

9 Bad Things Preventing Good Coaches From Being Great

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From time to time, good sales leaders find themselves unable to coach their sales team to the best of their ability. These rough patches matter more and more these days. As a matter of fact, it is time to declare enough is enough.

Why are these bad things happening more frequently? Why now the urgency to address them? Two reasons jump to the front of the line.

First, in today's market, sales team performance is a bigger piece of the competitive advantage puzzle. Every good sales leader knows it's extremely difficult to sustain a competitive advantage by product alone. Even if a company has a winning product, their competition is likely to get a product to market that is just as good, at half the price, in half the time it took several years ago. Or the company will face the terrible market dilemma of when the customer decides that the other guy is "good enough." All that to say, companies need both a great product and a great sales team.

Second, most sales leaders will agree that sales excellence is more difficult to achieve these days. So that means not only is superior sales performance more important than ever, it's harder to get there. Buyers are changing what they buy, how they buy and what they are willing to pay for it. As a result, in most markets it's not simply about a sales team getting better at doing what they've been doing; it's about doing something different – and that's harder.

Given those two complexities, it's tough to argue against the value of quality sales coaching in order to develop and retain a high-performance sales team. And while good sales leaders have every intention of offering their best coaching, it often doesn't happen – but why? Where's the disconnect?

Here are 9 bad things that prevent sales leaders from being great coaches.

1. Lack of Time.

For most sales leaders, their failure to coach effectively isn't about a lack of motivation – they simply run out of time. Amongst other things, they are inundated with requests for information about every topic imaginable: sales forecasts, why accounts aren't being closed, or personnel matters. "Have we replaced Sally yet? We need a salesperson in Salt Lake yesterday!" Sound familiar?

Unfortunately, sales leaders are not able to solve this problem without the buy-in and support from top management. Time for coaching will not be made available unless everyone decides it's a priority. That's the first step.

Once everyone's on the same page, the next step is to get an accurate estimate of how much time sales leaders are currently spending on coaching; guessing doesn't count. Nor does it count to include every single interaction that a sales leader has with a salesperson – we're talking dedicated coaching time here.

Once the hours have been totaled up, a safe assumption going forward in most cases is to double the time. And as the saying goes, what gets measured gets done, so keeping track is critical.

2. Ineffective Coverage.

Presuming the sales leader has found the time to coach, the next question is how they spend the time they have. There are two common traps when it comes to how sales leaders divvy up their time. The first trap is when they divide it equally over all the salespeople on their team. The second trap is when they overinvest in their poor performers and don't spend enough time with their average and top performers and new hires.

A good sales leader will develop a plan every quarter for how they will spend their coaching time and with whom. They use criteria for deciding how to allocate their time, taking into consideration the skill level and coachability of each salesperson. Finally, they determine which skills each salesperson needs to develop, confirm the salesperson is in agreement, and then track their progress quarter over quarter.

3. They Get Rusty.

Even for great sales leaders, if they're coaching their salespeople only two days a month, their coaching skills will start to decline. Imagine if a salesperson sold only two days a month. What would their sales skills look like after one year?

Good sales leaders did not simply wake up one morning as great coaches. And great coaches recognize that maintaining greatness is an ongoing challenge.

Top companies understand this challenge, and it's why they invest in micro-learning coaching modules and knowledge-management systems that provide their sales leaders with effective and efficient tools for updating and adapting their coaching skills.

4. Little or No Rehearsal.

Just like how sales leaders expect their salespeople to rehearse sales calls, sales leaders should also rehearse coaching sessions. Once the time and money has been invested into coaching, the proper response is not to do it on the fly.

Particularly when sales leaders have a challenging coaching session coming up – let's say with a top performer or a struggling new hire – it makes sense to rehearse the session ahead of time, get feedback, and adjust accordingly.

5. Failure to Leverage Alternatives.

The frontline sales leader is not the only person who can coach salespeople. One way to free up more time is to leverage alternative coaching options. Sales leaders can team up a struggling salesperson with a high performing peer or create a mentoring program.

Sometimes salespeople can benefit from a different perspective, so it can be a good idea to add a respected peer into the mix. Sales leaders can also tap marketing, product development, and even behind-the-scenes scientists and tech support people. The goal is to up the overall volume of coaching and to leverage the power and diversity of other members of the team.

6. Too Late.

In sales, being too late comes in a number of different forms. One example is when a company launches a new product but is late in providing the skills to sell that product. In that scenario, a lot was invested in R&D and marketing, yet the company failed to get the sales team up to speed. At first it looked okay. They won a fair amount business from early adopters and felt pretty good, but then it hit – the sales team simply had not developed the skills to sell the new product to a wider audience. They reverted back to doing what they were good at, and the great new product failed. Lesson: learn then launch versus launch then learn.

Another version of “too late” is the missed opportunity with a key account. In this case, there was no time to coach the salesperson on a strategy for the account, so the initial calls on the senior executives lacked polish and ultimately the competition secured the account.

An additional example is when coaching is used as a last-ditch effort because a salesperson is performing poorly. Coaching is so much more effective when it's routine from the get-go as opposed to waiting until it's do or die. By then it's probably too little, too late.

7. No Inspection Process.

Here's a cliché that may be overused but is still necessary and powerful: You must inspect what you expect.

Measurement, reporting and feedback tools need to be put in place so everyone can ensure coaching is happening the way they think it should be happening. A particularly important application of this idea is to have a process in place where the sales leader can get feedback on their coaching. It could incorporate feedback from a fellow sales leader or from members of the sales team. Too often coaching is not coming across as the coach thinks it is, so a little inspection and feedback are helpful for all concerned.

8. Capturing and Archiving.

Good selling must be documented and shared with the sales team. While individual salespeople may take different paths to reach sales excellence, everyone should have a shared vision of what it looks like when they get there. Without a common understanding of the end goal, the effectiveness of advanced ideas like peer coaching go out the window since the person being coached may get different messages from different coaches.

Another reason for archiving is efficiency. If every salesperson has to discover every best practice on their own that would be a colossal waste of time. The answer is to develop an inventory of real-life examples of what good selling looks like. That archive would integrate the best practices into a virtual coaching platform – a mobile-ready, 24/7 self-coaching resource. A platform like that can pay ongoing dividends not just as a knowledge database but also as a leaderboard of “greatest hits” video clips of elevator speeches, call openings, objection responses and product overviews.

9. Quality vs. Quantity.

In the end, it's better to have 3 solid coaching interactions than 10 so-so interactions.

A sales leader can ensure they're going to have a high-quality coaching call when they: establish a coaching objective, rehearse the call ahead of time, and allow the salesperson to self-assess by asking them questions instead of telling them what they need to do.

Summary

When sales leaders are freed from these 9 sticking points, the payoffs can range from revenue increases to talent retention to better client relationships.

From a top management perspective, it's important to remember two things:

First, it's essential to implement an integrated approach to sales training and coaching. In other words, it's no longer good enough to train salespeople and then look to coaching as an afterthought.

Second, technology and peer learning must be leveraged. There are a number of software packages and alternative resources available now that make all these solution ideas cheaper, better and faster to execute.

Remember, in the end, great coaching is all about collaboration rather than compliance.

About The Authors

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