

Professional Service Providers



Send Me in Coach!

By Don McNamara CMC

At one time there was a long-standing belief in many sales organizations that coaching of sales representatives was a fundamental sales 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 spoke on the sales manager success wheel.

In the early years of my sales career it was a mandate from upper management to sales managers throughout their respective organizations to learn coaching skills and employ them regularly. Furthermore, it was a requirement that they share the wealth of experience and knowledge gained with those throughout their respective teams. 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.

By contrast today, in the field skill set development is, at best, hit and miss leaving many sales people unclear how their performance is being evaluated. Little wonder sales force turnover is a reality.

One of the criteria for stabilizing a sales organization is for the sales managers to employ a set of coaching skills with their team members. 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 entire role is 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 the sales people themselves generate sales.) For several years sales supervision 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 person 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 managers point of view.

To coach a sales person effectively there must be a clearly identified starting point, which is an individual sales business plan. A superb sales manager knows this well in advance of any account and territory review because it offers a template from which to function during coaching sessions. When 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. Within the plan are the goals, objectives and activities of the sales person the sales manager will supervise. 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.

The key here is that a formal and written “game” plan be developed from which the sales 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.

Encapsulated in the *process* portion is coaching where the manager assists the sales rep in completion of 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. In the later case, this can be accomplished by discussing real world scenarios the sales person is currently facing with their accounts. If so the sales manager can model the skills that will be used by the sales rep so that in the future they can perform on their own.

The sales manager can work with the sales person in implementing the plan by providing the *content*, or the “how to do it” if you will. The goal is to optimize and maximize the sales persons’ skill set 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 not just for the customers and prospects, but also for the individuals within them.

No matter what tactic, technique or strategy agreed upon by sales manager and rep, 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 accomplished, a sales manager can coach to develop a more effective style- one where communications is bridged in a more pleasing way with customers and prospects. Coaching for better communications is a definite superior sales manager skill.

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 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 an educational and trial and error framework make the enhancing of the style portion of objective completion possible. The sales manager gives supportive encouraging feedback in these sessions to build sales person self esteem. Otherwise the sales person will never feel comfortable enough to try for them self and will be constantly asking the sales manager for assistance for the same task. The style portion of coaching, the how to do it, will bear fruit when the sales person becomes more confident in their ability to communicate effectively with their customers. At the end of the day, 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 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. The salesperson must see the sales manager as interested in helping them 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.

Key: Sales managers must make an investment in their sales staffs. 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. The professional sales manager must identify which area, if not both *process* and *content* need assistance. If it is in the area of *process*, the sales manager can lead the sales rep through a series of steps that ensures *process* gets developed and the sales person is comfortable implementing said *process*.

If it is determined assistance is required in the area of *content*, then the sales manager must work toward improving the sales person skills so those in turn can be successfully employed with their own customers.

Crucial in coaching sales people 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 person will pay close attention and take the counsel of their coach when they recognize the coach has the years of experience in a sales management role. Additionally, a sales person 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, 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 person being coached, that respect given to the sales manager comes from having 'been there, done that'. And sales people pick up on that very quickly. Once the coaches' credentials are established, trust and confidence get developed.

The sales manager therefore can assist the sales person on two levels. Getting the "what to do" formulated (the *process*) and then guiding the sales person through the steps of the "how to do it" (*content*) with finesse. The result is an effective sales person who well understands their goals and objectives. They also understand the appropriate sales style and proper technique to be used under any one of a myriad of different situations that may arise while pursuing their personal revenue goals.

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