

Secrets of the Most Successful Sales Managers: Higher Impact Coaching

It is a cliché to talk about having too much to do and too little time, yet that is the very real worldview of most sales managers today. They are working harder than ever to deliver the sales results their companies expect in an increasingly competitive environment for increasingly demanding customers.

What if it were possible for a sales manager to increase her effectiveness not by working more efficiently, but by choosing her tasks more “strategically”? Research conducted by The Forum Corporation and others reveal four areas in which sales managers can gain leverage in the use of their time and amplify their impact on sales results. These are:

- **Growing salespeople:** Developing individual salesperson capability and independence
- **Building firm-to-firm relationships:** Deploying sales management time spent with customers to leverage important relationships and build the salespeople’s credibility
- **Creating a proactive territory strategy:** Continuously and intentionally creating, implementing, and refining a strategy to make each salesperson as effective as possible in the territory
- **Creating internal sales partnerships:** Establishing a shared set of goals and objectives with the team and the sales organization’s internal supply chain

These four critical focus areas together drive sales force capability, and sales force capability drives sales results. Focusing strategically in upstream activities to develop sales force capability enables the salespeople to drive the downstream sales results. Unfortunately, very few sales managers follow this path. In fact, only 10 percent of all managers today take a focused, strategic approach to their job.¹

This field note will focus on the first of the four areas, growing salespeople. The most readily available method to sales managers for growing salespeople is on-the-job coaching. Sales managers who have studied coaching techniques have all heard some variation on the phrase, “there are hundreds of teachable moments every day” and many believe that better sales results are achievable if only the manager can take advantage of more teachable, or coachable, moments. Yet much more dramatic impact is available to those managers who sharpen their focus on specifically who they coach and in what contexts.

On Whom to Focus

Research by the Gallup organization shows that salesperson performance improved 20 percent with the attention of a talented manager—regardless of whether the salesperson was an A, B, or C performer. When the manager’s attention fell off, performance fell off. This research has been used extensively recently to support a shift in focus from B and C players to A players—those who give you the most bang for your buck. But do they? One study found that an improvement of as much as 20 percent among A players improved bottom-line results by only 2 percent while an improvement of only 5 percent among B players improved bottom-line results by 4 percent. The difference in bottom-line results is due to the greater number of B players over A players in a typical sales team, assuming distribution of A, B, and C players in many organizations is 10 percent-80 percent-10 percent. Additionally, there is a longer tail to the results from a coaching investment in B players because they are often the most loyal and reliably productive members of the team.

The strategic lesson is don’t shift focus exclusively to A players. Focus on building “A-level” performance by spending time with A and B players, and be willing to cut your losses with C players.

In What Context(s) to Focus

Having identified the players in which to make coaching time investments, focus on the situations that will most likely yield the improved skills in the player and results on the job. This context-specific coaching directs a sales manager’s attention and time towards specific points in the business development process that have relatively higher impact on sales results. For example:

- **Territory planning.** Identifying the highest priority prospects or accounts for a salesperson to cultivate and develop invariably establishes the framework for downstream business opportunities.
- **Opportunity Management.** Advancing qualified opportunities through the customer’s buying process/your selling process is critical to maintaining competitive advantage as well as accurately forecasting and delivering on revenue commitments.
- **Preparing for a major selling or account management event.** These pivotal customer meetings open or close the gates to further business opportunity. They include a final proposal/presentation or “bake-off”, contract negotiation, senior-level customer meeting, a recovery from a failed product/service delivery, or a periodic customer business review.

How to Focus

Within each context always follow a consistent coaching process, minimally moving through four core steps: confirm the purpose and benefits of the coaching conversation, explore and agree on the business situation and its importance, consider a range of options, and finally, focus on specific actions the salesperson will take, and as appropriate, actions the sales manager can take to assist.

Sales managers can gain leverage and boost sales results by strategically focusing *upstream* in growing their salespeople’s capability. Invest at least 25 percent of your time in your A and B players in high impact, context-specific coaching discussions. And remember to give all the credit to your players when they win and let them know how much you appreciate their work and results.

Endnote

¹ Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal, “Beware the Busy Manager,” *Harvard Business Review*, 2002.

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