



Learning to Lead

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Salespeople don't always find it easy to move into a managerial role. Finding out how to focus on both tasks and team can help smooth the path, says sales coach Anna Britnor Guest

Promotion from sales to sales management is an obvious career path and organisations frequently expect great salespeople to make great sales managers.

Unfortunately, the new sales manager sometimes finds that the personal attributes that brought sales success do not automatically lead to managerial competence. In particular, salespeople are expected to be self-reliant. They spend considerable time working alone and their role as team-player is often limited to social interaction with colleagues and the orchestration of 'virtual' teams involved in meeting customer requirements.

Clearly, this approach is incompatible with effective sales team management!

The Sales Manager's role

"If anyone tells you that being a sales manager is easy, don't believe them!", warns Amanda. "All of a sudden you truly understand why as a salesperson you had to do all the things you found so tedious - like forecasting - and why the company set the boundaries and expectations it did. I spent the first few months trying to please everybody and quickly discovered that, often, I was 'damned if I did and damned if I didn't'. That really is the sales manager's plight - stuck in the middle of everybody's expectations. But if you ask me now, two years into the job, would I change that? Definitely not!"

So, what is the role of the sales manager?

Management and leadership guru, John Adair, defines the function of management as three interlinking circles: 'Achieving the task', 'Building and maintaining the team' and 'Developing the individual'. To use the age-old juggling analogy, all three balls need to be kept in the air equally.

Managers often have a leaning towards either task or people focus. The 'supermanager' harnesses both to ensure the right balance in all situations. Measuring your tendencies - particularly by asking colleagues for feedback - assists in maintaining appropriate focus in all three functions.

Michael Morris, author of 'The First-time Manager' highlights the relevance of focusing on more than just task. "One of sales management's main headaches is keeping up morale while their people, frequently hundreds of miles from the company base, constantly experience rejection and frustration".

Making the move

How successfully new sales managers transition into the role is a joint responsibility between individual, team members and the company. To assist the manager in feeling adequately prepared and supported the company will need to provide:

- A clear definition of role by function and measurable objectives



- Positive communication of the promotion across all relevant sections of the organisation
- Identification and acceptance of the learning curve - and focus on addressing development needs

As James explains "I was very lucky. My team were really supportive and both they and the company recognised that I would need to grow into the role. My manager didn't have the time - or patience - to help me personally and so he arranged for me to work with a coach. It proved invaluable in helping me to think through and test my ideas and giving me somewhere to go when I just didn't know what to do. I think it also raised my credibility amongst my team and my peers as evidence that I was proactively developing as a manager."

For those that don't receive this level of support, managing your own development and learning from others will still make a difference.

Firstly create a personal development plan. Document what you feel you need in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude to be a successful sales manager. Undertake a SWOT analysis of yourself against this. SWOT is a widely used management tool for assessing situations and stands for:

Strengths
Weaknesses
Opportunities
Threats

Strengths and weaknesses relate to you personally whilst opportunities and threats relate these to the external environment.

Extend the process to each individual team member as well as to the department as a whole to determine where your key priorities lie.

Common experiences

Learning from the experiences of others is key. Many sales managers identify a number of common issues:

Acceptance in the role. James warns "I was aware that one of my close colleagues had also applied for my job. We got on well before and I was worried about how he might feel. I tackled it head on and asked him. Fortunately he didn't have a problem with the fact that I was now his boss but he was concerned that it limited his career development as there was nowhere for him to go. With HR's help we created a career development plan which has effectively allowed me to delegate more to him than I might have done otherwise".

Whether moving to a new company or receiving internal promotion, it is important to **achieve buy-in from others** - talk to colleagues you trust about key opportunities and challenges and encourage those people you feel are less supportive to discuss their concerns.

What to change? As salespeople we know exactly what we would do if we were in charge. Implementing such change is somewhat harder! As Alex explains "I had lots of ideas about what we should do differently but I found that some team members were quite resistant to change. I learnt the hard way that you can't just tell people what to do - they have to not only see the



benefits but want to do it!" Understand your objectives and how these will be measured and seek to act in response to this, involving the team at all stages.

Developing a broader perspective. Understand the company's strategic direction and short term drivers. Spend time with managers of other departments understanding each others' key objectives and pressures. You will then be able to better assess the broader implications of your and others' decisions.

Juggling priorities. Many sales managers are required to retain a personal sales target. This presents a challenge in terms of prioritising workload, particularly when selling is within our personal comfort zone and therefore easy! Added to this are the many demands made on the manager by team, peers and managers. Accept that you can not do everything at once nor can you please all of the people all of the time. Manage your time as effectively as possible, learn to delegate up, down and sideways where appropriate and prioritise based on key objectives, balancing quick wins with achieving longer term goals.

Communication. When we become too task oriented we forget to tell the right people the right information at the right time. A common employee complaint is 'Nobody ever asks us and nobody ever tells us!' Ensure you communicate the big picture, offer clear guidance and direction and encourage input and involvement from your team. Remember that you have a responsibility to communicate effectively with peers and your manager to report progress against objectives, generate ideas and ensure the smooth operation of the business.

Meeting individual needs. As a new manager you are enjoying personal growth and development. Ensure you understand each team member's personal drive and motivation and support them in their career development.

Finally, in developing as a new manager recognise that no-one has all the answers but observe and learn from other managers whose style you respect as well as those you don't!

The voice of experience

"The hardest thing is balancing meeting my personal sales target with a 'completely separate' management role. They have different pressures and it's difficult to prioritise internal demands over customers.

One of my strengths is in challenging what we do. I listen to customers' needs and structure our working practices accordingly.

To a new manager I recommend:

- Get a clear role definition and ensure it reflects your time focus and remuneration.
- Do the same for your team. I let the team dictate too much at first which caused confusion over responsibilities.
- Involve the team in generating ideas and solving problems - the results are better.
- Communicate with other departments particularly with regard to changes.
- Individual team members expect your time, direction and support. Ignore this at your peril! It's not just about bringing in the figures - it's about meeting individual needs and career aspirations!