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### The Three Roles of a Sales Manager

Being a frontline sales manager was the most frustrating, most stressful, hardest and the most satisfying job I've ever had. I was a sales manager for decades and in all that time, no two days were even remotely alike. Everyday presented a fresh challenge and an opportunity to grow both professionally and personally. Front line sales managers are critical to a company's success and good sales managers impact their sales people's careers like a parent impacts their children's lives. Sales management is a complex task and requires the manager to have a bit of a split personality. I have identified the three key areas of responsibility crucial to successful sales management:

- Leader/Cheerleader
- Administrator/Enforcer
- Trainer/Coach

I will cover the leadership role in this month's Link and Learn and address the others in future columns.

#### Leader/Cheerleader Role

Thomas Watson, the founder of IBM, said "*the real difference between success and failure in a corporation can be traced to the question of how well the organization brings out the great energies and talents of its people.*" This is an outstanding description of the role of the sales manager as leader. In his book, "It Worked for Me," General Colin Powell tells a story about the introduction of training simulators to the Army. The Army wanted to determine if the simulators were effective in training tank crews. They chose two units, training one in the field and the other on the new machines. The group which had used traditional training methods won a clear victory in a post training war game calling the effectiveness of the simulators into question. The units then switched training methods and met again in another war game. The same unit won again, in spite of the fact that they had been using the new equipment. Upon investigation, the Army discovered that the commander of the twice victorious unit pushed his team to train hard and expected the best from them. The Army found that the quality of leadership was a much bigger factor in the success of the unit than the type of equipment they were using. Leadership is the practice of getting optimal performance from each and every individual on your team and then getting those individuals to work together to achieve the

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team's objectives. This is why people admire strong leaders and enjoy working for them. Good leaders take us to levels of excellence we never imagined for ourselves.

### **The definition of leadership**

The bookstores and libraries are packed with thick books on the subject of leadership. Some universities offer advanced degrees in executive and organizational leadership. I have personally spent decades studying this subject and observing leaders in action. I have come to believe that leadership can be summed up in the following statement:

***“Leadership is the achievement of predetermined goals through the voluntary cooperation of others.”***

To extract the full meaning from this statement, we need to break it down into its component parts. The first word that stands out is:

### ***“Achievement”***

Achievement is the purpose of leadership. The leader exists to organize the resources given to him/her and to focus the efforts of his/her group toward achieving the goals of the organization. In the words of Hal Geneen, *“In business, words are words; explanations are explanations, promises are promises, but only performance is reality.”* Leaders are obsessed with getting the most from their team. They take full responsibility for their group's success or failure and are always striving to take them to the next level of achievement.

### ***“of pre-determined goals”***

In the days of the pioneers, every wagon train had a “wagon master” who went ahead of the group to scout out the best way to get to their destination. The “wagon master” had covered the terrain before and the settlers relied on his experience and knowledge. A sales leader serves this same function for their group. They should have a clear idea of what they want their group to accomplish and how to get there. This vision should go beyond “hitting their numbers” to what they want the group to become. The leader's goals should include the development of his/her people and the creation of new products and opportunities. Like the “wagon master,” they should always think about “what lies over the next ridge” and what they want to do when they get there. The leader should be able to articulate their goals so vividly that their team comes to share this vision and is anxious to get there.



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### *“through the voluntary cooperation of others”*

When I have discussed this with some old school *“My way or the highway”* managers, I often receive pushback on the word “voluntary.” After many years in management, I have come to believe that a manager can never truly force someone to do something they don’t really want to do. Perhaps the manager of a production line can force someone to tighten 500 bolts per hour, but selling is a much more complex undertaking. Salespeople need to be fully engaged, physically, mentally and emotionally, to be effective. We’ve all heard the old saying, “you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make them drink.” It is the leader’s job to make the horse thirsty! We need to make our people thirsty for success, thirsty to please us and thirsty for personal and professional excellence. Great leaders know how to motivate their teams. They understand that people do things for their own reasons and how to tap into each person’s individual needs and desires to get the most from them. Leaders understand that motivation is not an event, but rather a continuous process. They keep their team motivated by creating an environment where people feel engaged, challenged, valued and respected. They make their team feel as though they can handle any situation and overcome any obstacle. As entrepreneur and author Paul Hawken said, *“Good management is the art of making problems so interesting and their solutions so constructive that everyone wants to get to work and deal with them.”* If your people know you believe in them and their ability to do the job, they will believe in themselves and they will want to prove you right.

### *“through... others”*

One of the greatest temptations of leadership is to take charge of a situation and solve your people’s problems for them. While this may be expedient in the short term, it is disastrous in the long run. If we jump in and handle a situation or close a sale, we send a signal to our rep that we do not trust them to do the job. They will come to rely on us and will try to push every challenge our way. This inhibits their growth and devours the manager’s time. It is tempting to do this for several reasons. Handling a problem is often easier than teaching others to do so. This may be true, but teaching reps and helping them grow is a critical function of the leader. Coming to a rep’s aid can also be satisfying emotionally. We get to be the hero, the person with all the answers and we get to use the expertise we acquired as a sales person. We need to remind ourselves that we are no longer sales people; that we have moved on. We need to do the job we have today, not the job that got us there.

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If we could handle every problem and make every sale, there would be no need for sales people, or for sales managers. We need to accomplish our goals through the activities of our team. The leader's role is to leverage their experience and expertise to improve the performance of their team. To be effective, leaders should spend their time on activities that only they can do while delegating less critical tasks.

### **The paradox of leadership**

Many people are attracted to the sales profession because of the opportunity to control their own destiny. Sales people get recognized and rewarded for what they do in a very direct manner. Making the jump from sales person to sales manager changes this dynamic. A sales manager is recognized and rewarded for what the people who report to him/her do essentially surrendering a great deal of control over their lives to others. The direct relationship between how hard we work and what we earn gets muddled. Sales leadership is a much more complex and nuanced activity. As a sales manager, we need to work smart as well as hard and we need to give our team credit for our successes, while shouldering the blame for our failures. We need to expand our vision, learning from the past, directing today's activities and envisioning the future. Simultaneously we need to be teachers, cheerleaders, psychologists, politicians and drill sergeants. Leadership is not for everyone, but for a select few, there's nothing like it. All the aggravations, challenges and hard work of being a leader are offset by the sense of satisfaction that comes from doing a very tough job well. True leaders enjoy making a difference or as John Quincy Adams said: *"If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader."*

Next month: The Administrator/Enforcer role.

*This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.*

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