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The Three Roles of a Sales Manager Part 3 The trainer/coach role

This is the third and final installment in a series of articles on what it takes to be an effective sales manager. The first article in this series looked at a manager's responsibilities as a leader and motivator and the second addressed a manager's role as an administrator and enforcer. Sometimes these two roles seem at odds with one another in a sort of "good cop/bad cop" relationship. This month we will discuss the manager's role as a trainer/coach. This third role bridges the gap between the leader and administrator roles. As a leader we may motivate our teams to accomplish their goals but without a well-planned training program to give them the skills to do so, we will only frustrate and stress out our reps. Likewise holding people accountable to accomplish an objective without providing them with tools they need to do so, will quickly destroy your team's morale and productivity. One of my mentors once told me that a good manager must be able to deliver a pat on the back or a kick in the butt and to know when and where the proper pressure must be applied. I would add that a helping hand pointing the way should be applied to this mix. It is the trainer/coach role that ensures the long-term continued success of your team.

Most managers acknowledge the importance of training and coaching their people, but this is the first area cut when budgets are trimmed and time is tight. Managers will tell me, "I just don't have the time to train my people." The best managers MAKE the time to train their teams. They understand that training is not a luxury, but an absolute necessity if they wish to consistently achieve their objectives. I find that rather than wasting time, a good training program actually saves time in the long run. Well-trained sales people are much more effective than their "shoot from the hip" peers. They are better at engaging customers, drawing out their business needs and presenting the value of their products. Their training helps them to sell more business for every hour they spend on the job. Trained sales people sell better programs and make fewer avoidable errors, so their customers tend to be very loyal. Developing and delivering a training plan for your people is a lot of work. Sticking with the plan requires discipline. This is analogous to exercising; the people who work the hardest and who show up at the gym rain or shine are always the ones who get the best results. Some years ago I was assigned the task of running a large classified call center. I set up a robust training program. I broke my team into three groups based on their skill levels and gave each group a full hour of training each week in addition to my day-to-day coaching activities. The three training sessions and preparing for them consumed almost a full day every week. Was spending this time justified? In just over three years, we tripled the revenue of the department at a time when the rest of the company saw no growth. In the same period, we had no significant rate increase and my staff actually shrunk by about 5%. The only reason for our success was a dedication to polishing our skills.

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Training and coaching: two sides of the same coin

The difference between training and coaching is that training is “wholesale” and “coaching” is retail. Training involves working with your team as a group and coaching is working with your reps one on one. There is a place for both activities in your staff development plan. Developing training and coaching sessions follow the same basic four step process:

- 1) Identify the problem or opportunity to be addressed
- 2) Present your solution to the problem to the team (training) or the rep (coaching)
- 3) Rehearse the new behavior with the team (training) or the rep (coaching)
- 4) Observe the reps in the field and offer feedback

Training is very efficient and allows a manager to deliver information to everyone on the team in a short period of time. Training classes are a great opportunity to build team unity and to recognize reps for their skills. The key to getting the greatest possible benefit from a training class is thorough preparation. It is important to plan the content of the class, what you want to communicate, but also how you want to present the material. Every class should include an opportunity for the reps to actively participate in the session. If you rely solely on lecturing your people, they can zone out. A discussion format keeps the reps engaged and thinking. If you have a rep who is particularly good at one part of the job, let them lead the class on that subject. Their first hand accounts will add meaning to the message and make it credible to the rest of the team.

Even though I usually get a few death threats every time I mention role- playing exercises, I still feel they are one of the most valuable tools in the trainer’s toolbox. I have heard the argument that role-playing is “nothing like the real world,” but it is the best way we have to practice our craft, until Best Buy starts carrying virtual reality helmets. Role-playing gives the reps a chance to rehearse and practice their presentation in a forgiving environment, where screwing up won’t cost them a sale. Martial artists practice a “Kata,” which is a slow motion dance-like run through of all of their fighting moves. While a “Kata” is nothing like actual combat, it gives them “muscle memories” which kick in when the pressure is on. Likewise, role-playing gets the reps comfortable with the best language to use in their presentation. After six months of pressuring one of my company’s sales managers to include role-playing into her meetings, I finally convinced her to try my idea. At the end of the week she called me to admit that the role- playing was a good idea after all. Observing two of her reps she had noticed they were “smoother and more confident.”

Generally I find that individual coaching is more effective, if not as efficient as group training. Good coaching zeroes in on very specific behaviors and often only requires minor adjustment to reap major benefits. The best observers are the best coaches. To correct a problem, you have to accurately diagnose it. The biggest challenge most managers face is divorcing their observations of a rep’s behavior from their feelings about the rep and their desire to make the sale. As coaches, we should sit

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on the sideline whenever possible and let the rep handle the call. This gives us the opportunity to observe their presentation as well as the customer's reaction to them. Sometimes it is important to let the rep fail as a learning experience. I am in the habit of taking detailed notes during the call, which allows me to offer solid feedback afterwards. When offering feedback, I follow the "three to one" rule. For every negative comment I make, I try to make three positive comments. Following this rule keeps the channels of communication open and reinforces the behaviors you want the rep to continue. A good manager always follows Tom Peter's advice and constantly tries to "catch their people doing something right!"

Most managers focus their training on product and procedures. This material is easy to explain and the sessions are easy to plan. I believe that the primary focus of training should be sales technique. As you work with your people through the week, look for opportunities for improvement. The web is a great resource for planning sales training sessions. Two great industry specific resources are the Leadership Institute archive on AFCP.org and the Link and Learn archive on PaperChain.org. I like to begin each training session with a review of the previous session. I ask the reps to talk about how they used the material we had covered previously and to describe the results. Since the reps know that they will have to report out on this, they pay better attention during the session and are more likely to implement the lessons.

Sales management is a marathon, not a sprint. Managers are expected to deliver consistent results and to grow their revenue year after year. This is why sales training must be a continuous process, rather than an occasional event. It is important to start new people off on the right foot. Even senior people need training. It is far too easy for them to slip into bad habits as they rush around to handle their territories. You should see every interaction with your people as a training opportunity. Sales managers achieve their goals through their teams, so if we are going to grow our revenue, it is imperative that we grow our people.

Sales management today is more challenging than ever before. Managers must constantly adapt to ever-changing situations, while maintaining a laser like focus on achieving their team's goals. Sales managers must embrace the three roles reviewed in these articles and they must possess the wisdom to know which role to apply in any given situation. To the people that fulfill these three roles so well, I'd like to conclude by saying—Thank you, thank you thank you.

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

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