

How to Coach a Sales Rep.

By Geoffrey James

One of the most important, and often most neglected, job responsibilities of the sales manager is coaching reps. Unfortunately, many sales managers don't know how to coach. I asked Linda Richardson (one of the world's top sales trainers and founder of the sales training firm Richardson) how sales managers can be better coaches. Here's an excerpt from that interview:

GJ: What is coaching, exactly?

LR: The big misconception is that coaching and evaluation are the same thing, simply because sales managers must be able to both. Evaluation is a rear-view mirror into what happened over the last fiscal period. Coaching is working with a person on a day-to-day basis to improve their performance. When the two are combined, the sales rep rightly feels that he or she is being graded, rather than helped. And that makes it more difficult to learn.

GJ: Why don't some sales managers like to coach?

LR: Most of the time, they say that they don't have the time. While it's true that managers are busy, there are few activities that are likely to have a bigger impact on revenue and profit than working one-on-

one with sales reps to improve their performance. This doesn't mean that managers should be spending all of their time coaching, but that it needs to be part of their contribution to the company's success.

GJ: What's the best way to coach a sales rep?

LR: The process is relatively simple. The manager watches the sales rep during a selling situation and observes where the rep may be encountering problems. After the sales call, the manager asks the rep where he or she could have done better. If necessary, the manager helps the rep clarify the problem areas. The manager then asks the rep how he or she could have handled the situation differently in order to avoid the problem. Once they agree upon a better approach, the manager helps the rep rehearse the new approach. They should then both agree upon a future follow-up to revisit the issue to see whether there's been improvement.

GJ: What's the biggest mistake the managers make when coaching?

LR: Telling rather than showing. In most cases, the rep will not want to talk about problems and will simply give a short answer when asked what could have been better. At that point, it's very easy

for the sales manager to simply tell the rep what was wrong and how to fix it, rather than patiently working with the rep to identify real weaknesses and figure out ways to strengthen them.

Now that you've got the straight scoop, print this blog post out and slip it under your manager's door. Unless you're already a sales manager, of course.

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