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Focus on the Buyer

Six Characteristics of World-class Sales Coaches

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Six Characteristics of World-Class Sales Coaches

Introduction

Great coaching is indispensable to great salesmanship. The research is incontrovertible.

Consider the world's top performers:

- Do they practice and hone their craft on a regular basis?
- Do they do it alone?
- Do they have professionals dedicated simply to helping them improve?

What is it that tenor Luciano Pavarotti, actress Julia Roberts, dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov, actor Robert de Niro and tennis great Andre Agassi have in common? All of them are superstars, and all of them employ world-class coaches. Pavarotti has four (one each for music, acting, language and voice). The world's great performers are continuously trying to improve their skills and the means to that end is inevitably great coaching. The same is true in business. Bill Gates turns to Warren Buffett as a coach. Executive and leadership coaching are booming sectors of the economy. Browse the bestseller shelf in any bookstore and you will see. It just so happens that top performers in every industry have great coaches.

This begs the question, why is the same not true in sales? Why is coaching so neglected, especially for the sales superstars? If great coaching is such a critical component of success, why is it so largely ignored in the sales effectiveness industry? The reasons are many and varied, and we shall look at some of them as we progress, but let us reflect for a moment on a few of the most obvious reasons that sales coaching is disregarded.

The first reason is that coaching is hard. Many top performers are prima donnas (don't misunderstand us – they are prima donnas and need to be treated as such) and are simply not easy to coach. The second reason is that there is a lack of great coaches. Many managers were promoted from being sales stars themselves and never trained in coaching. The skill sets required for selling and coaching have little in common. Thirdly, where does a busy manager find the time to coach?

For great coaches it is not about incremental time; it is about using what little coaching time may exist wisely; discarding non-productive behaviors and replacing them with productive behaviors. It is also about choosing the right salespeople to coach and not spreading the time over the gamut thinly (more on this shortly). Finally, most organizations do not support a coaching culture; we shall look at this in some depth later.

The reason we need coaches is that we simply cannot see our own swing; we humans are notoriously bad at self-analysis. Many top performers haven't a clue what it is they do that is so successful. Huthwaite research actually reveals that there is little relation between what top salespeople say is effective and what they do in the field. We need another with a critical eye to see our strengths and help us build on them; to recognize our weaknesses and help us compensate for – or control – them. Gallup research shows a significant link between great salespeople and their managers. Wherever they found a great salesperson, a great manager was not far behind. Indeed, the Gallup research shows that salespeople with the right managers can improve their performance up to 20%.[1]

Perhaps the strongest argument for coaching is this. However good your skills training in the classroom, unless it's followed up on the job, most of its effectiveness is lost. The Xerox Corporation carried out several studies, one of which showed that in the absence of follow-up coaching, 87% of the skills change brought about by the program was lost. That's 87¢ of every skills dollar. Knowledge training, on the other hand, generally shows a much smaller loss.

The reason for this painful finding lies in the nature of a skill. By definition, a new skill feels awkward and uncomfortable. It doesn't bring instant results. Think of any skill you've tried to change, such as your golf swing, your presentation style or your method of handling your children. Does the change bring instant success? Almost certainly not.

In learning most skills, we go through an awkward period, illustrated in Figure 1, where the skill doesn't feel natural and isn't bringing results. This period, sometimes called the 'results dip' or

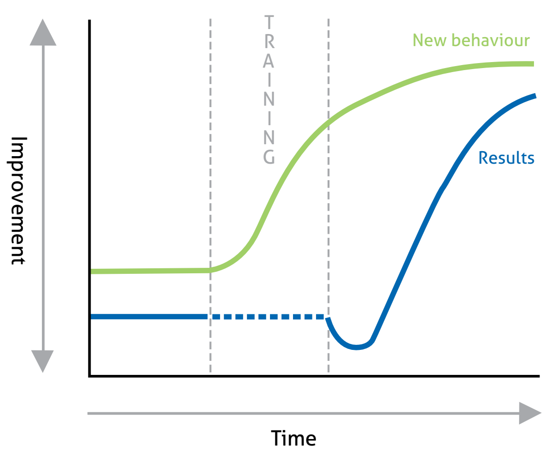

Figure 1: What SHOULD happen with a new skill.

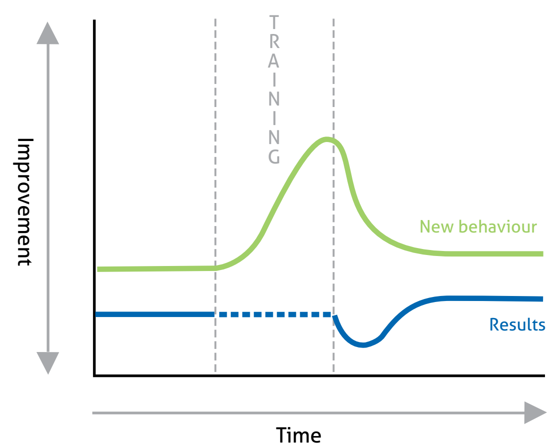

Figure 2: What ACTUALLY happens to a new skill without coaching.

Footnote:

1. *Discover Your Sales Strengths*, by Benson Smith and Tony Rutigliano, Warner Books 2003, page 16

'incorporation lag' is a bad time for most people. However, those who persevere gain the expected reward. If the learner continues with the new behavior, the skill feels more and more natural and begins to result in better performance.

What does this have to do with coaching? Coaching is the only way to keep a new skill reinforced and encouraged during the dismal period of the results dip. Without coaching, few people can maintain a newly acquired skill. When we are in the results dip, we abandon the new skill. Particularly in sales training, our evaluation studies show that classroom methods are almost useless for skills development without effective follow-up coaching. Most salespeople try out the new skills for a few calls only to find that they feel awkward, and the new method isn't bringing instant results, so they go back to their old ways.

However excellent your classroom training, without good coaching you are probably wasting 87¢ of every skills dollar you spend. Coaching is the only cost-effective way to reinforce new behaviors and skills until a learner is through the dangerous results dip. Once through the dip, when the new skills bring results, they will become self-reinforcing.

It is clear, then, that coaching is imperative. The question then becomes: Who do we coach? Time is limited and we may have more people reporting to us than is optimal (an 8:1 ratio is optimal, but not always practical or actual). So then where is coaching time best served? Our research has made this a fairly clear cut determination. It is not about equality, but rather about fairness and good business sense. Let us illustrate:

In Figure 3, we define each of the quadrants (and please resist the urge to get hung up on the wording, it is the axes that are the real point): Stars are those salespeople who regularly exceed expectations. They are always improving and could almost certainly handle tougher assignments. Solid performers usually meet – and sometimes exceed – expectations, but they are at or near their capacity and probably could not handle tougher work. Poor performers rarely, if ever, meet expectations. They cannot perform their current tasks adequately and certainly cannot handle more difficult work. Underachievers are those salespeople who sometimes meet the requirements, but their work is not what it could be. With the right skills, or motivation, they could do far greater things.

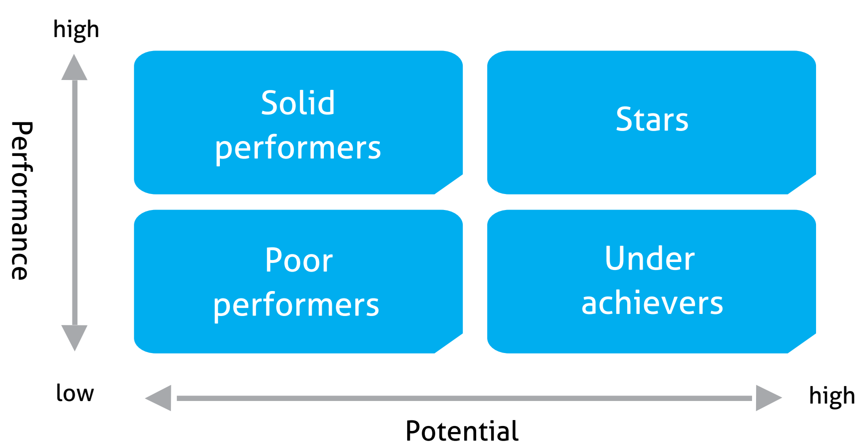

Figure 3: Coaching Quadrant.

The temptation for average managers is to:

- leave the stars alone to achieve goodness on their own – on the assumption that they are doing just fine;
- ignore the underachievers, because they are often a source of frustration;
- spend time with the solid performers because it is easiest; and
- spend far too much time with poor performers in the hopes of improving them.

This couldn't be less appropriate. Imagine a vertical line down the center: this is the great coaching divide. In world-class organizations, the research (and logic) shows that the greatest return on time investment is in coaching the star performers and those who have the potential to become star performers. They focus on the two right quadrants because that is where the payoff lies.

Figure 4 offers another perspective on whom to coach. Again, note the axes. Motivation is the vertical axis; Perception of Difficulty (how salespeople perceive their work) is the horizontal axis. The bottom left quadrant represents those salespeople who are self-motivated and perceive their work to be easy. These often high performers can be coached by simple show and tell. This group represents between 10% and 13% of the average sales force. The top left quadrant represents those salespeople who perceive their work to be easy, but who are externally motivated. These salespeople, representing between 35% and 40% of the average sales force, should be handled with incentives and rewards. The bottom right quadrant represents those salespeople who are self-motivated, but who perceive their work to be hard. They represent between 35% and 40% of the sales force. Those are people who will benefit massively from mentoring and great coaching. The fourth quadrant, those who are externally motivated and perceive the work to be difficult, are in the wrong job. These percentages, by the way, are absolutely predictable, as shown by the research.

These two illustrations reveal much about where to focus coaching time and attention. We are discussing business, not kindergarten – world-class companies are not egalitarian. They spend their coaching time and attention where they have the most potential to impact the business bottom line.

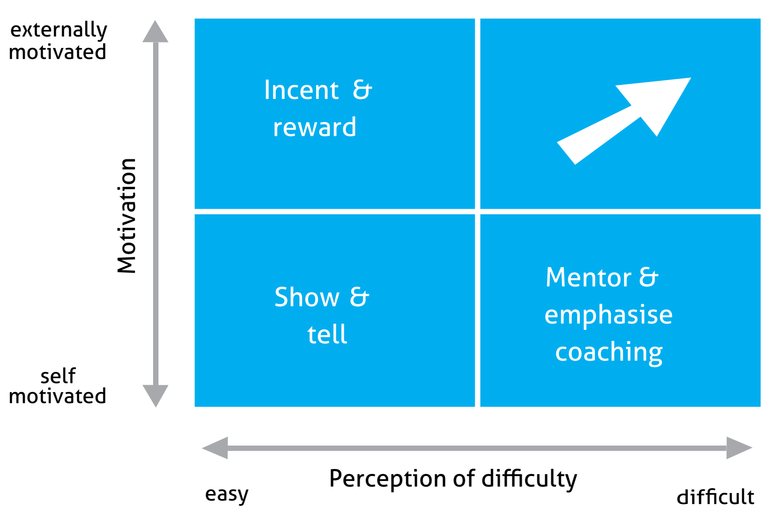

Figure 4: Whom to coach.

What does great coaching in exceptional organizations look like? We shall now explore the Six Characteristics of World-Class Sales Organizations in relation to coaching. These characteristics are largely counterintuitive, so remember that these findings are based on hard science. The best sales organizations:

1. Have the right balance of effectiveness and efficiency.
2. Have the right management involvement in face-to-face selling.
3. Sell where there is the most opportunity to create customer value or, stated another way, separate transactional business from consultative business.
4. Focus on the early stages of the business pipeline.
5. Build a coaching culture.
6. Ruthlessly reward high performers.

These characteristics each have a prerequisite – what it takes is an organization to be able to embrace these ideas. And remember that it is not a question of right versus wrong, but rather excellent versus average. Let us consider them in turn.

1. The right balance of efficiency and effectiveness

Efficiency metrics are activity measures, while effectiveness metrics are outcome measures. The key word in this characteristic is balance. There is a balance that must be struck between efficiency and effectiveness. The good news is that it does not take much effectiveness measurement to counterweigh an enormous amount of efficiency measurement. Effectiveness measures tend to be leading indicators (because they are indicative of something about the client), whereas efficiency measures tend to be lagging indicators – if that.

Efficiency is a measure of activity: number of calls, opportunities in the pipeline, total value in the pipeline, forecast values and so on. These numbers are important; they are the metrics we use to manage a business. In fact, the higher up you go in an organization, the more you will find these numbers relied on for decision making, because they are the pure and objective data by which business decisions are made.

The problem with measuring only efficiency indicators is that what is measured is what gets done. When the focus is on measuring activity, that is what will be done in spades, for its own sake.

In tough times, managers have a tendency to push harder on the accelerator of efficiency, which is to say, they push for more activity – and they get all the activity they want, but it doesn't go anywhere. And they get into a death spiral where the more they demand, the more they get and the less outcome they get from it. And down they go. The other problem with efficiency measures is that they tend to stymie top performers, who are focused on outcomes, not activities. It is average performers who focus on activities. Average managers tend to drive top performers away from their companies at the time when they are most needed. The truth is, as the research shows, more does not equal better in consultative sales and, in fact, it may be counterproductive, as onerous paperwork and fruitless racing about generally frustrate top performers. In major sales, success comes from working smarter, not harder.

Sales efficiency is about how to get in front of customers for the right amount of time at a minimum cost. Sales effectiveness is about how to maximize sales potential once you're there. The methods that increase efficiency are different from the ones that increase effectiveness. Many sales organizations have run into severe troubles because they have tried to apply efficiency solutions to effectiveness problems and vice versa. Many major sales managers damage their own success and that of their people by intentionally adopting selling harder solutions for selling smarter problems.

Great sales managers find the balance: optimal efficiency metrics and practical effectiveness measures. Recall that just a few effectiveness measures will balance a myriad of efficiency measures. Efficiency metrics are quantitative; effectiveness measures are done in ratio form, e.g. did a call plan lead to the desired outcome? The full discussion of this is well beyond the scope of this White Paper but, in essence, effectiveness metrics are oriented to a ratio measure of whether or not a progressive outcome resulted from an individual activity. For example, efficiency can be improved by activity management and territory configuration. Effectiveness improvement requires training, modeling and great coaching. Great coaches help their salespeople understand the importance of outcomes.

The prerequisite for striking a balance between efficiency and effectiveness is the ability to understand customer behavior. Customer behavior is the only indicator of effectiveness. The only indicator that we have done a good job is that the customer has said, "I'm willing to act" – whether that's to make a purchase or to make an interim step. If the customer is not reacting, our activity is going nowhere. And if all we are measuring are activities, we have no idea what the client or customer is doing. The good news is that it only takes two or three effectiveness measures to counterweight all the activity. If we had just a few ways of understanding how customer behavior maps to what we are doing, the world would come up roses. Few sellers know how to read or elicit customer behavior, so they are lost in a sea of activity. Great coaches help to sort this out by putting in place a few effectiveness measures.

2. The right management involvement in face-to-face selling

Our conclusions regarding management involvement in face-to-face selling may seem rather counterintuitive until you see the elegant simplicity of the right involvement. There are several basic guidelines that govern the behavior of great coaches.

The most fundamental point is that an effective organization – a world-class sales force – thinks a priori about the rules of when a manager will be involved face-to-face with a customer. That is to say, they consider in principle under what circumstances their managers will be involved in face-to-face selling, and the rules are derived by a process of reasoning without reference to particular facts or experience, but rather to certain generic realities.

The basic guidelines for involvement in face-to-face sales are as follows:

- Only become involved in face-to-face selling when your presence makes a unique difference.

- Don't make sales calls on a customer unless your salesperson is with you.
- Before any joint call, agree on specific and clear selling roles with your salesperson.
- Always have a withdrawal strategy that prevents any customer from becoming dependent on you personally.

The most vital, indeed the overriding principle on which all the others hang, is the first: a manager should be involved – and only should be involved – when he can make a unique difference. A unique difference exists when a manager has expertise, authority or a position that is both valuable to the client and making the sale.

- Expertise: The manager may have special industry knowledge, e.g. that can create value for the customer, and thus may move the sale forward.
- Authority: The manager may bring negotiating authority, e.g. which the salesperson cannot provide.
- Position: The manager may be able to use his title to get higher access in the buyer organization.

If a manager does not bring at least one of these three strengths to the table, they must absolutely not get involved. Period. Because these are generic strengths, a great corporation thinks about them a priori.

As noted earlier, most sales managers are promoted into management because they were spectacularly successful as salespeople. For this reason, most managers are able to sell at least as well as their top performers. Sometimes being great at something makes it difficult to sit on the sidelines; the temptation is to get in the game. Great coaches understand the error inherent in this impulse. They control the urge, and get involved only when their presence will make a unique difference.

The other guidelines are just that: guidelines. They come into play only when it has already been determined that their presence in a face-to-face selling situation will absolutely make a unique difference.

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There are a number of fairly obvious reasons for a manager not to make a sales call alone, but while most would agree that it is a bad idea, it happens dangerously often. Some examples of why it is not a good idea might include:

- It undermines the credibility of the salesperson.
- It opens the door for the customer to play divide-and-rule.
- It wastes time (the errant manager will have to explain later to the salesperson what went on during the meeting, a situation fraught with pitfalls).

Great coaches make no excuses. They simply never make a sales call alone.

Great managers insist on agreeing with the salesperson before a sales call whether their role in the meeting will be to coach or to sell, and they stick to the plan. One cannot coach and sell at the same time. If they intend to sell, they carefully and systematically plan joint roles that allow both to know who will lead the discussion at any point in the call. If they intend to coach, they are there merely as an observer and stringently adhere to a policy of silence and observation.

As the fat fees of divorce lawyers testify, relationships are generally much easier to get into than to get out of. The more active a manager becomes in a major account sale, the harder it is for them to disentangle themselves from customer involvement once the sale is complete. The research shows that many managers spend more than half their time fulfilling minor customer requests that should have been handled by the salesperson, but that came directly to them because of their prior involvement with the account. Great coaches avoid such entanglements by never visiting the customer alone; by building the stature of the salesperson in the eyes of the customer; and by never being seen making things happen (credit for any special treatment is given to the salesperson).

We run a little metric on people sometimes: We ask them to think about the percentage of time that they spend doing face-to-face activities in the four categories of firefighter, super closer, objection handler and exception maker (the great perils of face-to-face involvement).

We ask them to consider, as regards to time with the client, what percentage of that time is spent doing one of these four functions. In average organizations, typically more than 80% of their client face-to-face time is spent doing one of those four things. In highly effective organizations, it's less than 10%. Quite a disparity. It is an excellent little self-analysis. It clearly shows the importance of defining management involvement in face-to-face selling a priori and standing by the rules.

The prerequisite for the right involvement in face-to-face selling is that managers have to know two things:

1. Who to coach.
2. When to coach.

These questions are the key to being able to separate out the unique difference you can make, and when to apply it.

3. Sell where there's the most opportunity to create customer value

Economics 101 will tell you that Value = Benefits – Cost. It is a simple equation and it is true. Sales professionals probably prefer a more practical definition, such as, "Value is something the customer is willing to pay for". Great coaches show their salespeople where the opportunities exist to create value, independent of the product you sell. The research shows that there are four ways to create value for customers:

1. The Unrecognized Problem: Help customers understand their problems and issues in new and/or different ways.
2. The Unanticipated Solution: Help customers arrive at better solutions than they would have arrived at on their own.

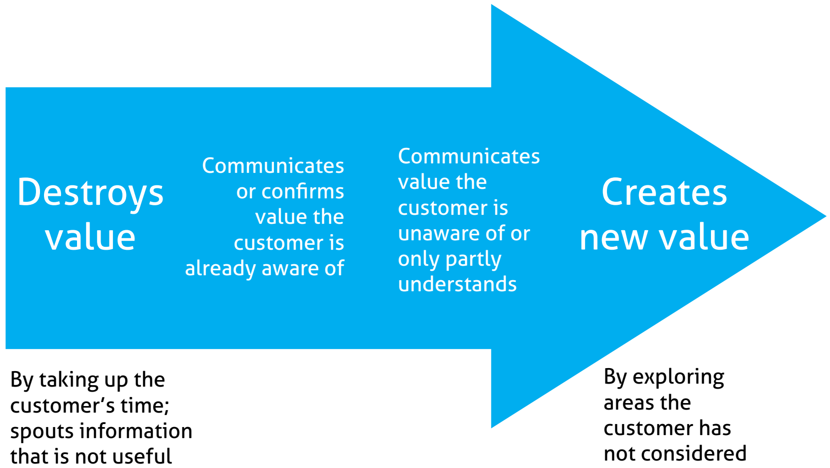

Figure 5: Difference in destroying value and creating value.

3. The Unforeseen Opportunity: Present opportunities that have escaped the customer's attention.
4. Broker of Capabilities: Become a broker of services and act as a customer advocate within the seller's own organization.

The key point about selling where there is an opportunity to create customer value is that great sales forces think through ahead of time what kind of unrecognized problems can be exposed, what unforeseen opportunities can be uncovered, what unanticipated solutions can be provided and what organizational capabilities can be brokered. These value drivers are considered beforehand.

But let us back up a little. Even before thinking through a means of creating value, world-class sales organizations take the first step by categorizing the type of buyer organization they are dealing with. There is a simple taxonomy uncovered by the research that helps make the determination of buyer type. In order to create value, it is first necessary to determine whether the customer is willing to buy value (Figure 6). Great managers go through the process of considering how to become strategically important or difficult to substitute a la these four quadrants. They identify

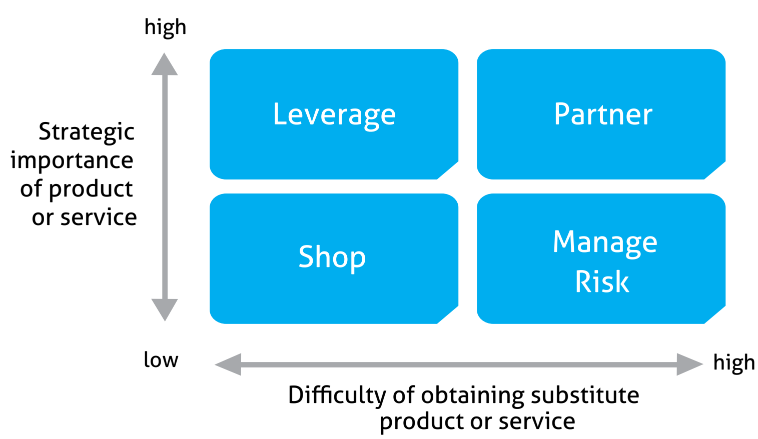

Figure 6: How customers perceive value.

which customers place them in the shop quadrant, why customers force them there and how they intend to filter through those customers continuously to make sure the only people who put them in the shop quadrant are the people who actually are truly transactional. What that requires for a manager, then, is a relentless orientation to guiding their sales force towards the four value drivers and the question: What are you doing in sales calls and sales strategy that makes you difficult to substitute or strategically important? Another way to look at it is through the lens of the value equation, which again is value equals benefits minus cost.

Many individuals, organizations and,indeed, industries are purely transactional. They want the cheapest price and no argument. Wal-Mart, Home Depot and the Dollar Store are examples of this phenomenon. Great coaches are always looking to move into consultative sales.

Once again, the vital point is that great coaches are constantly encouraging their salespeople to move out of the shop quadrant and are looking at the potential for value creation beforehand.

Great coaches know the difference between transactional and consultative sales; they understand where they can create value and they focus there. The prerequisite for value creation is that the sales force must be able to create value independent of the product/service they sell.

4. Focus on the early stages of the business pipeline

The real emphasis of this characteristic of world-class sales forces is spending more time looking at the early stages of the pipeline than the late stages. That is because the opportunity to create value rests in the early stages. In the case of average companies, the language of management towards its sales force is always thus: When is the deal going to close? When are we going to submit the proposal? When are we going to get the contract? When are we going to get the order? When are we going to send the invoice? When are we going to get paid?

The fact is, by the later stages of the pipeline, when the orientation is on closing the deal and tying up loose ends, it is too late. There are few degrees of freedom left to create value. By focusing on the later stages, average companies are inadvertently defining themselves as transactional companies selling a commodity. Now, to be sure, there is nothing wrong with these late-stage questions, but they have to be counterweighted with much more attention at the early stages of the pipeline, where great coaches begin asking questions such as: What unrecognized problem can we help this client see? What unforeseen opportunity can we help this client identify? And so on.

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The management in a world-class company spends at least as much time – and our research would argue twice as much time – focusing on that front end of the pipeline where the funnel is wide and the degrees of freedom are numerous to be able to create value. Again, there is nothing wrong with asking the late-stage questions, but if that's the only focus, the company is being focused in a transactional way. Companies that inadvertently become transactional by not focusing on the early stages of the pipeline, and then turn around and ask their sellers to be consultative, will find themselves in a quandary. If the only questions being asked are the late-stage questions, salespeople will soon realize that they have no need to be consultative because what is measured is what gets done. The most powerful form of measurement is what the manager asks about. And if a manager only asks the late-stage questions, he is simply saying: Make business happen. Superior coaches get involved early in the sales cycle, where there is most opportunity to create value. They ask the questions that help to create value and drive progressive outcomes.

The prerequisite for focusing on the early stages of the business pipeline is that sellers have to understand the phases that buyers go through when making a decision and how to recognize where they are in the cycle. The organization can then embrace the early stages of that cycle.

5. Build a coaching culture

World-class sales forces have a coaching culture as the driving force of their sales management practice. There are several questions that we ask of managers all the time. First, if we were to look at the performance of the people who report directly to you, and if we were to graph their performance, what would the shape of that curve be? Inevitably, even if they are not aware of the mathematical principle, they will say that it is a bell curve ("I have a few top performers, I have a few lousy ones and the vast majority are in the middle."). Then we ask them, "What is the job of a sales manager?" In most average companies the manager will say, "It is to deliver numbers". But if we then ask them, "What's the job of the salesperson?" They will say, "It is to deliver numbers". So we usually say, "Wow, that's kind of striking." Remember the old adage, why keep a dog and bark? If we step back from the answers and consider them carefully, we realize that the manager is getting the same performance curve that he would have gotten randomly, if he did nothing. And the manager has the same job as the salesperson. Why is he in management? Whereas, in world-class corporations, the job of management is to coach and prepare the people that work for them.

The job of management is to coach and prepare the people that work for them.

It has been said that the most important asset in a company goes to the parking lot every night and drives off. If people are the most important asset, then it stands to reason that developing them to their highest potential is a capital investment. Nothing is more important. Great companies recognize this basic truth and invest their time in developing a culture of coaching. Coaching cultures have thought through four questions:

1. Who do we coach.
2. When do we coach.
3. How do we coach.
4. To what do we coach.

In too many companies, coaching falls under the same head as calling your mother or working out every day – it is all this stuff that we wish we would get to, and we kind of know that it is good for us, but we haven't gotten it down to the practical, tactical measured things we do on a day-to-day basis to make it a fundamental part of the fabric of our culture.

Creating a coaching culture means allocating time; it means allocating metrics; it means allocating attention. But if we just step back and think of the previous four characteristics, they all reflect what it means to have a coaching culture. By focusing on effectiveness measures that counterweight efficiency measures, we have a direct way to know what to coach our salespeople on. We pay attention to the early stages of the pipeline because we can coach people there. All we can do at the end of the pipeline is negotiate price and terms. We can coach at the front end of the pipeline. By coaching our salespeople where to create value, we are moving the large part of our corporation, as many salespeople as possible, into the consultative space. They all play in.

So the culture is reflective of what we measure and what we focus on as a job. There is nothing wrong with focusing on the numbers. But it is the means to the numbers that make a difference. In a world-class corporation, the job of a manager is to coach people to achieve the numbers.

The prerequisite for a good coaching culture requires a system of empirical, objective and quantified measures to drive performance.

6. Ruthlessly reward high performers

We usually tell people that there is a great little test you can give a sales force to decide who your top performers are. All you have to do is listen to their language. An average performer – and it does not matter what company or industry it is – constantly complains about how the competition is kicking their a--, and if we just had a better price, if we just had more stuff to give away for free, he will swear he would do better out in the marketplace. They blame the competitor's strength for their failure. But if you listen to a top performer, they always say the same thing, "It's harder to do business inside this corporation than it is to do business outside this corporation. It's you guys who are encumbering me. I could sell more if you'd get off my back." That's the first clue to the ruthless reward that high performers want. It is not about money. They believe they can get money wherever they go. It's about degrees of freedom. It's about degrees of freedom that allow them to say, "I'm a top performer so give me more independence, give me more access to resources, give me things that enable me to move faster. Quit tying me down with lead boots and I'll deliver."

The key to rewarding top performers is that top performers want immediate rewards. They don't want to wait until the end of the year for an awards banquet. They want hard assignments. They want to be known as the one who gets the tough assignments. They want quick and candid feedback. When they fail they want to know it, and they want to know it immediately. They want to be known as a top performer. Celebrate that on a regular basis. You can recognize it with money, a pat on the back, an email or an award on the wall; it doesn't matter. Don't be thinking it is only money. The ruthless rewards that high performers get in great corporations are degrees of freedom and immediate reward and feedback. That's what they want. World-class coaches give rewards and feedback early and often.

The prerequisite for ruthlessly rewarding top performers is the courage to identify top performers.

Conclusion

Great coaches know who to coach, when to coach and what to coach to. They have figured out the secret to the balance of efficiency and effectiveness; they have the right management involvement in face-to-face selling; they know how to create value by understanding the nature of consultative selling; they understand the importance of focusing on the early stages of the business pipeline; they work towards building a coaching culture; and they ruthlessly reward top performers.

If you want to have a world-class selling organization, you must coach. It's like the ad says: Just do it. Make no excuses about the lack of time available or the difficulty of coaching. Coaching in sales effectiveness is like coaching in any field where greatness is expected: it is an imperative.

Note: We have used 'manager' and 'coach' interchangeably throughout this discussion. That is because great managers are great coaches!

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