

The Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams: 'Effective Sales Coaching'



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Second in a Series, July 2009

High Performing Sales Teams Equip and Enable First and Second-Level Sales Managers to Be Effective Field Sales Coaches

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 on 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: Effective Sales Coaching

I clearly remember my first promotion into sales management. My success in sales would surely position me well for success as a sales manager, or so I thought. Some in our sales leadership even seemed to regard the first-level sales manager's role as more of an elevated 'super sales rep.' The prevailing wisdom seemed to be that if we had exceeded our quotas as sales reps then we would do the same as sales managers, and if we did so then we were heroes, whether we added any value to our direct reports or not. A sales manager with one of PMI's clients recently shared his experience as a new manager. He felt that there was never any shortage of people ready and willing to tell him what to do, but that very few of these 'what-to-do' experts could provide real insight into how to actually do the job. I suspect that others have felt similarly and will continue to because ramping-up new managers and transitioning them to be effective sales coaches is just not that simple.

The Sales Coaching Problem



Today, many people believe that there is a significant lack of field sales coaching by first and second-level sales managers. My observation from both personal experience as well as from working with hundreds of client sales managers is that this problem is pervasive. Sales managers are told to ‘get out there and coach,’ yet most aren’t being provided with the ‘how to’ that is needed to effectuate field sales coaching. How can this be the case, many would ask, when so many companies are investing in coaching training for their managers? The answer is simple: generic coaching is not the same as field sales coaching. HR-type coaching courses may be wise in the ways of the ‘what and why’ of coaching, but they invariably fall far short in terms of specific processes and tools for first and second-level sales managers to use when coaching their salespeople in the field.

Why Sales Coaching Doesn’t Happen

Let’s face it: most of us get our first promotion into sales management because we were strong salespeople. I would submit that many of the traits and behaviors that underscored my sales success were actually counter to my success as a new sales manager. And the old adage that if we ‘keep doing what we did we’ll keep getting what we got’ just doesn’t work when making the transition from salesperson to sales manager. Perhaps the most revealing indicator of the true state of this problem is revealed when we ask sales managers why they don’t spend more time coaching, to which we typically hear one or both of the following responses:

- I don’t have time to coach (many of the sales managers from whom we have heard this are quick to acknowledge that more proactive coaching would likely result in less reactive scrambling)
- I don’t know how to coach (we have heard this from many sales managers that have attended generic coaching training).

I would submit that the time-related reason is primarily attitudinal in nature and a function of the sales manager’s discomfort with the role of the sales coach. If we don’t want to find time to do something, we usually won’t. But the second reason is much more about skill or aptitude: these sales managers really don’t know how to conduct a field sales coaching intervention. And when questioned about this, it should come as no surprise that the majority of them state that they never had a sales manager that provided effective sales coaching for them when they were sales reps. If they have never experienced field sales coaching, and they haven’t been equipped with coaching processes, skills and tools to enable them to coach effectively, then there is absolutely no reason to believe that sales coaching will happen. To the contrary, there is every reason to assume that sales coaching will predictably not happen (and it won’t) unless sales leadership takes action.

What Can Be Done to Help Transition Sales Managers into Effective Sales Coaches?

So what can be done about this? We find in our client work that what most sales managers really want and need are 3 types of equipping in the area of sales coaching:

1. **Processes** (predictable, repeatable approaches to conducting coaching interventions)
2. **Skills** (specific 'how to' skills that will be applied during the coaching intervention as appropriate)
3. **Tools** (tools and job-aides that have been customized to fit the business and sales environment).

We consider field sales coaching to be an essential management discipline for high performing sales teams, and let's be clear that this does not mean or imply that only sales managers serve as coaches: some of the most effective sales coaching can occur when peers, colleagues or non-reporting managers engage with salespeople and create value for them 'in the moment' by listening, assessing and coaching. But an expectation of field sales coaching must be 'front and center' in the role definitions and job descriptions of today's first and second-level sales managers, and this expectation should be supported by opportunities for training in field sales coaching best practices. Moreover, these sales coaching training programs should be tailored and aligned with the business and enabled with proven processes, skills and tools to ensure that managers are appropriately equipped to proactively conduct effective sales coaching interventions with confidence.

At PMI, we have found that what really creates momentum behind the adoption of sales coaching is a customized 'game plan' for the sales organization, which provides context and framework around the coaching processes, skills and tools. Then when sales managers engage in coaching interventions with their salespeople, they are equipped to ask questions that are directly related to the milestones that are the keys to their organization's success. PMI's client experience has shown that this approach can be very effective in providing a 'roadmap' to help sales managers begin the transition to effective sales coaching.

Building Confidence with Sales Coaching Workshops

Some say that effective coaching can only occur where a culture of coaching already exists. This is to admit that where there is no coaching there will never be any, and I couldn't disagree more. PMI's work with clients has shown that one of the most effective means for driving sales coaching into a sales organization is through the deployment of sales coaching workshops in which sales coaching processes, skills and tools can be 'tried on for fit' by sales managers. In these workshops, managers can practice using sales coaching processes, skills and tools in a 'safe harbor' environment with peer sales managers. We have observed that this approach to deploying sales coaching programs seems to work well even with the most experienced managers, and we have seen a greater willingness to 'give it a shot' in an environment in which they are completing exercises and role-plays with their peers. As a result, confidence builds and even some of the most skeptical sales managers begin to make time for sales coaching because they are now more comfortable that they can create value for their salespeople and take steps towards meeting their own objectives in the process!

Jump-Starting the Sales Coaching Transition

The scope of this article doesn't allow for in-depth discussion about specifics, but suffice it to say that a simple, repeatable process for conducting the coaching intervention is a must when deploying sales coaching. If sales managers can implement a flow or rhythm in their coaching process, it seems to work well for both the manager and the salesperson. The sales coaching process should be enabled and harmonized with specific coaching

skills – the ‘how to’ behind the process. PMI uses a coaching model with eight primary sales coaching skills, which provides the sales manager with a tool to help identify the coaching situation, recognize visible symptoms that indicate a need for sales coaching on the part of the salesperson, and then apply the correct coaching skill to this need.

One example of a sales coaching skill that we find particularly useful to sales managers is the *validating* skill. We define this skill as follows:

Validating: *Gaining concurrence with the salesperson that our conclusions and assumptions regarding the customer are correct and that we are where we think we are in this account and opportunity.*

We suggest that the sales coach deploy specific types of questions to help with validation, and observe that there are certain symptoms or signs of need that can serve as ‘early warning indicators’ that this type of coaching on the part of the coach can create value for the sales person. Finally, our work has taught us that sales managers prefer simple, concise job-aides and tools to help them with the coaching process. By equipping and enabling sales coaches with usable tools that fit their business and environment, you can jump-start the sales coaching process and increase the productivity of your sales managers simultaneously.

Conclusion

High performing sales teams equip and enable their first and second-level sales managers to be effective sales coaches, and their salespeople and customers benefit as a result. Does it take commitment and effort to help sales managers transition their role to include proactive field sales coaching? Of course it does – because if it was easy to develop a sales coaching culture every sales organization would have done so. Those organizations that ‘raise the bar’ by re-defining the role of the sales manager to include proactive sales coaching (and then equip and enable their managers accordingly) can expect to realize increased sales productivity, more consistent sales execution and competitive advantage within their markets.

Next Month

Our next article will extend Effective Sales Coaching into measurable results. In **Sales Effectiveness Measurement**, we will discuss how to define, develop and deploy measures and metrics to equip and enable the measurement of sales performance and customer value creation.

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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.