



Optimizing Sales Performance ...

The reality is we all are virtually responsible for coaching

By Bob Frailey

It's hard to be a buyer of technology. On the surface, many solutions appear to be viable. Buyers may not see the added value in one solution over another, and it is risky for sales teams to assume that buyers will be able to identify why your solution may be better suited to help them meet their requirements versus the alternatives. If a sales team does not do a good job of things like flushing out all the prospect's challenges, effectively differentiating your solution from the alternatives, making sure you are delivering the right messages to the right people, **then that sales team is at risk of having the prospect reach the dreaded "any solution will meet our requirements" conclusion.** So, unless your market strategy is one of cost leadership, you may want to assess how well your team is effectively self-coaching.

Coaching is generally thought of as the responsibility of front-line managers, and they clearly have the ultimate responsibility for bringing out and developing the best in those that report to them. However, today's sales teams more often than not consist of virtual members across multiple internal and perhaps external entities that may have multiple reporting structures. ***This creates a situation where at least three bad things can happen if teams are not careful:***

- 1) ***Do it because I say so.*** With the pressure of quota and time constraints, sometimes virtual team leaders may rely on assumed position power versus personal power to get others to behave in certain ways. How effectively we do or not manage and coach each other can have short and longer term ramifications.
- 2) ***Who's on first?*** Confusion is created through assumptions and lack of ownership and accountability as to who is responsible for which aspect of the campaign.
- 3) ***It's not my job to coach you.*** Team members make the mistake of thinking that it is "their manager's job" to give feedback, correct or enhance the performance of others on their team.

Effective sales teams, like successful sports teams, are aware of the challenges above and proactively ensure that they are overcome, or better, avoided in the first place. Teams that perform well over time generally have a very strong head-coach and also instill a culture of self-coaching.

So, what does it mean to be a coach? Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary definition is, "to train, to tutor, to assist others in achieving skills and improving performance".

InfoMentis would also suggest that an effective coach is one who:

- Respects the individual's personality and believes in their potential.
- Shares an energizing vision.
- Refutes impossibilities, scapegoats & alibis for failure and puts individuals back on track.
- Conducts coaching sessions without interrupting or telling.
- Asks questions, inspires, and generates options for consideration.
- Acts as sounding board and is not too quick to judge.

With this in mind, below are some things to consider as you are assessing how well you and your colleagues are self-coaching on the virtual team.

Know your style. Each of us, whether a manager or not, are at risk of taking on aspects of one or more of the management styles below. The key is to be self-aware, know the ramifications and take steps to perpetually move closer towards the role of a true coach.

- **The Boss** - Assumes that they know the “right” way to approach or solve a problem. Often implies positional power and authority to change behavior. The result often creates dependencies, stifles growth, fosters resentment and limits creativity.
- **The Judge** - Focuses on criticism of the person's abilities and on what went wrong. Is often directive in nature (e.g., “*that's not right; you should do it this way next time...*”)? This approach often creates frustration, distance/avoidance and dissention.
- **The Missing** - Assumes they work with good people who should know it all already or just too busy doing their own job to be concerned with what others are doing. When cornered will fall into the mode of the Boss or Judge. This approach results in poor team work and overall frustration.
- **The Super Rep** - Tendency to jump right in and do the work because, “*It'll get done sooner & better if I just do it myself*”. Often is not open to other approaches and ideas resulting in a situation that is not scaleable, stifles the growth of others and ultimately results in burn-out for the one trying to do it all,

If you don't know who's on first, figure it out and/or cover it yourself. With many tasks, players and objectives over long periods of time, it is essential that a virtual team have an effective means of communicating objectives, activities and responsibilities. Also, each member of the team should know they are empowered, responsible and accountable to make sure they do what's in the best interest of the team to ultimately secure the business. Otherwise, it is too easy for something to fall through the cracks which only benefits the competition

Who will take the lead in documenting a prospect's requirements, the competitive situation, people, power and influence, etc.? One of the greatest threats a virtual team faces is when someone on the team starts to think the “lead” is the responsible one to do it all and simply awaits their lead. Then when they don't have the right information, these members are usually the first to point fingers and blame the lead for lack of effort. Effective virtual teams all know that they all have ownership for securing the sale, regardless of individual compensation plans, and each member should be accountable for ensuring that the right things are done at the right time.

It is your job to coach. It can be uncomfortable to tell another team member what they did wrong and what they could be doing better, especially if that person does not report to you! However, without productive feedback, how can you expect the team to get better? Can you imagine professional athletes in team-based sports not debriefing after every game if not every play? Every member of the virtual team has a responsibility, an obligation, to provide ongoing feedback to each other. The key is to embrace an approach that empowers all team members and is based on growth-based feedback. One idea is to suggest that each team member self-assess what they did well and areas for improvement, then for the others to identify what that person did well before suggesting potential areas for improvement.

Creating a strong coaching culture means encouraging everyone to encourage everyone. Regardless of job title and “official” responsibilities, everyone has perspective, opinion, observations and experiences that can benefit others.