



Sales leadership and management

“People ask the difference between a leader and a boss... The leader works in the open, and the boss in covert. The leader leads and the boss drives” – Theodore Roosevelt

Abstract

The head of the sales function must provide vision, inspiration and strategic direction, while still driving the sales team to generate a consistent, predictable flow of new, high-quality business.

In this article Ian Henley of *ChangeBEAT* looks at the unique pressures and challenges facing the head of the sales function. This position, the “grinding point” between the vital sales function and the company at large, requires a range of skills and personality traits from inspirational leadership to efficient management.

The article concludes with some questions for sales leaders to assess where they stand in the “sales leadership stakes”.

The sales leader's challenge

No company can survive for long without sales and every company wants to sell more. At the head of the sales team is the person with the prime responsibility for delivering against that burgeoning expectation.

This vital person, usually called “vice president of sales”, “sales director”, “practice leader” or “sales manager” has a very challenging job. He or she must perform a number of distinctive tasks that require personality traits and management styles that often seem to be diametrically opposed.

Sales professionals, by their very nature, are self-motivated people. They are encouraged to be reward driven and to pursue ruthlessly their own objectives. They are selected for their determination, their toughness and ability to play on the edge.

Equally selling can be a draining task. Every time a sales professional engages, the pressure to win is intense. Sometimes sales professionals will, after months or years in the firing line, shrink from making the next cold call, or engaging in the next competitive battle. They may start to look for excuses for failure which, unless challenged, become a way of transferring blame away from themselves. Sometimes they seek to hide, for example, by writing proposals that they know, in their heart-of-hearts, are doomed to fail.

The head of sales, therefore, has a very challenging role. He or she† must be a visionary leader, capable of appealing to the team-ethic of even flint-hearted sales professionals. At the same time he must keep the team focused on the drum beat of day-to-day pipeline generation and closure rates.

He must also represent the company to the sales team and the sales team to the company. He must support the team he has, while always looking to build, improve and if necessary change the team. He must drive performance and not accept excuses for failure, while ensuring the company does indeed provide the sales function with the products, services, tools and support they desperately need to succeed.

† Hereafter “he”, for ease of reading only



In this short article we look at four vital aspects of the sales leader's role

- Leadership
- Building the team
- Managing performance
- Managing the company

Leadership

Every leader needs a vision, or, at least, a clear idea of where he wants the team to go. A vision provides an impetus and sense of direction to the team that transcends personal interest. It enables the sales leader to communicate a direction, both to the team and to other stakeholders. It is the basis for establishing where the sales team is going and how it will improve.

The vision must be a motivating statement. It should primarily appeal to the senses, describing how people should be seen and how their work and working environment should look. It should describe how others feel about them and how they feel about themselves. It should be more than just "grow the revenues" or "deliver the numbers", but describe how the team itself will grow and improve.

The vision for the sales team must obviously be intimately linked with the vision for the company as a whole, and it should describe how the sales team will support and enable the company's vision. This vision then becomes the touchstone and reason for the changes, improvements and new capabilities that the sales leader needs to drive to keep the sales team growing and improving.

Building the team

No sales leader can succeed without a winning team. If the right people, properly motivated, are in the right jobs, success is virtually assured. On the other hand, if the team is carrying people who cannot meet their responsibilities, then failure is certain.

Building a dream team, therefore, isn't just about getting the right people together; it's about getting the right people in the right jobs. A good team builder needs to understand where real value will be generated and put the best people there.

His first consideration is therefore to visualise what his "dream team" would look like and then populate it.



Part of that understanding is defining where the money is coming from through the sales planning process, and then allocating the sales type needed for each role. Sales "types" can be considered in the following categories:

Berry Pickers: Berry pickers do well in existing customers selling existing products or services. They can be relied upon to deliver natural business from established accounts.

Farmers: Farmers do well in existing customers and can be counted on to grow or maintain existing revenue streams. They will be good at developing longer term relationships with your key customers.

Hunters: Hunters are opportunists who will open new doors and win new sales using existing products or services in new markets. These are vital people to win new accounts and new sales, but they can't be counted on to talk about feelings!

Pioneers: A Pioneer is an entrepreneur, capable of selling new business in new markets. These valuable people can open up entirely new market opportunities, assuming the business plan requires new products and services to be developed and delivered.

It's also worth categorising people in terms of their motivation and ability to perform the role to which they are assigned:

- People who are low on motivation to perform their role and low on competence are **Problems**. These people need regular counselling, and if necessary, be moved on.
- People low on competence but high on motivation are **Willing Learners**. These are people who need to be coached.
- People low on motivation but high on competence are **Wreckers**. The Wreckers have the potential to cause serious problems unless the sales leader can use his skills to find a way to motivate them and turn them rapidly into Performers.
- People who are competent and motivated are **Performers**. These are the people who will build a leader's success.

The biggest leadership challenge is to create a team of Performers who can be relied upon to get the job done.



Managing performance

Performance management is about getting the very best from every member of the team. A successful sales manager will be attuned to the needs and motivation of each sales professional as well as to the team as a whole. Encouraging each individual to maximise their strengths and performance benefits the company and the team, as well as their career and future opportunities.

Knowing every member of the team and managing their performance can be achieved through

- A clearly defined sales process that supports the way a team sells and adds value in its own right, with effective, practical tools, describing the steps that must be followed to close a sale.
- Regular sales reviews that look systematically at the activity of the sales teams where discussions focus on opportunities, account plans and maximised sales cycles. The sales review can also provide an ideal opportunity to mould the behaviour of the sales team in new ways that support areas of particular importance.
- Performance coaching that helps individuals within the team to improve their skills or behave in a new way.

Managing the company

All too often organisations seek to blame the sales organisation for lack of sales success when they simply aren't giving them what they need. The sales leader must play an important role in managing the rest of the company, giving it the information it requires, while ensuring it delivers what the sales team needs to be successful.

A confident sales leader must demand the right support. He should seek to set the agenda with his colleagues about the support he needs to make his sales team successful. He mustn't just wait for what other parts of the organisation provide.

The sales leader needs to consider what new products, services, processes and tools he will require, and be assertive about those demands requesting timescales and deadlines.

He needs to think about suitable marketing collateral to support his goals; and pinpoint the training needs of the team and its members.



On the other hand the sales leader needs to ensure he gives the company what it needs, and the key communication is the sales forecast. Good sales and revenue forecasting is the hallmark of a sales leader in control of the business. Poor forecasting paralyses the company and corrosively undermines the confidence of external stakeholders in the sales leader.

A respected leader and talented boss

The head of the sales function must be a leader, but cannot rely on being a good leader alone. He must also combine leadership with hands-on management to drive the team to consistent high performance.

A sales leader that stacks up against this checklist is also a boss that sales people want to follow:

- He leads from a vision that shows the way to new and greater things.
- He builds and inspires a successful team and creates a culture of ever improving performance.
- He sets a high standard and accepts no excuse for poor performance.
- He manages his people through a process that adds value to their efforts and to the company.
- He fights the company and gets what his team need to succeed.

How do you stack up?



About the author

Ian Henley, chairman of *ChangeBEAT*, is recognised in the IT and technology market as a leading expert in improving business performance. He specialises in business strategy, marketing and sales and is well known through industry publications and Intellect where he provides advanced sales and commercial management training.



ChangeBEAT defines, develops and executes change programmes that help achieve enduring business benefit rapidly and reliably. Our people have practical field experience, and are equipped with WingBEAT, our proven change methodology, and our extensive tools. We are professional, pragmatic and action oriented.

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