

Send Me In, Coach!



by Don McNamara

AT ONE TIME, MOST SALES organizations believed that coaching sales reps was a sales management responsibility. Every sales trainer, sales book, and experienced sales manager verified that coaching was a spoke on the sales manager success wheel.

Early in my sales career, sales managers were required to learn coaching skills and employ them regularly. They shared the wealth of their experience and knowledge with team members, inducing incredible loyalty.

Today, skill development is more hit and miss, leaving many sales people unclear how their performance is being evaluated. There is little wonder sales force turnover is high.

One criteria for stabilizing a sales team is for sales managers to coach their team members.

Process or Content?

Coaching salespeople for personal improvement and enhanced performance involves a combination of process and content coaching. Let me explain the difference.

To coach a salesperson effectively, you need to start with an individual sales plan or template of expectations. When a sales manager and salesperson mutually generate and agree upon a sales plan, then coaching becomes a step-by-step monitoring process. Within the plan are the goals, objectives, and activities of the salesperson. Without a sales plan, both the sales manager and salesperson will find it difficult to measure accomplishment. So, decide the "what to do" first.

Develop a written "game plan" from which the sales rep can function and the sales manager can observe progress against each objective.

In the process portion is coaching, where the manager assists the sales rep in meeting each objective. The sales manager may assist in determining if the sales rep can execute the objective alone because of successful prior experience, or if other assistance is required. This can be done by discussing real-world scenarios that sales-

people face. The sales manager should model the skills that will be used by the sales reps.

The sales manager can work with the salesperson in implementing the plan by providing the content, or the "how to do it." The goal is to optimize and maximize the salesperson's skills to deliver the greatest sales and revenue. The sales manager can provide valuable insight for the sales rep in how to approach, prepare, and implement strategies and tactics for customers and prospects.

No matter what tactic, technique, or strategy is used, sales managers must be aware that accomplishing the objective is more vital than how well



it is done. Initially, substance must take precedence over style. Once accomplished, a sales manager can coach to develop a more effective style—more effective communications with customers and prospects. Coaching for better communications is a superior sales manager skill.

Sales managers coach at two levels: the process (sales plan) and the content (skill building). The content part may take role playing, where the sales manager acts the part of the sales person while the sales person takes on the role of the customer. Then the roles get reversed. A few attempts set in a trial-and-error framework make enhancing the style portion of objective completion possible. The sales manager gives supportive feedback in these sessions to build the salesperson's self-esteem. Otherwise, salespeople will never feel comfortable enough to try and will constantly ask the sales manager for assistance on the same task. The style portion of coaching will bear fruit

when salespeople communicate effectively with their customers. Sales managers need to be equally effective with their sales staff in content coaching.

The sales manager must be a confident individual who can coach salespeople during role-playing sessions. The worst scenario happens when the sales manager intentionally avoids assisting salespeople. Salespeople must see the sales manager as interested in helping them do things for themselves. The intention is that with time and practice the skill set of the salesperson is enhanced resulting in more effectiveness in the customer setting. As the effectiveness increases so will individual productivity. As productivity increases, so will sales, margins, and profits.

Sales managers must make an investment in their sales staffs. This investment will vary based on the experience, capability, and competency of each team member. The sales manager must identify which area, if not both process and content, need assistance. If the need is in the area of process, the sales manager can lead the sales rep through a series of steps that ensures the process gets developed and the salesperson is comfortable implementing the process. If assistance is required in the area of content, the sales manager must work to improve the salesperson's skills in dealing with customers.

Crucial in coaching is building a degree of trust and confidence between coach and salespeople. Salespeople will pay close attention and take the counsel of their coach when they recognize the coach has years of experience in a sales management role. Also, a salesperson will need to know that the sales manager has walked the walk and talked the talk. Once recognized, objective feedback and significant improvements can take place. The reason is respect. No other factor determines the success of a coach more.

The sales manager can assist the salesperson on two levels: getting the "what to do" formulated (the process) and then guiding the salesperson through the steps of the "how to do it" (content) with finesse. The result is effective salespeople who understand their goals and objectives well. They also understand the appropriate sales style and proper technique to be used in different situations that may arise while pursuing their personal revenue goals. SSE

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ACTION: Coach your salespeople.