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The value of a good sales manager

When I first became a sales manager, I was lucky to work for a general manager who was an excellent mentor. A former Marine drill instructor, he could be tough, but I always knew he had my best interests in mind. Like most good coaches he asked a lot of thought provoking questions. One of these stuck with me throughout my career: “If you were accused of being a manager, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” Having a title printed on your business card provides only circumstantial evidence. Abraham Lincoln once said, “How many legs does a dog have? Four. Calling a tail a leg doesn’t make it a leg.” Likewise calling someone a “Manager” doesn’t make them a manager. The proof of management ability is results. Real managers get results.

Why do we need managers?

Sales people like to think of themselves as self-motivated and in control of their own destinies. Their paychecks are tied directly to their individual efforts. Theoretically, a team of good people should go out and do the job without any direction or supervision. It doesn’t work this way in the real world. In many cases, good sales people will achieve their goals with little or no direction from their manager. In some cases, they struggle to achieve their goal in spite of a poor manager’s intervention. In every case, pairing a good sales team with a good manager will produce the best possible results. Paradoxically, the best people are always the ones who actively seek their manager’s help. This is not a coincidence; their willingness to learn is why they became successful. By coordinating and focusing the efforts of the group toward specific objectives, a good sales manager gets the maximum production from them. The gap between what the sales people can accomplish on their own and what they can accomplish when well led, represents the value a good manager brings to his/her company.

Good managers are obsessed with WIGs

This has nothing to do with the manager’s hairdo. WIGs stands for Wildly Important Goals. A WIG is easy to recognize. If you do not accomplish a WIG, you fail. As a sales manager, WIG #1 is to acquire customers and generate revenue. If your team does not meet its’ sales objectives, the sales manager has failed. An effective manager evaluates every action by considering whether

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or not that action is in alignment with their WIGs. They constantly ask themselves, “Will doing this help us reach our goal?” Good managers use this question to determine how and where they will spend their time.

Good managers know what makes their people tick

The biggest mistake a manager can make is to treat everyone on the team equally. Good managers know that each person is unique and we all have different backgrounds. It is important to get to know each individual on your team and to learn what motivates them. Some people are purely cash oriented, while others are looking for recognition or career advancement. To get the best from every member of our team we need to treat everyone as an individual.

Numbers don't lie...or let you lie to yourself

A good doctor can tell a lot about your health by simply taking your pulse and listening to your chest. A good sales manager can tell a lot about the health of a sales territory by looking at the sales results and reviewing call reports. Sales people excel at self-delusion. They will ascribe their failure to achieve their goals to the economy, to “cheap” customers or to increased sun spot activity before they accept responsibility for the shortfall. Good sales managers use sales numbers as a “reality check.” I have had many conversations that went like this: “I tell you I’m working harder than I’ve ever worked, but the prospects just aren’t buying.” To which I replied, “I know you’re working really hard, but when I look at the call numbers for the same period last year, you’re making only about half as many prospecting calls...Do you think if you were making more calls you would close more sales?” In this scenario the rep wasn’t consciously lying to me. He actually had convinced himself that he was working as hard as ever. Constantly reviewing the numbers with a rep keeps them, and you, in touch with what’s really going on in their territory. This also sends a clear signal that you expect each member of your team to hit their assigned targets.

SMBWA—Sales management by wandering around

In one of his spy novels, John Le Carre wrote that, “A desk is a very dangerous place from which to view the world.” I think every sales manager should have this posted in their office. To coach and manage people you need to regularly observe them in action. Going into the field with your people will reveal their strengths and their shortcomings, providing an opportunity to give them

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immediate feedback. Too many sales managers favor demonstration over observation. They jump in to make the sale whenever a rep begins to falter. While this helps the rep in the short term, it does not help them to grow. Good managers take the long view, allowing the rep to fail on a call and then using this as an opportunity to coach and train the rep.

To evaluate a rep's performance on a call I use the questions listed below.

Engagement—Did the rep show enthusiasm when approaching the customer? Did they use a good opening statement that promised the prospect a benefit?

Probing for needs—Did they ask good questions to discover customer needs? Was the call a conversation or a lecture?

Listening—Did the rep listen to the customer? Did they ask follow-up questions based on the customer's statements?

Messaging—Did they explain the benefits of our products using clear, concise language? Did they emphasize our product's competitive strengths and the value they offer?

Solution—Did they recommend an appropriate advertising program? Could they defend their recommendation?

Closing—Did the rep ask for the order? Did they use good closing techniques?

Objections—Did the rep use good techniques to counter the customer's objections?

I printed these on a form and shared it with my reps so they knew what I expected of them. During the call, I would make notes about what the rep was doing next to each question. After each call I talked to the rep to recap what they had done. I praised the rep for the things that they did well and suggested alternate techniques where I saw a need for improvement. I made my comments as specific as possible. Saying something like, "I liked how you asked the customer about the specials he was running. That question really helped you to sell him the coupon program." provides a much better learning experience than a simple, "Great Sale!" By riding with your people frequently, you will be able to notice how the rep is improving and where they need further training.

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Good managers don't care how hard their people are working

Far too many managers confuse effort with production. I don't care how much time my reps put in or how hard they work, I only care if they are achieving their sales objectives. You can't take "sweat" to the bank. No matter how hard a rep works, if they fail to hit their sales target (their WIG), they have failed.

The chief responsibility of a manager is to hold their reps accountable for reaching their assigned goals. We can coach and help them, but ultimately hitting their goal is their personal responsibility. A manager cannot afford to let a rep "slide". Failing to punish, and if necessary remove, a rep who underperforms will prevent the team from achieving its objectives.

Not holding every rep accountable for hitting their target is unfair to the people who work hard to achieve theirs. Failing to consistently demand excellence is managerial malpractice.

Conclusion—Earning your paycheck

In today's economy publishers cannot afford to carry "dead wood" on their payroll. Every employee must contribute to achieving the company's objectives to justify their continued employment. A sales manager's contribution to the bottom line consists of the added production that they get from their sales team. If you are willing to work hard to understand your team, to help them grow and to accept nothing short of excellence from them, the verdict is clear—"You're guilty of being a sales manager!"

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

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