

Fast Coach

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The sports coach is dedicated to helping each athlete perform to his or her highest potential. So why not let a sales coach do the same for your team, asks Anna Britnor Guest?

Imagine having an experienced person employed for no other purpose than to help you succeed! Someone who understands your job, your company, your strengths and weaknesses and who is committed to helping you personally achieve the results you want. At the end of the 'caring, sharing 90's' coaching is emerging as the new approach to employee and personal development. It has long been a cornerstone of sports training; now it's fast gaining a foothold in the world of business. The parallels are evident. The athletics coach is dedicated to helping the athlete perform to their highest potential. That is their remit - no more, no less. The same applies to a sales coach.

Evidence of the growth of coaching can be found everywhere - from the explosion of 'life coaches' (there are thought to be around 200 now practising in the UK) through to the numbers of training companies now repackaging their services as coaching. Even Gordon Brown used the word in the budget!

What is coaching?

In the sales world, coaching is essentially about working on an individual basis to make measurable, step-by-step improvements to performance and motivation. Coaching can therefore reach the parts other training methods can't. That's not to say that coaching is better, per se, than training: both have a strong part to play, however, there are several key principles which differentiate the two.

The most obvious is that coaching is generally delivered on a one-to-one basis. This allows emphasis on setting and achieving development objectives relevant to the individual's specific role and taking into account experience, knowledge, maturity and career path.

Most of us who made New Years Resolutions will, by now, have broken most of them. Perhaps, if we're really committed we may still be persevering with the odd one. The lesson is simple: try to make too many changes at once and you are likely to fail. Coaching is therefore about defining a goal and then breaking it down into manageable, measurable steps, enabling the coachee to constantly assess their progress.

To support this, coaching is provided on a 'little and often' basis, through intensive face-to-face sessions, telephone feedback and 'on-the-job' observation. Whether a junior salesperson learning the ropes or a dyed-in-the-wool, long-in-the-tooth old hand, coaching requires the salesperson to examine and challenge their approach, seeking fresh ideas to boost performance and personal job satisfaction. At all times, however, the coach is there to motivate and support.

What does coaching achieve?

You can't please all of the people all of the time, but coaching can be a powerful tool in implementing change, increasing motivation across the salesforce, and addressing individual performance issues, thereby harnessing the potential for success. The result is an organisation better equipped to beat the competition and better able to build long-lasting relationships with its customers.

Hanover Computer Systems, a provider of multi-vendor hardware and software solutions in the PC and AS400 arenas, have introduced coaching for the salesforce. Sue Smith, Commercial Director, explains why. 'We needed something that would have a long-lasting effect, that would



recognise the needs of the individual and that would help support the culture of the organisation we were trying to grow. Coaching seemed to offer us so much more than the traditional approach, although at the same time we could incorporate the traditional where appropriate'. The approach is paying dividends. 'The sales people have a sense of personal benefit in terms of the development of their personal skill sets at the same time as learning how to generate more business. We can manoeuvre the programme to address specific issues that arise or changes in our product portfolio or marketplace. What has been learnt can be reinforced 'on the job' rather than forgotten. Our coach has become a member of the team. As with other outsourcing projects, the contractor has the incentive to maintain focus and enthusiasm for the job in hand. Of course the ultimate goal is to have a happy, overachieving professional salesforce, which we are steadily working towards'.

Mike Maynard, Channel Partners Services Director of Ikon Office Solutions' IT division, describes the transformation he saw in one of his salespeople. 'I was pleased to see an improvement in his professionalism and attitude to work, his approach to problems and internal procedures improved and his colleagues' perception of his capabilities was heightened. The real pleasing aspect of the entire exercise was that the changes seemed to happen transparently as if he had changed his whole approach to work - indeed I believe this to be the case'.

One company which has wholly embraced a coaching culture is Mitel Telecom. Some four years ago they replaced their hierarchical management structure with a flatter coaching model. Mike Ford, Sales Director, explains the benefits they have seen. 'We have high levels of motivation and morale within the salesforce and when you have that you have better performance. The coach gives all the power to the people in the team. Their role is totally unselfish - they are there purely to make their people better in terms of both skills and performance. As a result, our people are able to make their own decisions and have the courage and confidence to do so - it saves me an awful lot of time!'

In a recent Austin Benn Human Resourcing survey, highlighted in last month's Infomatics, IT was rated as the industry employing the 'best' salespeople. However, IT sales departments also face some of the biggest challenges, such as coping with constant product development, which piles on the pressure to perform quickly and increase profit margins. Sales Managers may also carry their own personal sales targets, reducing the time available to develop and support their staff

Coaching can help organisations to address each of these areas. It works because it dovetails into the company culture. Firstly, coaching is designed to suit the time pressures of busy salespeople. The coach visits the salesperson at their office, typically for two hour sessions, and works on issues or areas pertinent to the individual's job. The salesperson is not expected to make wholesale change. Instead, they commit to making a number of small but significant and long-lasting modifications which combine to make a big difference.

Secondly, coaching offers 'surrogate sales management'. The coach can share the sales manager's burden, freeing his time to achieve company targets and objectives. Meanwhile, the coach works with the team to unlock their potential, provide advice to resolve issues and facilitate inter-team communication.

Coaching is also a powerful tool in the roll-out and acceptance of change and rapid growth. Whether a ramp up of sales target, the implementation of salesforce automation or CRM systems or other organisational change, success can only be achieved through the buy-in of everyone affected. Coaches have a unique role. Completely unbiased, they can understand both company objectives and individual concerns and can facilitate discussion, recommend modifications and encourage buy-in.

Finally, the coach can offer 'been there, seen it, done it' advice. Coaching is not about text book sales skills, it is about using them in the real world. Issues may arise from a number of



peculiarities of IT sales. These might range from the often complex and protracted sales cycles through to using different sales approaches, from box shifting to consultative selling, through to issues surrounding selling technology to meet business needs.

The coach, in questioning current practice and encouraging fresh approaches, is always willing to face challenge too. Unlike traditional training, the salesperson is actively encouraged to say when they disagree. In this way, techniques and style can be developed to suit the specific needs of each individual and their customer base.

There is enough evidence to confirm that coaching can be a powerful tool in the development of a motivated and successful sales team. Whilst it may be the 'new kid on the block', its advantages are fast becoming recognised. With its focus on helping each individual achieve results, coaching really can change your career for the better!

The four key steps in coaching

1. Identify the need for coaching
2. Establish baselines and measurable objectives
3. Modify behaviour / techniques and practise changes
4. Measure achievement against objectives

How to be...a sales coach

1. Put yourself firmly in the shoes of each individual team member. Be prepared to see and understand the world from their perspective Listen actively (just as you do with your prospects). Understand what is 'true for them', what motivates and interests them, what bores or demotivates them
2. Be prepared to make changes to your own style and approach as a result of what you learn. Watch out - this one can be painful!
3. Above all, remember the three words that mean so much - respect, empathy and objectivity. Bring these to your coaching sessions - every time
4. Book diary time and a meeting room for each coaching session. Ensure there are no interruptions. Treat each session with the reverence you would a presentation to your top prospect
5. Use your sales training techniques. Let the other person do 80% of the talking, prompted by your carefully considered questions
6. Use open questions to understand, probe, challenge and develop ideas. Use closed questions to pin down agreement and next actions
7. Identify specific areas for change and agree how the salesperson will modify their behaviour. Agree exactly how you will together monitor and measure their progress and keep track