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# The Most Common Mistakes Sales Managers Make

by DAVE KAHLE

In most organizations, sales managers are the essential bridge between the company's sales goals and the realization of those goals. The gritty day-to-day interactions between the salespeople and their customers are frequently filtered through the perspective of the sales manager on their way up the ladder. The aspirations and strategies of the company's management must be imprinted by the realism of the sales manager as they come down from above. Sales managers are the conductors who carefully orchestrate the tentative entanglement of the salespeople with their management.

It's an incredibly important and difficult job. Unfortunately, it is often the most under-trained job in the entire organization. Instead of providing information on the best practices and processes of the job, most companies hope that their sales managers will have learned enough during their days as a field salesperson to provide some roadmap as to how to do this job well.

Alas, only a small percentage of untrained sales managers ever really figure it out, arriving by trial and error and after hours of study at the best practices of an effective sales manager. The overwhelming majority find themselves caught up in the urgencies of the moment, the tempting details of all the transactions, and the continuing onslaught of crises and are never able to set in place a systematic blueprint for their success.

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## Managing Salespeople

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The net result? Few salespeople are effectively managed. All parties: executive management, sales manager and salespeople, bounce from one frustration to another. Company objectives are met frequently by happenstance, salespeople are not developed to their fullest potential, and sales managers lurch from one crisis to another.

Certain common mistakes often arise out of this unhealthy situation. As a long-time consultant and educator of salespeople and sales managers, I frequently see these three most common maladies suffered by sales managers.

- ***Lack of a focused sales structure.***

This is such a foreign concept to many compa-

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nies that the term itself is unfamiliar. The structure of a sales force consists of all the articulated and unspoken rules, policies and procedures that shape the behavior of the salesperson. It consists of such things as:

- The way sales territories are defined.
- The way salespeople go about their jobs.
- The way markets and customers are targeted.
- The way salespeople are compensated.
- The methods the manager uses to communicate with the salespeople.
- The expectations for the sales force.
- The training and development system of the company.
- The expectation for information collecting by the salespeople.
- The frequency and agenda for sales meetings.
- The sales tools used by the salespeople.
- And countless other such things.

A highly focused, well-designed sales structure can be one of the company's greatest assets, as it ultimately shapes the behavior of the sales force.

Most sales structures, however, haven't come under the critical review of the company's management. Typically, the structure slowly takes shape over time. Decisions are often made with heavy input from the salespeople, almost always in response to a single event. These decisions slowly become codified into the company's written and unwritten structure.

As a result, many sales structures are vestiges of years gone by, the legacy of salespeople who may not even be with the company today.

Why do you have the sales compensation plan that you have, for example? Is it because you crafted a strategic plan that directly compensates the sales force for achieving the company's objective, or is it because it's the plan you inherited?

Why do some salespeople come into the office every week? Is it because you have determined that this is the most valuable use of their time, or is it because that's just the way some of them like to do it?

Why is it that some of your salespeople are highly organized, with well-designed file systems and effective ways to track their interactions with their customers, while others continue to get by with scraps of paper and yellow pads? Is it because you have invested in a system that helps them become well-organized and information-savvy, or is it because that's just how it's worked out?

## Self Assessment

Respond to each statement, and then reply by putting a number in the space which corresponds to each of the following replies:

- You're kidding. What's that? = -2
- We're thinking about it. = 0
- We've looked at it. No action yet. = 2
- Yes, we're in good shape. = 6

- \_\_\_ 1. We have strategically reviewed the way sales territories are defined.
- \_\_\_ 2. We have strategically designed the way markets and customers are targeted.
- \_\_\_ 3. We have strategically designed the way salespeople are compensated.
- \_\_\_ 4. We have strategically designed the methods the manager uses to communicate with the salespeople.
- \_\_\_ 5. We have a specific set of expectations for each salesperson.
- \_\_\_ 6. We regularly and systematically communicate those expectations with each individual salesperson.
- \_\_\_ 7. We regularly and systematically provide feedback to each individual salesperson on how well they are meeting our expectations.
- \_\_\_ 8. We have a minimal set of qualifications that an entry-level salesperson must meet in order to be allowed to represent our company.
- \_\_\_ 9. We have a process to evaluate the entry-level salesperson's skills.
- \_\_\_ 10. We regularly inject our salespeople into learning events, and expect that they will continually improve themselves.
- \_\_\_ Total

Directions: Total your score, and compare the total to the standard described below:

-20 to 0 — See, I told you these were common. You're in trouble. Set aside serious time to rectify this situation. Top priority!

0 to 20 — Not bad. There's hope. Fix the issues that are weak and you'll be in good shape.

20 to 60 — Congratulations! You're in good shape. Do some fine-tuning and watch your sales grow.

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## The Evolution of Structure

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Can you see the point? Many of these structural issues — spoken and unspoken rules about how the salesperson does the job — have evolved as the salespeople respond to their own specific situations.

And most sales managers are oblivious to the impact of these decisions on the productivity and effectiveness of the salesperson.

I recently had lunch with a friend — an entrepreneur who had successfully started and run a number of businesses. As we were discussing the pros and cons of organizing a sales force for his latest venture, he remarked that he has learned how easy it is to gradually

cede control of the company to the sales force. One decision at a time, made in response to the passionate pleas of an individual salesperson, would form, over time, the structure that governed the sales side of the business.

I was impressed with his insight. That very observation described the number-one mistake that sales managers make — they accept the historically evolved status quo for the structure, and don't invest time in focusing it to provide the environment for sales success.

- ***Lack of regular and systematic direction and feedback for the salespeople.***

The relentless attraction of the urgent, and the demanding shouts of the transaction, like the pleading of a toddler, have a tendency to overwhelm the time and attention of most sales managers.

Sales managers often have the best of intentions. For example, they may need to do a set of performance reviews by the end of the year. But there is this big presentation in one account to attend. Another account wants to complain about some issue to the sales manager. Yet another needs the manager's touch to smooth some feathers, etc. And they really do need to spend some time in the field with the new salesperson. And, and, and — the demands of the urgent once again force regular face-to-face discus-

sions about expectations and results to the bottom of the “to do” list.

As a result, most salespeople are left directionless and provided with little feedback on how they are doing. Of course, we publish sales numbers, but there are lots of reasons why a set of numbers can be up, down or sideways above and beyond the impact of the salesperson.

What do you expect of this particular salesperson? And how well is he/she doing?

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## Direction and Feedback

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In most surveys of what salespeople really want from their managers, “direction and feedback” are often at the very top of the list. It's one thing to talk about some account or some deal, it's quite another to speak to the core issues of “my performance.”

Sales is an isolated job. It is not unusual for a salesperson to spend as much as 70 percent of the work week by himself. All that isolation often leads to anxiety and self-doubt, which often expresses itself through complaints and finding fault with the company.

All this negative energy can be prevented by providing the salesperson with regular direction, specific expectations, and regular feedback.

The old saying, “Out of sight, out of mind,” is too often the operational description of the typical sales manager. The salespeople are out there somewhere, doing their thing, while the tyranny of the urgent often occupies the manager's time.

As a result, salespeople are not nearly as focused as they could be, they default to unhealthy thoughts, and they spend too much time expressing negative energy.

- ***Lack of an organized training and development system.***

No profession in the world expects the serious practitioners of that profession to figure it out by themselves. Quite the contrary. Every profession has determined some minimal acceptable course of study, and typically has some event which signals the entry into that profession. It is for this reason that teachers, emergency medical technicians, and ministers are licensed; that attorneys must pass the bar exam; accountants must pass their certification exam, etc.

Unfortunately, that is rarely true of salespeople.

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In only the leading companies is there some required course of study for entry-level salespeople, and some event which signifies the successful completion of that study and their entry into the profession.

### Creating Standards

To even think this way is so outside of the reality of most sales managers that I can almost hear half of the readers of this article snickering over their coffee. "Some standard for allowing people into the job?" Incredible thought. But if you don't insist on it, you'll continue to labor with a hit-or-miss sales force where every hire is ultimately a shot in the dark.

No profession in the world expects that once someone has become qualified to enter the profession, they then no longer need to invest in their own development. And every profession has expectations of the practitioners' regular need to systematically improve himself or herself. Can you imagine a teacher who never attends an in-service training? A nurse who never invests in continuing development? A minister who never goes back to school? A doctor who never attends a conference?

Even if such lackadaisical professionals could keep their jobs, you would not want them to have anything to do with your family. You would never put your health in the hands of a doctor who hadn't updated himself since med school. You would not want your children taught by the teacher who hadn't learned anything since graduation. You would never put your lawsuit in the hands of an attorney who had never bothered to keep current.

The examples can go on and on. But you get the idea. The professional who doesn't regularly invest in his own continuous development is relegated to the dregs of the market.

So, why is it that the overwhelming majority of sales managers do not require regular and system-

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*Editor's Note: Readers are reminded of the Certified Professional Manufacturers' Representatives (CPMR) program conducted by MRERF, which offers the very same training/education that the author of this article is writing about.*

atic involvement in continuous development events for their charges? It may be that they don't see their salespeople (or themselves) as professionals. Or, it may be that they have never thought about it that way.

Regardless of the reason, the reality of this malady is that the quality of the sales force is not nearly what it could be, if only the sales managers required some minimum standard for their entry-level people, and then regular and continuous development of those who were on the inside. The wise sales manager will assemble a system for the education and development of his salespeople.

While there are as many other management miscues as there are sales managers, these three are the most common. Address them, and you'll be well on your way to outstanding success in sales management. □