



EVERY TEAM NEEDS A COACH

Your sales team can only perform better if they are given the proper tools and leadership to increase the company's bottom line. BY MARK OKUN

Adapting to marketplace changes and remaining competitive requires every department in a business to perform better than ever. That can only happen by educating your team in the required skills and then coaching them to reach their goals.

In this article, the word "training" has been replaced several times with the word "education" because it carries a responsibility for deeper communication and a higher level of understanding.

TRAINING IS NOT COACHING

Training and coaching are widely different, but simultaneous, activities. Implementation success is defined when these two activities are performed in harmony; individually, they are less effective at reaching any goal.

Skill-building and product knowledge (PK) meetings are "event-based training" sessions that are scheduled and performed in a classroom-like setting. This style of instructor-students type of training is best when introducing new products, sharing information, and practicing skills. With any training or educational process, there should be a format or curriculum for continuity in the message and expectations.

When the objective is to increase knowledge-based skills or change behaviors, there is a new way of thinking. The ROI of educating and coaching a team is realized only when there is a commitment to a different type of work.

SETTING EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Every sales or operations goal can be reached when adopting an education objective. Express the objective to match the desired performance goal. This example is sales-focused, but the format can be applied to any purpose: "Increase show-room revenue to X by increasing closing rates from X to X," or "Increase average order size 10 percent by increasing side-sell items."

When you create a training format with expressed standards, the goal is clear, the method has been shared, and the results are defined and measured.

What you *don't* want is a generic, standardized program. Those are fine as a 101 course, but do not take into account the nuances of the business, the staff, and the community served. General information and tactics fade shortly after the training ends with a retention rate of only 10-30 percent after 30 days (which is a 70-90 percent failure rate). It's pretty hard to meet goals and increase sales with that statistic.

What causes such poor performance is the result of several compounded issues. First, there is a misunderstanding that training is *only* the transfer of information. Before effective training can happen, the processes and training activities must be built. Next, define the measurements that will indicate results as well as areas of improvement.

"Training programs share specific information, but it can't end there."

CREATING A PLAN

The next step is to define how a post-training coaching program will be used. Unlike training, coaching caters to the staffer's needs instead of the group. Record the individual's current results and future commitments in a journal, along with the work to be done before the next coaching session. Having a record helps the coach and the employee focus on their progress.

Coaching sessions are not purely a motivational or conversational meeting. While the education activity teaches skills, coaching provides one-on-one instruction and identifies personal modifications to the employee's actions. It is based on the measured and observed results on the road to reaching short or long-term goals. This is all part of a well-documented development plan designed for each individual.

Keeping the staff engaged is no easy task when expressing ideas that may be foreign to them. Include interactive exercises that support the information being shared. When execution is practiced, retention and participation increase. These group exercises include the always successful role-playing activity. Involvement and retention occur when segments of the training are assigned to the team members. Having them conducting the training will cement the learning in place and share the expert spotlight.

LEARNING NEVER STOPS

Everyone agrees that there is a need for professional development to sharpen old skills and introduce new ones. This reminds me of the famous quote by Sir Richard Branson, "*Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of the clients.*"

The pathway to professional development includes potholes to navigate around. The challenges typically involve timing, consistency, and having suitable materials to present that are relative to your business. Fortunately, there are tools available for maneuvering around these obstacles. It is counter-productive not to invest in building

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“Tell them why, show them how, coach them forward.”

the capabilities of your team no matter the goal.

For those who ask, “What happens if we invest in developing our people and then they leave us?” I say, “What happens if we don’t, and they stay?” Dedicating time and resources for the advancement of the showroom team will provide benefits to all. There are distinct advantages for both clients and showrooms when the staff develops their knowledge and skills.

COACHING INCREASES PERFORMANCE

The next phase in building skills is coaching. The technical knowledge required to sell lighting correctly can be verified and reinforced with the usual training methods of teaching, review, and

test. When it comes to the soft skills of selling, behavior modification, or any skill development, coaching is required. Coaching individuals to reach the next level of their expertise is necessary for a successful sales team and business today.

COACH THE PERSON, TRAIN THE SKILL

Training is often built and delivered as a one-size-fits-all program. This is an excellent method for the group, but when individual skill levels vary, coaching becomes even more important. Coaching applies to every person in the company, at every level from new hires to all-stars.

Observation and recording what is observed for feedback purposes are vital activities for successful coaching. Many managers ask, “How can I find time to observe my sales team when I have so many things to do?” Digging deeper, it is not just time that is the enemy of coaching, it is often that many managers just don’t know how.

You can’t coach everything at once to everyone.

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“To build a superior sales force and solidify the behaviors you wish to provide to every client, you must train, coach, observe, and focus.”



Start with the one or two related actions that will make each person significantly better at his/her job. Begin with the numbers, such as closing rate or average sale. For a list of additional KPIs (key performance indicators) refer to the November 2017 On the Mark article called, *Measuring Up*.

HERE ARE A FEW POINTERS:

☛ **Give yourself permission to coach uninterrupted.** When a 1/2-hour of coaching time is consistently provided to an employee once or twice a month, the dividends will eclipse the initial investment.

☛ **Set up an easy record system;** I've found notebooks to be the best tool for recording each person's goals, KPI, the gap between current results and goal, and the action plan that the salesperson and coach agree to adhere to. This is a mutual relationship.

☛ **Begin coaching observation** based on an area of improvement, such as communication skills. What is his/her body language at the greeting? Is the staffer projecting an open and inviting feeling, or are they closed off? What words are being used?

☛ **How does he/she break from the client?** Are the words reassuring and acknowledging the empowered client of today? Does the break-away conversation provide wording so re-entry is not only expected, but anticipated with excitement?

☛ **What is the vocal tone when greeting, in discovery,** when presenting products, or handling objections? Is the employee telling the company's story? Does he/she create constructive tension with the client by posing thoughtful questions?

☛ **How many times does he/she attempt to close?** Is she/he showing the best products first to upsell the category or offer additional side-sell items?

☛ **Identify twice the number of positive observations** versus the coachable opportunities. Be fair and firm when it comes to coaching performance adjustments while openly celebrating the successes witnessed.

☛ **Create quality questions** to guide each employee to discover their own conclusions. The results must align with the goals of the company and the individual.

☛ **When a team member provides** a solution that the group can benefit from, share it at a meeting and give deliberate recognition to that person. Let that staffer explain the benefit he/she found and how it worked for them.

☛ **How does the person's performance** compare to the defined sales strategy and process? Identify the challenge or opportunity that is the gap between activity and result. Record the steps it will take both of you to reach the goal.

FORGING A RELATIONSHIP

Coaching is a symbiotic and personal relationship between salesperson and coach. Each brings something to the table, and each is accountable to the other for adhering to the personal program.

Coaching expands the knowledge base of the coach and each individual involved. Coaches grow by increasing their own abilities from the knowledge they acquire, and this information can be used to coach other team members.

Thanks to coaching, reviews are easier because there are no surprises. The employee and coach review performance once or twice a month, way in advance of any annual or bi-annual review. Individuals know their accomplishments, see the progress they have made with their personal growth, and know what to expect at evaluation time.

To build a superior sales force and solidify the behaviors you wish to provide to every client, you must train, coach, observe, and focus. Identify what the team is doing correctly, areas that need improvement, and then communicate both.

There is more to coaching than can be written in one article, but the takeaway is that it takes a team's personal investment to improve a showroom's performance. Coaching and training are valuable investments that companies must make in their staff and businesses.

As Always, Happy Selling!



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