

Coaching for Sales Leaders

by Peggy Besand

Salespeople collectively have different characteristics from other types of professionals within a company. They are driven (and compensated) by achievement. They are boundary spanners. They are stressed. Most of them are salespeople because they like the freedom to do their own thing.

The sales professional's job is sometimes exhilarating, other times depressing. As a result, managing them is often a challenge. In the interest of long-term corporate sustainability and customer satisfaction, sales leaders must assemble and manage teams of well-trained, highly motivated people who consistently make their numbers. So how do they inspire, lead, and support their sales teams? As it turns out, even the most seasoned sales leaders make mistakes from time to time.

I belong to a LinkedIn group: Sales/Marketing VPs and Directors—Software and Technology. I posted the following question: "What are the most common mistakes today's sales leaders are making?" The responses seemed wildly varied, but they consistently fit into five categories. Their representative responses appear below.

Know Your Customers and How They Buy.

"They change sales reps/account managers without advance notice or consideration from the customers' point of view. Customers expect consistency, stability, and knowledge from salespeople. Change will always happen, but outstanding communication with customers about impending change really puts them on your team instead of giving them the perception that you don't care."

"Not having a system in place for nurturing relationships with their customers. After all, this is where the fastest and easiest sales and referrals come from. The same system can be used for building relationships with prospects and 'prospects-in-waiting.'"

"Chasing RFPs versus creating sales cycles because of an inability to access and engage higher in prospect organizations in ways that can create curiosity, credibility, and interest in your ideas. This leads to a pipeline made up of 90+% of RFPs and commodity-type transactional competes versus a pipeline made up of at least 40+% of opportunities where their team created the need."

"Lack of the proper go-to-market strategy and market-ready messages for the buying process that their target market and sweet spot prefers."

"Lack of key relationships and alignment with their customer's personal and business agendas."



TAKEAWAY. Successful sales leaders know that a defined sales process built around customer behaviors and desired outcomes optimizes business operations and keeps the focus on delivering value to the customer. By working through a defined sales process, sellers can validate the value offered and delivered to—and acknowledged by—the customer at every stage in the sales process.

BEST PRACTICE. Customers value the consistent way that selling organizations sell to them. Effective sales leaders map their sales process to **what the seller wants the customer to do at each stage of the sales process**. These progress markers—or customer outcomes—tell sellers whether they have achieved a landmark point of concurrence with the customer, and how well they have managed activities related to that outcome. By implementing such a process, sales leaders ensure that sellers have a customer-outcome view of what is transpiring and what critical actions will move them steadily toward reaching those outcomes and moving a step ahead in closing the opportunity.

Know Your People.

“Resorting to training as the best way to address behind-plan results versus finding the real barriers to sales effectiveness and addressing them.”

“Not allowing their direct reports to do the job that they’re paid to do. Delegate and have the faith that they’ll get the job done.”

“Not knowing how their people use their time.”

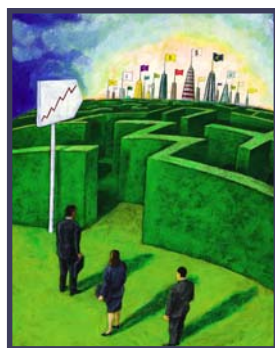
“Inconsistent go-to-market readiness among salespeople.”



TAKEAWAY. Successful sales leaders are diligent in defining skills they expect sales professionals to have to do their job. They assess each individual contributor, providing personalized access for skills improvement and establishing career paths and success planning.

BEST PRACTICE. The most successful sales leaders analyze how frequently their sales teams apply skills in specific customer and internal circumstances. With this data in hand, they develop skill paths associated with their selling teams’ required skills to improve the teams’ performance capabilities. More importantly, they embrace and reinforce the desired change in behavior. They follow up with regular, periodic assessments based on performance data and qualitative judgment. These assessments provide the sales leader with clear paths to improve the performance of individual contributors, as well as the sales team as a whole. Using skill assessments for succession planning and skills development ensures readiness for the inevitable changes that occur in sales organizations.

Know Your Processes.



“Creating a compensation framework that is misaligned with the business’ strategic objectives and goals. This creates tension between delivering incremental sales and achieving corporate goals.”

“Expecting that CRMs will somehow manage both the business and the people versus having person-to-person dialogues and coaching.”

“I would say that as a whole, sales leaders make the biggest mistake when they drive sales teams to perform day-to-day (meaning short-term and immediate sales), but are always talking about longer-

term issues with customers and have to deal with longer-term buying cycles. You pay/reward for one kind of action, but voice and expect them to act in another.”

“Often sales managers lack an effective program or approach for helping their salespeople have the right conversations with the right people at the right time. With a numbers mentality, they try to save the day, often causing internal confusion and disruption.”

“Sales cycles built on logic that can be supported by a business rationale versus emotion (personal driving mechanisms).”

“Lack of a consistent approach and governance process to install a predictable, scalable sales system and process.”

“Being more concerned about activity versus the effectiveness of the activity and the results it generates. They don’t have a systematic approach to coaching. Instead, they use numbers to measure activity versus coaching for productive outcomes.”

TAKEAWAY. Too often company executives (outside of the CSO) are interested in the *results* generated by the sales organization, but not how they are achieved. Yet, high-performance sales leaders focus on the *how* in order to rapidly exploit competitive gaps and best practices. They leverage the quantitative knowledge gained from disciplined, predictive, commercial processes to direct sales teams, engage customers, and drive extraordinary results.

BEST PRACTICE. The best sales leaders understand the systems and processes that their teams are using—both those that make them successful and those that impede their productivity. The leader’s job is to provide actionable processes and tools that align the critical thinking of their sales teams with the objectives set by management. The most important element of their processes is the knowledge found in predictability, in discipline.

Effective sales leaders establish best practices groups within their sales departments. These groups capture, codify, and scale repeatable best practices across their company. They institutionalize a program of sharing and deploying best practices within your organization. The idea is intuitively obvious; its activation requires intentionality and commitment. One of our clients uses every sales meeting as a forum for best practice discussions, asking high performers to share best practices with the team.

Know Your Solutions.

“Failure to keep their portfolio of services/products refreshed to meet future market requirements, or holding onto a ‘cash cow’ for too long and not developing ‘rising stars.’”

“Inability to know how to bundle their products and services in order to create more compelling business solutions”

“Developing a culture of innovation whilst introducing overly complex governance and processes that dilute the creative abilities of sales.”

TAKEAWAY. In order to enable a high-performance sales team, sales leaders must be able to clearly communicate the value of their offerings so it is understood by the selling teams and their customers. We see successful sales leaders simplifying their ever-increasing complex set of solutions. The ease with which their selling teams can articulate—and their customers can understand—the company’s solutions and value significantly enhances their scope of influence with your customers.



BEST PRACTICE. For many sales leaders, *activating a solution framework process and implementing solution value chains* are critical components of their go-to-market processes. They know that to attain given goals to win new customers or gain additional wallet share from existing customers, their sales teams must systematically view customers through the broader lens of their entire solution set. A solution framework provides that lens.

Selling teams recognize that selling the entire portfolio of solutions is critical to their company's success. But the savvy sales leader recognizes that each member of the team has varying confidence in a given capability or solution. Using the solution framework and value chains encourages discussions of what is possible, both internally and with customers. It increases the courage and confidence of their sales team, enhancing their ability to deliver messages that are heard, messages that stick to their customers. The sales leader knows that once the team and their customers understand what is possible, then the selling begins.

Know Your Results.

"Trying to manage results via monthly (sometimes more often) "bottom-of-the-funnel feeding frenzies" versus managing the process and sales activities required (meaningful funnel and/or activity plans) to achieve success."

"Commending sales reps for a large pipeline versus a qualified pipeline."

"Not understanding the six major reasons why they lose deals and the three major reasons that lead to success."

"Over-reliance on capturing demand versus creating demand. Instead of trying to find customers who are looking for a solution and are about to issue an RFP (which leads to transactional competitions), help alert customers about unseen or underestimated opportunities or risks in their business. This leads to building more trusting relationships that enable more effective sales cycles."

TAKEAWAY. Timely, trusted data and actionable metrics drive sales decisions, both strategic and tactical. Timely decisions drive increased sales performance, leading to greater revenue and profit. Effective sales leaders identify and measure key mathematical performance indicators that help them pinpoint problems and proactively manage change.

BEST PRACTICE. Knowing what actionable metrics to measure is a critical requirement for successfully managing sales performance. Successful sales leaders access, consolidate, and evaluate data from lagging, in-process, and leading performance indicators to reflect a single version of the truth, enhancing their timely decisions and, ultimately, the sales performance of their selling organization. Leaders who demonstrate discipline and predictable rhythm in their actions and cascade that discipline throughout the customer-facing organization consistently produce extraordinary results for their customers and their company.

Just as salespeople are unique in their characteristics and what they individually bring to a job, so are the managers that strive to guide and support them. But the collective weaknesses cited above confirm that successful sales leaders require discipline to press for short-term results, plan for the long-term, and institutionalize successful behaviors through coaching, processes, and rhythm.



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