

Piloting the hiring of top performers in sales

*Hiring right
is not
something
you simply
leave to
chance*

By Don McNamara



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Without question, the most critical skills in sales management are recruiting, selecting and hiring the best sales representatives. Let's compare the task of landing a top sales performer to flying a plane.

The first step is to file a flight plan in which you identify your route, time of departure, time of expected arrival and other pertinent information. Isn't this the same as identifying how and when you expect to conduct your interviews, when you expect to complete your search and when your top candidate will start?

Good pilots recognize the importance of visually checking the plane. Before you begin interviewing prospective candidates, you have to know what you're looking for. A well thought-out job description that has been tested against the realities in your company is your starting point. Start the interviewing sequence with full knowledge of the characteristics, skills and experience you are seeking.

Once in the cockpit, pilots verify all controls, gauges and electronics — a checklist, like having a planned sequence of questions to ask and responses to elicit. Initially, candidates can be asked a series of prequalifying questions during a telephone interview. Following both the phone questionnaire and the face-to-face interview with the same questions with every candidate will ensure that you're comparing apples to apples.

Rating the candidates during the flight can be tricky unless you build an evaluation grid to score the interviewees. You also can use it to get to your short list of candidates.

I recommend you select at least two finalists based on the objective criteria interviews.

Now check out all finalist references thoroughly. Develop a list of questions. Ask references to "rank Tom on a scale of 1 to 10 in each of these matters." Ask: "If there is one thing that you could offer that would improve Tom's sales performance, what would it be?" Use some imagination in this step — the more penetrating and thoughtful your questions, the better you can validate the assessments you formed during the interview.

Now let's assume you have enough information to make your choice and jump to what

happens next. Put together a "Getting Started Plan" for your new hire. Identify all activities, objectives, responsible parties and dates targeted for completion of each step. Prioritize the list sequentially — most important activity to least — and as activities are completed, acknowledge them and use this as an opportunity to discuss the progress your new hire is making, and make course corrections if called for.

A couple of milestones are achieved when you take an active and participatory role in this process. You establish your leadership style and the expectations you hold for your new person during the startup phase. And you create a glide path for your employee that can be measured and the new hire can be held accountable for his or her progress.

But let's not think of this as an ax hanging over the new person. Let's call this a "success" plan. Rather than leaving the new hire wandering about aimlessly, you put him or her on track so both of you can measure progress toward every identified objective.

Superior sales management and supervision begins at the time of the initial face-to-face interview. What happens thereafter and throughout your supervision of the representative is directly reflective of the leadership you displayed during the interview phase. Supervising the sales activities, as well as setting meaningful and cooperative goals for your employee will be smoother thereafter.

If you skip one of these steps in the process, it is something like hitting an air pocket — when you feel the bump, you know something is not right and you'd better check the plane.

Now, consider that the process you went through to find your new employee is in many ways an analog of the sales job that you hired that person for. In sales, too, you have to identify where you're going and when you intend to get there, do your homework, keep checking the continually developing situation as you go, prioritize the steps toward your goal, keep a record of your progress, quantify the results of your effort and remain flexible — but determined to reach the destination you had in mind when you set out. **RM**