

The Personal Touch

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More and more companies are employing professional coaches to improve the performance of individuals within the sales team. Anna Britnor Guest asks why.

With the influx of 'life coaches' from the States one might be forgiven for sceptically viewing coaching as the latest lifestyle accessory for rich New Yorkers; therapists by another name for the Ally McBeal's of this world. Whether life coaching finds a foothold in the UK remains to be seen. Meanwhile there's a quiet revolution happening much closer to home: coaching is gaining significant momentum in the corporate world.

The power of coaching

It is always wise to be suspicious of anything that claims to do everything for everybody: like the 'wonder drugs' that occasionally emerge, for every individual who experiences a miracle cure there is another for whom the effect is negligible. Coaching is not a cure-all nor does it always work for everyone: those who are approaching retirement or who have no motivation to progress further, for instance. However, within the sales environment where the desire to succeed should be strong, the results can be spectacular: greater motivation, focus, more control in and out of work and measurably improved sales performance. For the organisation this can be powerful.

Attachmate Sales UK is part of the world's largest privately-owned software company and provides host access management solutions. They have engaged coaches for the last two years. 'Coaching has been very successful for Attachmate. We like the flexibility of having a team of independent and professional personnel virtually on tap to help us develop our staff at a pace that suits the changing demands of our business, and to bounce ideas off whenever we want' says Ian Wells, Country Manager. 'In addition, my staff like the personal attention that coaching brings, and consequently are motivated to use their coach to challenge their approach and technique far more than with traditional training'.

What is coaching?

Coaching in the sales world is essentially about working on an individual basis to make step-by-step, measurable 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.

Comparisons are also sometimes drawn between coaching and counselling. However the two are very different. Coaching is about helping an individual to achieve more, counselling is about exploring specific behavioural or psychological issues.

How does it work?

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 one of them. The lesson is simple: try to make too many changes at once and you are likely to fail. Need another example? Imagine trying to learn a foreign language. How much more vocabulary will you absorb if you learn and practice 10 words a day than if you try to learn 100 in one go? And how much more will you remember 3 weeks later?



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.

So, how does this work in the sales world? 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.

Take John. He has been selling for a year and, with the help of his coach, has just made his monthly target for the first time. How? First, he and his coach took a long, hard look at what he was doing, from his sales techniques to his understanding of the sales process. Then they examined what motivated him and what he wanted to achieve both in his job and his life as a whole. Together, they identified his weak areas and his strengths. Guided by his coach, John tried new skills and techniques, learnt how to understand and communicate with his prospects and worked at building his self-confidence. At each point his coach was there to give feedback, to advise and to assess. The results are evident not only in his improved sales performance but also from the changing perception his colleagues now have of him.

The sales manager as coach

A growing number of organisations have developed a strong coaching culture and some refer internally to line managers as coaches. These companies tend to demonstrate a strong commitment to empowering their employees to continually learn and grow. They are rewarded with greater loyalty and commitment, manifested in increased motivation, effectiveness and professionalism.

'Coaching has become an integral part of the way Attachmate develops its key people, and has helped me build a professional team more quickly and effectively than I could have done otherwise' confirms Ian Wells.

So what if you are a Sales Manager wanting to become a coach to your team? Firstly it is important to consider if you have time to do this: coaching means regularly sitting down on a one-to-one basis, defining objectives and monitoring and measuring performance. If so, putting into practice the principles outlined in this article will help. For more guidance, a coaching practice will 'coach the coach' to develop the necessary framework and skills to ensure a successful migration.

If you haven't got time then employing a coach to do it for you will quickly bring the same benefits. Working alongside and as an extension to the management team the coach will facilitate change and development, report back on agreed measurement principles and, over time, transfer coaching responsibilities back to the management.

Conclusion

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, harnessing the potential for success. The result - an organisation better equipped to beat the competition and build long-lasting relationships with its customers.