
What's A Professional Sales Manager?

by DAVE KAHLE

I was in the depths of a major depression. As a third-year salesperson with a good company, I was doing well and was on my way to becoming the top salesperson in the nation for them. But business had slowed down a little, and I didn't have my usual number of proposals out for consideration. As a result, I wasn't as busy as usual. As my activity slowed, I began to worry. My doubts increased to the point where I had thought myself into a real depression, stuck on the question of "What's the use of trying?" The more negative my thoughts became, the less energy I had. My lack of energy led to fewer and fewer sales calls, which of course, led to less activity and more depressing thoughts. I was caught in a powerful downward spiral.

It was then that I caught a glimpse of what a professional sales manager is like.

Ned was my boss — a sales manager of the highest caliber. He could see the symptoms of my sour state spilling over into everything I was doing. So Ned intervened. He arranged to have lunch with me and listened patiently as I rambled on and on about my

problems, my doubts, and my lack of activity.

Finally, after I had dumped all my depression and negative thoughts on him, he looked me straight in the eye and said, with all the authority and resolve of someone who is absolutely sure of what they are saying, "Kahle, that's enough."

A Different Way to Motivate

I was stunned. I was expecting empathy, an understanding shoulder to cry on. Instead, I got a simple, straightforward mandate. Ned knew me well enough to cut through all the fluff and come right to the heart of the matter. He said, "That's enough. That's enough feeling sorry for yourself. That's enough thinking all these negative thoughts. That's enough

sitting back and not working as hard as you're used to. Stop it. You're better than all this. Stop it right now, today, and get your butt back to work."

He saw my situation clearly and provided me the direction I needed. That conversation turned me around. I left my depression and negativity at that lunch table and started back into my job with a renewed sense of the possible. A year later I was the number one salesperson in the nation for that company.

What made the difference in my performance was the skillful intervention of an astute and professional sales manager. He made the difference in my job performance, and that made a difference in my standing with that company, which made a difference in my career and ultimately led me to my current practice. It's

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entirely possible that I would not be doing what I do now, speaking and consulting with sales forces around the world, if it wasn't for his timely intervention.

All of us have become what we are, at least in part, as a result of the impact other people have had on us. A professional sales manager is gifted with a rare and precious opportunity — the opportunity to play a pivotal role in the lives of his/her charges. I so value the role that Ned played in my career, that the last paragraph on the “Acknowledgment” page of my first book reads, “Finally, I must make special, post-humous acknowledgment of the contribution made by Ned Shaheen, the best manager I ever worked for...It was Ned who, years ago, urged me to ‘write the book’....”

So what does this have to do with being a professional sales manager? During my 30+ years of sales experience, and 16 years of experience as a sales consultant and sales trainer, I've encountered many sales managers. Some have been good, many mediocre. But Ned was the best sales manager I ever met. He serves as a model for me. We can learn a number of lessons from him.

Building Up People

First, Ned knew the difference

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between the job of a salesperson and that of a sales manager. He had been a great salesperson — like many sales managers around the world — and had been promoted to sales manager. Yet he knew the jobs of sales manager and salesperson are completely different. A salesperson is responsible for building accounts and making sales. A sales manager, while ultimately responsible for the same results, understands that his job is to achieve those means through other people. A sales manager builds people, who in turn build the business. Salespeople focus on selling; sales managers focus on building salespeople.

As a salesperson, I could comfortably take Ned into any account, secure in the knowledge that he wouldn't try to take over the presentation or usurp my relationship with the customer. I knew Ned was more concerned with me than he was about any one sale.

Ned knew that a salesperson was essentially a loner, an individual who did most of his most important work by himself, while a sales manager was a coach, whose only success derived from the success of his team. A sales manager's best work is always done not with the customers, but with the people he supervises.

Ultimately, sales managers are measured by the results achieved by their people. Sales, gross profits, market share, key product selling — all these typical measurements of sales performance are also one of the rulers by which a sales manager is measured.

So, an excellent sales manager, like a great soccer coach, is ulti-

mately measured by his numbers. It doesn't matter how empathetic he is, nor how his players respect or like him, if year after year he produces a losing team. So it is with a sales manager. Ultimately, an excellent sales manager produces excellent numbers for his company. In the five years that I worked for Ned, my own territory grew by \$1 million a year, and the branch for which he was responsible grew from about \$6 million to about \$30 million.

Knowing How to Hire and Fire

Ned was excellent at one of the key competencies of the professional sales manager — he had an eye for talent. He knew how to hire good people. After all, he hired me! Over the years I watched him take his time, allowing a sales territory to go vacant for months, if necessary, while he waited for the right person to bubble up through his pipeline. Only one of his hires didn't work out — which gave him an incredible winning percentage.

A professional sales manager understands the importance of making the right hire, is always recruiting in order to keep the pipeline of prospective salespeople full, and spares no expense to make sure the person he hires meets all the necessary criteria. When I was hired, I went through four interviews and a full 10-hour day of tests with an industrial psychologist.

With all the time he took to make sure he was hiring the right person, Ned confided in me one day that “It is more important to fire well than it is to hire well.”

He went on to explain that hiring salespeople is an extremely difficult task, and that even the best sales managers fail at it frequently. Therefore, it was important to recognize your mistake quickly, and act decisively to fix it.

A professional sales manager, then, understands that when it is clear that a salesperson is not right for the job, he acts quickly, kindly and decisively to terminate the individual, allowing both the individual and the company an opportunity to find a better match. Acting quickly to terminate a salesperson who isn't working out is both good business as well as good ethics. To allow a mediocre situation to fester to the detriment of the company, the salesperson and the customers is to persist in a dishonesty.

Understanding that he works only through his salespeople and that he has the opportunity to make a great impact on his people, a professional sales manager makes it his business to know his people. Ned spent days with me in the field, talking not only about business, but also working at understanding the person I was as well. He'd arrange to meet me for breakfast or lunch regularly, even if he wasn't spending the day with me. He wanted to get to know my wife as well, and paid close attention to her opinions. We went to dinner several times with Ned and his wife over the course of five years.

I could never stop in the office without being expected to sit down and talk about things. And, of course, there was the annual pig roast at his house where all his salespeople and their families were invited to spend a fun day while the pig roasted over the spit.

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I was always a person to Ned, never just a "salesperson."

Learning How to Manage Well

Since he took the time to get to know me, he was equipped with the knowledge of exactly how to best manage me. He always saw the potential in me, and was ready to correct me when necessary.

In the first year of my employment, I was earning the reputation among the inside customer support and purchasing people of being difficult and demanding. I was a hotshot superstar who didn't take their feelings into consideration and came into the office dumping work on them. Ned let me know that my ways needed to change. At first, I didn't pay much attention.

My numbers were too good for anybody to be concerned. So Ned let me know a second time that I was going to have to change. The situation was so acute that the operations manager was lobbying to get me fired! Guided by his firm hand, I swallowed my pride and adopted a more humble attitude. My stock inside the company sprang up dramatically, my ways corrected, and my future was assured.

A professional sales manager guides and corrects his charges in order to help them achieve their potential.

Ned never stopped learning.

He would often tell me about seminars he'd attended, books he'd read, or ideas he'd picked up by talking with other people. He knew that he never "knew it all." So it is with every professional sales manager. A real professional never stops learning. He understands that the world is changing rapidly, continually demanding new skills, new ideas, and new competencies from him. At the same time, his salespeople and their customers are changing also. So, he understands that he has a challenge to continuously grow and improve, to learn more and become better at his job. Sales management isn't just a job, it's a challenge of a lifetime of improvement.

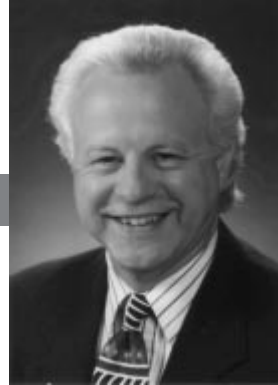
Success as a Goal

One more observation. Understanding that a professional sales manager is only successful when his charges are successful, an excellent sales manager supports, encourages and gives his salespeople the credit.

It was the fourth year of my tenure, and Ned was lobbying for me to be awarded the "Salesperson of the Year" award. It was given not only for sales performance, but for more subjective things — supporting the company's objectives and ethics, getting along with other people in the company, etc. The award was

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a great honor and extremely difficult to win. Each sales manager nominated their favorite salesperson and lobbied for them with the company's executives, who made

the final choice.

The annual awards banquet was held at an exclusive country club, where the men wore tuxedos and the women formal evening

gowns. When dinner was done, the speeches were finished and the lesser awards announced, it came time for the big one, the one I wanted.

The climate was tense and expectant. The entire room silent as the time approached for the announcement. Then, as the company president announced my name, it was Ned who thrust his fist in the air and shouted "YES!"

The photograph that hangs on my bedroom wall shows me shaking hands with the president and accepting the award. Look carefully and you'll see Ned standing proudly in the background.

Want to excel as a sales manager? Want to be a true professional? Look at your job as a unique opportunity to impact others, to select, correct, support and encourage your salespeople, to achieve your company's objectives by becoming a positive force in their lives. It's not a job, it's a mission.