

Sales to Sales Manager

It's a common assumption. A good sales manager should first be a good salesperson, right? Wrong. It is a big jump from being a skilled "doer" to being a skilled "coach of doers."

In many cases, the top sales person is an enigma. Salespeople are ego-driven and competitive and want to be recognized and rewarded. But like a cup with a hole in the bottom, no matter how much water you add Monday, it needs to be refilled by Tuesday. Top salespeople are often driven by ego-validation that comes from each sale and public recognition, and it never stops.

On the other hand, a top sales manager enjoys stepping back and letting others take credit. He or she takes pleasure in the success of subordinates and has a "smaller cup" to keep filled. Sales managers are like gardeners, tending and nurturing promising salespeople, having the patience to wait and watch them mature.

Defining Top

"Top" and "skilled" do not necessarily mean the same thing. Top salespeople are often measured by dollars or accomplishments; that is, the score at the end of the game. And like most folks, bosses tend to ignore how he or she got to the top.

For example, I once objected when a salesperson told a client we could do a job for 50K. I knew from experience the quote was about 1/5 what the final project would cost. The salesperson griped to the president; I was told to do the work; the salesperson won a sales award; and the client went wild when he saw the final bill. (Yes. It was my fault. I was unable to control the 80% gap. Shame on me. Mea culpa.)

Not only do top-dollar salespeople usually bend the truth to fit their ego needs, they often operate on automatic pilot. That is, top producers seem to instinctively know what to do and what to say. It is one of their gifts.

But instinct is often not something that can be broken down into coaching activities. The clue to an instinctive salesperson is, when someone asks for advice, they reply, "Watch...and learn."

If learning were that easy, then we would all be experts just by watching a videotape. This instinctive condition is called "unconscious competence." In other words, the person is unaware of why he or she is good; it just happens naturally.

A skilled producer, on the other hand, knows exactly what to do and when to do it. He or she can break down sales into small clusters of behavior such as initial relationship skills, questioning and discovery techniques, strategic analysis of the situation, and so forth. The big difference is the skilled performer is conscious of his or her competence: he or she knows when to choose certain skills. It's not an automatic reaction; it's a conscious decision.

The combination of sales-ethical behavior and general awareness of the situation generally makes the skilled salesperson successful, but not a top-dollar producer. Truly skilled salespeople put full effort on (this is a very important point) solving customers' problems, not persuading people to buy. As such, the skilled salesperson will walk away from bad business because it is bad business.

Technical Knowledge

Both the skilled salesperson and skilled manager are knowledgeable. They know their product or service thoroughly; they know the marketplace; and they understand the world where their customers' live.

A top-dollar salesperson, on the other hand, often blows off product knowledge as unimportant. These blowhards often claim they can "sell anything to anyone" (based entirely on their own opinion of themselves). They don't seem to understand that people generally dislike being sold something they don't want or need; further, people who feel manipulated make poor repeat customers.

Sales Skills

The skilled manager thoroughly understands how the sales process is divided into skills-sets that float back and forth. Relationship skills are necessary to open the dialogue and keep communications flowing. The main relationship skill is the art of helping the prospect or client feel comfortable.

Primarily, it includes words and actions that create an environment where the prospect feels he or she is the most important person in the universe. It includes projecting confidence, product and market knowledge, true empathy, and personal understanding.

Relating skills are brought into play when meeting, asking questions, encountering resistance, and giving assurances. If you think genuine relationship skills are difficult for an ego-centered person, you are right.

Fact-finding and discovery skills are the second most important skill-set. These include all the open and closed-ended questions associated with learning about the prospect's environment (i.e., what is happening in the marketplace, how it affects him or her, what's happening in the organization, their personal fears and aspirations).

The objective of discovery skills is for both prospect and salesperson to come to the same conclusion at the same time: "AHA! Here is a problem worth solving!"

A fly on the wall witnessing these two skill sets would see people chatting and discussing work. There would be no pitching. The salesperson would be gently fact-finding, offering helpful suggestions, and encouraging the flow of conversation. His or her objective would be to discover whether the prospect had a problem that needed a solution.

For example, it won't do for a bypass-surgery salesperson to approach a weight-challenged prospect and ask, "Have you ever noticed your head is much too small for your body?" Sensitive people might find this question offensive.

A skilled salesperson, on the other hand, would take time to know the prospect as a human being and through discussion, both would agree that weighing 500 pounds was not only unhealthy and uncomfortable, but he or she would never be able to compete in the annual cardiac ward break-dance competition. Now we move into the third skill-set: sales nirvana!

Sales nirvana is when the salesperson finally gets to take center stage. He or she gets to talk. This is the time to recommend solutions, discuss why they will solve the problem, why they are the best of all solutions, and why they will continue to be effective both now and in the future. Eighty percent of all salespeople I evaluate tend to think this is the only part to selling.

However, unless our weight-challenged prospect decided to drop 65% of their body weight at 1 p.m., and a bypass-surgery salesperson walked in with a solution at 1:05, being "at the right time and the right place" takes work.

Of course, not all sales calls go this smoothly, and most prospects waffle back and forth between relating, discovering and solving until they reach a decision. Skilled sales managers recognize these separate stages for what they are and know exactly what to do next. That's what makes them good coaches. They are conscious of the sales process and competent to act (or coach) accordingly.

On the other hand, top-dollar sales producers dance through the sales process like Savion Glover, Gregory Hines, and Fred Astaire all rolled into one. "Watch and learn," they shout as their blazing feet disappear into a blur of motion. Right.

Conclusion

There are a few very important points to make about salespeople and sales managers. For one thing, in their efforts to keep top-dollar salespeople happy, bosses often unwittingly destroy them by giving them a promotion. (If the bosses are lucky, the incompetent sales manager will quit before the rest of the sales force is decimated). Wouldn't it be better to let salespeople realize beforehand that management is not a promotion, it is an assignment to a different job requiring entirely different skills?

Another important point is sales skills and management skills are seldom interchangeable. When hiring a salesperson, look for someone who thoroughly understands each step in the sales process, not someone who is skilled at selling wastebaskets (or ashtrays) to the VP of Sales. Don't fall in love with the sales pitch; selling is more about fact-finding than persuading.

When hiring a sales manager, look for someone who not only knows the sales process, but is able to develop specific skill-sets among the existing sales staff. Forget about turning top-producing salespeople into skilled managers; this seldom happens.

After all, your head is not too small for your body, is it?



Dr. Wendell Williams (www@ScientificSelection.com) is a bottom-line consultant with a message: how to avoid nonsense HR practices, how to identify employees in the top 20%, and how to manage their performance effectively. He holds memberships in the American Psychological Association, The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology and The Association of Test Publishers. His website is www.ScientificSelection.com, and his phone number is (770) 792-6857.

Article was Reprinted with permission from ERE Media (www.ere.net)