

Promote Your Best

Michael Jordan is widely considered one of the greatest basketball players of our time. From his initial career in college basketball to leading the Chicago Bulls to 6 championships, he emerged as one of the stars of the league with prolific scoring, slam dunks and his entertaining leaping abilities. Throughout his career, his super star profile has attracted other stars to him such as Scottie Pippen, Dennis Rodman and Horace Grant. Together their combined talents have delivered award-winning results.

Where would the NBA be if it had not promoted its stars? Not all top performing athletes make great leaders or coaches, and even some fail, but overall the team managers and top coaches are former top performers. In sales it's no different! Top performing sales people are your best source for great sales managers.

You don't have to look far to find articles, blogs or opinions that claim great salespeople do not make great sales managers. Does this viewpoint come from people who have never achieved quota busting performances year-over-year? Have they never taken the next career step to leading their peers as the sales manager? I believe common sense speaks louder than all these critics.

What are the advantages of promoting a top sales person to the role of sales manager?

People need room to grow their careers. For sales people, consistent performance in achieving quota, handling difficult sales challenges and conducting the sales process in a professional manner are important thresholds. Through time sales people acquire the stories and anecdotes of your company that facilitate the delivery of the key selling points of your products and services. Once a role or task is mastered, it's human nature to look for new challenges to build on their expertise and depth of experience. If a company decides not to promote from within then they may become the farm team for another organization that is willing to take the risk of hiring and promoting the best.

Corporate culture is embodied in new employees in their initialization period. It takes time to acquire, and even more time to arrive at the point where sales people can evangelize the corporate messages to customers. The role of a sales manager is to instill the brand messages and corporate culture into new sales reps, and to quality control the messages delivered by incumbent sales people to their customers. Sales managers that have been hired from within are much more effective in this area.

Top producing sales people build a reputation and profile for success. This creates an audience of followers from their peer group and the opportunity to lead by example. People gravitate to winners, just as Michael Jordan drew winners to his team. Everyone wants a piece of the success to rub off on them, or to inspire them to greater heights. Just imagine the morale of your sales team if you promoted the lowest quota achiever.

So which top performing sales people make great sales managers?

As a former VP of sales in a professional services company, the challenge I faced was to identify top performing sales people that could be groomed and developed for the next

step in their career. The identification of the new branch sales manager was not based exclusively on their individual sales achievements.

Traits that make a person stand out for promotion include a clear adoption of the company's values and brand messages, the self-directed stamina to move forward to the next sales opportunity and their overall sales track record.

It is important that the top producer embraces the company culture and values and is able to espouse it to anyone they encounter. I also look for motivation from within; someone who is self directed and has the backbone to pick themselves up when they encounter a difficult sales transaction and can move on without being bogged down by the setback. Sales track record through good times and tough times is a key indicator for future success. However, you may find you have to compromise a little when you are launching a new business unit through a rocky start up period.

But there's still more that I look for with top performers. It is important that the candidate has the intellect to take on a new role. If the need to move their career forward is driven by external forces and not coming from within, then the promotion could be flawed. Without the complete buy in and the intellectual capacity to transition to a new role, the new sales manager may always be questioning and regretful of their decision.

Sales people love to sell. This is a process of listening to the buyer, discovering their specific needs, persuading them to your point of view and motivating the client to buy. Likewise sales managers should mirror this profile. I look for candidates that are open to sharing their expertise in an altruistic manner with their team: someone who is prepared to step into a coaching and mentoring role, someone who is willing to train rookies and mentor the pros, and someone who can take on a strategic role in closing business and achieving the collective goals of the sales team.

Identifying and promoting a top sales producer is best done from your own ranks. Take the time to groom people for a longer journey with your organization and reap the long-term benefits. Once you have identified your next great manager, then it's time to build a comprehensive mentoring and transition program to ensure success in their new role.

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