



salesmanagement

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FROM MANAGEMENT TO MENTOR: LEADING SALES IN THE 21st CENTURY

The sales manager position used to be one of the easiest to fill. Senior management looked for someone in the sales force with excellent personal production and innovative approaches. You know, the top producer who does such a good job sharing success stories during a sales meeting. Imagine this person as sales manager, artfully using charisma and high energy to whip the troops into action at an annual sales retreat. Then, add the criteria of numbers – if the super salesperson has a penchant for setting and reaching individual production goals, then, by extension, he or she certainly will hold other people's feet to the fire on company goals.

But in the past 10 years or so, the old prescription hasn't worked. Companies noticed that great personal selling skill does not necessarily translate into coaching prowess. They watched people manage by spreadsheet, with little ability to connect on a personal level with members of the sales team, to the point that, as one executive reported recently, "The salespeople see the manager as the guy with the bully stick."

In a time when ethics in the executive suite have come under fire and many employees are skeptical about the motives of those who lead them, the negative outcome of poor sales management selection is more pronounced. Sadly, the results are quite personal. Senior executives don't get the expected productivity from the manager, and annual bonuses are less certain. Sales managers who gave up a sales territory and clients – an activity they enjoyed and in which they excelled – are out of a job.

Skilled sales leadership is critical to the success of any organization. Acquiring and developing the right people is the key to increasing and sustaining higher levels of sales productivity. In addition to selling skills, the sales management professional of today must possess leadership skills to ensure that they will guide people. Max DePree explained it, in 1989, in Leadership Is An Art: "The art of leadership is liberating people to do what is required of them in the most effective and humane way possible. The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily in the followers. Are they reaching their full potential? Are they learning? Serving? Do they achieve the required results? Do they change with grace? Manage conflict?"

In assessing the skills of more than 1,000 sales management professionals since 1991, we found that, in addition to excellent consultative selling skills, they must demonstrate core competency in four areas: Setting Standards, Scouting Talent, Leading People, and Developing Talent. To determine the level of competency in each of the four major areas, we look at their practices – that is, what they do and why they do it:

Setting Standards

- On what do they ask salespeople to focus?
- In the sales process, where do they expect salespeople to concentrate?
- What is the correlation between personal goals and production goals?

Scouting Talent

- What are the key attributes in a top performing sales professional?
- What philosophy drives their ability to upgrade the sales force?

Leading People

- What is their priority – people or things?
- How do they strive to improve performance if a salesperson is struggling?
- What is the source of their greatest impact as a sales manager?
- How do they view achieving goals?
- What do they demand from others?

Developing Talent

- What is the most effective way to debrief a salesperson?
- How should a manager approach a joint sales call?
- When should one reward performance?
- What does an effective sales meeting include?
- What is the essence of coaching?

Almost twenty years after Max DePree's landmark book on leadership, Stephen Covey reminds us again of the importance of inspiring others in achieving greatness. In The 8th Habit, Covey speaks of leadership as an element of greatness. Says Covey, "Leadership means communicating people's worth potential so clearly that they are inspired to see it themselves." That is the role of the performance mentor – a world away from the spreadsheet bully of yesterday. When sales management professionals lead people properly, they help sales teams increase morale, rising above pressures of competition and reduced margins or lower compensation structures. When sales management professionals develop talent in the right way, they help others become independent, take ownership, and view their work as "my business."

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