

Developing Successful Sales Managers

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A GREAT SALES MANAGER? ACHIEVE-GLOBAL RESEARCH INDICATES THAT THE MOST EFFECTIVE SALES MANAGERS ARE MULTI-FACETED, DRAWING ON A NUMBER OF DIVERSE COMPETENCIES TO OPTIMIZE THEIR SALES TEAMS' PERFORMANCE.

Highly successful sales managers communicate both upward and downward. They recognize and develop individual abilities and efforts, while at the same time promoting a collaborative, cooperative team environment. They encourage autonomy by delegating responsibility, yet continually track and monitor individual performance. Visionaries with the ability to see the big picture, they also keep a sharp eye on details. They are an intermediate for upper management and a champion for employee causes. In other words, being an effective sales manager means balancing numerous, and often conflicting, demands.

A great sales person will not necessarily be a great, or even good, sales manager, because the competencies are very different, for example, team vs. individual focus, education vs. execution in the sales call, and the ability to make decisions on a market-specific basis rather than an account-specific basis.

Through interviews with decision makers, the collection and analysis of more than 2,000 examples of actual sales behaviors, and a review of the literature, AchieveGlobal's research (500 participants in 10 countries) concluded the following: (1) competencies define success in sales management; (2) these competencies can be combined into roles; (3) some roles may be more important than others, depending upon the situation; and (4) but all roles are ultimately required for success. The three roles identified through our research are those of strategist, coach, and communicator.

THE STRATEGIST

The strategist must simultaneously see the big picture and keep close watch on the details. The sales manager adept at this role considers grand strategies while managing expectations and actual performance. As a result, the manager contributes both to establishing direction and building sales-team confidence. It is in this role that the sales manager most often acts as the decision maker regarding resource decisions, proceeding with sales activities, penetrating a market, or agreeing to the terms of a sale. Typically viewed as the toughest role for a sales manager, this varies the most significantly across organizations.

Regardless of organizational structure, the sales manager is key to ensuring that strategy is executed

in the field and that sales activities are aligned with business objectives. Specific attributes of the successful strategist and how such a manager engenders positive behaviors within the sales team include:

Create, communicate, and execute a vision for the sales organization: The best strategists develop and communicate vision and mission, make decisions that further organizational objectives, and support and enforce (and if necessary, modify) company policies. This results in a shared vision as well as direction for navigating channel conflict, prioritizing leads, and prospecting.

Develop and maintain a strategic approach to the marketplace: To provide market expertise, sales managers must offer in-depth market analysis, including segmentation, purchasing behaviors, competition, and trends. Managers use this information to formulate an approach to the market, recommend and execute business development initiatives, and determine how best to position the products or services. Depending on the corporate infrastructure, this function may be shared with the marketing department.

Manage resources effectively: Meeting supply and demand requirements with regard to sales staff, financial resources, channel partners, and suppliers are key elements of this function. Perhaps most challenging, though, is taking responsibility for the team's contribution to the bottom line.

Maintain a current knowledge base: Successful sales managers maintain the knowledge level needed to assist in sales calls and develop strategic planning initiatives. Listening to the field sales team is one of the best ways to keep market knowledge current.

Potential pitfalls of the strategist role: A sales manager who is almost exclusively a strategist may excel at being a visionary. But with a lack of focus on the other two roles, this manager may become disappointed in the team's inability to turn the vision into reality. In turn, team members may view the manager as detached from the realities of the marketplace and/or hard to approach.

THE COACH

The coach instills high-performance behaviors and processes within the salesforce, including build-



Seleste Lunsford, senior product manager, sales portfolio, and Mark Marone, Ph.D., senior research manager, at AchieveGlobal, Tampa, Fla., an international provider of skills training and consulting services in customer service, sales performance, and leadership, make a case for what it takes to be a great sales manager.

ing teams, assisting in sales activities, developing skills, supporting careers, and motivating individuals. Often deemed the most important role by salespeople, this role is often the one most neglected because of internal constraints or lack of coaching skills. Key attributes and performance examples of the coach include:

Build cohesive teams: Sales teams should be greater than the sum of their parts, with the ability to collaborate on projects and share information among members. Effective sales managers ensure return on investment by recruiting top performers, using the most current tools, setting performance standards, resolving conflicts, promoting team spirit, delegating decision making, and treating members equitably, while still recognizing performers with the greatest potential for success.

Develop individual skills: The performance of all team members must constantly be improved, whether through behavioral observation, skill assessment, regular reviews, targeted coaching, or training. Managers should be sure to execute the necessary support steps, both before and after formal training, to ensure that reps benefit from the investment. These support steps include commitment building, skill assessment, reinforcement, application to specific work responsibilities, and ongoing evaluation.

Motivate individuals on the team: Sales managers need to recognize and motivate based on each individual's style and needs. Moving well beyond quotas and incentives, they should use verbal recognition, performance management, and communication to motivate and evoke enthusiasm.

Assist in sales activities: Sales managers can gain respect from the sales team by participating in the sales process at the appropriate level. This includes

using their network of contacts to identify prospects, leveraging their understanding of the big picture, and strategizing account plans. The goal is to help close business without taking over the sales process and becoming a sales person again.

Pitfalls of the coach role: Sales managers who devote their time to coaching at the expense of the other roles may not unleash the full potential of team members. Although they may be successful at managing a mature market, they may experience difficulty expanding beyond organic growth and are often out of touch with corporate objectives.

THE COMMUNICATOR

The role of communicator entails upward and downward communication and creating a culture of information sharing. Competencies and examples include:

Communicate to other parts of the organization: Superior sales managers are viewed by their teams as conduits to upper management. Most frequently, this involves accurate forecasts and reporting, acting as a field advocate, and paving the way for interdepartmental cooperation.

Communicate from other parts of the organization: Effective sales managers communicate with team members to help them understand corporate market and product strategies. Once team members can view actions in relation to the bigger picture, they are more likely to exhibit supportive behaviors.

Solicit and value feedback: Sales reps know better than anyone what customers think and want. Managers must not only solicit the team's opinions and suggestions, but also incorporate that input into decision making.

Facilitate communication among team members: Effective sales managers create a team culture of communication about customers, accounts, and best practices. Furthermore, they provide reps with access to a formal mechanism for facilitating the sharing of information. This can be enabled through team (and cross-team) meetings, collaborative activities, mentoring programs, intranet portals, salesforce automation software, or

HOW DO YOUR SALES MANAGERS RATE?

Not all competencies, or even a high level of proficiency in each, are required in all cases. In fact, there are instances when a sales manager only needs to draw on one or two of the roles. Ultimately, however, all three roles are required to optimize the performance of a sales team. Even a team of superstars needs a manager who can successfully navigate all three.

Below is a thumbnail assessment that provides some high-level insight into how well your sales managers fill the three roles.

SALES MANAGER ROLES AND COMPETENCIES

(1 = Extremely Ineffective; 5 = Extremely Effective)

COACH

Build a cohesive team

1 2 3 4 5

Develop professional skills of individuals in the sales organization

1 2 3 4 5

Motivate individuals in the sales organization

1 2 3 4 5

Assist in sales call activities

1 2 3 4 5

Total:

STRATEGIST

Create, communicate, and execute a vision for the sales organization

1 2 3 4 5

Develop an approach to the marketplace

1 2 3 4 5

Manage resources effectively

1 2 3 4 5

Maintain current knowledge base

1 2 3 4 5

Total:

COMMUNICATOR

Communicate effectively to other parts of the organization

1 2 3 4 5

Communicate information from other parts of the organization to sales staff

1 2 3 4 5

Solicit and value feedback from the sales team

1 2 3 4 5

Facilitate communication among team members

1 2 3 4 5

Total:

Scoring: Total Points

17 - 20: Extremely effective in this role

14 - 16: Demonstrates sufficient skills in this role

9 - 13: Needs to work on improving skills in this role

4 - 8: Focus efforts on acquiring skills in this role

Source: AchieveGlobal, Tampa, Fla. For more information, visit achieveglobal.com.

any combination thereof. The key is to make it easy and comfortable for reps to share information with each other.

Potential pitfalls of the communicator: Managers who excel at communication, at the expense of the other two roles, are often perceived as administrators who are better with details than with the big picture. As a result, the territory may never progress beyond the status quo.

ENABLING AND INHIBITING

AchieveGlobal's research also gleaned information on management styles, described by salespeople as either an "enabler" or "inhibitor." Based on the comments of those interviewed, an enabling management style allows the sales manager to execute the three roles more easily, thereby assisting sales reps in performing at their peak. Those identified as having an enabling management style were more successful in meeting quotas, while those with an inhibiting style typically had higher turnover rates and more revenue problems.

There's more to inhibiting than just the management style. Organizations can present inhibitors as well. Elements of the organization such as training and development, marketing, and senior management greatly influence whether the sales manager is able to succeed in each of the three roles. The following are examples of some of these factors:

- The strategist can be inhibited by non-integrated IT systems, lack of career path descriptions, and confusing channel strategies.
- The coach can be hindered by a lack of training and performance evaluation tools and can be overburdened with administrative tasks.
- The communicator can be constrained by an atmosphere of one-way communication, a culture that discourages interdepartmental exchange, and a lack of defined strategies.

Whatever the cause, successful sales managers must be able to understand their organization — its vision, mission, values, culture, strategies, and policies — to apply them most effectively in interactions with the sales team.

PharmaVoice welcomes comments about this article. E-mail us at feedback@pharmavoices.com.