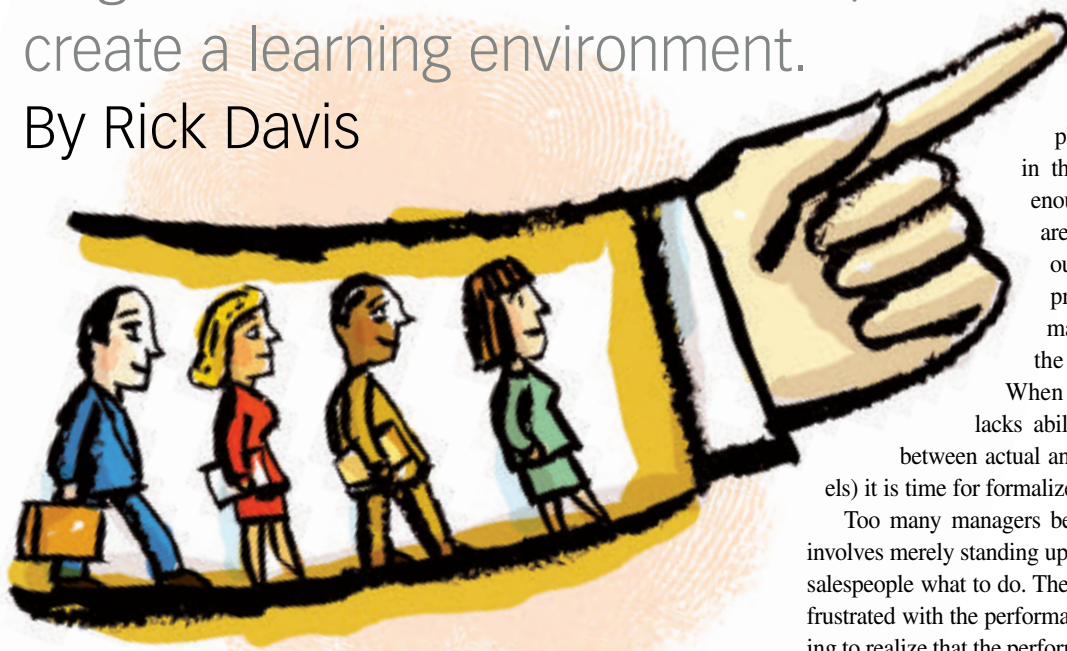


Basic Training

To grow a successful sales team, create a learning environment.

By Rick Davis



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Creating a great sales team begins by creating a great learning environment.

Consider this: The best hospitals in the country are found at universities because they emphasize learning, and they earn their reputations because of the outstanding research that takes place there. It should be no different for a great sales organization. If you want to develop a great sales team, begin with a commitment to learning.

There are two essential components to learning: training and coaching. You already know that training is an essential component of the development process. As a manager you probably also know that coaching can reinforce behaviors and improve performance. But do you know the difference between training and coaching?

Coaching involves the observation of on-the-job performance for the purpose of creating feedback. Observations can occur in the field during the actual performance or by examining data afterward. During the coaching process, the manager provides advice, both praise and constructive feedback, in order to enhance performance. The manager also should invest time with salespeople to determine opportunities for training.

Training occurs separate from the field of battle. The

purpose of training is to teach skills and create confidence, and to ensure that your salespeople have the ability to perform in the field. Talent alone is not enough to ensure success; skills are the behaviors that are carved out of talent during the training process. While training, the manager does not assume that the desired skills even exist. When a salesperson completely lacks ability (or suffers a severe gap between actual and expected performance levels) it is time for formalized training.

Too many managers believe that a training session involves merely standing up at a meeting and telling their salespeople what to do. These managers quickly become frustrated with the performance of their salespeople, failing to realize that the performance is actually hindered by the manager's lack of clear instruction. Force-feeding information is not training.

Without proper training, coaching success is difficult to achieve. Professionals in all stages of life and business require ongoing training and coaching to improve and correct performance. Even Tiger Woods continues to go through extensive training to modify and improve his already superior performance in golf.

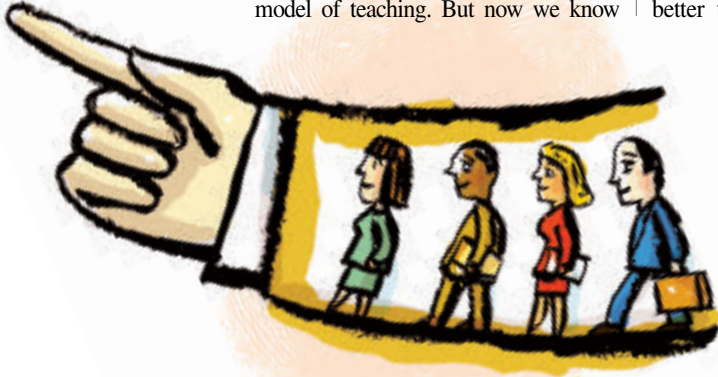
Create a Learning Environment

Training is a process, not an event. However, successful training is a process that is made up of a series of events. Properly structured sales training creates the behaviors that will increase the likelihood for success.

The key to creating a winning training initiative begins when you identify the specific skills you want to teach. At a minimum, your objective should be to teach salespeople specific skills that they can use during the course of their normal workday. For example, a training session should focus on just one of the selling skills—e.g., questioning, phone prospecting, presentation—at any given time.

You also should take time to consider how you will structure and present your training. Methods have evolved

in recent years, and it is important for you to recognize the best ways to structure your program. For hundreds of years, the lecture format was the basic model of teaching. But now we know



that simply calling a meeting and spending a few hours in front of a PowerPoint presentation usually is not effective.

In recent years, lecturing has been replaced by the adult learning model, which emphasizes teaching the importance of skills in order to get “buy-in” from the student. It is no longer enough to teach “how”; students, particularly experienced salespeople, are not attentive until they also know “why.” Stress the importance of a skill to ensure an attentive audience and optimum value for your training investment.

Even more recently, contingencies have been factored into the adult learning model that take into consideration the different ways in which humans learn. A well-structured training session addresses all three learning modal-

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ities—audio, visual, and kinesthetic (touch). Lectures and PowerPoint presentations address the need for visual and auditory involvement, for example. Workbooks, where participants fill out blank spaces and take notes, and the use of product samples address the need for physical involvement.

You must also consider the different skill levels of participants. If the content is too simple, your highly skilled participants will become bored. Since it is better to have too much information than too little, structure your program to stimulate the highest skill levels of your audience by offering an abundance of ideas; your intermediate performers and beginners will gain as well. Your training objective need not ensure that participants retain all the content of the program; instead, each participant should be able to

walk away with a few new ideas that help them grow in their careers.

The Adult Learning Model

As you build your training program to foster and hone your employees’ skills, consider these steps in the adult learning model:

1. Describe why the skill is important. A participant must understand and believe in the importance of a skill. A manager can influence this prior to the training and after. If someone does not recognize the importance of the skill, his or her involvement in the training session will be reduced or nonexistent; more importantly, the likelihood of the salesperson using the skill on the job severely declines. Understanding the relevance of a skill

ensures full involvement in the training process.

2. The specific skill (behavior) is explained. The skill must be described in behavioral terms. For example, it is not enough to tell salespeople to keep good records of potential sales opportunities. A better train-

ing lesson would teach salespeople to document specific information using a spreadsheet that is shown during the meeting. The behavior must be described in specific and simple terms. When the skill is easily understood, the salesperson will be able to practice it successfully.

3. Demonstrate the skill.

Watching another person utilizing the skill reinforces the theory learned through practical applications. It may be demonstrated with videos or other forms of media. The trainer also can demonstrate the skill during the session.

4. Practice the skill. A skill is remembered best when it’s practiced. The first opportunity to practice occurs during the training session. At that time there is little penalty when a behavior is performed poorly, so the salesperson gets a “free” opportunity to use the skill before real-life situations occur and negative consequences might result. The participant practices the skill while the trainer and other participants provide feedback.

5. Plan to use the skill. The purpose of the training is to create behaviors on the job that are linked to the objectives of the organization. Before the training session is complete, the participant can plan to use the skill in the workplace or even his or her home. The manager can work with the salesperson after the session to support the use of the skill and then measure performance.

The process of learning should be ongoing for every salesperson and sales manager. Of course, a manager who creates a strong learning environment often loses a valuable employee or two. But at the same time, the skills of the entire team are improved. Many managers proudly boast that their greatest accomplishments are the employees that they lost because the salesperson grew into a new opportunity, either within the organization or elsewhere. Managers who create a powerful learning environment establish a level of credibility with their employees that lasts forever. The value of that is priceless. ■