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The art of coaching

I spend a lot of time working with sales managers. In my conversations with them I try to burn one critical thing into their brains:

No activity is more important to a manager's long term success than training and coaching their sales people.

In case you didn't catch that:

No activity is more important to a manager's long term success than training and coaching their sales people.

All managers are tasked with organizing the resources given to them by their employer in the most effective manner to produce the maximum return on their company's investment. If you are running a truck factory this means setting up the production line to maximize the output of trucks while minimizing the waste of raw materials. An advertising sales manager's job is to build their company's client base and maximize the revenue produced in his/her district. A sales manager's "machinery" is their sales team and the raw materials are the accounts and prospects in their area. Unlike a factory manager, sales managers aren't likely to get a boost in productivity by installing robots any time soon; we just need to increase the skill and productivity of the human beings reporting to us. Training and coaching is the best way to accomplish this.

The impact of coaching and training your sales people. Obviously training and coaching enhances a sales person's skill and understanding of their job. Training has a much broader effect on sales reps beyond making them better "technicians." There is a clear relationship between a person's level of skill and their level of confidence. The more skilled someone is at a task, the more confident they become and the more comfortable they will be when called upon to use their skills. Everyone likes to take pride in mastering a skill, particularly a difficult one. This feeling of mastery increases our satisfaction with life and we become happier and less stressed. (The fact that they earn more commission doesn't hurt their morale either). Training and particularly coaching builds a bond between the manager and his/her team. Taking the time to help sales reps become more successful sends a signal that the manager cares about them. From the manager's point of view, skilled, confident and well-compensated sales people are highly motivated and easy to manage.

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Training subjects. Generally training covers four types of information:

1. **Product, procedures and industry training.** Covers the nuts and bolts of your business such as pricing and order entry. This is the basic information the reps need to sell your products.
2. **Market and business training.** Information on the local economic environment and on the challenges faced by our advertisers. This helps the reps to understand their customer's situation.
3. **Sales techniques.** How to present and position your products to prospects. Introduces the reps to the art and science of persuasion.
4. **Personal development training.** This is "soft skills" training that helps the reps become better business people. This includes subjects such as maintaining a good attitude, and organizational and time management skills.

In my experience, most managers spend most of their training time on products and procedures. They essentially tell their people, "here's what we got, here's how you do the paperwork... go get 'em guys." I believe any product training needs to be coupled with training on how to present the item to clients. In addition to the "what" we sell, it is vital to give the reps an understanding of the "why" people should purchase the product and the "how" of selling it. Giving reps the verbiage they need to sell your products will make them much more comfortable in presenting them.

Planning training. In many ways the training process mirrors the selling process. As a trainer you must sell the information to the reps. A sales person must uncover a prospects needs; a trainer must identify the reps training needs. The best way to do this is to observe the reps in the field, review their results and ask them where they feel they could use help. Once you have clarified their needs you should collect as much information as possible on the subject. Finally you should plan the session. Many managers tell me that they simply do not have the time required to plan training. Again I want to repeat: ***No activity is more important to a manager's long term success than training and coaching their sales people.*** This is a highly efficient use of a manager's time, your personal investment in planning benefits your entire team. When I ran a large call center with a team of 35 people, I scheduled 3 hours every week to do training with groups of my sales people. I invested many more hours planning the sessions. Over a 5 year period, my team increased their average annual sales by about \$3 million without any increase in circulation or any significant price increase. Training enabled them

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to close more sales, retain existing clients and increase the dollar value of their average sale. During this period, in spite of the fact that they were working harder and the fast pace was stressful; we had virtually no staff turnover.

Formal Training. Brief training should be a regular part of your sales meetings. You should also schedule longer dedicated training meetings at regular intervals. Training should be done at least once a month, more frequently if the team is inexperienced. Your reps will complain about “losing this time”, but if you take the time to plan and deliver good training, they will soon see the value of training in their pay checks. Start the meeting by stating the objective of the session. Get the reps involved in the training. Ask lots of questions and listen to their input. Reps can tune out a “lecture” but they must stay engaged in a discussion of the material. Use real world examples based on your time in the field as lessons. Make sure everyone participates in your session. At the end of the session get the reps commitment to apply the lesson in the field. I start my regular sessions by having the reps report on their experiences using the techniques taught in the preceding class. They know they will be asked to give feedback, so they make a concerted effort to at least experiment with what they learned in class.

Coaching. Group sessions are valuable because they allow you to deliver large amounts of information to your entire group in a relatively short period of time, but for the development of the members of your team, nothing beats coaching. Coaching is individualized and immediate. Coaching is why you need to spend as much time in the field (or at their desk in the case of inside sales people) as possible. The closer you are to the action the more effective you will be as a coach. When you are with a rep, you can observe patterns and behaviors; you can see how customers respond to the rep and how the rep responds to sales situations. After the call discuss what happened. Don't lecture or criticize, ask the rep's opinion of how things went. Ask a lot of questions. Avoid dictating changes in behaviors. Instead of saying, “Next time do this!” use statements like, “What do you think would happen if we did this?” I will often do an impromptu one-on-one role-play with the rep to practice the suggested technique. If necessary demonstrate your ideas on a few calls.

The art of giving feedback. Feedback is the most powerful tool available to change rep behavior. Good feedback changes behavior and makes the rep hungry for more. To be effective, feedback must be immediate and specific. The shorter the gap between observing a behavior and giving feedback the more effective it will be. During the call, observe the rep and take careful notes. After you leave the call, take a few minutes to discuss it with the rep. Use your notes to recap

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the call. Telling a rep “Good Job!” is meaningless. Saying, “I like the question you asked the customer about his plans; it really got him to think,” identifies and reinforces the behavior you want to see. Keep your feedback positive. This doesn’t mean you can not correct a rep, but if you limit your comments to criticism, the rep will soon tune you out. In his recent book, “The Happiness Advantage,” Shawn Achor relates a study that found that companies, whose managers offer praise three times for every criticism they offer, significantly out-perform their less positive competitors. Surround your suggestions with positives. For example: “I liked how you opened the call, and you asked some very good questions, but I wonder if we would have made a bigger sale by starting with a full page recommendation rather than a quarter page. What do you think?” When you observe a rep do something that works particularly well, bring it up in your sales meeting and ask the rep to describe what they did. This will reward that behavior and motivate the rest of your team to replicate it. Remember the number one reason good people give when leaving a company is that they felt under appreciated. To use Tom Peter’s words you should always be trying to, “Catch them doing something right.”

Conclusion. Studies have found that highly successful people are typically no smarter than their less successful peers. They don’t even necessarily work harder. What sets them apart is that they spend the majority of their time on activities that have the maximum impact on their bottom line. Highly successful advertising sales managers devote a significant amount of time to developing their teams. They can identify with the words of John Russell who said: “I never cease to be amazed at the power of the coaching process to draw out the skills or talent that was previously hidden within an individual, and which invariably finds a way to solve a problem previously thought unsolvable.” They know that time invested in developing their teams will pay dividends far into the future. In fact they often say:

No activity is more important to a manager’s long term success than training and coaching their sales people.*

*One final training tip—When you really want your team to remember a key point repeat it over and over.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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