

Fast coach

The sports coach is dedicated to helping each athlete perform to his or her highest potential. So why not let a sales coach do the same for your team, asks Anna Britnor Guest?



Imagine having an experienced person employed for no other purpose than to help you succeed. Someone who understands your job, your company, your strengths and weaknesses and who is committed to helping you personally achieve the results you want.

At the end of the 'caring, sharing '90s' coaching is emerging as the new approach to employee and personal development. Evidence of the growth of coaching can be found everywhere, from the explosion of 'life' coaches (there are thought to be around 200

of these now practising in the UK), through to the numbers of training companies now repackaging their services as coaching. Even Gordon Brown used the word in his budget!

What is coaching?

In the sales world, coaching is essentially about working on an individual basis to make measurable, step-by-step improvements to performance and motivation. Coaching can therefore reach the parts other training methods can't. That's not to say that coaching is better, per se, than training: both have a

strong part to play, however, there are several key principles which differentiate the two.

The most obvious difference is that coaching is generally delivered on a one-to-one basis. This allows emphasis on setting and achieving development objectives relevant to the individual's specific role and taking into account experience, knowledge, maturity and career path. Most of us who made New Year's Resolutions will, by now, have broken most of them. Perhaps, if we're really committed we may still be persevering with the odd one. The lesson is simple: try to make too many changes at once and



you are likely to fail. Coaching is therefore about defining a goal and then breaking it down into manageable, measurable steps, enabling the coachee to constantly assess their progress.

To support this, coaching is provided on a 'little and often' basis, through intensive face-to-face sessions, telephone feedback and on-the-job observation. Whether a junior salesperson learning the ropes or a dyed-in-the-wool, long-in-the-tooth old hand, coaching requires the salesperson to examine and challenge their approach, seeking fresh ideas to boost performance and personal job

satisfaction. At all times, however, the coach is there to motivate and support.

What does coaching achieve?

You can't please all of the people all of the time, but coaching can be a powerful tool in implementing change, increasing motivation across the salesforce, addressing individual performance issues and thereby harnessing the potential for success. The result is an organisation better equipped to beat the competition and better able to build long-lasting relationships with its customers.

Coach in focus **Shaz Quereshi**

Shaz Quereshi started life as a mainframe programmer and went into sales 12 years ago. He was sales and marketing director for systems integrator RCMS and more recently development tool vendor Magic Software. He now runs his own sales mentoring and coaching company, SOCA Management Consultants Limited.

"In my last job, I built the sales team up from six to 23 within 18 months, to cope with the market. I always felt that it was important for me to nurture and coach my sales staff but found I couldn't make the time because corporates demand that managers look to business growth rather than staff development. Consequently, I sought consultants to help me but found it almost impossible to find a real coach, someone who is not a sales trainer and will appreciate different development needs in different people and work with them closely to actually help them move key sales forward.

"Seeing an opportunity in the market, I formed my own sales mentoring and personal coaching consultancy. We already successfully provide sales coaching for a number of IT-based companies. One of these is a systems house called Code Red Consultancy (CRC). I work with CRC sales management to help their staff appreciate the complexity of sales cycles, understand the real difference between selling products and services and learn how to leverage relationships with partners.

"Personal coaching allows sales managers to ensure that their staff needs are well catered for while they get on with the job of growing the business. The key to trust is empathy: salespeople only respect you if they know you've done their job, and management only use you if they believe you can deliver a real improvement to their revenue."

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Hanover Computer Systems, a provider of multi-vendor hardware and software solutions in the PC and AS400 arenas, has introduced coaching for its salesforce. Sue Smith, commercial director, explains why: "We needed something that would have a long-lasting effect, that would recognise the needs of the individual and that would help support the culture of the organisation we were trying to grow. The approach is paying dividends. The salespeople have a sense of personal benefit in terms of the development of their personal skill sets, at the same time as learning how to generate more business. We can manoeuvre the programme to address specific issues that arise or changes in our product portfolio or marketplace, and what has been learnt can be reinforced on the job rather than forgotten."

Mike Maynard, channel partners services director of Ikon Office Solutions' IT division, describes the transformation through coaching he saw in one of his salespeople: "I was pleased to see an improvement in his professionalism and attitude to work. His approach to problems and internal procedures improved and his colleagues' perception of his capabilities was heightened. The most pleasing aspect of the exercise was that the changes seemed to happen transparently, as if he had changed his whole approach to work... indeed, I believe this to be the case."

Another company which has wholly embraced a coaching culture is Mitel Telecom. Some four years ago, it replaced its hierarchical management structure with a flatter coaching model. Mike Ford, sales director, explains the benefits the company has seen: "We have high levels of motivation and morale within the salesforce, and when you have that you have better performance. The coach gives all the power to the people in the team. The role of the coach is a totally unselfish one. He is there purely to make people better in terms of both skills and performance. As a result, our people are able to make their own decisions and have the courage and confidence to do so. It saves me an awful lot of time!"

What could coaching do for you?

In the Austin Benn Human Resourcing survey, (see *Infomatics*, March 1999, p6), IT was rated as the industry employing the best salespeople. However, IT salespeople also face some of the biggest challenges, such as coping with constant product development, which piles on the pressure to perform quickly and increase profit margins. Sales managers may also carry their own personal sales targets, reducing the time available to develop and support their staff.

Four key steps to successful coaching

1. Identify the need for coaching in your company
2. Establish baselines and measurable objectives
3. Modify behaviour/techniques and practice changes
4. Measure achievement against objectives

How to be... a sales coach

- Put yourself firmly in the shoes of each individual team member. Be prepared to see and understand the world from their perspective
- Listen actively (just as you do with your prospects). Understand what is 'true for them', what motivates and interests them, what bores or demotivates them
- Be prepared to make changes to your own style and approach as a result of what you learn. Watch out, this one can be painful!
- Above all, remember the three words that mean so much – respect, empathy and objectivity. Bring these to your coaching sessions every time
- Book diary time and a meeting room for each coaching session. Ensure there are no interruptions. Treat each session with the reverence you would a presentation to your top prospect



- Use your sales training techniques. Let the other person do 80% of the talking, prompted by your carefully considered questions

- Use open questions to understand, probe, challenge and develop ideas. Use closed questions to pin down agreement and next actions

- Identify specific areas for change and agree how the salesperson will modify their behaviour. Agree exactly how, together, you will monitor and measure their progress and keep track

Coaching can help organisations to address each of these areas. It works because it dovetails into the company culture. Firstly, coaching is designed to suit the time pressures of busy salespeople. The coach visits the salesperson at their office, typically for two-hour sessions, and works on issues or areas pertinent to the individual's job. The salesperson is not expected to make wholesale changes. Instead, they commit to making a number of small but significant and long-lasting modifications which combine to make a big difference.

Secondly, coaching offers surrogate sales management. The coach can share the sales manager's burden, freeing his time to achieve company targets and objectives. Meanwhile, the coach works with the team members to unlock their potential, provide advice to resolve issues and facilitate inter-team communication.

Coaching is also a powerful tool in the roll-out and acceptance of change and rapid growth. Whether a ramp-up of the sales target, the implementation of salesforce automation or CRM systems, or other organisational change, success can only be achieved through the buy-in of everyone affected. Coaches have a unique role. Completely unbiased, they can understand both company objectives and individual concerns and can facilitate discussion, recommend modifications and encourage buy-in.

Finally, the coach can offer 'been there, seen it, done it' advice. Coaching is not about textbook sales skills, it is about using them in the real world.

Issues may arise from a number of peculiarities of IT sales, ranging from complex, protracted sales cycles to the issues surrounding selling technology to meet business needs. The coach, in questioning current practice and encouraging fresh approaches, is always willing to face a challenge, too. Unlike traditional training, the salesperson is actively encouraged to say when they disagree. In this way, techniques and style can be developed to suit the specific needs of each individual and their customer base.

There is enough evidence to confirm that coaching can be a powerful tool in the development of a motivated and successful sales team. While it may be the 'new kid on the block', its advantages are fast becoming recognised. With its focus on helping each individual achieve results, coaching really could change your career for the better!

Anna Britnor Guest specialises in coaching IT salespeople. Drawing on extensive personal sales success, she helps salespeople develop their full potential and works with organisations to develop a coaching culture.

She is a Fellow of the Institute of Sales & Marketing Management (FInstSMM) and UK South Chapter Host for the International Coach Federation. She is also co-founder of a new Web-based Coaching & Mentoring Network.

Coaching & Mentoring Network

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