



# The personal touch

More and more companies are employing professional coaches to improve the performance of individuals within the sales team. ANNA BRITNOR GUEST explains why

**W**ith the recent influx of a number of 'life coaches' from the USA, one might be forgiven for sceptically viewing coaching as the latest lifestyle accessory for rich New Yorkers – therapists by another name for the Ally McBeal's of this world.

Whether life coaching finds a foothold in the UK remains to be seen. Meanwhile, there's a quiet revolution happening much closer to home, as

coaching gains significant momentum in the corporate world.

## The power of coaching

It is always wise to be suspicious of anything that claims to do everything for everybody. As with the 'wonder drugs' that occasionally emerge, for every individual who experiences a miracle cure there is another for whom the effect is negligible. Coaching is not a cure-all, nor

does it always work for everyone – for instance, it is unlikely to benefit those who have no motivation to progress further, or people who are approaching retirement. However, within the sales environment, where the desire to succeed should be strong, the results can be spectacular: greater motivation, better focus, more control, in and out of work – and measurably improved sales performance. The effect on the

organisation as a whole can therefore be extremely powerful.

One company that has seen the benefits to be gained from coaching is Attachmate Sales UK, part of the world's largest privately-owned software company. "Coaching has been very successful for us," says Ian Wells, Attachmate's Country Manager. "We like the flexibility of having a team of independent and professional personnel virtually on tap. They help us develop our staff at a pace that suits the changing demands of our business – and we can bounce ideas off them whenever we want. In addition, my staff like the personal attention that coaching brings, and consequently are motivated to use their coach to challenge their approach and technique far more than they would with traditional training."

#### What is coaching?

In the sales world, coaching is essentially about working on an individual basis to make step-by-step, measurable 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 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, taking into account experience, knowledge, maturity and career path.

Comparisons are also sometimes drawn between coaching and counselling. However, the two are very different. Coaching is about helping an individual to achieve more, whilst counselling is about exploring specific behavioural or psychological issues.

#### How does it work?

Those of us who made New Year resolutions will probably have broken them by now. Perhaps, if we're really committed, we may still be persevering with one or two of them. The lesson is simple: try to make too many changes at once and you are likely to fail. If >>>



#### The four key steps in coaching

- 1** Identify the need for coaching
- 2** Establish baselines and measurable objectives
- 3** Modify behaviour/techniques and practise changes
- 4** Measure achievement against objectives

## Making the right choice

### TRAINING

'Wholesale' transfer of new skills required as a result of new job functions, changes in procedures, introduction of new systems, etc

### COACHING

Actively untaps potential  
Fine tunes & develops skills  
Eliminates specific performance problems

### COUNSELLING

Explores personal issues and problems through discussion, in order to increase understanding or acceptance of a situation

➤ you need another example, imagine that you are trying to learn a foreign language. How much more vocabulary do you think you would absorb if you learnt and practised 10 words a day, rather than trying to learn 100 words in one go? And how much more do you think you would be able to remember three weeks later?

Coaching is about first defining a goal and then breaking the goal into manageable, measurable steps, enabling the coachee to constantly assess his/her progress. To support this, coaching is provided on a 'little and often' basis through a combination of intensive face-to-face sessions, telephone feedback and 'on-the-job' observation.

So, how does this work in the sales world? Whether for 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 that will boost performance and personal job satisfaction.

Take John. He has been selling for a year and, with the help of his coach, has just made his monthly target for the first time. How? First, he and his coach took a long, hard look at what he was doing – from his sales techniques to his understanding of the sales process. Then they examined what motivated him and what he wanted to achieve, not just in his job but in his life as a whole. Together they identified his weak areas and his

strengths. Guided by his coach, John tried new skills and techniques, learnt how to understand and communicate with his prospects and worked at building his self-confidence. At each point, his coach was there to give feedback, to advise and to assess his progress. The results are evident, not only in his improved sales performance but also in the different perception John's colleagues now have of him.

#### The sales manager as coach

A growing number of organisations have developed a strong coaching culture and some already refer to line managers as coaches. These companies tend to demonstrate a strong commitment to empowering their employees to continually learn and grow. They are rewarded with greater loyalty and commitment,

manifested in increased motivation, effectiveness and professionalism.

So what if you are a sales manager wanting to become a coach to your team? Firstly, it is important to consider whether you have time to do this, since coaching will entail regularly sitting down on a one-to-one basis, to define objectives and monitor and measure performance. If you can fit it into your schedule, start by putting into practice the principles outlined in this article. For more guidance, you could consider enlisting a coaching practice to 'coach the coach' in order to develop the necessary framework and skills to ensure a successful migration.

If you do not have the time to act as a coach yourself, you can quickly achieve the same benefits by employing a professional coach. Working alongside, and as an extension to, the management team, a good coach will facilitate change and development, report back on agreed measurement principles and, over time, transfer coaching responsibilities back to the management.

#### A positive outcome

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, and addressing individual performance issues, thereby harnessing the potential for success. The result will be an organisation that is better equipped to beat the competition and better able to build long-lasting relationships with its customers. ■

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