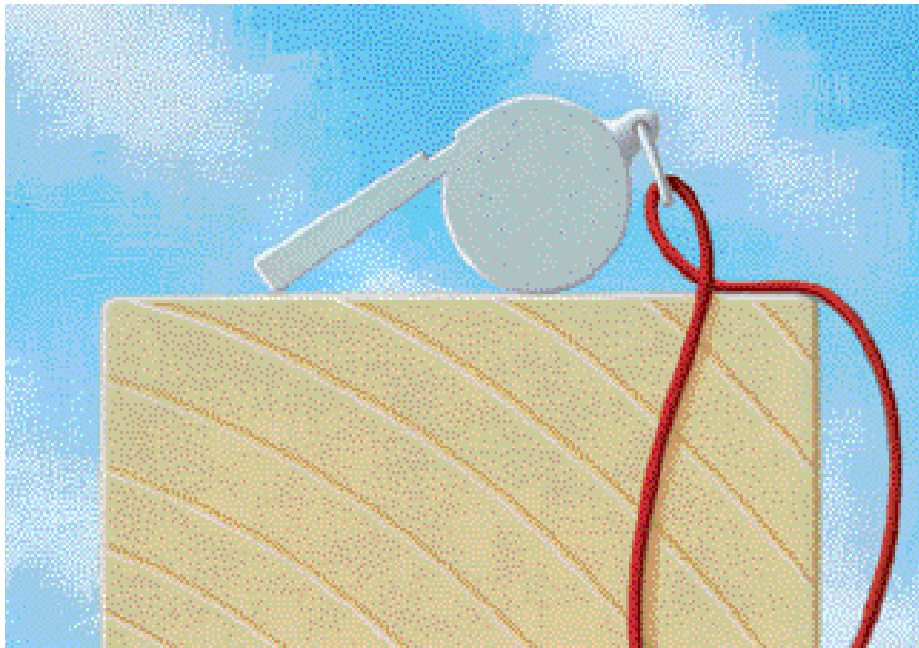


Head Coaching

Sales managers need to coach from the sidelines to help develop their reps' skills. By Rick Davis



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Imagine you're a sales manager in the midst of meeting with a potential new customer. Your sales rep is running the meeting, and things are not going the way you had hoped. In fact, the salesperson is talking too much, making a presentation that is lengthy, and obviously not creating enthusiasm in the prospect. What do you do?

A. Take over the meeting.

B. Delicately involve yourself to redirect the focus of the meeting.

C. Sit and observe the remainder of the meeting.

If you answered *A* or *B*, you are like most managers. You would take control or partial control in hopes of salvaging the meeting and demonstrating how things should be done. In reality, this tactic fails to improve the skills of the salesperson and may not even improve the outcome of the meeting. Whether you answered *A* or *B*, your intervention during the sales call potentially jeopardizes your salesperson's credibility. More importantly, you, as the sales manager, would have missed a prime coaching

opportunity. Ultimately you must ask yourself why your salesperson was not performing up to expectations in the first place.

If you answered *C*, (sit and observe the remainder of the meeting), consider yourself a bit of a Zen coaching wizard, similar to Phil Jackson, one of the greatest coaches in NBA history. Even when things were going poorly for his teams, Jackson rarely panicked, demonstrating a calm that is rare for coaches. This is because he accepted the fact that he couldn't enter the game to play. He had to allow his players to perform.

Sales managers should consider themselves limited in much the same way. A great Zen coach and mentor does not flinch in the face of disaster, but rather recognizes that even failure is a learning opportunity. He must accept that he will not always be present to bail his salespeople out of difficult situations. The difference between coaching in professional sports and in business is that the sports coach must accept his inability to enter the fray. In business, the coach must proactively choose to let his players play, even when there is occasional risk of a bad performance.

Sales managers, because they are often promoted as a result of their out-

standing success as salespeople, remain anxious to display those skills after they have stepped up the ladder. But in order to achieve management and coaching success, a sales manager must avoid the temptation to do the job for his or her reps and instead strive to clone his or her own skills.

One of the great characteristics of Phil Jackson and other outstanding coaches is their power of acceptance. They accept that success is in the percentages. You can't win them all, and losing is not always a bad thing. Great leaders recognize that failure and poor performances are opportunities for coaching and leadership. For example, when a salesperson realizes that things have not gone well, particularly when a supervisor is in the room, he or she usually becomes receptive to constructive feedback. When the sales manager takes over a meeting, the opportunity for providing constructive feedback is stifled. The salesperson, believing that he or she was on the verge of pulling out of the tailspin, resents the involvement and lack of confidence displayed by the sales manager. Thus, constructive feed-

back from the sales manager after the meeting is typically met with resistance, and the potential for a confrontation escalates.

A sales manager can take advantage of a powerful opportunity by staying calm during a poor performance and reacting with positive feedback afterward. The salesperson expects the worst—an angry or disappointed man-

manager as a career coach. At the same time, the manager provides positive feedback that enables the salesperson to improve upon his or her overall performance.

On the Sidelines

The ability to establish your role as a Sales Leader requires that you have a solid approach to coaching. Try the fol-

are a multitude of tasks and skills that a salesperson must develop, including prospecting, qualifying, time management, computer proficiency, presentations, handling objections, building rapport, goal setting, closing, and more. When you, as a sales manager, become too general in your coaching efforts, the lack of focus hampers progress. Build the overall skill package of your direct reports by establishing only one or two skills at a time. Begin with the core skills of prospecting, time management, and questioning. Focus solely on those skills, even if it means that you ignore performance deficiencies in other areas while creating a foundation you can build on.

2. Be a calm observer. During a joint sales call with a sales employee, agree ahead of time about your role in the meeting. If your objective is to observe the performance of the

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ager who will deliver a reprimand. When the manager reacts calmly and demonstrates the learning opportunity inherent in the moment, the relationship is dramatically improved and the salesperson recognizes the value of the

lowing skills to emulate other great coaches and leaders:

1. Isolate the skills you want to observe and coach. This seemingly simple task is not so easy, particularly in the sales profession. There

salesperson, you can frame that in a positive light by explaining that your objective is to learn and share ideas. Expressly state that you have confidence in your salesperson to perform and that you probably won't participate actively in the meeting.

Specifically state that you will be anxious to observe the specific skills noted in No. 1. Naturally, you will need to be involved in the meeting to some degree to create a comfort level for the customer; however, allow your salesperson to take the leadership role, and then calmly observe like a Zen coach.

3. Deliver constructive feedback with the perspective of a career coach. A title on a business card does not provide license to wield power like a weapon. A great leader recognizes that credibility is the key to power—a tool for shaping the confidence of others. Leaders

attract followers because of their calm wisdom and ability to help mold careers. Remember that poor performance does not always necessitate punishment, but is often a time

for growth and an opportunity for learning.

4. After a coaching session, plan your follow-up. Give the recipient of your coaching one to three suggestions. Ask the rep what he or she feels will be the best way to improve performance. Listen carefully. Come to an agreement on the behaviors that need to be developed. Then plan a follow-up coaching ses-

sion with the salesperson that allows him or her to demonstrate progress.

Remember that coaching is a two-way street. When I teach training pro-

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grams and work with clients, they often teach me more than I teach them.

The truly accomplished sales manager leads from the sidelines and empowers salespeople to become self-correcting Sales Leaders. When you finally create that level of proficiency within your organization, then you have worked yourself out of a sales job and onto the sidelines. That is the place for the real Sales Management Leader. ■