

## Sales managers are key to sales force performance

High performing sales forces do not just happen. Even starting with the best raw materials, sales teams need to be carefully managed and coached to perform at their best. Performance management is the key to getting the best from a sales force.

This is largely the domain of the sales manager. Whilst Sales Directors and business leaders define and lead the overall organisation and strategy, the first-line manager is the lynchpin of the sales team. The manager and the tools they employ are the key to a high-performing sales team, so it is vital that sales managers have the skills and support that they need.

### The role of the sales manager

Good sales management is not just about being the best salesperson. In fact, traditional management skills, such as people management and planning, are often more important than sales ability. Many organisations overlook this and promote their best salesperson to a sales management position, in the process they lose a good salesperson and gain a bad manager.

The sales manager's role is to ensure that the sales team meets business objectives, whilst ensuring the team has everything it needs to do so. Day-to-day, the sales manager must make sure that the right sales resources are deployed and utilised effectively in order to deliver the business plan, whilst reporting progress against forecast to the business leaders. And the sales manager must deal with the many personal and professional issues involved in managing a team, from dealing with staffing levels and performance, to resolving problems with customers and other departments within the company. Actual selling time is often very limited, with good reason.

This is clearly a diverse role, and doing it effectively requires the sales manager to wear several, quite distinct hats:

- the boss – the most obvious, sales managers must be able to command respect from their sales team, provide leadership and discipline, and demand high effort and performance, but this should not turn into bullying
- coach and mentor – providing advice and support to ensure that each salesperson has the skills and knowledge they need to perform and progress
- tactical planner – developing the detailed sales and resource deployment plan for a territory or market
- sales adviser – providing specific advice on how to tackle sales issues, such as overcoming customer objections or structuring a deal
- process expert – streamlining processes to maximise selling time
- market researcher – identifying important trends, customer or competitor events
- human resource expert – recruiting and developing the team, dealing with personal issues, managing holiday cover, providing non-financial rewards such as increased responsibility
- financial controller – monitoring performance against target, managing expenses, possibly giving financial rewards from a limited incentive budget
- diplomat – resolving issues with customers, partners, suppliers and other company departments (marketing and finance in particular)
- employee – meeting the needs of the sales leadership and other business leaders

Good sales managers bring all these skills to bear to lead their teams to higher performance whilst satisfying the (sometimes changing) requirements of the business leaders. Managers need training to do this, especially if they have risen through the sales ranks and it is their first management position.

In particular, many sales managers need training to understand how to strike the right balance between providing support and managing firmly. Both are necessary from time to time. Too much of one or the other leads to poor performance, either because the manager is seen as an indecisive pushover, or as a loud-mouthed bully. Managers must also remember that they are not there to take the glory for the efforts of their team. This is surprisingly common (for many reasons), and quickly leads to resentment and reduced effort from the team.

These issues can be resolved through careful manager selection, coaching and training, and the right tools and procedures. Some of the most simple and effective sales management tools and processes are described below.

## Day-to-day performance management

Sales managers need a number of tools in their arsenal that they can deploy regularly or ad hoc to drive performance within the sales team. These centre on routine working practices that serve as a management framework, giving the manager control and showing the sales team who's boss, whilst ensuring the sales team has the coaching and support it needs.

The following are examples of routine tasks that sales managers can program into their routine to performance manage their teams. Each of these uses a combination of the skills defined earlier in this article:

### *Activity and expense monitoring*

A key part of the manager's job is to "keep the salespeople on their toes" by regularly monitoring activity, effort and expenses. Whilst sales is not just "a numbers game", all other things being equal, more activity will yield more results. There are many reasons why a salesperson would choose not to work as hard as possible, or in the most efficient way. And expenses can easily run out of control for little visible return.

Many business leaders are surprised to learn that their salespeople regularly spend a day or two travelling hundreds of miles to visit one customer, and produce nothing tangible for it. This is not uncommon. Empowering salespeople is healthy, letting them run out of control is not.

By monitoring activity and requiring salespeople to justify their actions, sales managers can ensure the sales team maintains high productivity whilst efficiently expending effort and expenses on tangible opportunities.

This can be achieved in many ways, paper reports, telephone calls, or computerised activity reports, depending on the size of the sales force.

### *Pipeline reviews*

Regular pipeline reviews are highly effective in developing accurate forecasts and qualifying opportunities. Reviews can be as simple as a weekly or fortnightly session in which the salesperson walks through the size, timing and likelihood of current opportunities and future developments, giving the sales manager the opportunity to challenge, coach and resolve issues in order to help the salesperson progress each opportunity to a close.

Reviews do not need to be face-to-face, telephone-based or even report submissions are highly effective.

### *Territory appraisals*

Territory or market appraisals are important tools to work through the detail of the salesperson's forward plan to meet target, as well as spending more time assessing current performance against target and resolving any issues. The appraisal might also include forecasting for the next sales period.

The appraisal allows the sales manager to:

- ensure that the salesperson understands how they will approach each market, territory or customer, including planning each customer visit and qualifying opportunities
- assess how the salesperson's skills are developing, and provide tips and training recommendations to fill skill or knowledge gaps
- review the pipeline in more detail, identifying issues with opportunities, clients or internal relationships, then taking action to resolve them and coaching the salesperson as needed
- ensure that current and future forecasts are sound, taking into account the salesperson's local knowledge, and ensure that the salesperson signs-on to achieving the forecast

Monthly or quarterly appraisals are good opportunities for managers to take a detailed look at each territory or market, and to assess the performance of each salesperson.

### *Sales conference*

Regular sales conferences (quarterly, bi-annual or annual) that draw together the whole sales team, or multiple sales teams, are good opportunities to look at the "big picture" and communicate major themes. They are also opportunities to reward the sales team as a whole, make awards for top performers, allow salespeople to network with business leaders and inject enthusiasm and confidence into the team.

In particular, conferences are good for:

- reinforcing specific sales techniques or sales messages

- giving information about company strategy, new product launches, market intelligence or new company procedures
- setting policy, targets and tactics for the coming period
- introducing new team members and present awards for top performers
- building team spirit and reinforcing a productive, high-energy culture
- demonstrating that the rest of the business values the efforts of the sales team, with the presence of senior leaders, and maybe by holding the conference in a nice location

### *Field visit observations*

Many sales managers find “two-up” customer visits with their sales team to be the best way of assessing performance. During the visit, the sales manager should take a back seat, resisting the inevitable temptation to intervene when they know they can do better than the salesperson. By observing and not taking part, the sales manager builds a complete picture of how the salesperson can improve.

After the visit, the sales manager should spend time walking through the visit with the salesperson, providing immediate coaching, resolving issues and identifying training needs. Over time, these visits will improve the manager/salesperson relationship and improve the performance of each salesperson.

### *Everyday actions*

As well as the regular programmed activities, sales managers need to be on-hand to deliver the everyday management support that all team members need. In a sales environment, these are typically:

- resolving issues – being on-hand when needed to resolve customer-specific, company or personal issues, coaching the salesperson if needed
- providing intelligence or leads – managers should always be on the look-out for intelligence and prospects, using their contacts and experience to help their salespeople find new leads and progress existing opportunities
- sharing success – a big deal to a salesperson might not be a big deal to the manager, but the sales manager needs to show appreciation and enthusiasm whenever a deal is closed
- allocating rewards – managers and their teams benefit if the manager has some authority to allocate financial or non-financial rewards

### **Conclusion**

A good performance management routine, combined with day-to-day support, direction and coaching will allow managers to get the best from their team. Managers need to tread a fine line between empowerment and control, but the right management regime will make this balance easier to strike, and will make the sales team more receptive to management input.

## About LoganLea

LoganLea specialises in defining and implementing effective change within sales operations. Supporting business and sales leaders to manage, support and lead high performance sales teams and individuals. Our resource base consists of FTSE100 Sales Directors, sales change specialists and functional experts. Call us to discuss how we can help .