

Professional Service Providers

Superior Sales Management Coaching The Successful Blending of Process and Content

By Don McNamara CMC

Executive Overview

Long before coaching became a recognized niche of and by itself, there was a long-standing belief in many sales organizations that coaching of employees was a fundamental management responsibility. Moreover, every professional sales trainer you spoke to, every textbook you read and every sales manager who had several years of experience would verify that coaching was a fundamental cog on the sales manager success wheel. But what has happened since?

Days of Yore

In the early years of my sales career it was a mandate from upper management to managers throughout their respective organizations to learn coaching skills and employ them regularly. It was a requirement that they share the wealth of experience and knowledge gained with those throughout their respective teams. In many cases, the ability to be an effective coach was an item in their own evaluation and used as a determining factor in promotion. As a by-product incredible loyalty to sales managers became a hallmark of sales teams where the managers themselves took an active and participative role in sales team skill set development.

The issue today, as I see it, is many sales managers who are baby boomers, Gen X and Y have not been exposed to the skills of coaching. The result oftentimes is a group or an entire sales organization functioning at less than peak performance. Additionally, sales people are left unclear how their performance is being evaluated. Little wonder sales force turnover is a reality among sales organizations.

One of the benchmarks in stabilizing a sales organization is for the sales managers to employ a set of coaching skills of their own. The problem of course is where can they get such training and coaching. The truth is every successful sales manager has learned the hard way – mostly by trial and error, often at the expense of sales effectiveness and productivity. Today's sales manager may be of the mentality that their role solely requires them to supervise sales team members based on a process. (The fact of the matter is that sales managers do not really manage sales, they really are supervising the activities of their sales team members so that sales are generated by the sales people themselves.) For several years coaching in this area has tended to be ensuring a methodical step-by-step approach was taken by sales team members so that the sales results could be achieved.

In my experience, the most significant difference in coaching a sales manager for personal improvement and enhanced performance is a combination of process and content coaching. Let me explain the difference between process and content from a sales manager's point of view.

Process Defined

Webster defines process as the series of actions, operations, or motions involved in the accomplishment of an end. In the case of sales management, coaching a sales manager effectively must have a clearly identified starting point, which is a sales plan. A superb sales management coach knows this well in advance of any engagement because it offers a template from which to function during coaching sessions. Within the plan are the goals, objectives and activities of the sales team the sales manager will supervise. In other words, a clearly defined set of actions, operations and motions will guide the sales manager so that the goals themselves can be achieved. Without a sales plan or template of expectations, each will find it difficult to measure accomplishment because the “what to do” has not been established.

Similarly, a sales manager needs to have a process with their sales team members based on the individual business plans. If a mutually agreed upon business plan is generated by a sales person, then completion of objectives is the step by step monitoring the sales manager takes with each rep. The key here is that a formal and written “game” plan be developed from which the sale rep can follow and function and the sales manager can observe progress against each objective the sales person lists. This is the “what” will be done.

Content Defined

Webster's definition of content is all that is contained in something; everything inside, the main substance or meaning. Here the coach can work with the sales manager in implementing the plan by providing the “how to do it”. Skill building opportunities are within the content portion of sales management coaching while working through certain personnel activities that the sales manager undertakes with his/her sales team on a continuous basis. The goal is to optimize and maximize the sales forces' skill set to deliver the greatest sales and revenue for the group as a whole. The coach can provide valuable insight for the sales manager in how to approach, prepare and implement strategies and tactics not just for the customers and prospects, but also for the individuals within the sales group.

Encapsulated in the content portion is coaching where the coach assists the sales manager in completion of each objective. The coach may assist in determining if the sales manager can execute the objective alone because of successful prior experience or if other assistance is required. In the later case, this can be accomplished through role-playing exercises built on real world scenarios the sales manager is currently facing with the sales team. If so the coach can model the skills that will be used by the sales manager so that in the future they can perform on his or her own.

No matter what tactic, technique or strategy agreed upon by the coach and sales manager, the sales manager must be aware that accomplishing the objective is more vital than how well it was done. Simply stated this means substance over style. Once this is accomplished a sales manager can call on the sales management coach to develop a more effective style - one

where communications is bridged in a more pleasing way. Every encounter between a sales manager and a sales person calls for a defined method of communication where the sales manager determines which management style to use based on the need to communicate with each rep in order to effect the needed behavioral changes. Just as everyone is different, so will be the sales management style employed with each team member to improve his or her personal performance depending on the matter at hand. This is a definite superior sales management skill, one that can be developed in coordination with a superior sales management coach.

The coaching then a sales manager coach does is at two levels – the process (sales plan) and the content (skill building, or how to do it). The how to do it part may take role playing, where the sales management coach acts the part of the sales manager while the sales manager takes on the role of sales person. Then the roles get reversed. A few attempts set in an educational and trial and error framework make the enhancing of the style portion of objective completion possible. The sales management coach gives supportive encouraging feedback in these sessions to build sales manager self esteem. Otherwise the sales manager will never feel comfortable enough to try for them self and will be constantly asking the sales management coach for assistance for the same task. The style portion of coaching, the how to do it, will bear fruit when the sales manager becomes more confident in their ability to communicate effectively with sales team members. The sales managers need to be equally effective with their sales staff in the area of content coaching too and that's a huge differentiator when it comes to being an average sales manager and a superior one.

THE CAVEAT

The sales manager must be a confidant individual and able to coach a sales person during role-playing sessions. The worst scenario happens when the sales manager intentionally avoids assisting the sales person. Certainly this is not the positive behavior change sales management coaching intends to improve. The salesperson must see the sales manager as interested in helping to be able to do things for themselves. The intention naturally is that with time and practice the skill set of the sales person is enhanced resulting in more effectiveness in the customer setting. Where the effectiveness increases so will individual sales person productivity. Where productivity increases, so will sales, margins and profits.

Human Capital Investment

Key: the sales manager must make an investment in the sales staff. This investment will vary based on the experience, capability and competency of each sales team member. The real issue at stake is in coaching each and every one of them depends on individual needs. It is the function of the sales manager coach to assist the sales manager in understanding which style to employ with each sales person and under what conditions. Frankly, each is situationally dependent just as every person on this planet is different.

While some would argue that the sales person modifies their style in communication with the sales manager, I would maintain that is the responsibility of the sales manager to determine which communication and management style to use with the intention of effecting the needed behavioral changes.

The professional sales manager coach can help identify which area, if not both process and content need assistance. If it is in the area of process, the sales manager coach can lead the

coachee through a series of steps that ensures process gets developed and the sales manager is comfortable implementing said process.

If it is determined assistance is required in the area of content, then the coach can work toward improving the sales manager skills so those in turn can be successfully employed with sales team members.

Crucial in coaching sales managers is the degree of trust and confidence that is built and maintained between coach and coachee. Having spent one-half of my career in corporate America in various sales management capacities, I believe that a sales manager will pay particular close attention and take the counsel of their coach when they recognize the coach has the years of experience in a sales management role. Once the coaches' credentials are established, trust and confidence get developed.

A sales manager will need to know that the sales management coach has walked the walk and talked the talk. After the sales manager acknowledges the coach has the experience base and can provide objective feedback significant improvements can take place. The reason, simply put, is respect. Personally, I know of no other word that determines the success of a coach and coachee relationship better than respect. In the case of the sales manager being coached, that respect given to the sales manager coach comes from having 'walked the walk and talked the talk'. And sales managers pick up on that very quickly. They have a keen sense of awareness and intuitive instinct that they call upon when evaluating another into their world. Net: it is best to have an experienced sales management coach in both process and content or the engagement could unravel very quickly.

The Bottom Line

Whereas in most other areas of the coaching profession advanced degrees and certifications are required for acknowledgement within the coaching community, sales management coaching pedigrees are built by having been in the trenches as a successful sales manager oneself. A superb sales management coach has 'been there, done that' and their experience is without question the most significant factor in the coaches' ability to move the coachee to higher levels of personal effectiveness with their sales team members.

The sales management coach therefore can assist the sales manager on two levels. Getting the "what to do" formulated (the process) and then guiding the sales manager through the steps of the "how to do it" (content) with finesse. The result is an effective sales manager who understands the individuals in the sales team so well that the appropriate management style and proper technique are used under any one of a myriad of different situations that may arise as a by-product of making the enterprise revenue goals.

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