

Who's Failing Whom?

Developing Successful Sales Managers

By Frank Sarr

When sales managers fail, we often hear management say “his district didn’t make quota,” or “he never grasped how we do things,” “he followed the wrong opportunities” and so on. But does this really explain the situation, or is there much more to consider?

Is management to blame?

In my experience, I have found many areas where management is failing in its responsibility to develop sales managers. To be sure not all companies fail in every area. However, most companies fail to varying extents in several key areas. I firmly believe if these are addressed properly, companies will see tangible near-term benefits that will drive long-term success.

Here are the areas I’m talking about:

1. Candidate Selection

Typically, a sales manager is selected on the basis of his/her superior sales record and a gut feel assessment of his/her personality traits. But does this person have the necessary skills to motivate others to sell, recruit new staff, coach under-achievers, and develop broad sales strategies, all while handling day-to-day management and administrative tasks? The answer is maybe. But are we missing the better candidate?

2. Sink or Swim Mindset

I’ve seen many instances where management simply fills a slot with a convenient choice believing that he/she has the motivation to succeed. If not they will be terminated and someone else put in the slot. This approach not only sends the wrong message to the marketplace but also fosters lower morale and even reluctance for new candidates to step forward.

3. The First 90-120 days

This is a critical time in a new sales manager’s development. It is also a time where a new manager’s energy and desire to learn are at their peak. During this period management fails the new manager when it does not deliver proper training. Missing this window is simply a fundamental mistake.

4. Best Practices Foundation

Management fails when it doesn’t equip sales managers with best practices that are inherent to sales management regardless of industry. Oftentimes, best practices are confused with those necessary for individual selling like client retention, account penetration, pipeline development, etc. What is needed is a firm grounding in areas such as coaching, motivation, team building, recruiting, and accountability.

5. Critical Mass Syndrome

For a variety of reasons, mostly related to cost and travel, management often waits until there is a critical mass of new sales managers to provide them with training as a group. This approach fails to provide new hires with training that they need almost immediately to get a fast start into their new positions. It also fails to address individual needs.

6. Delayed Investment

Many companies wait to invest in a sales manager until he/she achieves a certain level of success or tenure. I have found that trainees in this situation have low levels of buy-in, retain very little of what is presented, and generally view the activity as a boondoggle.

The need for a fresh look

The areas I have highlighted cannot be adequately addressed with a business as usual attitude. The solution certainly does not lie in traditional training courses. These fall short because of their high cost, generalized content, and lower than acceptable learning retention. Rather, what is needed is a new paradigm that incorporates the following elements:

1. Accountability

In a traditional training course the instructor presents the material, questions are answered, and the attendees return home with a binder that is often put in a bookcase to catch dust. It is not surprising that learning retention is low. What is needed is a level of accountability on the part of the trainee. By this I mean the trainee must pass the course through a final certification process in which he/she provides an oral explanation of what they learned. I have found that learning retention increases dramatically when this type of final test is incorporated into the learning process.

2. Measureability/Feedback

How often is it said that it's difficult to know if a training program really works? The solution lies in a training environment where each trainee is evaluated and reports are issued on progress achieved such as performance in facilitated meetings and demonstrated ability to implement learned skills.

3. Technology

The internet provides an excellent delivery mechanism for training purposes when used properly and in conjunction with oral and written communication. It offers the advantage that the learner can work at his or her own pace at a time that does not conflict with work schedules. For management it solves the problem of the critical mass syndrome and provides a tool to measure progress. It also ensures that a uniform level of training is delivered to each location.

To summarize, management must recognize that it is essential to play a proactive role in the development of new sales managers. It is equally important that new solutions outside the realm of traditional processes are an integral part of this process.

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