

Five-Minute Sales Coaching

You can do some bang-up coaching in just a few minutes—
once you get the process down and stick to one or two problems.
Here's how.

By Linda Richardson

Sales coaches are nothing new, but now more companies are using them to try to cure the lack of people skills in sales managers. Such sales coaches do everything that sales managers ideally should do—from evaluation to encouragement. The more defined role of the professional sales coach has arisen because many sales managers aren't doing much coaching.

But does the concept of sales coaching undermine the vision of companies in which everyone is a coach? To paraphrase an old saying, "Give a company a coach and it will coach for a day. Teach a company to coach and it will coach for a lifetime." Sales coaches are having an impact and are needed. But they're just a beginning. In fact, in organizations that develop true coaching cultures, the term *sales coach* will be redundant. When coaching really works, everyone is a coach. If corporate sales coaches only coach and don't make it their job to teach others to coach, then coaching can't go deep or far enough. Yet, despite the lip

service regarding the need for sales coaching, there's a lot of resistance. The reasons are no role models, no rewards, no know-how, and no training.

Sales coaching is minute-by-minute sales leadership; it's grassroots sales leadership. Though towering views on sales leadership are important, how individuals interact is the bottom line. And that's the purview of sales coaching. But you need initiative and know-how. It's up to you to supply the initiative. The goal of this article is to provide some know-how.

No more carrots or sticks

Coaching often has a negative connotation associated with long sessions to address a particular problem. Typically, after the session the coach isn't sure whether anything will change. That kind of coaching will never have company-wide appeal. Fortunately, there's an alternative—a process of developmental sales coaching that takes no more than 15 to 20 minutes and, once in place, one

to two minutes. The key is to focus on one or two things at most.

Sales coaching involves the removal of obstacles. The key question: Whose job is it to remove the obstacles? Most managers think it's their job because they feel responsible for motivating their staff. Traditionally, managers have motivated through the carrot or stick approach. Everyone knows the stick works, provided the manager continues to exert pressure. Everyone knows the carrot also works, provided the manager keeps dangling the carrot and making it more appealing. Most sales coaching motivates with the stick. But regardless whether it's the carrot or stick, the manager does all of the work and reinforces external behavior. The primary role of a sales coach is to make salespeople responsible for their own development and to support them in that effort. As sales managers become sales coaches, they must ask themselves, "How hard are my salespeople working?" A sales coach's job isn't to put out fires but help his or

How To Get Started

The first step in creating a sales coaching culture is to provide a half-day coaching program for sales managers. Ideally, it should be integrated with sales training. All sales managers should have to participate in a management version of sales training, coupled with developmental sales-coaching training to ensure role modeling and ongoing reinforcement. Sales coaches and salespeople need a common language and approach. In addition, all sales training programs should include a segment on peer and self-coaching.

One client of a leading global organization showed her understanding of the need to link sales training and sales coaching when she said, “We are training our salespeople to sell. That’s not the problem. It’s that the managers don’t coach. It’s ‘Here’s

your desk, here’s your phone. Have a nice day!’”

The training should reflect sales managers’ real challenges. As a training professional, you can identify those by interviewing a few sales managers to learn their challenges and then develop some short cases based on those. You can also create a seminar in which sales managers raise a priority sales-coaching issue. Prior to the seminar, have them outline a salesperson’s performance problem by identifying the obstacle, by gauging the salesperson’s receptivity, and by determining the desired outcome. That prework can be the launching pad for teaching the appropriate process and skills. By integrating sales coaching for managers with sales training for the salesforce, both groups will learn

to give and get feedback.

After the training, the real story is what is role modeled, practiced, supported, and talked about. To keep the sales coaching process alive, it’s important to have a coaching champion—someone in sales or training, or a professional sales coach. Our experience with thousands of sales managers is that most want to coach but don’t know how. Invariably, the best performing sales managers become top-level managers, without ever having given or received the proper development. And yet, we see many sales managers and salespeople who are hungry for feedback. Some effective training can lessen the fear of feedback and coaching. It’s a way to transform a manager into the kind of coach a salesforce needs.

her salespeople put out their own fires. A coaching dialogue is an effective way to accomplish that. For managers to become coaches, they must have coaching skills and understand the coaching process—especially managers who are used to directing, controlling, handling, and telling. Instead, they need to guide, prompt, ask, and direct when needed.

Coaching skills

Here are the critical skills a coach needs to facilitate a developmental coaching dialogue.

Presence. The ability to convey self-confidence and a sense of comfort. Those help a coach say, “I’m here to help” versus “I’ll tell you what to do”—and not convey, “I’m out to get you.”

Relating. Helps a coach be hard on issues but easy on people.

Questioning. Helps salespeople self-assess. A coach must be able to ask good questions and dig deep in the coaching dialogue to uncover and remove obstacles.

Listening. Helps a coach hear a salesperson’s point of view and identify obstacles. It’s a passive way of saying, “I respect your view.”

Positioning. Enables a coach to discuss issues, incorporating a salesperson’s view, and to be persuasive.

Checking. Asking for the salesperson’s feedback from what the coach said. It gives the coach a read on how the salesperson is responding.

Feedback, a major element of coaching, represents a coach’s ability to use all of the critical skills just described. A sales coach can’t coach or teach others if he or she can’t give and receive feedback. If a coach is a good listener, he or she will get feedback.

There are two kinds of feedback: developmental and evaluative. The goal of developmental feedback is to improve a person’s performance and achieve results. It can occur every workday. Evaluative feedback examines and rates past performance, is often related to compensation, and occurs annually or quarterly. It’s paper-based and more formal. Developmental feedback can improve a person’s evaluative score. Both types of feedback are needed; ideally, they work together. Developmental feedback empowers; evaluative feedback informs. Developmental feedback is incremental; it works on one or two things at a time to seek dramatic progress.

It takes two people to create good feedback. Most people shy away from giving or receiving feedback, usually because they associate it with confrontation. But

feedback can be viewed as a gift, if the dos and don’ts are understood. The guidelines for giving feedback are few, but vital.

□ **Be prepared.** Have an objective for the coaching session and be ready to give recent and specific examples of the person’s behavior.

□ **Give feedback in private.** Balance it. Discuss strengths first, then areas for improvement.

□ **Focus.** Work on one thing at a time.

□ **Talk second.** Let the feedback recipient talk first and get his or her view—all of it.

□ **Ask questions.** Be honest and open. If the person can fix the problem, it’s the coach’s job to give feedback.

□ **Ask for return feedback.** To receive feedback, listen for what you can use—not what you disagree with.

□ **Thank the giver.** Curb your negative responses.

Don’t tell, ask

Sales managers who want to coach must learn an interactive, developmental process. Good sales coaching looks a lot like good selling. The big question in selling is how client-focused you can be—in other words, how much interaction you can create with a client. Most salespeople—in spite of whether their

technique is consultative or relationship-oriented—sell by telling. Not surprisingly, sales coaches coach by telling. The key to good sales coaching—the kind that leads to self- and peer coaching—is coaching through asking. Coaches who coach by asking are truly developing their people and themselves.

Once a coach starts using the ask-don't-tell approach, he or she can fast-forward from a 15- to 20-minute session to one to five minutes because readiness has been established. Such small-dose coaching has these elements:

- an opening
- perceptions and needs
- the identification and removal of obstacles
- agreement on an action plan
- follow-up.

The opening. Take a moment to greet the salesperson you're about to coach and try to build some rapport. Even if the message you're about to give is partly negative, a positive opening can set a more responsive tone. First, explain the reason for the session without being judgmental. For example, don't say, "Bob Johnston called me and was furi-

ous. Why didn't you tell him about missing the deadline?" Instead say, "Do have a moment? I'd like to speak with you. I'm concerned because Bob Johnston called and was furious. He said he didn't know about the delay. What happened?"

Though it may be tempting for a sales coach to assume that the salesperson dropped the ball, the coach should suspend judgment until the salesperson has had a chance to speak.

Perceptions and needs. This is the area in which many sales managers take over and start telling instead of asking. About 40 percent of the ones we've worked with do ask such questions as "How do you think X went?" or "What happened?" But usually the salesperson's answer is short and not specific. The manager, having asked the obligatory questions, then jumps in and explains how to fix the problem. That parallels when salespeople launch into a product dump with a customer.

A sales coach's strategy should be to get the salesperson's perception of the positives and negatives. That lets the coach focus on the right obstacle and diagnose. Equally important, it builds the

relationship by showing respect and confidence in the salesperson's ability. Ask: "What happened? What do you see as your strengths? Areas for improvement? How do you feel you handled...?" An effective coach involves salespeople in the problem solving to gain their buy-in and get them to begin the process of self-coaching. Then, it's appropriate and necessary for the coach to give his or her view. The reason that the coaching can occur in 15 to 20 minutes is because it focuses on only one or two issues. Last, the coach should say, "I agree and would like to add some areas to work on."

Identifying and removing obstacles. Once both parties' perceptions are on the table, the coach can clarify and begin to remove any obstacles. The simple question, "What do you see as the obstacle?" can help the salesperson identify what's blocking improvement. Usually, the salesperson will have a pretty good idea what that is. If not, the coach should ask again. If that doesn't work, the coach can suggest what the obstacle is and then ask, "What do you think?"—placing the ball back in the salesperson's court.

Channel Relationships

By Haidee E. Allerton,
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Increasingly, large organizations rely on business partners to sell their products. Says Lynn Shively of Target Marketing Systems of Atlanta, "Changing trends in the marketplace have resulted in organizations migrating to channels of leveraged distribution, combined with direct sales teams and focused account-based teams for major customers."

The challenge is how to manage these channel relationships involving a network of a firm's own sales and marketing people, distributors, dealers, retailers, system integrators, and independent reps or agents—all often working with different electronic formats. Shively, who runs a workshop called Managing Channel Relationships, points to these new characteristics: broader, flatter spans of control within a direct sales organization; multiple, disparate sales organizations within the same company; increased use of the Internet and other alternative

sales channels; the transfer of sales costs to indirect channels; fewer suppliers; deeper relationships with strategic suppliers; and increased complexity of influences and channels such as virtual sales teams and competition.

Here's a profile of a successful global marketing and sales team, based on a survey conducted by Sales Builders, Fairfax, Virginia:

- an ethnic connection and sensitivity to other cultures
- a high regard for world history, remembering that America is a relative newcomer
- experience with diverse people
- at ease with change
- an open, flexible mind
- respected and connected at home
- rock-solid ethics
- a whiz at planning
- well-rounded business skills
- a builder and manager of relationships
- an effective manager of difficulties under duress.

A profile of successful sales-partner

management includes these elements:

- selection of partners who are good marketers and good managers
- carefully managed communications focused on how information is supplied and packaged and to whom and by whom it's delivered, using such "hooks" as daily conversations, meetings, personal visits, special events, and technology—not heavy use of phone, fax, and email
- nurtured relationships, clarified in writing on the rules, roles, and boundaries
- an understanding of the markets
- managed support with a comprehensive tool box of sales aids, collateral materials, and market-development programs
- legal acuity on laws and regulations related to the business
- training
- effective, active sales management and coaching
- flexibility and good listening skills.

Once the obstacle is identified, the coach can help the salesperson create an action plan for removing it by asking such questions as, “What outcome would you like to see?” “What are your options?” “What ideas can we brainstorm?” and “What do you think is the best next step?” A coach can give input, but only after the salesperson has done a serious self-assessment and thought up some strategies.

Once an action plan is set, the sales coach can ask the salesperson what support he or she needs to carry it out. That could be role playing, teaching, or identifying resources. The goal is have the salesperson think of internal solutions, instead of such external solutions as asking for new products to sell, attending a seminar, or hiring a sales assistant. Though some external solutions may be appropriate, they should come after the all-important question: “What can you do that’s in your control to improve the situation?”

Agreeing on action. At the conclusion of the session, the coach should ask the salesperson to summarize the action step, expectations, and timeframe.

Follow-up. Often, salespeople will test a coach to see whether he or she is serious, or they may think: “This too shall pass.” But if a sales coach demonstrates that he or she will follow up as agreed, salespeople are more likely to be attentive and accountable.

Because many salespeople haven’t been made responsible for their own development, they may resist coaching. Resistance comes in all forms. A salesperson may have the attitude that the sales coach is the boss and should prescribe what to do. Or a salesperson may resist a coach’s ideas by saying something like, “I can’t go over the buyer’s head.” Though a coach has the authority to demand a particular action, even inexperienced managers know that compliance without buy-in isn’t worth much. A sales coach should approach salespeople’s resistance the same way he or she trains them to address customers’ resistance—by acknowledging their concerns and asking questions to clarify their concerns.

Successful coaching comes from mastering the process, but it also results from changing people’s behavior, accelerating their learning, and improving their results by getting them to self-coach and be responsible for their own

10 Tips for Sales Leaders

Here are some tips from “Selling Value,” a presentation by Nancy Skinner of Nancy Skinner & Associates in Grand Rapids, Michigan:

Define value. What customers want for competitive advantage and profitability.

Internalize benefits. Providing value to customers will give you a better return on sale than focusing on the commodity.

Sharpen marketing strategies. Who’s your target? How will you position the value you offer? How can you best generate leads and qualify opportunities? How can you understand your customer’s vision? Sharpen sales skills. Focus especially on communication.

Understand the new models of selling. When selling features and benefits of a value-added relationship, 40 percent of the time should be devoted to building trust and credibility.

Sell the relationship before the solution. Begin with customers’ needs.

Sharpen listening skills. Formulate your 10 best questions to understand your customers’ “big hurt and big want.”

Sell a value-added solution. Go beyond the features and benefits of a product.

Know the best close. When selling value, the best close is “Where do we go from here?” In other words, the customer must see you as strategic to its business.

Deliver what you promise. That’s the source of long-term credibility.

development.

Small-dose coaching is a shorthand process for helping people self-assess and remove obstacles. Coaching by asking leads to self-coaching and a readiness to work quickly through an issue. A coach can reinforce self-development *and* good selling at the same time—whether he or she observes a salesperson’s interaction with a client or is approached by a salesperson on the fly.

Boiled down, the small-dose coaching process looks like this:

- “What’s the problem?”
- “What’s the obstacle?”
- “What action steps can you take?”
- “Here’s what I think....”
- “What do you think about that?”

For example, suppose that a salesperson says, “My customer Susan Harris is on the phone and she wants.... What shall I tell her?” A sales coach asks, “What do *you* think?”—and the salesperson will learn just that—what he or she thinks.

In the throes of closing the deal and meeting quotas, it’s challenging for a salesperson to stop and reflect. The process of self-coaching needs to be taught. It looks like this:

- “What are my strengths?”
- “What are my areas for improvement?”
- “Where can I go to learn more?”

The question “Where can I go to learn more?” brings us full circle. Because all of us have blind spots, we have to seek an outside view. That’s when coaching becomes a two-way street. Managers are responsible for coaching; salespeople are responsible for asking for coaching. All parties must give and get feedback. The developmental sales coaching process ultimately leads to self-coaching—coaching that internalizes and strengthens the lessons. □

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