

Formal Sales Coaching: So Irresistible, Why So Hard?

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People knowledgeable about sales excellence know that coaching is worthwhile; it can make a difference; it needs to be a priority. Most sales leaders agree about the importance of sales coaching yet would also admit “the job isn’t getting done.”

A lot of great companies start coaching initiatives with tremendous energy and commitment. Far fewer exit the other end of the tunnel.

Three propositions increase the urgency for a renewed dialogue about coaching.

1. Sales Force performance is a bigger piece of the competitive advantage puzzle.

Today it is challenging to sustain a competitive advantage by product alone. Even if you have a winning product, the competition is likely to bring to market one that is just as good, cheaper, and in half the time it took several years ago.

2. Sales excellence is more difficult to achieve.

Not only is superior sales performance more critical than ever, but it’s also harder to get there. Today’s salespeople must develop their knowledge and skills to an unprecedented level. Now top performers have to know more and know it at a higher level of competency than ever before.

3. Skill development cannot be an event; it must be a process.

Parachuting salespeople into any training event and expecting them to learn and integrate the complex skills to create value in today’s markets is unrealistic. It simply will not happen regardless of how good the program or how talented the trainer. Skill development needs to be a process, not an event, and coaching is an essential ingredient for making that happen.

Superimpose these developments on one of the most transformational and disruptive periods in recent history, and you create a picture that explains why market-leading companies are taking a second look at getting coaching done, and getting it right.

Best Practices

At Level Five, we have had the privilege of working with great sales leaders. Here are some of the best practices these great sales leaders are doing on a good day for getting coaching right.

- + **They are improving the diagnosis.** Unfortunately, most people struggle to construct an accurate self-assessment of their abilities. In fact, most people seek out evidence that confirms their positive opinions and ignores evidence to the contrary.

It's challenging to travel the performance improvement road unless everyone agrees on where the journey begins. Recognizing the myth and achieving a better beginning diagnosis is one of the best opportunities for improving the coaching process. Some specific ideas:

- Change the standard against which the salesperson is self-judging — shift to a best practice standard versus “what everyone else is doing.”
- Discuss specific behaviors like “asking questions” or “active listening” when coaching ideas like “selling value.”
- Coach how to leverage strengths as well as how to correct deficiencies.

- + **Helping salespeople learn versus teach.** A traditional sales coaching model sounds like this, “I’m the leader – I’ll suggest what you should do to improve your performance. Your job is to practice – my job is to give feedback.” This model is about teaching people how to fix a performance problem.

An alternative model says, “You’re the one responsible for the learning. As your leader, I’m responsible for helping you become more aware of your strengths and weaknesses, expand your alternatives for improving and increase your understanding of how you’re doing.”

This latter model helps explain why top coaches ask more than tell – and listen more than talk.

- + **Coaching both account strategy and call execution.** Account strategy formulation and call execution skills are critical for any world-class sales team. Hence, they both should be a top priority for coaching.

But in many companies, account strategy coaching is underemphasized. If you select the correct accounts and establish a rigorous coaching protocol, performance improvement per unit of time spent on sales strategy can significantly impact sales productivity.

Summary

The importance of having a superior sales team is increasing, but you can’t just “buy” one. Having a great group of front-line leaders who are masterful at coaching and get coaching done are necessary parts of the answer. Only five years ago, you might have been okay at putting this “getting good at coaching goal” on the back burner for other priorities. However, in today’s market, that decision is more difficult to justify.