davis

Kevin F. Davis is the president of TopLine Leadership Inc., a leading provider of customizable sales and sales management training programs targeted at helping clients drive consistent sales growth.

Kevin has more than 30 years of experience, having worked his way up from sales rep, to sales manager, to general manager. He therefore understands the particular challenges faced when transitioning into management and when transitioning to managing managers. Kevin continues to draw on his firsthand experiences to help his clients remove barriers in the way of great success.

Under Kevin's guidance, TopLine helps sales managers organize their priorities—separate out the merely urgent from the truly important—to elevate overall performance and boost efficiency. Sales managers discover how to transition their coaching style from one that primarily judges lagging indicators to a more balanced approach that includes proactive developmental coaching.

TopLine's salesforce programs are focused on establishing a consistent, repeatable sales process and sales funnel linked to the buying process. This helps sales reps develop more effective sales strategies, be more effective in every customer meeting, and be more accurate in predicting deal closings.

Kevin is the author of two sales books: The first, *Getting Into Your Customer's Head: 8 Secret Roles of Selling Your Competitors Don't Know*, was selected as one of the top 30 business books of 1996 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries. The second, *Slow Down, Sell Faster! Understand Your Customer's Buying Process and Maximize Your Sales* breaks the entrenched myth that a faster sales pitch leads to a faster close.

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