



In Praise of Sales Management

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Whatever happened to good ol' fashioned sales management? Somewhere between the tolerant 80's and the progressive 90's the role of the front-line sales manager as a manager began to die out and is now in danger of becoming virtually extinct! In many companies the term manager as it relates to the sales function is viewed with the same distain as if it were dust on the finger of a white glove! Management is out, replaced by the team leader, the sales coach, the team cheerleader or the super sales person, anything but manager!

Why is this bad for businesses? What we've seen and experienced in the last 5-7 years is a growing litany of companies that regularly miss revenue performance expectations, and experience declining sales yields, increasing sales costs, high employee turnover, ad-hoc and ineffective selling activity and lower face-to-face selling time. While these negative impacts cannot be solely attributed to weakened sales management, it is clear that there is a relationship between the flagging health of these organizations and the decline of the sales management function.

The role of management is defined as the achievement of results through the effort of others, usually subordinates. The role of sales management can be more specifically defined as the development of a sales team that is capable of performing the right activities at the right time to achieve specific sales targets or goals. Sales managers do this through managing the business process of sales.



To be effective, managers must divide their time in 4 major activity quadrants:

Planning: Setting the strategy for achieving the defined goals within their territory based on a number external and internal influences

Organizing: Recruiting the right mix of resources that will facilitate team success, defining the types of activities that those resources will engage in and defining how those resources will interact with each other

Leading: Defining and communicating objectives, acting decisively to resolve issues, and providing personalized guidance and motivation to the team.

Monitoring: Defining performance standards and then measuring, evaluating and correcting performance as necessary

Each of these 4 elements is critically important to the long-term success of a sales team; the lack of any one of them compromises the effectiveness of the team, the lack of two or more is recipe for disaster.

Without a plan you don't know where you are and what direction you want to travel in. Without the proper organization, there is lack of clarity of roles with overlaps and gaps in both skills and work accomplished. More importantly there is no accountability for performance. Without leadership you have people rushing madly off in all directions focusing on individual interpretation of objectives and priorities. And without monitoring there is no mechanism by which to understand success or failure; each comes only through the whim of nature or divine intervention rather than through the collective efforts of the team.

Many of the sales managers that we have spoken with spend little or no time in planning activities. Planning is often confined to yanking last year's plan off the shelf, blowing the dust off, changing the title to reflect the current year. The action plans and strategies are left intact other than to update the milestone dates, and the only substantive change is that the revenue numbers are increased by 20-30% with no corresponding idea as to how those numbers will be achieved.

Organizing is limited to hiring as many sales people as the budget will allow as quickly as possible. The prospective employees are enticed into joining with the promise of being able to earn a whack of money by meeting their sales plan, but then are given nothing more than a pile of product brochures as their training and introduction, a revenue target two times the size of current average yields, and a smile and wish for good luck as the sales manager heads for the airport!

Leadership is limited to knee-jerk decision making based on incomplete information and communicating corporate speak and platitudes, trying to make staff forget about how bad last quarter's performance was, how good this one is going to be, yet offering no strategic change in direction nor anything tangible that would make the promise come true.



And monitoring seems to be almost totally absent. Sales managers don't seem to be able to set and maintain adequate performance standards, they don't consistently measure performance other than in terms of net revenue at the end of a quarter, and they certainly don't seem to be in a strong position to take corrective action on either individual or collective performance issues. And what's even more disturbing is that, when asked, they don't even feel that they have the right to intercede! The sales manager has been emasculated!

How has this been allowed to happen? There are a number of contributing factors.

Over the past 12-15 years there has been a general quest for increased personal empowerment coupled with a drive to de-layer organization structure. This has led to generally more autonomy and more democracy in the decision making process within organizations. Employees now have a greater say in their work habits and work environment, which is generally a good thing. But it has also meant that managers have larger spans of control with less time to spend individually providing direction and coaching. And managers can no longer count on commanding respect and obedience through their positional authority. Managers must earn, and then continue to earn, the respect of their direct reports. This is a particularly daunting task for a sales manager.

The Sales organization especially is viewed as being comprised of individuals that are self-motivated and where you either know inherently what to do to achieve results or else you don't survive. Many senior managers believe that good sales people are born not created and therefore require little direction on what or how to do what they do to achieve their "magic". They think, "if I can just hire the brightest and best I will make my revenue targets." I have heard comments like, "Sales people are paid commission so they should have the proper motivation" or "they know best how to spend their time if only they are left to their own devices."

So the expectation of the role of the sales manager has become less of an interventionist and more like a facilitator. And, because their span of control is so large sales managers often have difficulty, even if they wanted to, in spending quality time with their direct reports.

The situation is worsened by two additional factors.

First is the notion that internal bureaucracy is the greatest limiter of sales productivity and therefore any sales time not spent in front of a customer is time wasted. How often have I heard the lament, "If I could just free up my sales force to spend more of face-to-face selling time, I'd get more revenue"! The sales manager often becomes the convenient coat hanger for problems that the reps are not capable of solving or do not wish to waste their time solving. They become the master handlers of the internal bureaucracy, the report writers and the time protectors of their sales force. They have no time to manage because they are spending too much time riding shotgun for their staff.



The second factor is that many front-line sales managers are promoted from the ranks of the best sales reps but with little or no management experience and little or no management training. They may have great selling skills but have little practice or capability in the 4-management skill quadrants mentioned earlier in this article.

Often the newly promoted sales manager who wants desperately to add value to the team, resorts to their comfort zone and takes on the role of the senior sales person for the team; the one who closes the big deals at the end of the quarter to make the quota; the "super sales-woman"; the one who will go out there and "show the others how it's done". But like the story of feeding the fish to the starving, the super sales guy does little to transfer skills to his team, who become more and more dependent on his ability to come in at the right time to get the job done. It's doomed to fail as the budgets get higher and higher and our sales hero simply runs out of time, energy, or both.

So for the past number of years organizational culture has valued individual empowerment and autonomy over management leadership, direction and control. The majority role of the manager has been relegated to being either the super sales person or the clearinghouse for the internal bureaucratic workload. Or both. And the managers themselves, in many instances, have been ill trained, ill prepared and ill supported to improve their lot. Is there any wonder therefore that the role of sales manager is in such a state of decline?

A sales manager's job is not to do the selling activity themselves but to teach others how to be more effective in their selling role. That means coaching, that means sharing best practices, that means tailoring messages to meet individual needs, that means earning the right to offer constructive criticism.

And equally a sales managers job is not to be the senior internal administrator or the champion stomping out internal bureaucracy. Rather it is to coach the team on developing their own problem solving skills while at the same time escalating common issues and providing input for process improvements on elements that are beyond the control of the individual sales contributor.

And finally there is the infamous role of technology. I think that sometimes companies introduce technology in the hopes that it will substitute for lack of sales management and sales process. Companies spend millions of dollars on CRM applications in the blind hope that better technology will lead to better sales. It rarely does. Technology by itself cannot implement judgment. Technology by itself cannot institute coordination of resources. Technology by itself cannot institute discipline! Only management supported by the appropriate processes can do this.



A sales manager is not...

A super salesman, although that maybe one of the characteristics

A visionary leader, leave that up to the CEO

A country club manager who hires all top level people and then let's them do pretty much what they please

Someone who focuses primarily on the eliminating internal barriers and obstacles on behalf of their staff.

A sales manager is...

Consciously competent in the art and science of sales and sales management

Capable of assembling and retaining resources commensurate with the task

Capable of providing leadership and delegation commensurate with the skill and experience level of their individual staff members

Someone who sets the stage and the context for each person on the sales team and defines their success

Someone who understands their team's part in meeting the corporate vision, mission, strategy and objectives and defines a strategy within their own context for meeting those objectives

Someone who worries about the things they can control and appropriately escalates the rest

Someone who ensures the implementation of corporately defined methods and tools

Someone who acts as the champion for the sales team to corporate management

Someone who acts as the champion for corporate management to their sales team

Capable of being a coach to motivate and stimulate

Capable of being a teacher to pass on skills and develop people

A custodian of corporate resources and sales costs.

So I say that the time has come to re-establish the position of the front-line sales manager to it's rightful place in the organization, that being the key position to assemble, coach and grow winning sales teams that will meet the organizational revenue and growth goals now and into the future! To do that, sales managers must be given training so that they can learn how to manage a selling team effectively. They must be given a sales process that they can manage to. They must be coached and mentored by their managers in ways to effectively develop their own leadership style. And they must be given a cultural framework that will allow them the time to plan and organize properly, the courage to lead effectively and the support for the tough decisions that they will have to make regarding setting, measuring and maintaining performance standards. It's time for sales managers to earn the respect that they deserve!