



Coaching One Thing At A Time

By Linda Richardson on Feb 27, 2007 | Sales Management



A Sales Manager expressed concern about using the Richardson Developmental Sales Coaching approach with the poor performers who reported to him. His fear was that he would never get anywhere with the Developmental Sales Coaching approach because he would be working on only one thing at a time, and there was so much to correct with his poor performers. His usual approach was to give feedback on the full sales call (Preparation, Opening, Needs, Solution, Objections, Close) each time he coached. When we asked him how this broad-brush coaching approach was working, he said he was not seeing much improvement.

He agreed to try the developmental approach of coaching on one or two things at a time, focusing each time on a priority and setting a specific action step to follow up on. This limited focus would also help reduce most of his coaching sessions to less than 15 minutes.

A synopsis of his coaching session (which focused on questioning) looked like this:

Sales Manager: "How do you feel you used questions to learn about the client's needs?"

Salesperson: "I asked him a few questions and got the information I needed."

Sales Manager: "Yes, you did ask a few questions. What did you learn about his needs?"

Salesperson: "The client was pretty clear in telling me ... (technical details)."

Sales Manager: "I agree. He was pretty clear, but what about the needs driving those requirements? What did you learn about why he had the objective to ...?"

Salesperson: "I didn't get into that because I feel I understand why most clients want that based on my experience ..."

Sales Manager: "I agree that you are experienced. Let me give you my perceptions. I saw an opportunity for you to probe a lot more. When he said ... you simply talked about our product. You never asked why he needed ... so your presentation was fairly generic. How do you feel about probing more before you discuss our solution?"

Salesperson: "I really didn't think of it, but it would have helped because he later said ... which caused him to express concern about ..."

Sales Manager: "What do you think the obstacle was to asking questions?"

Salesperson: "I didn't want to take too much time or upset him with too many questions."

Sales Manager: "What questions might you have asked that, without wasting time or upsetting the client, could have added to the call?"

Together, they brainstormed not only the questions that should have been asked, but also how to ask questions and use questions to provide focus and shorten vs. lengthen the call. The Sales Manager ended the coaching session by getting the salesperson's agreement to prepare and increase the questions she asks before she suggests solutions.

The Outcome: The Sales Manager reported that during his next observation, the salesperson actually asked need and drill-down questions, created a better dialogue, and, as a result, was more persuasive because what she presented was customized to the client's needs.

Of course, as a manager, you are under pressure to make changes that will impact performance as fast as possible. Certainly, a sense of urgency is required — but when it comes to development and learning, most people can really only learn a few things at a time, particularly when it comes to a skill because there are multiple dimensions to every skill. For example, to help your salespeople become better at asking questions, it is important to teach questioning skills (such as open-ended, prefacing with a benefit, acknowledging before asking your next question, drilling down to clarify vague words, and tactfully phrasing questions), as well as the sequence of questions and, of course, the content of questions to ask — i.e., what the key questions are to ask and what to listen for.

Taking one solid coaching step at a time can be the fastest way to help you and your salespeople reach their goals.