

The Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams: 'More from the Middle'



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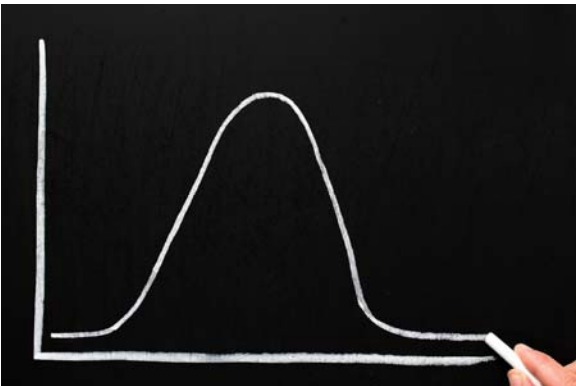
High Performing Sales Teams Increase Productivity from the 'Middle of the Lineup' in Their Sales Organization

Prior to launching PMI ten years ago, I held Chief Sales Officer positions with several organizations. Sometimes my Chief Sales Officer responsibilities included marketing and sometimes my responsibilities included customer service. But in all cases, it was clearly understood that I was the guy that was responsible for making the numbers. I often reflect upon these experiences in my client work today. It was probably the best preparation that anyone could have for the type of work that PMI does, and other PMI'ers with the same type of background agree: the challenges of modern sales executives are daunting and formidable, and "walking in their shoes" is the only way to truly understand the stress and difficulty of this role.



By combining my own experiences with the Chief Sales Officers that I have had the opportunity to work with, certain things stand out as best practices required for high performance. In some cases, success can be connected with a specific best practice because it has been implemented. In some cases, there has been a lack of success that appears to result from the absence of a specific best practice. The **Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams** article series will focus on sales best practices that tend to be predictors of success in sales leadership/management, sales performance/execution, sales strategy deployment and strategic account management.

Best Practice: More from the Middle



From my first sales management position until my last, it was always my experience that I could count on my top performers and bottom performers to be more predictable than the vast "middle majority" in their sales performance. These groups to the right and left of the sales performance curve would typically achieve and not achieve their sales targets with predictability. Not so with the performance of the middle group – and as my sales goals became larger and larger over time, I came to a

realization: my likelihood of being successful was significantly greater if I could determine what, how and why my top performers were successful and then equip and enable the middle performers to behave more like them.

What's the Matter in the Middle?

Many salespeople today feel that there are too many people ready to tell them “what to do,” and not nearly enough people that are able (and willing) to advise them on “how to do it.” This is less of a problem for top performers, as they seem to be consistently successful in finding ways to win with or without help. On the other hand, middle performers need field sales coaching and the best practices of top performers, lest they will always be middle performers. The problem in the middle is that unless there is a proactive attempt to provide ongoing coaching and share best practices of top performers, things just don't change. Some sales managers readily admit that they spend more time with their top and bottom performers than their middle group because, as one sales manager put it, “This seems to be where the biggest opportunities and problems are!” I suggest that sales managers assess how their time is being distributed across their personal sales performance curve to get a feel for whether there is adequate investment in developing the middle group of sales performers.

How Do Top Performing Sales Managers Consistently Hit Their Numbers?

Based on PMI's experience with clients, we have observed that this “more from the middle” concept is typically at work (either consciously or unconsciously) in those sales managers that are consistently successful and predictably hitting their numbers. It only makes sense, if you consider that the risk of your top performers underperforming or having an “off year” can be mitigated if middle performers are able to pick up the slack. Furthermore, if the productivity of the top and the bottom of the sales performance curve is as expected, then driving more productivity from the middle performers equates to the sales manager planning to exceed their own quota targets. Whether it is a conscious strategy to equip and enable the middle performers to execute more like top performers or not, the fact is that many of the best sales managers that we see today seem to have adopted this as a personal best practice, and they invest in the middle 60-80% of their sales team with this in mind.



Why Is the Middle of the Lineup So Important in Today's Business Climate?

Just in case more convincing about the importance and potential value of the middle of the sales performance curve is required, here are a few things to consider:

- **The middle is large, and in most organizations, getting larger:** If a sales manager's sales team consists of 5-6 reps, then we might expect her to have 1 top performer, 3-4 middle performers and 1 underperformer. In these types of cases, it is clear that achieving a “shift to the right” of one middle performer can (and probably will) have a dramatic impact on the manager's success. But what about the case where there are 10-12 reps and a larger quota? Assuming a similar distribution of sales

performance (20% / 60% / 20% = Low/Middle/High Performance), ask if we are assured the same level of impact by moving one middle performer into the high performance category, and the answer becomes less clear. Extrapolate this model into the range of a total sales organization that may have hundreds or thousands of salespeople and we begin to realize that as the middle expands, the upside of getting more from many in the middle becomes significant. Getting more from the middle can be a form of sales management risk reduction in today's demanding and difficult economy.

- **Some of those in the middle are candidates to become tomorrow's top performers:** Not all middle performers have the capacity to become "top guns," just as not all top guns were necessarily ever middle performers. But the thoughtful sales manager invests in the future by identifying potential growth candidates within the team and developing personal growth strategies for these individuals. Let's face it: unless we can hire our competitor's top performers in great numbers (and they are probably trying to hire ours!), then the only realistic option if we're going to grow our sales teams is to proactively facilitate the evolution of select middle performers into top performers. Investing in your middle group can be an effective alternative to hiring additional salespeople that may need months to ramp-up and become productive.
- **Champions have become dynasties by getting more from the middle:** When I ask audiences to think of a championship team (they were #1 one time) that became a dynasty (they were #1 multiple times), I invariably hear the 1927 New York Yankees mentioned. My next question is "Who played for this team?" and I typically hear the same 2 names: Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig (circled in red). No one seems to remember the middle of the 1927 Yankees' lineup (circled in yellow), or the coach of this true dynasty (circled in blue) and yet it is clear that Joe Dugan, Tony Lazzeri and Bob Meusel had a significant impact on the performance of this team. And Yankee manager Miller Huggins, arguable the most effective manager and coach of his era, made an effective transition from average player to top performing manager and led this group to multiple championships. Getting more from the middle, developing people and providing effective coaching (see second article in this series) can be the difference in succeeding once or being repeatedly successful and sustaining high performance.



How Can You Get More from the Middle of Your Lineup?

In our work with clients, we have developed a process for understanding an organization's sales performance, benchmarking and assessing these findings against a model of industry best practices and then designing, developing and deploying customized solutions. This approach leverages "what's working" today by capturing and sharing the best practices of top performers while filling gaps and facilitating performance improvement with innovative and proven best practices. Those committed to getting more from the middle may want to consider a comparable model, through which the sales manager first assesses what's working and what's not, discovers

and deploys appropriate best practices to fill gaps and facilitate sales performance improvement, and then follows-up as appropriate with proactive coaching to drive adoption and change, thus “hitting the mark” with the individuals that make-up the middle majority of their sales team.

Consider this approach to getting more from the middle of your lineup:

- A. Assessment:** Ask top performers how and why they feel that they are winning business. Target an opportunity that they won and go through their sales process and best practices from beginning to end. Ask them to identify their top 3 reasons for winning, and capture these as you debrief and review their success.

Tips: Do not rush this process and do not skip over things that may not seem to be important to you on the surface. Discover, on an individual basis, how and why this salesperson is winning business.

- B. Best Practices:** Having captured what was shared during assessment, conduct team meetings in which winning practices are shared, preferably by the top performers themselves. Encourage them to go into detail and to even assist in peer coaching, if you feel that it is appropriate.

Tips: Repeat these team meetings on a predictable schedule and look for opportunities to showcase success from middle performers. Over time, if we get more from the middle we should consider providing them with similar opportunities to share their successes with the team, particularly those that result from winning practices that were shared earlier with them.

- C. Coaching:** Follow-up with individuals to discover and recognize examples where winning practices were repeated and predictable, successful outcomes resulted.

Tips: Consider asking a customer that was on the receiving end of one of your team member’s “sales excellence” to participate in a team meeting (virtual meeting/conference call works just fine) so that your entire sales team can hear from the customer’s mouth how your salesperson created value for them, and your salesperson of record can receive this recognition in front of their peers.



Conclusion

High performing sales teams look for opportunities to increase the productivity of salespeople in their middle majority. These organizations realize that through ongoing assessment, best practices deployment and coaching that is proactive and targeted, overall performance will be more sustainable because their middle performers will have opportunities to understand and adopt the best practices of their top performers.

Will this transformation happen naturally without sales leadership and management intervention? Absolutely not. It will take a commitment of time, team and talent resources to initiate and sustain this process, but the benefits of this approach have been proven and far outweigh the costs of doing nothing and ignoring the opportunity to get more from the middle of the lineup.

Next Month

Our next article will extend the **Field Sales Coaching, Sales Effectiveness Measurement** and **More from the Middle** articles and address a current problem facing many sales organizations: how to transition and grow their salespeople from being primarily product sellers to business problem solvers and consultative sellers. In **Consultative Selling Skills**, we will discuss how to increase overall sales performance by equipping and enabling the sales team with new skills that will help them better align with their customers, discover customer drivers and business objectives, position their solutions and differentiate their unique value.

Performance Methods, Inc., recognized by TrainingIndustry.com as one of the **2009 Top Sales Training Companies**, will be featured in a series of articles that will focus on the **Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams**. PMI is proud to serve the needs of a broad group of industry-leading companies and will be sharing with the TrainingIndustry.com readership how leading global firms are deploying proven best practices to increase sales effectiveness, create customer value, grow customer relationships and gain competitive advantage. The **Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams** article series will cover a number of critical areas of sales performance and provide readers with insight into how sales best practices are being deployed effectively by world-class sales organizations in a variety of industries. These articles will provide special emphasis on key best practices driving effective sales leadership/management, sales performance/execution, sales strategy deployment and strategic account management.

