



7 Keys to Building a Sales Coaching Culture

By Kevin F. Davis.

CSO Insights' 2017 Sales Manager Enablement Report compared the win rates on forecasted sales opportunities between companies with a formalized approach to coaching—meaning there is a standard approach used by all sales managers—to those companies where coaching strategies were entirely left up to the manager or done informally. Their findings provide proof as to why a sales coaching initiative at your company is so important: companies who had adopted a formal approach to sales coaching achieved a win-rate on forecasted deals that was 19% higher.

In short, developing a strong sales coaching culture offers a great ROI. And great leverage: Each sales manager trained is then empowered to improve the win rates of every sales rep on their team. Here are seven keys that will move you in that direction.

1. Develop a leadership mindset in your sales managers

The greater success a person had as a salesperson, the more difficult the transition to sales manager will be. Here are just a few examples of instincts that make salespeople successful but that hinder management effectiveness:

- **The urge to sell.** Sales reps who are promoted into management are likely high achievers. Their instincts are still to keep selling rather than focusing on teaching others how to sell. Their teams will struggle to meet expectations because no one is helping them improve. Results falter ... the manager gets even more pressure from above to increase sales ... and interprets that as a calling to do even *more* selling. That demoralizes salespeople who think they're not good enough in management's eyes. And customers think the rep calling on them must not be very good if the manager has to keep stepping in.
- **The adrenaline rush of the chase.** What really catches the attention of a top sales rep is the opportunity for a big sale. Nothing gets our blood up like the chase! But that instinct for the chase and closing deals can lead

sales managers awry once they're in management because it feeds into their urge to keep selling.

- **Paying more attention to tasks than people.** Effective salespeople are high energy. They like to do stuff; they like to complete tasks. That drive contributes to their success. "Getting things done" sounds like a good attribute for a sales manager, too, doesn't it? Not so fast. A sales manager who is overly task oriented can spend too much time making sure mundane to-do items get done while ignoring the development needs of their salespeople.
- **Wanting to be liked rather than respected.** Sales reps learn that it's good to be liked by prospects and customers. They go out of their way to avoid conflict with people they want to influence. But to be effective, a boss has to be respected first and foremost. He or she has to be confident that the team will respect messages and implement decisions the boss delivers, even if they don't "like" or agree with the course of action.

Clearly, the transition from salesperson to sales manager is one of the biggest challenges in the sales profession. Overnight, a new sales manager goes from being in control of his or her own income and destiny to having their performance determined by the success of others.

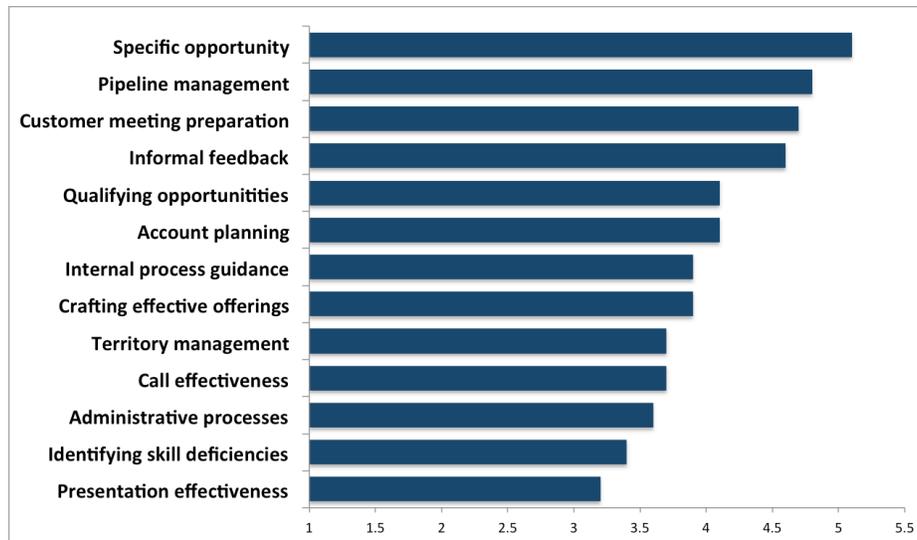
Every sales manager I know probably attended a dozen or more different sales training courses during the time they spent as a sales rep. But few if any have received any training specific to effective sales management (until, that is, they attend one of my courses). So it's no wonder that most salespeople-turned-managers are far more skilled at selling than they are at managing and leading a sales team.

2. Define what coaching is

Sales managers often say they already do coaching, but what they really mean is that they hold performance reviews once or twice a year where they call a salesperson into their office and discuss past activities and results.

Some interesting data from the Sales Management Association (SMA) shows why this approach is a problem. SMA did a survey where they asked sales managers how often they discuss 13 specific topics when coaching. You can see

the results in the graph below (the higher the number, the more likely it is that the topic would be covered in a coaching conversation).



SMA went one step further and looked at the relationship between how often these topics were discussed and the revenue growth in the company. Can you guess which topic had the single biggest impact on revenue growth?

The answer lies down near the bottom of the chart at **Identifying Skill Deficiencies**. It came in 12th out of 13 items—well behind topics like “advancing a sales opportunity,” “crafting proposals,” and even below the 11th-ranked item, “instruction on administrative processes.” So sales managers spent more time making sure their people know how to fill out an expense reimbursement form than improving their sales skills!

Now take a look at the top six topics on the list. Can you tell what they have in common? All are related to discussions about specific sales opportunities.

Obviously, sales managers can’t ignore those top six topics, But if nothing else, the SMA research shows that to achieve revenue growth the balance has to shift to include more time exploring and dealing with sales rep’s skill deficiencies (I’d add “will” deficiencies—attitude or morale issues—in that category as well).

Whenever sales managers tell me they do a lot of coaching, I press them for details. As it turns out, they often *think* they’re having coaching conversations with salespeople—but they’re not. At least they’re not having conversations that contribute to reps’ revenue growth. Sales coaching... good sales coaching... is

the daily commitment to apply sales leadership skills with the goal of developing each salesperson to his or her maximum potential.

3. Identify and teach the skills of coaching

Ineffective coaching creates a vicious cycle. Reps who receive little coaching — or only “performance reviews” that look to the past results and activities — don’t know how to practice coaching for revenue growth when they become managers. And as I discussed earlier, the natural skills that made them great at selling do little to help them lead and manage.

Again, according to the CSO Insights study, “providing managers with training on how to coach their reps can generate a significant ROI.” I have a hit list of six key coaching skills I think every sales manager should be trained on:

1) Observation & Diagnosis. Great coaches never jump in with advice. They take the time to observe players both on and off the field first. They look not just at results but also at the methods the player uses to get the results. That coach uses those observations to diagnose specific issues for each player, look for patterns that indicate root causes, and provide advice tailored to each player.

2) Questioning. The most effective coaches don’t just teach new skills to a player; they help players get better at *learning how to improve*. They don’t provide all the answers; they help steer a player towards the right answers through questioning.

For example, suppose a manager sees that a rep has a hard time reaching C-level decision-makers. After a call, the manager would ask the rep questions designed to help them think through what they could have done better, such as “Did you accomplish what you wanted to accomplish on that call? Why do you think the person you talked to wouldn’t refer you up to the C-suite? What kinds of messages would you have to convey or questions would you have to ask in order for someone to think it was appropriate to refer you to a higher-level decision maker?”

3) Priority and goal setting. A good coach helps a player define specific improvement goals and set priorities. To do that, the coach needs to know what each player’s strengths and weaknesses are, and what kinds of accomplishments would motivate that person. The coach would then work with each player to figure out what areas of improvement will *most* help that player achieve more.

- 4) Skill-building.** A coach's role is to help a player perform better on the field, and that takes skills — which must be practiced *before* game time. In a sales office, skill-building practice might include role-plays with the coach or mentor.
- 5) Delivering critical feedback.** Sales managers face a variety of challenging personnel scenarios: Under-performing reps, a good rep gone stale, good rep who's become a prima donna, reps who don't update CRM, etc. Ineffective sales managers are often confrontational with these types of coaching challenges, which usually makes the problem worse. The rep shuts down and nothing changes. Effective sales managers know how to deliver critical feedback in a way that does not make the rep defensive, which allows them to take it in, process the feedback, and respond constructively.
- 6) Follow up.** Even the most diligent players are unlikely to bother with changes if they think no one is paying attention. So an effective coach must hold players accountable for implementing changes. The coach needs to look for sustained behavior changes, not short-term efforts that fall flat after a week or two.

4. Ensure high-impact coaching

Not all sales coaching is created equal. As I discussed in Item 2, "define what coaching is," some sales coaching has relatively little impact on rep development or revenue growth. Here are two principles (there are many others) that will help you ensure that the coaching your sales managers do will have an impact.

a) Focus most attention on your "B" players

When it comes to coaching, most sales managers have natural instincts to either **rescue the worst players** (because obviously they need the most help) or **gravitate to the best players** (because they will likely have the biggest, most exciting deal opportunities).

If either of these sounds like your sales managers, the results of a study reported in the *Harvard Business Review*¹ might come as a surprise.

In research involving thousands of reps, we found that coaching—even world-class coaching—has a marginal impact on either the weakest or the strongest performers in the sales organization. You’d think that coaching the lowest performers would pay off because they have nowhere to go but up. Actually, that’s often not true, particularly for the bottom 10 percent. These reps, we’ve found, are less likely to be underperformers who can improve, and more likely to be a bad fit for the role altogether. That’s not really something coaching can fix. It’s likely a different kind of conversation altogether (often involving HR).

Likewise, star-performing reps show virtually no performance improvement due to coaching either. While our research shows that there are some important retention benefits from coaching your high performers, it would be nice to think that great coaching (especially from former high performers) makes your stars just a little more stellar. But that’s just not the case.

The conclusion from this research is clear: sales managers would do better to focus more on people with the biggest potential and less on the people with the biggest problems or on people who are already achieving great results.

b) Focus on early-pipeline coaching

In their concern about “what is closing this month,” sales managers often don’t initiate pipeline conversations with their sales reps until a deal is in the later stages of a sales funnel. At that point, the “coaching” isn’t really perceived by salespeople as coaching; it’s perceived as criticism because it’s delivered weeks or perhaps months after the real selling was done. The failure of the coaching effort, in turn, can demotivate sales reps.

The size of most deals and the probability of success are largely determined in the very first contacts that a rep has with a prospect. So to win larger sales *downstream* in the pipeline, sales reps have to master the *upstream* steps —

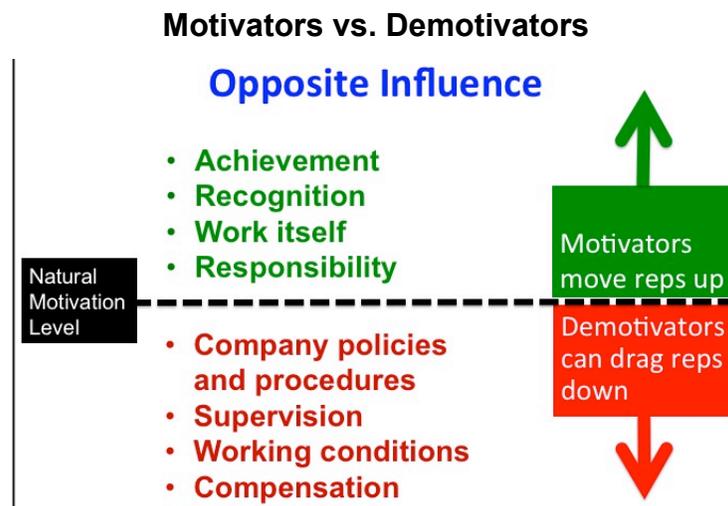
¹ Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson, “HBR Blog: The Dirty Secret of Effective Sales Coaching,” *Harvard Business Review*. January 31, 2011. <https://hbr.org/2011/01/the-dirty-secret-of-effective>

such as identifying multiple needs (greater needs = bigger deals), reaching multiple decision makers, understanding how your solution compares to the competition's offering, and tying your solution to the customer's priority requirements in ways perceived as being different or better than your competition.

Sales managers need to know how to work with reps when their sales opportunities are in the early stages, which is when coaching efforts will have a bigger effect.

5. Teach managers about motivation and demotivation

If you've done any research into motivation, you'll know that there are a lot of competing models. The one I find most helpful as a manager is shown below. The graphic shows examples of both the positive factors, called **motivators**, that raise the natural level of motivation (providing incentives for people to improve and get better), and the negative factors, called **demotivators**, that rob people of their enthusiasm for the job.



There are two things I always point out about this model:

- 1) Motivators are intrinsic factors that address internal thoughts and emotions; demotivators are almost always extrinsic factors in the environment that people cannot control.

- 2) There is no overlap between the two sets of factors. You cannot motivate people simply by removing demotivators and you cannot demotivate them simply by ignoring the motivators.

In sum, there is a big difference between being **un**motivated (not having enough motivators, which usually shows up as a lack of energy to engage) and being **de**motivated (being discouraged about the job).

Sales managers cannot control what will motivate or demotivate people—both demotivators and motivators are deeply personal. That means they have to do some digging to figure out what will provide an incentive for each person on their team to not only do a good job but also maintain their energy and desire to keep improving on the job. They also have to figure out if there are issues in the workplace that reps find demotivating.

6. Expect Sales Managers to *Get* Feedback (not just give it)

Leadership expert Timothy R. Clark states that Coachability “is the willingness to be corrected and to act on that correction. It means recognizing we can learn from others and can accept straightforward feedback on our performance.”

This perspective is as true for sales managers as it is for reps. That is, a successful sales coaching culture has to be constructed on a two-way street. Managers cannot ask their salespeople to accept and act upon the feedback if they don’t ask for and act on feedback from their team.

The method for doing this need not be elaborate. I recommend that sales managers periodically add the following three questions to the end of a coaching session with a rep:

1. What are you getting from me that you find most helpful?
2. What am I doing that doesn’t help you at all?
3. What could I start doing to help you more? Why would that help?

7. Hire for coachability

Like many people, I’m a big fan of March Madness and followed the exploits of the Villanova Wildcats in the 2016 NCAA basketball tournament. Along with the rest of America, I was thrilled by the last-second three-point shot that won them the national championship. Their achievement impressed me so much that I decided to study up on the team coach, Jay Wright.

Wright has said that when doing recruiting, he looks for players who are both hungry and humble, and he uses variations on the motto “stay humble, stay hungry” as part of his coaching strategy.

I think the hungry part we all get. We all want players on our team who are driven to win and motivated to achieve great things.

But what about humble? That struck me as odd. I’d have thought he’d want players who were perhaps bold and brash, whose self-confidence could carry them through tough times. But Wright has great insight. He says that if a player does not have humility, they won’t be coachable. And what good is a player who isn’t coachable?

Surely sales managers have this same question. What good does it do to coach for revenue growth if their reps are uncoachable?

Luckily, the need to look at coachability during the hiring process is seeping into the sales world. Sales managers increasingly tell me that they’re paying more attention to coachability when they look for new hires—mostly because they’re tired of dealing with sales reps who refuse to listen to advice.

However, when I ask sales managers what “coachable” means, a large percentage say they are looking for someone who has an agreeable personality and listens attentively. But in my experience, an agreeable person is not necessarily coachable.

Coachability is tied to personality traits such as willingness to change, openness to feedback and ideas from others, positive acceptance of constructive criticism, interest in continued improvement, and motivation to succeed and constantly strive for new challenges and results. People with these traits will not just listen to advice but commit to *applying* it. If a sales rep doesn’t have these kinds of traits, your coaching will have little impact.

In sum, if you want to have a stronger sales coaching culture, you need to pay as much attention to the “coach-ees” as the coaches.

Creating a Coaching Culture

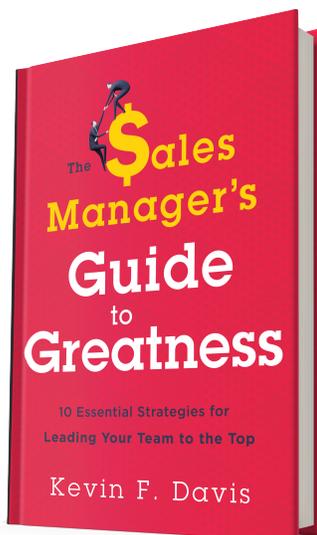
Sales management is a contact sport. It’s about spending time to get to know the strengths and weaknesses of each salesperson, about the relationships that

sales managers develop with their reps. It's about having sales managers who know what they can do to get the most out of each rep.

You have to communicate to sales managers that your organization expects them to fill a significant portion of their time with coaching, with the goal of helping reps create and implement personal development plans. They need to become masters of time and priority management so that they can allocate sufficient time to not just provide opportunity or deal coaching, but developmental coaching as well. They need to know how to figure out what motivates and demotivates each rep.

Focus on developing these skills in your sales managers, and you'll improve the skills and results from all of your sales reps. It's that simple.

KEVIN F. DAVIS is the author of [*The Sales Manager's Guide to Greatness: 10 Essential Strategies for Leading Your Team to the Top*](#), which describes methods for everything from leading, coaching, and managing priorities, to hiring, forecasting, and driving rep accountability. For more information on TopLine's sales management training program visit [TopLine Leadership, Inc.](#)



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