



You the Sales Coach

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Sales managers who learn how to coach and develop their staff are likely to score higher on both staff morale and results, says Anna Britnor Guest. Here's how to get started.

Sales managers who effectively develop and support their team find their sales people not only perform to their potential but demonstrate loyalty and high motivation. They are also likely to be focused on achieving goals and attaining personal satisfaction from meeting their objectives.

Developing coaching, not only as a core skill, but as the basis of management style is a key step in achieving this.

A coaching style means encouraging people to work out solutions for themselves. This requires asking questions to encourage the salesperson to think things through and decide their own preferred approach rather than telling or advising them what you think they should do.

This is essentially the opposite of 'command and control', a management style to which IT sales people have never responded particularly well.

Putting it into practice

So, how do you coach your team?

A commitment to personal and ongoing development is important. Authors Eric Parsloe and Monika Wray in their book 'Coaching & Mentoring' throw down the gauntlet 'Managers who cannot agree and support Personal Development Plans that balance the ambitions of the individual with real business benefits should probably be sacked!' This may be a little provocative but personal development planning does form the basis of successful coaching. You need to ensure that you and your organisation are able to offer a suitable climate or culture in which coaching can prosper before embarking on full-scale coaching initiatives. Worse than offering no development plan is introducing the idea without the means of allowing the individual to grow.

Understanding the process

The process of coaching is, on paper, very simple. The widely used 'GROW' model offers a straightforward model for coaching conversations:

GOAL - What do you want to achieve?

REALITY - Where are you right now? Are you sure? What's the gap between this and the goal? Does the goal really bring you the benefits you want? How achievable is it?

OPTIONS - What are the different ways you could achieve the goal? What are the pros and cons of each?

WILL - Which option will you take? How committed are you to this course of action? When will you achieve it by? How will you ensure success?



The art of coaching is to provoke and support the individual's own thoughts through this process without influencing or judging.

Achieving this requires the same finely tuned communication skills as you use with customers and prospects:

- Listen actively to absorb all the information and to understand the other person's perspective
- Be objective - and remember that perception is reality
- Use open questions to understand, probe, challenge and develop ideas. Use closed questions to confirm understanding and pin down agreement and actions
- Let them do most of the talking, prompted by your questions
- Monitor and measure progress against defined goals - SMART planning can assist this
- Book time to meet away from interruptions and distractions

A significant aspect of coaching is that it encourages development through many regular small steps rather than aiming for immediate wholesale transformation. Most of us know from abandoned New Year resolutions how difficult overnight change is!

It is also highly focused on action and results. Planning is important but means nothing without the follow-up action. Coaching requires action and measurement of progress towards defined goals and objectives.

In adopting these principles, the sales manager can help team members to individually explore in detail their sales approach, their proficiency, how to achieve their potential in their current role and work actively towards making their next career step.

Coaching to fix problems

As well as optimising peak performance, these techniques can also help address performance issues. For example, a salesperson is failing to make sufficient cold calls to build their pipeline. Rather than telling the individual how you see the problem and what you expect them to do about it, a coaching approach enquires non-judgementally: 'What difficulties do you face in cold calling?' 'What are the factors that contribute to this situation?', 'How do you feel cold calling affects your overall sales performance?', 'What can you do to improve your pipeline?', 'How can I as your manager help you?', 'How will you measure your progress?', 'So, what action will you take now?'

Responses to these questions help to gauge the individual's own awareness of the problem, how serious they consider it to be and encourages them to think about it from different perspectives. It then supports them in identifying possible solutions and committing to specific measurable action. Typically this approach has longer lasting effects and is useful in identifying where the individual needs particular help. In this example is the issue about quality or quantity, both or neither? Are there other, more serious, factors influencing their ability to find new opportunities (perhaps product knowledge, sales skills, fear of failure or time management)? From here sales manager and salesperson can work together to resolve the problem.



Alternative sources of coaching

Sometimes the 'sales manager as coach' model may not be feasible. Time pressures can be a major hurdle. Some managers may not feel that coaching plays to their personal strengths or reflects their personal goals. In these cases, seeking external coaching for the team - and the manager - may achieve the same result. Whether the coach is internal to the company, or external, they free the manager's time and ensure that salespeople have the opportunity to enhance their skills, assess the effectiveness of their sales strategies and keep an eye firmly on career development.

Whichever approach is taken, the result can be enhanced motivation, improved skills and constant focus on achievement, forming a key piece in the elusive sales performance jigsaw.

Useful models in coaching

SMART

SMART ensures that objectives and actions are clearly defined, unambiguous and likely to result in the required outcome through being:

Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Relevant
Timed

SWOT

SWOT is useful for analysing a situation and works as well for assessing sales opportunities as it does for personal development. Within a defined situation it considers

- Strengths
- Weaknesses
- Opportunities
- Threats

Strengths and weaknesses are inward looking whilst Opportunities and Threats relate to external factors and influences.

Useful coaching questions

- What did you observe about (a specific situation / behaviour)?
- How did / does 'that' make you feel?
- What do you think the other person experienced / might experience? What evidence did (might) you see of that (body language, words, tone of voice etc)?
- What do you think was / might be the impact of this approach / behaviour / action (on people, situation etc)?
- What might you do differently?
- How could you make that change?
- What obstacles might prevent you?
- How will you know when you've reached that goal?
- Is that what you are going to do?