

What's Holding You Back From Coaching Your People?



Coaching is now widely viewed as an important tool for developing sales excellence. It's also frequently cited as a key lever for driving growth. In fact, sales coaching often ranks as the single most important manager activity impacting both performance and retention.



Our research of over 200 sales leaders, conducted earlier this year with The Sales Management Association, confirms this trend: 76% of organizations rated coaching as “strategically important to reaching their targets this year.” So why, then, did more than three-fourths of these companies report that they do too little or even no coaching at all?

Despite the mountain of evidence about coaching's benefits, the vast majority of sales managers don't coach — or at least not well. More than half the firms participating in our study said the coaching in their organizations is ineffective. From our research, it's clear: Even though companies tout its importance, coaching remains poorly understood, inconsistently executed and inadequately supported.

Some organizations do “get it right,” however, and they're reaping the rewards. Companies that rated themselves as “effective” at sales coaching reported a 9% improvement in sales performance vs. the competition. Not only that, managers who do coach — especially when it's effective and consistent —

experienced measurable goal achievement and revenue gains.

Barriers to a Coaching Culture...and the Fallout

What's holding so many companies back? We uncovered a number of barriers, including:

Lack of a clear definition: Only 25% of the respondents have a published definition of sales coaching and its activities. Over 63% have no agreed-upon definition, relying instead on individual managers to decide what it is, what it isn't, when they should do it and how often.

Lack of accountability: Without a common definition, language, tactics and processes holding them accountable, sales managers tend to default to avoidance behaviors (“I don't have time to coach”) and revert back to old habits. It's easier to focus on closing the deal yourself rather than supporting and nurturing talent from the sidelines.

Lack of confidence: People like to do things they're confident they can do well. In our survey, 55% of sales managers reported that they've never had any training in coaching, so it's not surprising that they choose to do something else, even if they value coaching.

What happens when effective coaching isn't part of the culture?

Turnover spikes. Some salespeople may not receive the necessary support to develop their skills and stay motivated, while high performers may feel like they've maxed out — or are just sick of picking up the slack.

Performance issues fester. Salespeople who aren't equipped to handle challenging situations or close deals will continue to struggle.

Sales managers' time is diverted. They'll have to step in and take over when they should be managing, not selling. They may also have to spend time trying to reengage a demotivated, demoralized team that can't hit the numbers.

Building a Coaching Culture: What Works

If you want to improve sales coaching frequency and effectiveness, here are some lessons you can take from our study:

- **Train your managers:** Organizations that implement strategies to provide “coaching for coaches” showed a 23% lift in performance over those that don't.
- **Invest the time:** Organizations spending 9+ hours of coaching per week per manager outperform companies that coach 2.5 hours or less per week by more than 12%.
- **Go beyond skills focus:** Successful sales coaches focus on an individual's motivation for selling and what they see as possible for themselves, addressing self-limiting behaviors to build self-confidence and accelerate performance improvement. These organizations outperform others by 20%.
- **Coach top performers:** Firms that coach high-performing salespeople realize 10% higher sales goal achievement and create a wall of protection around their most valuable salespeople.

Coaching Proficiency: Know Your Level

Consider where you fall in the four levels of coaching proficiency scale:

Novice: “Bare-bones” at best. Sales coaching is performed at the manager's discretion and isn't part of a broader talent management strategy. Ongoing, structured coaching is rare, but when it does happen,

it's typically focused around company information and requirements. (*Two or fewer hours/week of coaching*).

Beginner: *Scattered, but not critical to personal or company success.* Coaching may happen around quarterly reviews, often focusing on shortcomings and product/service knowledge. If salespeople ask for coaching, they may or may not get it. If managers are required to coach, it's up to them to decide how, when and what to do. (*2-5 hours/week of coaching*).

Mature: *Encouraged and valued by senior leadership.* Managers see coaching as a good use of time, but sometimes they cancel sessions because they're busy with pipeline issues and deals. Salespeople see coaching as important to their development. Coaching is focused on developing skills and is provided to all salespeople, both through consistently scheduled and ad hoc sessions. Managers also receive training to build their coaching skills. (*5-10 hours/week of coaching*).

Advanced: *Critical to success, a key leadership competency, built into talent management systems.* Senior leaders hold managers accountable, assess coaching effectiveness and reward them for developing people. They also provide managers with consistent coaching, building confidence and independence that cascades throughout the organization. Coaching sessions, which are mostly scheduled and rarely canceled, are provided to all salespeople. Salespeople welcome coaching because it's personalized and they feel understood, motivated and inspired. (*10+ hours/week of coaching*).

Where would you honestly rank your organization? What would it take to shift to a higher coaching proficiency? How you answer those two questions can have very real impact on the results your sales team achieves. ■

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