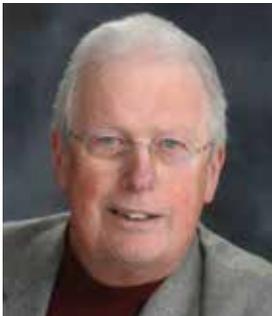


Too Much of a Bad Thing

Three problems infecting sales management

Recently a friend sent me an article titled “*There are too many bad salespeople*,” with the suggestion that this could serve as an inspiration for a future column in *Vet-Advantage Magazine*. My friend, a sales manager, will be pleased to discover I was indeed inspired, but perhaps not in the way she intended.



By Patrick T. Malone

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The problem of poor sales performance is real, but I believe it’s more directly attributable to bad sales management practices than bad salespeople. While there is a cornucopia of examples of poor sales management, I’m going to focus this column on the top three problems infecting today’s sales managers.

No. 1: “I don’t have time to coach”

If you are not currently spending the vast majority of your time coaching and developing the sales reps that report to you, then you are likely

nothing but a glorified sales rep with a different title. One of the biggest productivity frauds being inflicted on businesses today is the concept that managers can carry a personal quota in addition to a district/region quota.

The skills that made you a great salesperson, which probably is the reason you were promoted to a management position, are not the same

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skills that will make you a great sales manager. So if you are charged with serving two masters – sales AND management – your default will be to that with which you are most comfortable. Hence the claim “I don’t have time to coach.”

This problem is further compounded by the fact that senior sales leadership has no idea how to coach and develop fledgling sales managers in the skills necessary for them to succeed in their



new management roles. They resort to the “Watch me. Now go do what I did” school of coaching. How much would your golf game improve if you followed Tiger Woods around at the Masters, and as he was walking off the 18th green he turned to you and said “Go and do that”?

No. 2: Information overload

On a recent transcontinental flight I was seated next to a sales manager. After we exchanged pleasantries, he excused himself to review his sales reports. I couldn't help but see the sales reports on his iPad and the highlighted numbers he intended to review with each rep. Unfortunately, he highlighted the vast majority of each page.

Some poor sales rep was about to get a data dump session that would further demoralize a struggling rep. Even worse, the sales manager would report this as a coaching session and wonder why there was no improvement in 30, 60 or 90 days.

While there may be multiple areas in need of improvement, my experience is that reps can only handle a maximum of three at any given time. Sales managers must prioritize and limit their discussion to a maximum of the three most important areas during any given coaching session.

A couple of good tips:

1. Start the session by pointing out an area in which they are excelling.
2. Instead of criticizing the areas needing improvement, point them in the direction of solutions to improve their performance. Good coaches use more “try this” and less “don't do that.”

Once you start to see improvement in the top three areas, you can move to

Real coaching occurs when managers at all levels:

1. Define the success point
2. Demonstrate the skill themselves
3. Get reps to practice to acquire muscle memory
4. Allow reps to execute in real business situations
5. Debrief those situations
6. Raise the bar and repeat 1 thru 5

the next three, and that is the template for continuous improvement.

No. 3: Short-term thinking

You're working with a rep near the end of the quarter and there is a deal in front of you that will allow her to make that quarter's quota and help your district exceed quota this quarter. You can close the deal, but the rep will learn nothing in the process. She might be able to close the deal herself, and it would be a great learning experience whether or not the deal closes.

Do you step in and close the deal? Or do you step back and let the rep try?

Recognizing there are a number of factors that would influence your final

decision, I find most sales managers too eager to close the deal themselves. This puts too much emphasis on short-term results and not enough balance with long-term thinking.

Sales managers whose entire focus is on this quarter usually have ulcers and are difficult to work with. Sales managers whose entire focus is on the long term are usually non-confrontational and mostly end up getting fired. However, there is a balance that has sufficient intensity to achieve today while preparing for tomorrow.

For the sales reps

You may have thought this column was intended for your manager exclusively and thought “it's about time.” Well as

College Football Analyst Lee Corso is apt to say on ESPN's College Game-Day “Not so fast my friend.”

I think of you as the sales managers of your territories and I see your clients and their staff as sales reps for your products and services. So these three suggestions play just as big a role in your success as they do in the success of your sales management. ■

Give reps the runway to success

When flying, we all feel the lag between the throttles being pushed forward and the engines spooling up to create enough thrust for takeoff speed.