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The Sales Manager's Productivity Challenge

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Sales Managers today are facing greater challenges than ever before however they are also finding in leading organizations greater recognition for their importance in executing on the senior leaderships sales and growth aspirations.

So lets first examine some of the challenges sales managers face:

- Doing more with less
- Increased stakeholder management
- A rapid pace of change
- Recruitment, retention and motivation of the sales team
- Multiple and often conflicting measurements of success

The Way Forward

Have Clear Purpose

Vague goals kill motivation. Without a clear and concise target to reach for, your sales team can't possibly trigger their internal drive simply because it has nothing to head toward. Only when the objective is vivid in their mind can you tap into a powerful inner drive. If you haven't already created a set of clear goals for them, it's time to deliver a little more direction. Meet with them and let them know clearly what the objectives and expectations are. Continue narrowing down the goals until they clearly see the point of detail you need.

On the flip side if your senior leadership team has not done the same for you then you need to ask for more clarity. As a sales manager you are the voice of the sales force and the customer base to your senior leaders. This means you must have the confidence and the competence to challenge their thinking from time to time. For example if they are seeking high growth numbers from new business in a particular region and you don't have any business development people in that region only account management sales people great at growing rather than winning business, then you need to make that clear and build in time to recruit the right people first. To support how important it is for sales managers to ensure their metrics are aligned to the business objectives, in Miller Heiman's 2011 Sales Best Practices Research 89% of organizations classified as World Class Sales stated that their sales performance metrics were aligned to the business objectives of the organization. In all other organizations not classed as World Class this was jus 38% which shows the misalignment that can occur.

Improve Stakeholder Management

In discussions with sales managers I regularly hear that they would like to spend more time in the field with customers and conducting coaching and deal reviews but are prevented because of internal meetings and managing up the line. Sales

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managers need to push back a little here and really identify what meetings they are needed at and look at ways they can systemize the reporting and stakeholder management. For example I often see sales managers producing reports to senior leaders that either not read, not understood or both. Be ruthless with your time and systemize and delegate as many tasks as you can to the right people. If you are suffering from meeting and report overload it may be because you are light on resources in the area of sales operations so consider hiring in this area. However be quick as effective sales operations people are worth their weight in gold! Remember to be an agent of change for your senior leaders. Your senior leaders are undergoing change and pressure from their stakeholders such as CEO's, Presidents, Boards and shareholders too. If you can seek to understand them and be their agent of change within your organization or team this will create a strong sense of trust in the long term.

Recruit the Right People

The first thing to realize is that you are 100% in the sales recruitment business. Therefore you need to be constantly on the look out for good people, know what you are looking for and have a system for hiring, retaining and motivating your sales people. This system for recruiting is vital and is a skill that new sales managers need to acquire quickly yet it is rarely covered.

Below are some basic rules for consistently hiring customer focused sales people:

Hire people who can smile- sounds obvious but it's amazing how people can't or won't yet think they will ace at sales. As they say hire for attitude and train for skill.

Hire people who speak clearly – if you can't understand them during the interview then think how a busy customer would react?

Hire people who are able to promote/sell the company's product or service with ease – some people can communicate easily, others struggle. Hire the ones who don't struggle as you will have better results quicker and they also tend to be more coachable

Benchmark your best people using profiling tools - then hire against those profiles for the role required. As a starting point you should have an ideal profile of your best business development person, best relationship manager, best sales operations person and best key account manager. It is too expensive to rely upon 'gut feel' only.

Don't be afraid to fire – It is your role to protect your organizations brand and your customer from poor sales people. Despite this obvious fact research by McKinsey Quarterly suggests that taking action to deal with poor performers is the most difficult, least exploited talent-building lever for any company. Indeed, ineffective people often stay in position for years. This also applies to channel members also. It is interesting to note how many high maintenance channel members are also the lowest contributors to revenue yet take our time away from the low maintenance

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high upside channel members.

Identify Your Top Performers and Leverage Them

It is important to identify, retain and leverage your top performers in 95% of World Class Sales Organizations according to the 2011 Miller Heiman best practices research yet there is an unwillingness or a lack of systems to develop talent in most organizations.

Sales people around the world have an intense need for growth and variety; too much of the same old thing and soon there will be no sign of motivation. To avoid this experience, put them out there for new work challenges to keep things fresh and new on the job. One simple yet highly effective way to do this is to have your top performers mentor younger and newer sales people. However don't expect this to happen automatically. You will need to provide some training on how to mentor effectively and seek feedback from parties to ensure success. Also don't think this is just a Gen Y thing, do this for all your staff no matter what their age or generation.

While you're talking with them about their current goals, spend time talking about the path of advancement within your organization as it may apply to them. Motivation needs growth to maintain its power. If they aren't sure what opportunity lies ahead, they'll find that their drive to keep pushing forward begins to diminish. No matter what it takes, articulate a path of advancement that is open to them. By telling them which opportunities are in their future and exactly what they need to do today to experience them down the road you will fuel their ambition. In the TV series *Undercover Boss* this was a consistent theme where the Undercover Bosses came across talented staff who were about to leave because "they could not see a future" at their current employer.

Systemize the Sales Process

One of the most consistent responses we hear from Miller Heiman customers in response to "what have been the benefits of Miller Heiman" is a consistent language when talking about sales and the sales process. Sales Managers must be able to leverage as many resources as they can. In World Class Sales Organizations 94% stated their organization collaborated across departments for large opportunities. They do this by developing a sales culture in an organization where as many people as possible understand the sales process even when they are not customer facing, allows the sales manager to manage resources (assets, people, time) more effectively.

A common sales process that systemizes how you create and manage opportunities and manages long-term relationships is the only way for a sales manager to scale their business. Sales managers need to have confidence that if they have hired well, that every day on every call a consistent customer focused process is being followed to obtain the best possible outcome for the customer and the selling organization.

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By having a system for acquiring, growing and retaining customers as described above it is much easier to promote the concept of cross selling and up selling to the sales system. Done as part of the sales system cross selling and up selling is able to be introduced at the optimum time in the sales cycle. This allows sales managers to work more closely with product marketing teams for example.

Finally and most importantly a sales process provides what very little other sales training provide and that is something robust and measurable to coach against. So much coaching in the sales environment is done subjectively and on gut feel. A sales process allows sales managers to coach with precision, which is more effective for both the sales person and the sales manager.

Stay Close to Your Customer

This is a challenge for sales managers as they often spend their time in internal meetings and less time out with customers coaching their people.

Sales managers must keep in touch with the market and what is happening in their market place and their customer base. Here are some ways to do this:

- Conduct regular win/loss reviews with customers and prospects
- Be part of quarterly/annual reviews with key customers
- Write articles on your customers sales environment and learn from them about their challenges
- Regularly conduct 360 degree reviews of your team which will involve speaking with customers and alliance partners

Sales managers today are definitely under pressure more than ever to succeed and deliver more with less. However this role is also the undisputed path to senior leadership roles in most organizations. Learn to make this role a productive and saleable one and the lessons learned will prepare you for greater roles in the future.

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