

Learning to lead



Salespeople don't always find it easy to move into a managerial role. Finding out how to focus on both tasks and team can help smooth the path, says sales coach Anna Britnor Guest

Promotion from sales to sales management is an obvious career path and organisations frequently expect great salespeople to make great sales managers.

Unfortunately, the new sales manager sometimes finds that the attributes that brought sales success do not automatically lead to managerial competence. In particular, salespeople are expected to be self-reliant. They spend considerable time working alone and their role as team-players is often limited to social interaction with colleagues and the orchestration of 'virtual' teams involved in meeting customer requirements. Clearly, this is incompatible with effective sales team management.

The sales manager's role

"If anyone tells you that being a sales manager is easy, don't believe them," warns Amanda. "All of a sudden you truly understand why, as a salesperson, you had to do all the things you found so tedious – like forecasting – and why the company set the boundaries and expectations it did. I spent the first few months trying to please everybody and quickly discovered that, often, I was 'damned if I did and damned if I didn't'. That really is the sales manager's plight – stuck in the middle of everybody's expectations. But if you ask me now, two years into the job, would I change that? Definitely not."

What's the role of the sales manager?

Management and leadership guru, John Adair, defines the function of management as three interlinking circles: "Achieving the task", "Building and maintaining the team" and "Developing the individual". Managers often have a leaning towards either task or people focus. The 'supermanager' harnesses both to ensure the right balance in all situations. Asking colleagues for feedback helps to maintain appropriate focus.

Michael Morris, author of *The First-time Manager*, highlights the relevance of focusing on more than just task. "One of sales management's main headaches is

The voice of experience

Jonathan Wild, corporate sales manager at HP reseller, DTP: "The hardest thing is balancing meeting my personal sales target with a 'completely separate' management role. To a new manager I recommend:

- Get a clear role definition and ensure it reflects your time focus and remuneration.
- Do the same for your team. I let the team dictate too much at first which caused confusion over responsibilities.
- Involve the team in generating ideas and solving problems – the results are better.
- Individual team members expect your time, direction and support. Ignore this at your peril."

keeping up morale while their people, frequently hundreds of miles from the company base, constantly experience rejection and frustration," he says.

Making the move

How successfully new sales managers move into the role is the responsibility of the individual, team members and the company. To prepare and support the new manager, the company will need to provide:

- A clear definition of role by function and measurable objectives.
- Positive communication of the promotion across the organisation.
- Identification and acceptance of the learning curve.

As James explains, "I was very lucky. My team was really supportive and both they and the company recognised that I would need to grow into the role. My manager didn't have the time – or patience – to help me personally, and so he arranged for me to work with a coach. It proved invaluable in helping me to think through and test my ideas."

For those who don't receive this level of support, managing your own development and learning from others will still make a difference.

Create a personal development plan. Document what you feel you need in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude to be a successful sales manager. Undertake a SWOT analysis of yourself against this. Extend the process to each team member as well as to the department as a whole, to determine where your key priorities lie.

Common experiences

Many sales managers identify a number of common issues:

Acceptance in the role: James warns, "I was aware that one of my close colleagues had also applied for my job and I was worried about how he might feel. I tackled it head on and asked him. He didn't have a problem with the fact that I was now his boss, but he was concerned that it limited his career development. With HR's help, we created a career development plan which has effectively allowed me to delegate more to him than I might otherwise have done."

It is important to talk to colleagues you trust about key opportunities and challenges, and encourage those people you feel are less supportive to discuss their concerns.

What to change? As salespeople we know exactly what we would do if we were in charge. Making those changes is somewhat harder! As Alex explains, "I had lots of ideas about what we should do differently, but I found that some team members were quite resistant to change. I learnt the hard way that you can't just tell people what to do – they have to not only see the benefits but want to do it."

Developing a broader perspective: Understand the company's strategic direction and short-term drivers. Spend time with managers of other departments, understanding each others' key objectives and pressures.

Juggling priorities: Many sales managers are required to retain a personal sales target which presents a

Where to go for help

Organisations:

Institute of Sales & Marketing Management
01727 812500, sales@ismm.co.uk, www.ismm.co.uk

The Coaching & Mentoring Network

0870 733 3313 www.coachingnetwork.org.uk

Books:

Personal Effectiveness

Focuses on key management skills

Authors: Alexander Murdock and Carol Scutt

ISBN 0-7506-3393-X

Published by Butterworth Heinemann 1998

John Adair's Effective Management series

Published by Pan.

challenge in terms of prioritising workload. Added to this are the demands made on the manager by team, peers and managers. Manage your time effectively, learn to delegate where appropriate and prioritise based on key objectives.

Communication: Ensure you communicate the big picture, offer guidance and direction, and encourage input and involvement from your team.

Meeting individual needs: As a new manager, you are enjoying personal growth and development. Ensure you understand each team member's personal drive and motivation and support them in their career development.

Finally, in developing as a new manager, recognise that no one has all the answers, but observe and learn from other managers whose style you respect – as well as those you don't!



About the author...

Anna Britnor Guest is a co-founder and director of Lauriate Coaching Ltd, which specialises in designing and delivering coaching and mentoring programmes within the IT sector. Anna works predominantly with salespeople and managers, drawing on her own successful IT sales career. She is also a co-founder and director of The Coaching & Mentoring Network, the UK's leading web-based source of free and independent information on coaching and mentoring.

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Anna writes regularly on sales, coaching and mentoring for the business press, is the Infomatics 'Sales Coach', and a Fellow of the Institute of Sales and Marketing Management (FInstSMM).

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