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Do you have what it takes to be a leader?

By Jim Busch

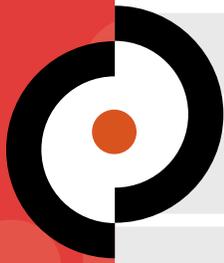
This month's column marks a turn for Link and Learn. Until now Link and Learn has focused exclusively on helping front line sales people. This month's article is the first in a series of occasional pieces covering topics of interest to sales managers. This change was prompted by the large number of requests from Link and Learn readers. General Dwight Eisenhower was often heard to say, "The sergeants are the army." He knew that they were the glue that held the army together and that noncoms turned the orders and the intentions of the commander into action. In our industry the same can be said for the sales manager. Even the most experienced and dedicated sales person can benefit from the support of a good manager. A good sales manager is the catalyst that brings out the best in his or her team. They create a synergy where the whole far exceeds the sum of its parts.

In my career I have seen some sales people become outstanding sales managers...and I've seen others crash and burn. As a young man I worked for a large corporation that had a well-designed training and mentoring program for developing new sales managers. This process started by identifying potential leaders. If a sales person expressed an interest in a management position they were invited to an "exploring management" seminar at our regional headquarters. For three days we participated in exercises that allowed the training department to determine if we possessed the proper attitudes and aptitudes to be effective leaders. The group was also given an overview of what was expected of managers and how they spent their time. After this initial class some people were advised to pursue a non management career, others were advanced to the leadership program, and still others decided management was not for them. This program smoothed out the transition from sales to management and increased the success rate of newly promoted team leaders. Unfortunately, most free and community papers lack the staff or resources to institute a similar management development program. Here are some points to consider before accepting (or offering) a promotion.

Enough about me

One of the things that attract people to sales is the direct relationship between what you produce and what you get credit for. You make a sale and you earn a commission. You win a sales contest or top the sales ranking and you are a hero. Win or lose you don't have to share the prize or the blame. As a sales manager you become the person handing out the rewards rather than receiving them. Anyone worthy of the title of "sales manager" must be willing to accept

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the blame for failure and give their team the full credit for their successes. This is not easy, particularly for someone used to the limelight. Taking credit for your team's victories, even when you are a big part of them, is counter productive. Your sales people need kudos to stay motivated; you need to find other satisfactions. Like a parent who delights in their children's success, you need to find satisfaction in your team's success and in rewarding them for their accomplishments. When you are ready to step out of the spotlight, you are ready to be a manager.

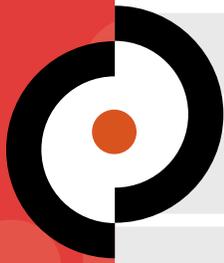
I'm out of control

It may seem a contradiction, but one of the challenges faced by new managers is a feeling that they have lost control. A sales person does their own work, their own way. A sales manager accomplishes their work through the efforts of their team. If they could do all the work themselves, they wouldn't need a sales team. This means that you must surrender some of the control you have over your life. Unless you lead a team made up of your genetic clones, each person under you will have their own personalities and will bring their own set of experiences to the job. A sales manager has to learn to adapt to the personalities of each person on their team. What should matter is that your reps achieve their goals; it does not matter if they do it your way or their way. I have seen managers try to mold their reps in their own image with very bad results. Reps will be much more successful if you allow them to inject their own personality into running their territories. The desire for control leads many managers to jump in and do their reps work. They handle the big sales or the big problems. This deprives their reps of an opportunity to develop their sales skills. It also makes them wonder if you trust them to do the job. A manager has to set parameters and establish sales goals, but they must give their reps the freedom to get the job done in their own way.

From competition to cooperation

Sales reps are naturally competitive. They are pitted against the competitor's sales reps and against other sales reps in their company. They are supposed to look out for #1, as a manager, your responsibility is to look out for the best interests of the company. This is true when what needs doing is not in your own immediate best interest. I have been in situations where my rep was involved in a dispute with another manager's rep. When an investigation proved that my rep was in the wrong, I immediately gave up the account. As a manager, I understood that supporting the company's policies and adhering to the rules was more important than winning an account or an argument. A manager is responsible for protecting the company and maintaining its profitability. This big-picture long-term thinking must take precedence over a manager's personal interests.

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Do you need to be liked?

Sales people are skilled at establishing rapport and getting people to like them. Many people gravitate to a sales career because they are very likable. On the other hand, sales managers often have to do things that their people will not like. Many former sales people have a hard time doing this. Being liked by your team can be an asset and helps you to accomplish your goals. The danger lies in the “need” to be liked. If you need to be liked, you surrender your power to lead. If you fail to make a decision that is good for your company because it may be unpopular, you are not a manager. I absolutely hate to fire people, yet in thirty plus years in management I have had to let many people go. Some of the people I had to terminate were people I liked, but who did not produce the desired results. I made these decisions based on their performance and did not let my personal feelings interfere. Had I not done this, my team’s results would have been hurt, my company would have been hurt and I believe our customers would have been underserved. My need to do what was emotionally comforting would have done a great deal of harm. While being liked is not vital to your success, being respected is. Respect is earned by showing respect to others and acting with integrity. If you are willing to ruffle a few feathers when the situation warrants, you are cut out to be a manager.

Can you make the switch?

None of us like change, but change is a requirement of growth. Taking on the responsibilities of a manager requires a sales person to grow both personally and professionally. To be an effective leader we must expand our vision from what is in our own best interest into what is best for our team and for our company. While it is true that managers must leave behind some of the satisfactions that motivated them as sales people, these will be replaced by another set of satisfactions. While many things change when an individual moves from sales to sales management, many of the things that lead to sales success are invaluable to a manager as well. Both positions require a strong work ethic, intelligence and a dedication to continuous self improvement and a burning desire to achieve one’s goals. In both sales and sales management, in fact in every human endeavor, there is one thing that always rings true...the best way to get what we want is to help as many people as possible get what they want.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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